



EQUIPPING SAINTS TO SERVE

.....

A Two Year Planner

Bible Studies • Devotions • Sketches • and More!

.....

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Calendar of Suggested Resources	5
Listing of Bible Studies and Devotions by Theme	7
Bible Studies	9
Devotions	253
Litanies, Sketches, and Program	313
Alphabetical Listing of All Resources	353

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to 2023–2025 ***Equipping Saints to Serve: A Two-Year Planner***

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11–13).

One of the greatest joys as Lutheran Women in Mission is to use the gifts with which we have been equipped to proclaim the glory of the Triune God and tell the truth that salvation is found only in Him. The purpose of the *Equipping Saints to Serve* manual is to help you do this with joy! Every Bible study, devotion, litany, sketch, or program contained in this manual has been LCMS doctrinally reviewed so you can use them with confidence knowing that they truthfully proclaim God’s Word. The materials in this manual have been designed to help you reach the “woman in the pew” so that she can grow spiritually, joyfully join her LWML sisters in Christ, and spread the Word in service to Him.

How to Use This Planner Effectively

- Download the manual to your computer, or if using a paper copy, keep it in a handy binder; share it with the next leader(s).
- Review the entire planner to become familiar with its contents.
- The 2023–2025 planner is arranged chronologically (with a suggested calendar plan), thematically, and alphabetically. It includes a blend of new and classic resources to use in your local LWML group, zone, or district meetings and gatherings. Resources within this planner may be appropriate for use by other groups within your congregation as well.
- Determine theme, target group, and objectives for your meeting or event.
- Remember that trying something new can be a good thing!

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:16–17).

CALENDAR OF SUGGESTED RESOURCES

(Additional options follow the calendar.)

July 2023

Devotion: Sent to the Nations
Bible Study: Created for God's Work
Sketch: Where Do I Find That?

August 2023

Devotion: Author and Word
Bible Study: An Age of Grace

September 2023

Devotion: Seasons in Life
Bible Study: Surrender — Part 1

October 2023

Devotion: Fear Not!
Bible Study: Surrender — Part 2

November 2023

Devotion: The Oliver Special, Please!
Bible Study: Treasured By God
Litany: Women of the Bible

December 2023

Devotion: Love Explained
Bible Study: We Await His Coming
Sketch: Return to Jesus
Advent By Candlelight Program: All Things Work Out For Good

January 2024

Devotion: It Is Swell!
Bible Study: Family Matters — Women in Christ's Genealogy

February 2024

Devotion: How Do I Do This, Lord?
Bible Study: Abiding in Christ

March 2024

Devotion: The Season of Caregiving
Bible Study: Living Hope in a Graveyard

April 2024

Devotion: Treasured to Perfection
Bible Study: Chosen and Treasured
Litany: King of Time and Eternity

May 2024

Devotion: Don't Discard Me, God!
Bible Study: Destroying Walls

June 2024

Devotion: Sowing Seeds in All Seasons of Life
Bible Study: Women of the Bible — Women of Today

July 2024

Devotion: Creating Wondrous Water Wakes
Bible Study: Wellspring of Life
Litany: Riding the Waves

August 2024

Devotion: Figuring It All Out
Bible Study: Turning the Sailboat

September 2024

Devotion: Relationship Requirements
Bible Study: Living in Love

October 2024

Devotion: Seasons
Bible Study: Stillness in the Seasons of Life

November 2024

Devotion: Struggles and Challenges — Oh, My!
Bible Study: The Light No Darkness Can Overcome

December 2024

Devotion: His Christmas Presence
Bible Study: Steadfast in Christ
Sketch: At the Innkeeper's House
Advent By Candlelight Program: All Things Work Out For Good

January 2025

Devotion: What Am I Worth?

Bible Study: Who's Number One?

February 2025

Devotion: Candy Hearts

Bible Study: "Heart" Matters: A Look at Mary

Litany: Pleasing Thoughts and Words

March 2025

Devotion: Rejoice in Hope

Bible Study: Women with Jesus at the Cross and the Tomb

April 2025

Devotion: You are Priceless and Precious

Bible Study: Chosen. Treasured. Redeemed.

May 2025

Devotion: Guaranteed!

Bible Study: Life "Out of Control"

June 2025

Devotion: Immanuel — God With Us

Bible Study: Wind and Fire

Sketch: Clean House, Clean Heart

Additional options

Advent Joy — A — Tude (Advent devotion)

I Know You (devotion on grief)

Fear or...? (devotion)

Unknown Number (devotion)

ALPHABETICAL LISTING OF DEVOTIONS AND BIBLE STUDIES BY THEME

Special Occasions

Advent Joy — A — Tude (devotion).....	255
Candy Hearts (devotion)	259
His Christmas Presence (devotion).....	273
Living Hope in a Graveyard (Bible study)	107
Love Explained (devotion).....	283
We Await His Coming (Bible study).....	197
Women with Jesus at the Cross and the Tomb (Bible study)	245

Seasons of Life

An Age of Grace (Bible study)	23
Author and Word (devotion).....	257
Figuring It All Out (devotion).....	269
I Know You (devotion).....	277
Immanuel — God With Us (devotion)	279
The Season of Caregiving (devotion)	291
Seasons (devotion)	293
Seasons in Life (devotion).....	295
Sowing Seeds in All Seasons of Life (devotion)	299
Stillness in the Seasons of Life (Bible study).....	141
Turning the Sailboat (Bible study).....	181

Women Doing God’s Work

Created for God’s Work (Bible study).....	49
“Heart” Matters: A Look at Mary (Bible study)	83
Sent to the Nations (devotion).....	297
Creating Wondrous Water Wakes (devotion)	261
Family Matters — Women in Christ’s Genealogy (Bible study)	75
Women of the Bible — Women of Today (Bible study).....	237

Struggles and Challenges

Destroying Walls (Bible study)	61
Don’t Discard Me, God! (devotion).....	263
Fear Not! (devotion)	265
Guaranteed! (devotion).....	271
How Do I Do This, Lord? (devotion).....	275
Life “Out of Control”	91
Rejoice in Hope (devotion).....	287
Struggles and Challenges — Oh, My! (devotion).....	301

Surrender — Part 1 (Bible study).....	153
Surrender — Part 2 (Bible study).....	161

Treasured

Chosen and Treasured (Bible study).....	31
Chosen. Treasured. Redeemed. (Bible study).....	41
Living in Love (Bible study).....	119
The Oliver Special, Please! (devotion).....	285
Treasured By God (Bible study).....	173
Treasured to Perfection (devotion).....	305
What Am I Worth? (devotion).....	309
Who’s Number One? (Bible study).....	217
You are Priceless and Precious (devotion).....	311

Other

Abiding in Christ (Bible study).....	11
Fear or...? (devotion).....	267
It Is Swell! (devotion).....	281
The Light No Darkness Can Overcome (Bible study).....	99
Relationship Requirements (devotion).....	289
Steadfast in Christ (Bible study).....	131
Unknown Number (devotion).....	307
Wellspring of Life (Bible study).....	205
Wind and Fire (Bible study).....	225

ALPHABETICAL LISTING OF BIBLE STUDIES

(each followed by a Leader's Guide)

Abiding in Christ	11
An Age of Grace	23
Chosen and Treasured	31
Chosen. Treasured. Redeemed.	41
Created for God's Work.....	49
Destroying Walls.....	61
Family Matters — Women in Christ's Genealogy.....	75
"Heart" Matters: A Look at Mary.....	83
Life "Out of Control"	91
The Light No Darkness Can Overcome	99
Living Hope in a Graveyard.....	107
Living in Love.....	119
Steadfast in Christ.....	131
Stillness in the Seasons of Life	141
Surrender — Part 1.....	153
Surrender — Part 2.....	161
Treasured By God.....	173
Turning the Sailboat	181
We Await His Coming	197
Wellspring of Life.....	205
Who's Number One?.....	217
Wind and Fire.....	225
Women of the Bible — Women of Today	237
Women with Jesus at the Cross and the Tomb	245

ABIDING IN CHRIST

Bible Study • Study Guide

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me (John 15:1–4).

Opening Prayer: Dear Lord, we have been grafted into You, the eternal life-giving vine. We find our life in You, our hope in You, and our lives in You. Today as we look at what it means to be grafted into You, open our eyes to what You gave so that we may be united with You. Open our hearts to know what it means that all we will ever need we will find in being united with You. In Your most holy name, Jesus. Amen.

Read Romans 11:1–24.

Have you ever seen a lemon-lime tree or a lemon-orange tree? Grafting is where a branch from one tree is implanted into the trunk of another tree. Grafting was used widely in Jesus’ day, and still is today. Paul refers to the Gentiles (us) being grafted into the tree of God’s people (Romans 11). Grafting is an excellent illustration of what Christ means when He tells us to *abide in me* (John 15:4a). In this lesson we will look at how grafting can teach us how we are connected to Christ.

In order to successfully graft, the vine receiving the graft must be wounded.

In order to graft a new branch to the original vine, the vine must be cut. It must be pierced and notched, and the sap must be able to flow out.

Read Isaiah 53.

In verse 2, to what is Jesus compared?

How was this plant wounded for us?

Verse 3

Verse 4

Verse 5

Verse 8

“Tell me, ye who hear Him groaning,
Was there ever grief like His?
Friends through fear His cause disowning,
Foes insulting His distress;
Many hands were raised to wound Him,
None would intervene to save;
But the deepest stroke that pierced Him
Was the stroke that justice gave.”
Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted (LSB 451:2)

Take time to discuss the ways that Jesus was wounded for you.

Why did Jesus have to be wounded for you?

In order to be grafted, the branch must be cut to fit into the vine.

The second thing we know about grafting is that the branch that is to be grafted into the vine must also be cut, and the closer the cut of the branch is to the cut of the vine, the better the fit and the better the graft. Let us look at this closer.

In order for the branch to be grafted, it must be torn away from the tree from which it naturally grows. We also need to be torn away from the branch from which we naturally grow.

What is our natural state?

Psalm 51:5

Ephesians 2:1-5

1 Corinthians 2:14

These are not just words, but the reality of our lives.

Discuss how you truly see your sin.

If looking at our sin does not make us sick to our stomach, and ready to retch, it is probably because we do not really see the sin in our lives.

Do you agree with this statement or not? Why?

Note: Is it not rather noteworthy: that from which we must be cut away started with a plant?
(Genesis 3:1-6)

The graft must be shaped to fit into the wound in the vine.

In order for the graft to be fitted to the vine, it must be shaped.

How does God put us into shape to fit into the wounds of Christ?

John 3:3-8

What must we be?

What must we be born of in order to be born again?

How are we born again?

Acts 2:38

How does God shape us in Baptism?

Acts 22:16

Romans 6:4–11

1 Peter 3:21

In order to be grafted to the branch, it must be united to the vine.

Baptism does not only cleanse us from our sin, overcome sin and death, and give us eternal life; it also unites us with Jesus. We literally are in Jesus.

In Romans 6:4–6, with what are we united?

Because we are united with Christ, we can say with Martin Luther:

“That is the mystery which is rich in divine grace to sinners: wherein by a *wonderful exchange* our sins are no longer ours but Christ’s and the righteousness of Christ not Christ’s but ours. He has emptied Himself of His righteousness that He might clothe us with it, and fill us with it. And He has taken our evils upon Himself that He might deliver us from them... in the same manner as He grieved and suffered in our sins, and was confounded, in the same manner we rejoice and glory in His righteousness.” –Martin Luther, *Werke* (Weimar, 1883), 5: 608.

Since we are united with Christ, all that we have is Christ’s, and all that is Christ’s is ours. All that the vine offers — the branch receives.

In order to be grafted, the branch must be bound to the vine.

For the graft to take place it must be bound tightly to the vine.

What does God use to bind us tightly to Him?

Romans 10:17

John 15:7

Colossians 3:16

How does God's Word keep you bound close to Jesus? Which of the following ways do you use the Word in your life? Check all that apply.

- Study it.
- Sing it.
- Pray it.
- Memorize it.
- Quote it to yourself.
- Use it when you are upset.
- Turn to it when you are sad.
- Find comfort when you are hurting.
- Find strength when you are weak.
- Find hope when you are at the end of your rope.

Share a Bible verse that means something special to you and why, a time that you remembered a Bible verse right when you needed it, or a time you opened the Bible and God spoke to you through that Word.

In order to grow strong, the branch must be pruned.

The grafted branch will thrive as it gets its life from the vine (abides in Jesus). However, the branch often sends out shoots that make it weaker. These shoots are often called suckers and should be removed as soon as they appear.

What "suckers" have grown in your life that take away your focus on abiding in Jesus?

According to Hebrews 12:1-2, how do we throw off the "suckers" in our lives?

Read John 15:1–2.

When we are abiding in Jesus, what will the Father do?

How has God pruned you in your life? Share examples.

How has that pruning helped you be more fruitful for Jesus?

Conclusion

Like a branch, we were grafted into Jesus’ suffering and death, being united to Him. He alone became our source of love, life, and everything that is in life. And as we grow in the Word of God, He feeds us, strengthens us, and helps us bear fruit. We live a new life knowing that because we have been grafted into Christ Himself, *in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 8:37–39).

Closing Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank You that You were wounded so that I could be grafted into You and Your love. Help me to see that all my strength, my life, and my love comes from You. As the vine You feed me, grow me, and support me, so that I may live in You all the days of my life. Amen.

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ABIDING IN CHRIST

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide Bibles and copies of the Bible study for attendees.]

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me (John 15:1–4).

Opening Prayer: Dear Lord, we have been grafted into You, the eternal life-giving vine. We find our life in You, our hope in You, and our lives in You. Today as we look at what it means to be grafted into You, open our eyes to what You gave so that we may be united with You. Open our hearts to know what it means that all we will ever need we will find in being united with You. In Your most holy name, Jesus. Amen.

Read Romans 11:11–24.

Have you ever seen a lemon-lime tree or a lemon-orange tree? Grafting is where a branch from one tree is implanted into the trunk of another tree. Grafting was used widely in Jesus’ day, and still is today. Paul refers to the Gentiles (us) being grafted into the tree of God’s people (Romans 11). Grafting is an excellent illustration of what Christ means when He tells us to *abide in me* (John 15:4a). In this lesson we will look at how grafting can teach us how we are connected to Christ.

In order to successfully graft, the vine receiving the graft must be wounded.

In order to graft a new branch to the original vine, the vine must be cut. It must be pierced and notched, and the sap must be able to flow out.

Read Isaiah 53.

In verse 2, to what is Jesus compared?

He is compared to a young plant and a root out of dry ground.

How was this plant wounded for us?

Verse 3

He was despised and rejected by men.

Verse 4

He bore our griefs and carried our sorrows; we considered Him stricken and afflicted by God.

Verse 5

He was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquity, chastised for our peace, wounded for our healing.

Verse 8

He was cut off from the land of the living.

“Tell me, ye who hear Him groaning,
 Was there ever grief like His?
 Friends through fear His cause disowning,
 Foes insulting His distress;
 Many hands were raised to wound Him,
 None would intervene to save;
 But the deepest stroke that pierced Him
 Was the stroke that justice gave.”
Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted (LSB 451:2)

Take time to discuss the ways that Jesus was wounded for you.

Jesus was beaten, pierced by nails, spit upon, and mocked to name just a few.

Often it is only during Lent that we contemplate what Jesus did for us. As you talk about the wounds of Jesus, how do you feel toward Him who gave all of that for you?

Why did Jesus have to be wounded for you?

He was wounded for us because it was the only way to pay the price of our many sins.

In order to be grafted, the branch must be cut to fit into the vine.

The second thing we know about grafting is that the branch that is to be grafted into the vine must also be cut, and the closer the cut of the branch is to the cut of the vine, the better the fit and the better the graft. Let us look at this closer.

In order for the branch to be grafted, it must be torn away from the tree from which it naturally grows. We also need to be torn away from the branch from which we naturally grow.

What is our natural state?**Psalm 51:5**

From the moment we were conceived, we were sinful and unclean in the eyes of God.
 We were shaped in sin in our very body and corrupted by sin down to our DNA.

Ephesians 2:1–5

We were dead in our trespasses and sins. We were under the power of Satan and lived by our flesh. By our very nature, we were objects of wrath.

1 Corinthians 2:14

We cannot even begin to understand God. Without the Spirit, we are truly blind, dead, and an enemy of God.

These are not just words, but the reality of our lives.

Discuss how you truly see your sin.

It is important that we truly see our sin for what it is — ugly and disgusting to God. For until we see our sin in its ugliness, we will never really understand the grace of God.

If looking at our sin does not make us sick to our stomach, and ready to retch, it is probably because we do not really see the sin in our lives.

Do you agree with this statement or not? Why?

When Isaiah saw God (Isaiah 6) he knew that he was deserving of death because he was a sinner and a sinful man cannot live in the presence of God. David calls himself a worm in Psalm 22. It is only as we see ourselves for who we truly are that we will be ready to rejoice in our salvation.

Note: Is it not rather noteworthy: that from which we must be cut away started with a plant? (Genesis 3:1–6)

The graft must be shaped to fit into the wound in the vine.

In order for the graft to be fitted to the vine, it must be shaped.

How does God put us into shape to fit into the wounds of Christ?

John 3:3–8

What must we be?

We must be born again.

What must we be born of in order to be born again?

We must be born of water and the Spirit.

How are we born again?

Acts 2:38

Repent, be baptized, and you will receive the Holy Spirit.

How does God shape us in Baptism?

Acts 22:16

He washes away our sins.

Romans 6:4–11

In baptism, we overcome sin and death to walk in newness of life.

1 Peter 3:21

In Baptism, we are saved through the power of the resurrection.

In order to be grafted to the branch, it must be united to the vine.

Baptism does not only cleanse us from our sin, overcome sin and death, and give us eternal life; it also unites us with Jesus. We literally are in Jesus.

In Romans 6:4–6, with what are we united?

We are united in His death — our old nature was nailed to the cross.

We are united in His life — that we might walk in a new life.

Because we are united with Christ, we can say with Martin Luther:

“That is the mystery which is rich in divine grace to sinners: wherein by a *wonderful exchange* our sins are no longer ours but Christ’s and the righteousness of Christ not Christ’s but ours. He has emptied Himself of His righteousness that He might clothe us with it, and fill us with it. And He has taken our evils upon Himself that He might deliver us from them... in the same manner as He grieved and suffered in our sins, and was confounded, in the same manner we rejoice and glory in His righteousness.” –Martin Luther, *Werke* (Weimar, 1883), 5: 608.

Since we are united with Christ, all that we have is Christ’s, and all that is Christ’s is ours. All that the vine offers — the branch receives.

In order to be grafted, the branch must be bound to the vine.

For the graft to take place it must be bound tightly to the vine.

What does God use to bind us tightly to Him?

Romans 10:17

The Word of Christ brings faith.

John 15:7

It is through the Word that we remain in Jesus.

Colossians 3:16

We are to have the Word dwell (live) inside of us constantly.

How does God’s Word keep you bound close to Jesus? Which of the following ways do you use the Word in your life? Check all that apply.

- Study it.
- Sing it.
- Pray it.
- Memorize it.
- Quote it to yourself.
- Use it when you are upset.
- Turn to it when you are sad.
- Find comfort when you are hurting.
- Find strength when you are weak.
- Find hope when you are at the end of your rope.

Share a Bible verse that means something special to you and why, a time that you remembered a Bible verse right when you needed it, or a time you opened the Bible and God spoke to you through that Word.

In order to grow strong, the branch must be pruned.

The grafted branch will thrive as it gets its life from the vine (abides in Jesus). However, the branch often sends out shoots that make it weaker. These shoots are often called suckers and should be removed as soon as they appear.

What “suckers” have grown in your life that take away your focus on abiding in Jesus?

Here you can list all the things that Satan brings into your life to distract you from Jesus.

According to Hebrews 12:1–2, how do we throw off the “suckers” in our lives?

We have to fix our eyes on Jesus and focus on what He has done for us, what He has called us from, and what He has called us to. We can give thanks for God’s protection in all things.

Read John 15:1–2.

When we are abiding in Jesus, what will the Father do?

The Father will prune us. If you have time, you can read Hebrews 12:5–13.

How has God pruned you in your life? Share examples.

This is a time to share personal hurts, struggles, and losses in our lives that have brought us closer to Christ.

How has that pruning helped you be more fruitful for Jesus?

Share times that God worked in your life that resulted in your growing closer to Him.

Conclusion

Like a branch, we were grafted into Jesus' suffering and death, being united to Him. He alone became our source of love, life, and everything that is in life. And as we grow in the Word of God, He feeds us, strengthens us, and helps us bear fruit. We live a new life knowing that because we have been grafted into Christ Himself, *in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 8:37–39).

Closing Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank You that You were wounded so that I could be grafted into You and Your love. Help me to see that all my strength, my life, and my love comes from You. As the vine You feed me, grow me, and support me, so that I may live in You all the days of my life. Amen.

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AN AGE OF GRACE

Bible Study • Study Guide

Opening Prayer: *O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to another generation, your power to all those to come. Your righteousness, O God, reaches the high heavens. You who have done great things, O God, who is like you? (Psalm 71:17–19). Amen.*

“Youth is wasted on the young.” “Age before beauty.” “I’m not as young as I used to be.”
“Aging gracefully.”

What other age-related phrases do you hear often? Which have you said yourself?

Our culture seems to be consumed with the aging process.

Why do you think that is? What kinds of messages can Christians give about living life at any age?

Activity Quiz time: Briefly answer the following questions with your opinions.

How old is old? _____ **How young is young?** _____

What do you consider to be the perfect age? _____

Now, think about this: Would your answers be different if you were twenty years older? How about twenty years younger?

Read about the following women.

Describe who they were. What were they called to do?

Sarah (Genesis 17:15–21)

Miriam (Exodus 2:1–10; Numbers 26:59)

Naomi (Ruth 1:1–5, 15–18; 4:13–17)

Mary (Luke 1:26–38)

Anna (Luke 2:36–38)

Lydia (Acts 16:11–15)

When describing these biblical servants of God, did you note their ages? If not, take time to go back and do that now. How old do you think each of these women was during the passages given? Further consider this: How may their age have seemed beneficial to their task? Could their ages have been considered an obstacle somehow?

Now, think about the stages of life you have already encountered.

How has God used you at each stage? What are ways you may serve Him in the future?

Read Job 12:12–13.

What is one blessing that often comes with age? From whom does this blessing come?

Read 1 Timothy 4:11–12.

Why would youth be something to "despise" in a young believer? How could it be an asset for young people to set a Christian example?

Read Jesus' promises to us in Revelation 22:12–14. Think about God's timeline.

Who is "the beginning"? Who is "the end"? Thanks to the Alpha and Omega, how long will our lives be?

How do these answers change our perspective on age?

We can do our sisters in Christ a disservice by not considering them for a task due to age — any age! Women who are bedridden can be prayer warriors and amazing examples of Christian patience. Women who are just entering adulthood can provide insight on how to reach a new generation as well as enthusiasm to serve with new ideas. Women in all stages in between can use their unique combinations of experience, time, and energy to provide service to the Lord and His people.

What gifts can younger people bring to the Church?

What gifts can older people bring to the Church?

What can a mother to grade-schoolers contribute?

What can a new grandma contribute?

Look around your group.

Is there a gap somewhere in the ages of the people in the room?

Why do you think this is?

Try to reach out to women of this age group.

How can you help them? What ideas do they have for your group? How can you be more available to more women?

How does your current stage in life enable you to serve in special ways?

Think of the next stage of life you will likely encounter.

How will you be able to serve the Lord then?

The women in the Bible listed above were all loved by their Heavenly Father. Some of them were happy with their stage in life. Others were not. All of them experienced God's grace and learned of His perfect timing in their lives. Thanks to our loving Savior, every age we experience is an age of grace — where we experience the forgiveness of Jesus and share the Good News of that grace with those around us.

Closing Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, thank You for loving us, Your daughters, no matter our ages! Thank You for giving us eternal life through Your Son, Jesus Christ. Enable us to use our time on earth to serve You and our brothers and sisters in Christ in every age and stage we experience. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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An Age of Grace, written by Lisa M. Clark, St. Louis, Missouri
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AN AGE OF GRACE

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide each participant a Bible and copy of this study guide.]

Opening Prayer: *O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to another generation, your power to all those to come. Your righteousness, O God, reaches the high heavens. You who have done great things, O God, who is like you? (Psalm 71:17–19). Amen.*

“Youth is wasted on the young.” “Age before beauty.” “I’m not as young as I used to be.” “Aging gracefully.”

What other age-related phrases do you hear often? Which have you said yourself?

Our culture seems to be consumed with the aging process.

Why do you think that is? What kinds of messages can Christians give about living life at any age?

Both sets of opening questions are meant to introduce the theme. Women may want to think about the answers silently. Encourage participation if it is provided, but do not let the conversation here overshadow the rest of the Bible study time.

Activity Quiz time: Briefly answer the following questions with your opinions.

Answers will vary.

How old is old? _____ How young is young? _____

What do you consider to be the perfect age? _____

Now, think about this: Would your answers be different if you were twenty years older?

How about twenty years younger?

Again, do not force out-loud sharing; be careful that this does not become a time to target any particular age for criticism. Instead, it can open the doors to empathy if women are comfortable offering their thoughts.

Read about the following women.

Describe who they were. What were they called to do?

You may want to select only a few, or divide the passages into groups if time is limited.

Sarah (Genesis 17:15–21)

Sarah wanted to be a mother for decades, but she did not expect it to happen when she was ninety-one years old! This, however, was the Lord's plan for her.

Miriam (Exodus 2:1–10; Numbers 26:59)

As a young girl, Miriam watched for the well-being of her brother, Moses, whom God would later use to bring His people out of Egypt.

Naomi (Ruth 1:1–5, 15–18; 4:13–17)

Naomi thought her life was over when she lost her husband and adult sons, but she later became a nurse to her grandson, Obed.

Mary (Luke 1:26–38)

Mary was likely a young teenager when she learned of her role as an unwed mother to the Son of God. This would be daunting at any age!

Anna (Luke 2:36–38)

Anna lived most of her long life as a childless widow; she served the Lord at the temple in continual prayer and worship. She was one of the first witnesses of baby Jesus, and she spread the Good News to all who were looking for the Messiah.

Lydia (Acts 16:11–15)

We are not certain of Lydia's age, but she was a wealthy working woman, a seller of purple goods. She and her household were baptized, and she showed hospitality to Paul and Silas.

When describing these biblical servants of God, did you note their ages? If not, take time to go back and do that now. How old do you think each of these women was during the passages given? Further consider this: How may their age have seemed beneficial to their task? Could their ages have been considered an obstacle somehow?

Further discussion about age and roles may vary. These women were different ages with different life situations, but God loved them all and used them all in special ways.

Now, think about the stages of life you have already encountered.

How has God used you at each stage? What are ways you may serve Him in the future?

This can be a meditative question again, but women can witness to one another of God's care in their lives.

Read Job 12:12–13.

What is one blessing that often comes with age? From whom does this blessing come?

Wisdom and understanding can come with age; these gifts are ultimately from God.

Those who exhibit wisdom and understanding can be wonderful loving role models for Christians of all ages.

Read 1 Timothy 4:11–12.

Why would youth be something to "despise" in a young believer? How could it be an asset for young people to set a Christian example?

Inexperience or a difference in interests may be reasons some people may not be kind to younger adults. Enthusiasm and new ideas may be assets young people can bring to the church. Young adults who are witnesses of a Christian lifestyle can be powerful influences in the surrounding culture.

Read Jesus' promises to us in Revelation 22:12–14. Think about God's timeline.

Who is "the beginning"? Who is "the end"? Thanks to the Alpha and Omega, how long will our lives be?

God is the beginning and the end. Thanks to the Alpha and Omega, we will live in heaven with Him forever.

How do these answers change our perspective on age?

Our God is timeless. Jesus is eternal. When we remember that we will live forever, a one hundred-year-old seems very young! We can then be motivated to make our time on earth full of love and witness to our neighbors, that they may live forever with their Savior too.

We can do our sisters in Christ a disservice by not considering them for a task due to age — any age! Women who are bedridden can be prayer warriors and amazing examples of Christian patience. Women who are just entering adulthood can provide insight on how to reach a new generation as well as enthusiasm to serve with new ideas. Women in all stages in between can use their unique combinations of experience, time, and energy to provide service to the Lord and His people.

The answers below will vary for each group. The goal of this section is to help women understand and appreciate those of different ages. Guide discussion so that it focuses on ways to reach out — not single out — and connect with women who may currently be overlooked.

What gifts can younger people bring to the Church?

Answers might include energy, enthusiasm, and physical strength.

What gifts can older people bring to the Church?

Answers might include wisdom, experience, and patience.

What can a mother to grade-schoolers contribute?

Answers might include access to new technologies and abilities.

What can a new grandma contribute?

Answers might include time and experience.

Look around your group.

Is there a gap somewhere in the ages of the people in the room?

Why do you think this is?

Try to reach out to women of this age group.

How can you help them? What ideas do they have for your group? How can you be more available to more women?

How does your current stage in life enable you to serve in special ways?

Think of the next stage of life you will likely encounter.

How will you be able to serve the Lord then?

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CHOSEN AND TREASURED

Bible Study • Study Guide

Opening Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, as we study Your Word, come alongside each of us and reach into our hearts and minds to create the understanding You would have us gain through our study. We humbly ask this as Your treasured chosen people. In Your name we pray. Amen.

Introduction

Have you ever watched the History channel's program, *Oak Island*? This little island is in Nova Scotia, Canada, and many people have been hunting for buried treasure on the island for several hundred years. Several people have been killed looking for the treasure, and still nothing of any value has been found. However, they are still looking, and over the past nine years two brothers have invested a vast amount of money to find the treasure that is supposedly buried there. Will they ever find anything? I do not know and I have my doubts. If they do find treasure, will the investment in the search have been worth it?

Have you ever gone hunting for treasure? Spend some time talking about the search.

What steps did you take, what were you searching for, and was it worth the effort? If you found your "treasure", do you still treasure it today?

Who Seeks?

As humans we tend to seek material things. It might be something we can see, like the appearance of someone we wish to be like, or it might be something more tangible like money, cars, or houses. Often our seeking for treasure in this world is misplaced on things. Does it not fill your heart to know that God's seeking is not misplaced? He is seeking you because He treasures you, and loves you more than you can comprehend.

Read Genesis 3:8–9.

Who is doing the seeking?

What words are evidence of the seeking?

Why do you think the seeking is happening?

Find and Treasure

Read Genesis 3:14–15

What is the evidence that God treasured Adam and Eve?

Who is referenced in verse 15?

God provided us with a Savior from the very beginning. He did not want us to live in everlasting sin and life with the devil as boss. He treasured each of us as His creation so much that He made a plan for our salvation through the sacrifice of the Lamb which He provided.

What do these verses say about God treasuring His children?

Deuteronomy 7:6

Deuteronomy 14:2

Deuteronomy 26:18–19

Isaiah 62:4

Ephesians 2:19–22

1 Peter 2:9

God Protects You

Not only did God call you from the very beginning, He also protects you. God's protection for us is from eternal death and damnation. He does not say He will keep us from all harm in this world, but that He will guard us, and we can find refuge in Him so that we can spend eternity with Him. **Read the following verses and focus on God's protection for us.**

Psalm 9:10

Psalm 91:4

Psalm 91:11

2 Timothy 1:7

God Claims You

For something to be our treasure, we need to claim it as our own. You cannot claim it as your own without some ownership of, or entitlement to, the treasure. God claims you as His own. **Read the verses below, and digest how God claims you and treasures you.**

Psalm 139:13-14

Jeremiah 29:11

Ephesians 1:4

God Gives You Rest

God recognizes that living in a world filled with sin, death, and the devil is exhausting. One of the ways He treasures us is by giving us rest from the struggles of the world. He gives us rest in Christian community, in His sacraments, and in the comfort provided in His Word.

In the verses below, how does God give us rest?

Matthew 11:28

John 14:26–27

2 Thessalonians 3:16

God Gives You Eternal Life

Ultimately, God’s greatest blessing is the promise of everlasting life in heaven with Him for all of eternity. There is no better way for God to treasure us.

Note how the following verses provide assurance that He treasures us in this promise.

Psalms 62:7

John 3:16

John 6:47

1 John 3:16

God treasures us in ways we cannot fully comprehend. We have explored God’s provisions for our care and His promise of everlasting life, for His protection from sin, death, and the devil, and for rest in Him in this life and in the next. God treasures us — each of us — and it is with this assurance that we can face each day and all that the devil throws at us. We are assured that God has chosen us; He assures us that we will spend eternity with Him because of the sacrifice Jesus made at the cross.

Closing Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, help us to remember that You have chosen us with the ultimate goal for each of us to join You in heaven evermore praising you. Grant us continued faith and strength to live each day with our focus on You, serving You and those You bring into our lives, and treasuring You in a small fraction of the way that You treasure us, but each effort made perfect by you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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CHOSEN AND TREASURED

Bible Study • Leader Guide

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Opening Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, as we study Your Word, come alongside each of us and reach into our hearts and minds to create the understanding You would have us gain through our study. We humbly ask this as Your treasured chosen people. In Your name we pray. Amen.

Introduction

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Read Genesis 3:8–9.

Who is doing the seeking?

God is doing the seeking, v 8.

What words are evidence of the seeking?

Where are you? God knows where they are — He is seeking Adam and Eve. He is asking them to come to Him.

Why do you think the seeking is happening?

Even in these very early moments of sin in this world, God recognized that His human beings would need Him for confession and absolution, so He sought them out.

Find and Treasure

Read Genesis 3:14–15

What is the evidence that God treasured Adam and Eve?

He curses the devil and makes him to always be lower than even the beasts of the field.

Who is referenced in verse 15?

God makes His promise of a Savior, and He lets the devil know that he would not win but that he would be conquered later.

God provided us with a Savior from the very beginning. He did not want us to live in everlasting sin and life with the devil as boss. He treasured each of us as His creation so much that He made a plan for our salvation through the sacrifice of the Lamb which He provided.

What do these verses say about God treasuring His children?

Deuteronomy 7:6

You are His treasured possession. He chose you.

Deuteronomy 14:2

You are His treasured possession. He chose you.

Deuteronomy 26:18–19

You are His treasured possession, and He will set you in a place of honor.

Isaiah 62:4

You are called and the Lord delights in you.

Ephesians 2:19–22

You are members of God's household.

1 Peter 2:9

You are a chosen, special possession. He called you!

God Protects You

Not only did God call you from the very beginning, He also protects you. God's protection for us is from eternal death and damnation. He does not say He will keep us from all harm in this world, but that He will guard us, and we can find refuge in Him so that we can spend eternity with Him. **Read the following verses and focus on God's protection for us.**

Psalm 9:10

The Lord will not forsake us.

Psalm 91:4

He is our refuge and shield.

Psalm 91:11

He guards our ways.

2 Timothy 1:7

God gave us the Holy Spirit who gives us power, love, and self-control.

God Claims You

For something to be our treasure, we need to claim it as our own. You cannot claim it as your own without some ownership of or entitlement to the treasure. God claims you as His own.

Read the verses below, and digest how God claims you and treasures you.

Psalm 139:13–14

He knew you and formed you in your mother's womb.

Jeremiah 29:11

He plans your life and your future especially for you.

Ephesians 1:4

He chose you from the beginning.

God Gives You Rest

God recognizes that living in a world filled with sin, death, and the devil is exhausting. One of the ways He treasures us is by giving us rest from the struggles of the world. He gives us rest in the Christian community, in His sacraments, and in the comfort provided in His Word.

In the verses below, how does God give us rest?

Matthew 11:28

Come to me — there is rest in God.

John 14:26–27

He provides us peace. He leaves the Holy Spirit with us to be in our hearts and minds.

2 Thessalonians 3:16

When the Lord is with us (living in our hearts and minds) we can find peace in Him.

God Gives You Eternal Life

Ultimately, God's greatest blessing is the promise of everlasting life in heaven with Him for all of eternity. There is no better way for God to treasure us.

Note how the following verses provide assurance that He treasures us in this promise.

Psalm 62:7

My salvation is in God.

John 3:16

The Son was given so we would not perish.

John 6:47

He has created faith in me so that I can have eternal life.

1 John 3:16

He gave His life for us.

God treasures us in ways we cannot fully comprehend. We have explored God's provisions for our care and His promise of everlasting life, for His protection from sin, death, and the devil, and for rest in Him in this life and in the next. God treasures us — each of us — and it is with this assurance that we can face each day and all that the devil throws at us. We are assured that God has chosen us; He assures us that we will spend eternity with Him because of the sacrifice Jesus made at the cross.

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CHOSEN. TREASURED. REDEEMED.

Bible Study • Study Guide

Opening Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, You created us and we are wonderfully made. We are sorry for our sins that separate us from You. Thank You for planning our salvation by sending Your Son to be born, live a perfect life, suffer, die, and rise to life again. Because Jesus has redeemed us, we are saved to live lives for you. Thank You for Your Holy Spirit who generates and nurtures faith in Jesus as Savior through the Word and Sacraments. Remind us that we are chosen and treasured by You, and help us to tell the Good News of salvation in Jesus to family and friends. Be with us as we study Your Word. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

“Pick me! Pick me!” are words often heard on a playground. Children often vie for positions of honor and seniority on a team and bombard the team captain with the intensity of their need to be chosen.

How would you describe the feelings that accompany being chosen for a team? How would you describe the feelings experienced when you are not chosen? Make two lists with your partner or small group.

Read Deuteronomy 7:6–9. **Who chooses us to be God's children?**

Why did He choose us to be His *treasured possession*?

What specific attributes of God are mentioned in verse 9?

What other attributes of God can you name?

What was the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants — God's treasured people? See Genesis 17:7.

What means does God use to choose us to be His children? See 1 Thessalonians 1:4–5, 1 Peter 3:21, and Mark 14:22–24.

Share with a partner or the small group some traditions in your family surrounding Baptisms and Confirmations.

In 1 Peter 2:9–10, how are God's people described?

What feelings do these descriptions elicit?

Read the following Bible passages and determine what benefits we receive as God's chosen and treasured possessions.

Psalms 103:2–4

Matthew 28:20

John 3:16

John 14:26–27

Galatians 5:22–23

Ephesians 1:7–11

1 Corinthians 12:4–11

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12, 27.

Share with a partner or the small group how your God-given talents and spiritual gifts can specifically be used to build up the body of Christ.

Perhaps you have heard the story of a young boy and the sailboat that he loved. The boy had lovingly and painstakingly fashioned his boat, only to lose it as the wind filled its sails and carried it quickly away from the boy. The next day, the boat was featured “for sale” in a pawn shop. The boy worked many hours so he could pay for the boat. After several weeks, he bought the boat and as he left the store, holding the sailboat close to his chest, the boy could be heard joyfully exclaiming: “You are my boat. You are twice my boat. First, you are my boat because I made you. Second, you are my boat because I bought you.”

Read Isaiah 43:1 and Galatians 4:4–7. **How did Jesus redeem all mankind who were enslaved *under the law*?**

Why, though He lived a perfect life, did He have to die on the cross? See Romans 6:23a.

The title of this study is “Chosen. Treasured. Redeemed.”

Who does the choosing, treasuring, and redeeming? Why?

As God’s chosen, treasured, and redeemed children, what is our Spirit-led response to His love?

Deuteronomy 7:9

Psalm 105:1–6, 45

Colossians 3:12–17

Philippians 4:4–8

1 Peter 2:9

As His treasured children, what are we promised by our loving and faithful God?

See 2 Timothy 4:7–8; James 1:12; and Revelation 2:10.

To someone who needs to hear the Good News of salvation in Christ alone, *proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light* (1 Peter 2:9b).

Closing Prayer: Sing or pray “Great is Thy Faithfulness” (*LSB* 809).

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CHOSEN. TREASURED. REDEEMED.

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide a copy of this study and a Bible for each participant. Assure the group that all narratives shared within the group stay in the group, unless permission is given.]

Opening Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, You created us and we are wonderfully made. We are sorry for our sins that separate us from You. Thank You for planning our salvation by sending Your Son to be born, live a perfect life, suffer, die, and rise to life again. Because Jesus has redeemed us, we are saved to live lives for you. Thank You for Your Holy Spirit who generates and nurtures faith in Jesus as Savior through the Word and Sacraments. Remind us that we are chosen and treasured by You, and help us to tell the Good News of salvation in Jesus to family and friends. Be with us as we study Your Word. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

“Pick me! Pick me!” are words often heard on a playground. Children often vie for positions of honor and seniority on a team and bombard the team captain with the intensity of their need to “be chosen.”

How would you describe the feelings that accompany being chosen for a team? How would you describe the feelings experienced when you are not chosen? Make two lists with your partner or small group.

Answers will vary by group. Feelings experienced when chosen might include: joy, happiness, anticipation, relief, and optimism. Feelings experienced when not chosen might include: sadness, dejection, anger, embarrassment, awkwardness, and inadequacy.

Read Deuteronomy 7:6–9. **Who chooses us to be God's children?**

God

Why did He choose us to be His treasured possession?

God loves us and is keeping His covenant with His people; it is not because of our merits.

What specific attributes of God are mentioned in verse 9?

He is faithful and loves steadfastly.

What other attributes of God can you name?

Answers will vary by group but could include: good, holy, loving, merciful, gracious, eternal, unchangeable, just, present everywhere (omnipresent), all-knowing (omniscient), and all-powerful (omnipotent).

What was the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants — God's treasured people? See Genesis 17:7.

He would be their God, and they would be His people.

What means does God use to choose us to be His children? See 1 Thessalonians 1:4–5, 1 Peter 3:21, and Mark 14:22–24.

The Holy Spirit works faith through His Means of Grace — God's Word and Sacraments (Baptism and Holy Communion).

Share with a partner or the small group some traditions in your family surrounding Baptisms and Confirmations.

Answers will vary, but encourage all group members to share. The leader should begin discussion with personal examples.

In 1 Peter 2:9–10, how are God's people described?

They are described as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and God's people who have received mercy.

What feelings do these descriptions elicit?

Answers will vary by group but could include: special, loved, thankful, full of anticipation, and joyful.

Read the following Bible passages and determine what benefits we receive as God's chosen and treasured possessions.

Psalm 103:2–4

God forgives all sins, heals physical and spiritual disease, redemption, steadfast love and mercy

Matthew 28:20

God is with us always.

John 3:16

Eternal life

John 14:26–27

Holy Spirit — the Helper, guidance, peace that only God can give

Galatians 5:22–23

Fruit of the Spirit — love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (one fruit = we get the entire package)

Ephesians 1:7–11

Redemption, forgiveness of sins, an inheritance of eternal life

1 Corinthians 12:4–11

Gifts of the Spirit for the building up of God’s church (wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues, and interpretation of tongues)

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12, 27.

Share with a partner or the small group how your God-given talents and spiritual gifts can specifically be used to build up the body of Christ.

Answers will vary, but encourage all to share.

Perhaps you have heard the story of a young boy and the sailboat that he loved. The boy had lovingly and painstakingly fashioned his boat, only to lose it as the wind filled its sails and carried it quickly away from the boy. The next day, the boat was for sale in a pawn shop. The boy worked many hours so he could pay for the boat. After several weeks, he bought the boat and as he left the store, holding the sailboat close to his chest, the boy could be heard joyfully exclaiming: “You are my boat. You are twice my boat. First, you are my boat because I made you. Second, you are my boat because I bought you.”

Read Isaiah 43:1 and Galatians 4:4–7. **How did Jesus redeem all mankind who were enslaved *under the law*?**

Jesus created us and redeemed us; He humbled Himself to be a man to “buy us back” to make us God’s people and heirs.

Why, though He lived a perfect life, did He have to die on the cross? See Romans 6:23a.

Because He kept God’s law perfectly (without sinning) He did not have to die but chose to die for our sins, thus making us God’s own people.

The title of this study is “Chosen. Treasured. Redeemed.”

Who does the choosing, treasuring, and redeeming? Why?

God. We cannot because our sinful nature will not allow it.

As God’s chosen, treasured, and redeemed children, what is our Spirit-led response to His love?

Deuteronomy 7:9

Live as God would want us to, keeping His commandments.

Psalm 105:1–6, 45

Thank God, tell about what God has done, sing praises to Him, rejoice, seek God, remember what He has done, and keep His laws and statutes.

Colossians 3:12–17

Be compassionate, forgiving, kind, humble, meek, patient, loving, and thankful. Study the Word, let peace of Christ rule in heart, and do all in the name of Jesus.

Philippians 4:4–8

Rejoice in the Lord, pray to God, think about things worthy of praise, and follow Christian examples and mentors.

1 Peter 2:9

Proclaim the message of salvation in Jesus — He has called us out of the darkness of sin into His light of life.

As His treasured children, what are we promised by our loving and faithful God?

See 2 Timothy 4:7–8; James 1:12; and Revelation 2:10b.

When we fight the good fight and endure trials of this world in the name of Jesus, God gives us the crown of righteousness — the crown of life.

To someone who needs to hear the Good News of salvation in Christ alone, *proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light* (1 Peter 2:9b).

Closing Prayer: Sing or pray “Great is Thy Faithfulness” (*LSB* 809).

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CREATED FOR GOD'S WORK

Bible Study • Study Guide

Opening Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, send Your Holy Spirit to guide us as we study Your Word. Help us to understand the message You have for us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Read Ephesians 2:10.

Which words stand out for you? What is your reaction to these words?

In this Bible study, we will read the stories of women from the Old and New Testaments who were created to do God's work. After reading each of their stories in the Bible, answer the following questions:

(If time is short, have individual women or small groups take one or two of the women and report back to the group.)

Deborah

Read Judges 4 and 5.

1. What work did God have for this woman to do?

2. How did she react?

3. What was the outcome?

4. How was her situation remarkable or unique?

Jael

Read Judges 4:9, 17–24.

1. What work did God have for this woman to do?

2. How did she react?

3. What was the outcome?

4. How was her situation remarkable or unique?

Rahab

Read Joshua 2, 6:22–25, Hebrews 11:31, Matthew 1:5.

1. What work did God have for this woman to do?

2. How did she react?

3. What was the outcome?

4. How was her situation remarkable or unique?

Esther

Read Esther 2, 4, 5:1–8, 7, 8:1–8.

1. What work did God have for this woman to do?

2. How did she react?

3. What was the outcome?

4. How was her situation remarkable or unique?

Elizabeth

Read Luke 1:5–17, 24–25, 39–45, 57–66, 80.

1. What work did God have for this woman to do?

2. How did she react?

3. What was the outcome?

4. How was her situation remarkable or unique?

Mary, the Mother of Jesus

Read Luke 1:26–38, 46–55, 2:1–7, 15–21, 39–52.

1. What work did God have for this woman to do?

2. How did she react?

3. What was the outcome?

4. How was her situation remarkable or unique?

The Grateful, Forgiven Woman

Read Luke 7:36–50.

1. What work did God have for this woman to do?

2. How did she react?

3. What was the outcome?

4. How was her situation remarkable or unique?

Lydia

Read Acts 16:11–15.

1. What work did God have for this woman to do?

2. How did she react?

3. What was the outcome?

4. How was her situation remarkable or unique?

Consider the variety of work that God created for these women to do, their responses, and their unique circumstances.

What work has God created for you to do?

Closing Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, guide us to know the work You have created for us to do. Support us in carrying out those works. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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CREATED FOR GOD'S WORK

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide a copy of this study and a Bible for each participant. Assure the group that all narratives shared within the group stay in the group, unless permission is given.]

Opening Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, send Your Holy Spirit to guide us as we study Your Word. Help us to understand the message You have for us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Read Ephesians 2:10.

Which words stand out for you? What is your reaction to these words?

God's workmanship: The word "workmanship" used here is the Greek word *poiema*, meaning a work of art or a masterpiece. (John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scripture* by Dallas Seminary Faculty, New Testament edition. Colorado Springs, Colorado: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1985, 624.)

Our good works do not belong to us. They are created by God for us to do. "The verb 'to create' is used in the Bible to express the idea of God bringing something into being out of nothing." (Walter L. Rosen, *EPHESIANS — The Church: God's Servant*, God's Word for Today. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996, 18.)

Because of faith, given to us by the Holy Spirit, we are able to do good works. (*The Lutheran Study Bible*, English Standard Version. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009, 2019.)

Our omniscient and eternal God prepares these works beforehand.

Participants may have other responses.

In this Bible study, we will read the stories of women from the Old and New Testament who were created to do God's work.

(If time is short, have individual women or small groups take one or two of the women and report back to the group.)

Deborah

Read Judges 4 and 5.

1. What work did God have for this woman to do?

She was a prophetess and judge for Israel. She settled disputes between the people.

2. How did she react?

She did what the Lord asked of her. She told Barak to do as God had commanded him. He was to gather 10,000 troops and take them to the Kishon River, where he would be met by General Sisera of Jabin's army. She let Barak know that the victory would not lead to his glory but result from the actions of a woman. At Barak's request, Deborah agreed to accompany him. She reminded Barak that the Lord went before him.

3. What was the outcome?

Israel was given the victory, as Deborah had prophesied. Deborah and Barak sang a retelling of the victory, praising God, and encouraging the soldiers.

4. How was her situation remarkable or unique?

Deborah is the only woman judge mentioned in the Bible.

Jael

Read Judges 4:9, 17–24.

1. What work did God have for this woman to do?

Her actions would give the Israelites victory over the Canaanites.

2. How did she react?

General Sisera came to her tent, trusted her, lay down, and fell asleep. She was able to approach him and drive the tent peg into his temple, killing him.

3. What was the outcome?

The Israelites defeated the Canaanites by God's plan.

4. How was her situation remarkable or unique?

A woman gave the final blow for the victory. This was considered a shameful defeat for a proud warrior. (*The Lutheran Study Bible*, English Standard Version. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009, 388.)

Rahab

Read Joshua 2, 6:22–25, Hebrews 11:31, Matthew 1:5.

1. What work did God have for this woman to do?

With her home built in the Jericho wall, she was in a strategic position to hide the Israelite spies. God chose her to do just that. The spies were checking out Jericho in preparation for taking the city.

2. How did she react?

She hid the spies on her roof under stalks of flax. She confessed to the spies that she believed their God was the God of heaven and earth. She said she knew that the Lord had given them the land. She related what happened at the Red Sea and what had

happened to the two Amorite kings. Rahab asked the spies to spare her family from death when Jericho was taken. When the king of Jericho asked about the spies, she reported that they had gone out of the city before the gate closed. She encouraged the king's men to pursue them. She gave the spies instructions for a safe escape plan. As instructed by the spies, she tied a scarlet cord around the window of her house, so that they could spare her family.

3. What was the outcome?

The Israelite spies successfully escaped from Jericho. The Israelites did take the city. Rahab's family was taken out before the city was set on fire. She and her family continued to live in Israel.

4. How was her situation remarkable or unique?

Rahab was a prostitute. She confessed her faith in the God of Israel. "In the midst of judgment and destruction comes a scene of mercy and safety. The former prostitute, with her God-given faith, and her family are delivered from the judgment that surrounds them — a picture and reminder of God's mercy in Christ as the place of refuge." (This statement is found in the notes for 6:22 in *The Lutheran Study Bible*, English Standard Version. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009, 350.) Rahab is mentioned in Hebrews 11:31 in the "By Faith" chapter. Rahab was an ancestor of Jesus Christ.

Esther

Read Esther 2, 4, 5:1–8, 7, 8:1–8.

1. What work did God have for this woman to do?

She was put in a position to influence the Persian King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) regarding a plot against the Jews by Haman, one of the king's officials.

2. How did she react?

When the king was looking for a young woman to replace Queen Vashti, Esther was chosen as one of the women to be considered. When it was her turn to go to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai, the king's eunuch in charge of the women, advised. She obeyed her guardian Mordecai and did not make known her kindred or her people. Esther won favor with the king and he set the royal crown on her head. He gave her a feast. When Mordecai learned of the plans of Haman, he went to the entrance of the king's gate in sackcloth and ashes. Esther called for Hathach, the eunuch appointed to attend her. Hathach went to Mordecai and learned of the plot against the Jews. Messages were carried back and forth. Then Esther agreed to go before the king, though it was against the law to approach him without being called. She was willing to do it, even if the king had her killed.

3. What was the outcome?

The outcome was that Esther won favor in the king's sight. He listened to her request to have a feast for the king and Haman. Haman's plot was exposed and he was hanged. Esther saved the Jews and was given the house of Haman.

4. How was her situation remarkable or unique?

Esther was Jewish. She was bold enough to approach the king, even though it was against the law to do so without being called.

Elizabeth

Read Luke 1:5–17, 24–25, 39–45, 57–66, 80.

1. What work did God have for this woman to do?

She was to give birth to and raise John, the Baptist. John would prepare the way for the Messiah.

2. How did she react?

We know of Zechariah's initial reaction to the message from Gabriel, but we do not know of Elizabeth's initial reaction. After she conceived, she acknowledged that God had taken away her reproach among people. She proclaimed that Mary was carrying her Lord. When John leaped in her womb at Mary's greeting, she shared this with Mary. Elizabeth expressed wonder that Mary had come to visit her. One can only imagine what a comfort Elizabeth was to Mary.

3. What was the outcome?

Elizabeth gave birth to John. Her neighbors and relatives rejoiced with her. His family followed the instructions that were given to Zechariah at Gabriel's announcement. John grew and became strong in the Spirit. He was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance.

4. How was her situation remarkable or unique?

Elizabeth was barren and past childbearing age. Elizabeth and Mary were relatives.

Mary, the Mother of Jesus

Read Luke 1:26–38, 46–55, 2:1–7, 15–21, 39–52.

1. What work did God have for this woman to do?

She was to give birth to and raise Jesus, the promised Messiah. She was an eyewitness to the life of Jesus and may have been a source for Luke's gospel. (See the note for 2:19 in *The Lutheran Study Bible*, English Standard Version. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009, 1709.)

2. How did she react?

At first, Mary was troubled by the visit of the angel, but the account says she tried to discern the meaning of the message. She responds with, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:34b). Mary “wonders in faith.” (See the note for 1:34 in *The Lutheran Study Bible*, English Standard Version. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009, 1706.) Contrast this with Zechariah’s response. Mary describes herself as a servant and is ready to do God’s will. She breaks into a song of praise, describing God’s actions throughout history. After the visit by the shepherds, Luke says *Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart* (Luke 2:19). When Jesus was eight days old, his parents took him to be circumcised and he was given the name of Jesus, as instructed by the angel.

3. What was the outcome?

Mary gave birth to Jesus. He grew and became strong and wise. He did fulfill His role as the Messiah, who was crucified for our sins and rose from the dead, then ascended back to heaven.

4. How was her situation remarkable or unique?

Mary was a virgin, but she was able to conceive Jesus by the Holy Spirit. She was from Nazareth, described as an “obscure and insignificant” town. (See the note for 1:26 in *The Lutheran Study Bible*, English Standard Version. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009, 1706.)

The Grateful, Forgiven Woman

Read Luke 7:36–50.

1. What work did God have for this woman to do?

She was an example to the Pharisees and to us of what it means to have sins forgiven. She gave Jesus an opportunity to teach about the need for forgiveness of all sinners and the reaction of sinners to having sins forgiven.

2. How did she react?

She heard that Jesus was dining at the home of a Pharisee. She entered the home with an alabaster flask of ointment. She wet Jesus’ feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, kissed his feet, and anointed them with the oil.

3. What was the outcome?

Even though her behavior would be viewed as scandalous for that time, Jesus sees her behavior “as reverent and appropriate.” (See the note for 7:38 in *The Lutheran Study Bible*, English Standard Version. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009, 1724.) Jesus takes advantage of this situation to tell a story that illustrates the reaction of having much debt forgiven, in other words, of having much sin forgiven. Jesus tells

her that her sins are forgiven and that her faith has saved her and given her peace. Faith is a free gift.

4. How was her situation remarkable or unique?

She was a known sinner, likely a prostitute or adulteress. Simon, the Pharisee, did not think Jesus should be associating with her.

Lydia

Read Acts 16:11–15.

1. What work did God have for this woman to do?

She was a Christian witness to others. She was an example of Christian hospitality.

2. How did she react?

She listened to Paul’s Gospel message.

3. What was the outcome?

The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul (Acts 16:14b). She and her household were baptized. She opened her home to Paul.

4. How was her situation remarkable or unique?

Lydia was a seller of purple goods. Purple dye was expensive and made a profitable trade. (See the note in 16:14 in *The Lutheran Study Bible*, English Standard Version. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009, 1869.)

Consider the variety of work that God created for these women to do, their responses, and their unique circumstances.

What work has God created for you to do?

Closing Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, guide us to know the work You have created for us to do. Support us in carrying out those works. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

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DESTROYING WALLS

Bible Study • Study Guide

Opening Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus, who through His death and resurrection broke down the wall of sin which divided us from You. In this world, Lord, we continue to face visible and invisible walls built by our own sins and the sins of others. These worldly walls can impact us in negative ways. They can keep us from fully experiencing the relationship You have established with us through faith. They can keep us from showing the love and care for others that You desire. They can keep us from proclaiming Jesus to all. Lead us to trust in Your power and love to break down the walls which separate us from others and which keep us from sharing Jesus and His saving love with everyone. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Visible and Invisible Walls

Visible walls: From the time people began to build physical shelters in which to live and work, walls have been an integral part of these structures. These visible walls can be made from many materials: rock, stone, brick, mud, plaster, cement, wood, iron, woven vines, and even fabric.

What positive purposes do visible walls serve for us?

The Bible mentions visible walls or poetically describes such walls to remind us of an important way God uses visible walls for our benefit.

Read each Bible passage below. Explain how each one describes the same important way God used or uses visible walls (or an illustration of a visible wall) for our benefit.

Nehemiah 2:17–18:

Psalms 18:1–3:

Revelation 21:9–14:

These visible walls God provides are for our protection. However, when we think about people building visible walls, the reasons for doing so are not always positive.

Name a personal experience or a time in history when visible walls served a negative purpose.

Invisible walls: Invisible walls not made of physical materials can also exist between people. These walls rarely serve a positive purpose.

What emotions and circumstances can lead to the creation of invisible walls between individuals or groups?

Read Genesis 3:1–24.

What invisible wall did the actions of Adam and Eve create?

Besides separating them from God, what other consequences did Adam and Eve experience because of their disobedience?

When they disobeyed God’s command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve erected walls of doubt, shame, fear, blame, physical pain, and physical death between themselves and God. Their actions also built a wall between themselves as Adam blamed Eve for his disobedient action. Our sinful actions and thoughts and the sinful thoughts and actions of others cause these same results either between God and us or between others and us.

Jesus Demolishes The Wall Separating Us From God

The devil tempted Adam and Eve to rebel against God. Adam and Eve sinned when they doubted the truth of God's Word and when they desired to become like God.

Read Romans 5:12.

What happened to all people as a result of Adam and Eve's sin?

Read Romans 3:9–18.

How do these verses describe the wall that our sins created between us and God?

On our own, we cannot demolish the wall sin has created between God and us. God knows this. After Adam and Eve's sin, God immediately set in motion a plan to demolish this wall which we created.

Reread Genesis 3:15.

What was God's plan?

God's plan was fulfilled through Christ Jesus. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus demolished the wall of sin we built between God and us.

Read Ephesians 1:7–10.

By God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, what else do we now have?

Jesus Enables The Walls Dividing Us From One Another To Be Demolished

Jesus, the sinless one-man wrecking crew, demolished the wall our sins built between God and us. Through His forgiving love, grace, and mercy, He enables the walls which separate us from one another to be demolished.

The Christian congregation in Ephesus once found itself facing a religious and cultural wall which divided them. This congregation was made up of both Jewish and Gentile (anyone who

is not Jewish) believers. For centuries, Jews and Gentiles had a religious and cultural wall between them. The separation of God’s people from the unbelieving peoples around them was begun by God for an important reason. In Old Testament times, because many Gentiles did not know or believe in the true God, God had required that the Israelites (later known as Jews) stay separate from them so that their faith would not be corrupted. This separation was commanded by God so that His people would stay true to Him alone. Out of people’s sinful natures there grew between the Jews and Gentiles a genuine hatred toward one another. By New Testament times, rather than travel through land inhabited by Gentiles, Jews would walk many miles out of their way. Jews believed that Gentiles were both physically and spiritually unclean. Neither group wanted to be together or to help one another.

To the wonder of His disciples and to the anger of the Jewish leaders, Jesus established a different way. Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus reached out to all people, both Jews and Gentiles. We note this in His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1–42), His healing of the Centurion’s servant (Luke 7:1–10), His various encounters and meals with tax collectors and sinners, and at other times recorded in the Bible. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, He gave His disciples and all who believe in Him this command: “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations*” [emphasis mine] (Matthew 28:19a).

As John 3:16 reminds us, “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*” God sent Jesus to rescue everyone and to give everyone who trusts in Jesus as their Lord and Savior a new and eternal life. Furthermore, Jesus *died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised* (2 Corinthians 5:15). *God our Savior ... desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth* (1 Timothy 2:3b–4).

Despite Jesus’ death and resurrection for all, the old hatred and mistrust between Jews and Gentiles threatened to separate newly formed congregations in the early church. Some Jews were telling the Gentile believers in Ephesus that they had to obey Old Testament Law (such as circumcision) in addition to believing in Jesus. When the apostle Paul found out the congregation in Ephesus was suffering because of these false teachings, he was deeply concerned because the invisible walls they were building were threatening their unity in faith.

Read Ephesians 2:1–10.

Of what did Paul remind all in the Ephesus congregation?

Read Ephesians 2:13–16.

What did Jesus do for the Gentiles in the Ephesus congregation as well as for us today?

Read Ephesians 2:18–22.

How did Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, direct both the Jews and Gentile believers in Ephesus to live?

How do these words from Ephesians direct us today to work together as members of the body of Christ and as we reach out to others with the Gospel?

Identify an incident/time when your own sinful behavior and/or the sinful behaviors of others led to the building of an invisible, yet deeply separating, wall.

How did you or how are you handling the difficulties this invisible wall creates?

Read Ephesians 4:22–32.

How does God work through us to break down the invisible walls which separate us?

Read Romans 8:31–39.

How can trusting in this promise from God help break down whatever might separate us from one another?

Closing Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank You for giving Your life to rescue us from our sins and to bring us back to God our Heavenly Father. May Your power, love, mercy, grace, and forgiveness tear down the walls which separate us from others. Fill our hearts with Your care and compassion so that we are enabled to serve You and others in the unity You desire. In Your saving name we pray. Amen.

Sing: “In Adam We Have All Been One” (*LSB* 569)

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DESTROYING WALLS

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide a copy of this study, a Bible, and a hymnal for each participant. Assure the group that all narratives shared within the group stay in the group, unless permission is given.]

Opening Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You for sending Your Son, Jesus, who through His death and resurrection broke down the wall of sin which divided us from You. In this world, Lord, we continue to face visible and invisible walls built by our own sins and the sins of others. We are sorry, Father, that these worldly walls can impact us in negative ways and can keep us from fully experiencing the relationship You have established with us through faith. We are sorry they keep us from showing the love and care for others that You desire. We are sorry these walls can keep us from proclaiming Jesus to all. Please keep them from hurting our oneness with you, the oneness You gave us through faith. Lead us to trust in Your power and love to break down the walls which separate us from others and which keep us from sharing Jesus and His saving love with everyone. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Visible and Invisible Walls

Visible walls: From the time people began to build physical shelters in which to live and work, walls have been an integral part of these structures. These visible walls can be made from many materials: rock, stone, brick, mud, plaster, cement, wood, iron, woven vines, and even fabric.

What positive purposes do visible walls serve for us?

Walls provide buildings with support and structure and also help divide large spaces into smaller rooms and areas. They provide privacy and can reduce noise within a home or building. They can be a decorative element. Visible walls provide protection from weather and natural events such as erosion and landslides (e.g., retaining walls). Walls can keep out intruders. Walls can keep criminals confined for their own safety as well as ours. Visible walls which surround places like power plants and factories keep us from physical harm and danger.

The Bible mentions visible walls or poetically describes such walls to remind us of an important way God uses visible walls for our benefit.

Read each Bible passage below. Explain how each one describes the same important way God used or uses visible walls (or an illustration of a visible wall) for our benefit.

Nehemiah 2:17–18:

Following the Israelites' captivity in Babylon, God led His people and Nehemiah to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem. These walls were necessary for the people's and the city's protection.

Psalm 18:1–3:

In this psalm, David calls God *my rock and my fortress and my deliverer* (v. 2). A fortress is a structure with thick, impenetrable walls — a safe place. When we are in all kinds of danger, God's mighty protection surrounds us.

Revelation 21:9–14:

In his vision of heaven, the Apostle John sees that it has *a great, high wall, with twelve gates* (v. 12) and *twelve foundations* (v. 14). These walls of heaven again remind us of God's protection, especially from sin and eternal death. These walls remind us that we are securely with God forever through faith in Christ.

These visible walls God provides are for our protection. However, when we think about people building visible walls, the reasons for doing so are not always positive.

Name a personal experience or a time in history when visible walls served a negative purpose.

Visible walls can be built to intentionally keep others out, especially on property lines where neighbors do not get along. They can be built between countries (e.g., the Berlin Wall) to separate people from interacting with each other. People with evil intentions may construct walls to inhibit the freedom of others by physically imprisoning them.

Invisible walls: Invisible walls not made of physical materials can also exist between people. These walls rarely serve a positive purpose.

What emotions and circumstances can lead to the creation of invisible walls between individuals or groups?

Anger, resentment, hurt, hatred, jealousy, misunderstandings, lack of the truth, and hearts which are not willing to forgive are just a few emotions and circumstances which can separate individuals or groups. Long-standing falsehoods which lead to prejudice and bias can separate people, sometimes for generations. Differing opinions concerning almost any topic can separate people, as well as religious and cultural differences.

Read Genesis 3:1–24.

What invisible wall did the actions of Adam and Eve create?

Adam and Eve's actions created a wall of sin which ruined the perfect world God created and which separated them from God.

Besides separating them from God, what other consequences did Adam and Eve experience because of their disobedience?

For the first time, Adam and Eve doubted God's truthfulness (vv. 1–5). They became self-conscious and ashamed (v. 7). They were afraid of God (vv. 8–10). They blamed others for their actions (vv. 11–13). Eve would experience pain in childbearing (v. 16). Work would become difficult (v. 17–18). Physical death was now a reality (v. 19). Adam and Eve were physically barred from the perfect Garden of Eden (vv. 23–24).

When they disobeyed God's command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve erected walls of doubt, shame, fear, blame, physical pain, and physical death between themselves and God. Their actions also built a wall between themselves as Adam blamed Eve for his disobedient action. Our sinful actions and thoughts and the sinful thoughts and actions of others cause these same results either between God and us or between others and us.

Jesus Demolishes The Wall Separating Us From God

The devil tempted Adam and Eve to rebel against God. Adam and Eve sinned when they doubted the truth of God's Word and when they desired to become like God.

Read Romans 5:12.

What happened to all people as a result of Adam and Eve's sin?

We all inherited the desire to sin and its resulting consequences of hurt, pain, and death.

Read Romans 3:9–18.

How do these verses describe the wall that our sins created between us and God?

No one is righteous (v. 10). *No one understands; no one seeks for God* (v. 11). *We have turned aside, become worthless, no one does good* (v. 12). The words we say are deceitful and dangerous (v. 13). The words we say are full of *curses and bitterness* (v. 14). We are quick to *shed blood* (v. 15). We are ruined, miserable, and we don't know God's peace (vv. 16–17). We no longer respect God (v. 18).

On our own, we cannot demolish the wall sin has created between God and us. God knows this. After Adam and Eve's sin, God immediately set in motion a plan to demolish this wall which we created.

Reread Genesis 3:15.

What was God's plan?

God promised to send a descendant of Eve to defeat the devil. This promised One would be Jesus who would die for our sins and who would rise from the dead to show His ultimate power over all things, including sin, death, and the devil.

God's plan was fulfilled through Christ Jesus. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus demolished the wall of sin we built between God and us.

Read Ephesians 1:7–10.

By God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, what else do we now have?

We now have redemption through his [Jesus'] blood and the forgiveness of our trespasses (v. 7). Jesus' actions not only reconciled us to God the Father, but they also reconciled us to one another to unify us in faith and purpose (v. 10).

Jesus Enables The Walls Dividing Us From One Another To Be Demolished

Jesus, the sinless one-man wrecking crew, demolished the wall our sins built between God and us. Through His forgiving love, grace, and mercy, He enables the walls which separate us from one another to be demolished.

The Christian congregation in Ephesus once found itself facing a religious and cultural wall which divided them. This congregation was made up of both Jewish and Gentile (anyone who is not Jewish) believers. For centuries, Jews and Gentiles had a religious and cultural wall between them. The separation of God's people from the unbelieving peoples around them was begun by God for an important reason. In Old Testament times, because many Gentiles did not know or believe in the true God, God had required that the Israelites (later known as Jews) stay separate from them so that their faith would not be corrupted. One reason this separation was commanded by God was so that His people would stay true to Him alone. Out of people's sinful natures there grew between the Jews and Gentiles a genuine hatred toward one another. By New Testament times, rather than travel through land inhabited by Gentiles, Jews would walk many miles out of their way. Jews believed that Gentiles were both physically and spiritually unclean. Neither group wanted to be together or to help one another.

To the wonder of His disciples and to the anger of the Jewish leaders, Jesus established a different way. Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus reached out to all people, both Jews and Gentiles. We note this in His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1–42), His healing of the Centurion's servant (Luke 7:1–10), His various encounters and meals with tax collectors and sinners, and at other times recorded in the Bible. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, He gave His disciples and all who believe in Him this command: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations”* (emphasis mine) (Matthew 28:19a).

As John 3:16 reminds us, *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”* God sent Jesus to rescue everyone and to give everyone who trusts in Jesus as their Lord and Savior a new and eternal life. Furthermore, Jesus *died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised* (2 Corinthians 5:15). *God our Savior ... desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth* (1 Timothy 2:3b–4).

Despite Jesus' death and resurrection for all, the old hatred and mistrust between Jews and Gentiles threatened to separate newly formed congregations in the early church. Some Jews were telling the Gentile believers in Ephesus that they had to obey Old Testament Law (such as circumcision) in addition to believing in Jesus. When the apostle Paul found out the congregation in Ephesus was suffering because of these false teachings, he was deeply concerned because the invisible walls they were building were threatening their unity in faith.

Read Ephesians 2:1–10.

Of what did Paul remind all in the Ephesus congregation?

All people once walked in sin, and it is only because of God's mercy and grace for all sinners that we have been saved. This grace and salvation, which we have through faith in Christ Jesus, is God's gift. We do not receive it because of anything we do or because of any law we follow. Together, *we are his workmanship* (Ephesians 2:10).

Read Ephesians 2:13–16.

What did Jesus do for the Gentiles in the Ephesus congregation as well as for us today?

Through Jesus' shedding of blood for the sins of all people, He brought those Gentile believers *who once were far off* (v. 13) into His church. Through the price He paid for us by giving His life for us on the cross, Jesus *has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility* (v. 14) that existed between God and us as well as between others and us. Jesus reconciled both Jews and Gentiles *to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility* (v. 16). We now have peace with God (v. 15).

Read Ephesians 2:18–22.

How did Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, direct both the Jews and Gentile believers in Ephesus to live?

They were to live together as *fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God* (v. 19) with both having access to the same Triune God (v. 18). They were now being built together by the Holy Spirit as God's church, built on the foundation of Jesus Christ.

How do these words from Ephesians direct us today to work together as members of the body of Christ and as we reach out to others with the Gospel?

God desires and the Holy Spirit empowers us to work together as His church, with *Jesus himself being the cornerstone* (v. 20). The Holy Spirit works in us and among us, joining us together to love, praise, worship, and serve our Triune God.

Identify an incident/time where your own sinful behavior and/or the sinful behaviors of others led to the building of an invisible, yet deeply separating, wall.

Possible answers include things such as, when someone spreads something told them in confidence and trust is destroyed, spousal infidelity, gossip and false accusations, unwillingness to forgive, deliberate exclusion or shunning of an individual for any

reason, bullying, different opinions or beliefs, violence and abuse, fears both founded and unfounded about an individual or group. (Please note in certain circumstances, especially child and spousal abuse, both physical and invisible walls may be necessary for the abused person's protection, wellbeing, and healing. In these situations, God works in the heart of the abused person to help her forgive her abuser as well as works repentance in the heart of the abuser.)

How did you or how are you handling the difficulties this invisible wall creates?

Possible answers include prayer, turning to God's Word for guidance, truly listening and lovingly discussing a solution with the person or persons on the other side of the wall, bringing in an impartial person to help mediate the situation, avoiding the situation as well as the person involved, continued dealing with feelings of hurt, resentment, and anger with no relief.

Read Ephesians 4:22–32.

How does God work through us to break down the invisible walls which separate us?

Recalling that when we were baptized our old sinful self was drowned, we daily repent of our sins and are renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit to *put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness* (v. 24). We are to *put away falsehood and speak the truth* with one another (v. 25). This includes honestly sharing our feelings in a gentle way. We are not to let anger, an honest emotional reaction, cause us to sin (vv. 26–27). If we are the one who has sinned and built the wall, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are to change our behavior and replace it with behavior God desires (v. 28). Instead of continuing to build a destructive invisible wall, we are called to rely on the strength God gives through faith to use God-pleasing talk and actions to build others up and to show God's grace and forgiveness (v. 29). We are not to let an invisible wall lead us to also turn away from God (*grieve the Holy Spirit of God*) (v. 30). We are to put away all *bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander* as well as *malice* (v. 31). By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are to be *kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you* (v. 32). It is only through Jesus and His forgiving love and grace that we can show this same love, grace, and forgiveness to others.

Read Romans 8:31–39.

How can trusting in this promise from God help break down whatever might separate us from one another?

Trusting in the fact that Jesus' work on the cross paid the price for our sins, appeased God's wrath against us, and brought us back (reconciled) to God, we know that nothing can separate us from Him. Through faith, we know that God is with us in every situation, and He enables the walls which exist between us and other people to be destroyed. [We] *can do all things through Him who strengthens [us]* (Philippians 4:13).

Closing Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank You for giving Your life to rescue us from our sins and to bring us back to God our Heavenly Father. May Your power, love, mercy, grace, and forgiveness tear down the walls which separate us from others. Fill our hearts with Your care and compassion so that we are enabled to serve You and others in the unity You desire. In Your saving name we pray. Amen.

Sing: “In Adam We Have All Been One” (*LSB* 569)

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FAMILY MATTERS — WOMEN IN CHRIST'S GENEALOGY

Bible Study • Study Guide

Opening prayer: Almighty God, thank You for calling each of us to be your precious daughters and giving us the gift of faith. Please bless our time in Your Word as we learn from the Bible and apply these lessons to our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Have you ever felt unsure of how God could use you to point others to Him? Maybe you are new in your faith and do not feel good enough, or you keep remembering your past sins and think you are not holy enough to be a vessel for God's mission.

The Gospel of Matthew reminds us of some women from the Old Testament. Matthew started his recording of Jesus' life by writing a genealogy. The genealogies (lists of people in the generations leading up to Jesus) in Scripture are easy to just skim over because there are so many unrecognizable names (plus some that are just plain difficult to say out loud). It was traditional for these genealogies to list only men. However, Matthew intentionally included five women in his list.

Read Matthew 1:1–17.

Write the names of the women in the verses listed below and record how they are described.

verse 3:

verse 5:

verse 5:

verse 6:

verse 16:

What was so great about these women that Matthew included them? Why were they so holy and magnificent to be included in the introduction to Matthew's description of the birth of our Savior? Take a look at their stories in the Old Testament to learn more about them.

Write down what surprises you about each woman and summarize her reputation.

Genesis 38:12–17, 24

Joshua 2:1–7

Ruth 1:1–6, 22

2 Samuel 11:2–5, 26–27

Matthew 1:18–19

So, why were these women amazing enough to be recorded by Matthew? The answer is: they weren't! On their own they looked pretty bad. No one was looking up to them as role models. Three of the five had, for some amount of time, shame and troubles due to seemingly ill-timed pregnancies. These five women, like all of us, had sinned and made mistakes that affected their relationships and reputation with others.

Read the following verses and write down how God turned around these women's lives and used them for His plan.

Genesis 38:25–27

Joshua 6:17, 25

Ruth 4:13–22

1 Kings 2:19

Matthew 1:20–25

God saw these down-trodden women as His beautiful daughters and used them in His plan to bring salvation for all people through the birth of Jesus. The amazing part about these women is that they had life-altering faith in the one true God. He enabled them to be a blessing to others despite the hardships they had experienced and the rotten labels and sins with which others associated them.

What is your reputation? How can God use you because of or despite your past mistakes?

Even when we cannot see His plan, God has a way to use you and your gifts to benefit your church and to further His mission of sharing the Gospel with others. No matter what we have experienced, by God’s grace we are empowered to live lives that point others to Him. Our sins are no longer a death sentence because Jesus has paid the price for us. We can live each day in celebration and excitement as we, with the power of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, grow in faith and share the great news of our Savior (with an amazing genealogy!) with others we know!

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Jesus to redeem us, regardless of the mistakes we have made and sins we have committed. We praise You for empowering us, through the Holy Spirit, to show Your love to others in our day-to-day lives, even when we are not perfect! Bless us with Your peace and comfort as we rest in the assurance that we are Your daughters and will live with You eternally. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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FAMILY MATTERS — WOMEN IN CHRIST'S GENEALOGY

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide a copy of this study and a Bible for each participant. Assure the group that all narratives shared within the group stay in the group, unless permission is given.]

Opening prayer: Almighty God, thank You for calling each of us to be your precious daughters and giving us the gift of faith. Please bless our time in Your Word as we learn from the Old Testament and apply these lessons to our lives. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Have you ever felt unsure of how God could use you to point others to Him? Maybe you're new in your faith and do not feel good enough, or you keep remembering your past sins and think you aren't holy enough to be a vessel for God's mission.

The Gospel of Matthew reminds us of some women from the Old Testament. Matthew started his recording of Jesus' life by writing a genealogy. The genealogies (lists of people in the generations leading up to Jesus) in Scripture are easy to just skim over because there are so many unrecognizable names (plus some that are just plain difficult to say out loud). It was traditional for these genealogies to list only men. However, Matthew intentionally included five women in his list.

Read Matthew 1:1–17.

Write the names of the women in the verses listed below and record how they are described.

verse 3:

Tamar, mother of Perez and Zerah by Judah

verse 5:

Rahab, mother of Boaz by Salmon

verse 5:

Ruth, mother of Obed by Boaz

verse 6:

wife of Uriah (aka Bathsheba), mother of Solomon by David

verse 16:

Mary, mother of Jesus, wife of Joseph

What was so great about these women that Matthew included them? Why were they so holy and magnificent to be included in the introduction to Matthew's description of the birth of our Savior? Take a look at their stories in the Old Testament to learn more about them.

Write down what surprises you about each woman and summarize her reputation.

Genesis 38:12–17, 24

(To get more context, you can read all of Genesis 38:6–26.)

She was a widow who was viewed as an adulterer when she got pregnant with twins. She was to be burned at the stake for her sins. (Judah didn't realize he was the one who had impregnated her when he thought she was a prostitute.)

Joshua 2:1–7

Rahab was a Gentile (non-Israelite) prostitute in Jericho. She had little to no standing/reputation and yet protected the spies by hiding them from the guards of Jericho.

Ruth 1:1–6, 22

(You can also read Ruth 2:8–13 or more of chapters 1–2 as time allows.)

She was a Moabite, a Gentile/non-Israelite. She would have been seen as an outsider when she moved to Israel with Naomi.

She was a widow who chose to live with her mother-in-law, who was also a widow, rather than return to her family to be cared for and maybe get married again. This put her into the poorest class and made her dependent on assistance from others for food and money to survive because she had no children.

2 Samuel 11:2–5, 26–27

(To get more context, you can read all of 2 Samuel 11.)

Bathsheba was obedient to the king, but because of King David's lust she got pregnant and her husband was killed in battle in an attempt to hide that he (Uriah) was not the father. Matthew listed her as Uriah's wife rather than as Bathsheba to remind readers just how many sins occurred to bring Bathsheba into the palace.

Matthew 1:18–19

Mary hadn't yet married Joseph when she conceived Jesus; they were only engaged. So, her reputation was tarnished when others logically assumed she got pregnant by another man. Not only did it make her and Joseph look bad to their community, but according to the Jewish laws she could be killed for her supposed premarital relations.

So, why were these women amazing enough to be recorded by Matthew? The answer is: they weren't! On their own they looked pretty bad. No one was looking up to them as role models. Three of the five had, for some amount of time, shame and troubles due to seemingly ill-timed pregnancies. These five women, like all of us, had sinned and made mistakes that affected their relationships and reputation with others.

Read the following verses and write down how God turned around these women's lives and used them for His plan.

Genesis 38:25–27

Her life was saved when the truth was revealed that Judah was the father of the twins in her womb and he realized he was in the wrong for not caring for his daughter-in-law earlier.

Her son Perez is listed as an ancestor of Jesus.

Joshua 6:17, 25

God gave her faith and spared her during the destruction of Jericho.

She married an Israelite man named Salmon and their son Boaz is listed as an ancestor of Jesus (and husband of Ruth).

Ruth 4:13–22

She was a Gentile in a country that was foreign to her, but Boaz married and cared for her.

Her son Obed was the father of King David, an ancestor of Jesus.

1 Kings 2:19

Bathsheba lost many loved ones and suffered the consequences of David's sins and shame yet became a wife of King David and later the honored mother of King Solomon.

Matthew 1:20–25

When Joseph decided to not marry Mary, God sent an angel to tell Joseph that Mary was going to give birth to the Son of God so Joseph protected them both.

God saw these down-trodden women as His beautiful daughters and used them in His plan to bring salvation for all people through the birth of Jesus. The amazing part about these women is that they had life-altering faith in the one true God. He enabled them to be a blessing to others despite the hardships they had experienced and the rotten labels and sins with which others associated them.

What is your reputation? How can God use you because of or despite your past mistakes?

Allow women to answer out loud if they wish or just write something down. (These questions may be very personal for some.)

All answers will vary. Despite good or bad reputations God has a plan to use each of us, and we all are part of the mission to share the Gospel!

Even when we cannot see His plan, God has a way to use you and your gifts to benefit your church and to further His mission of sharing the Gospel with others. No matter what we have experienced, by God's grace we are empowered to live lives that point others to Him. Our sins are no longer a death sentence because Jesus has paid the price for us. We can live each day in celebration and excitement as we, with the power of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, grow in faith and share the great news of our Savior (with an amazing genealogy!) with others we know!

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank You for sending Jesus to redeem us, regardless of the mistakes we have made and sins we have committed. We praise You for empowering us, through the Holy Spirit, to show Your love to others in our day-to-day lives, even when we are not perfect! Bless us with Your peace and comfort as we rest in the assurance that we are Your daughters and will live with You eternally. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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“HEART” MATTERS: A LOOK AT MARY

Bible Study • Study Guide

Opening Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, we rejoice and thank You for creating us and making us Your children through the waters of Holy Baptism. We confess that we sin daily and destroy our relationship with You. Thank You for the forgiveness we have because of Your Son’s own victory over death. Because of His resurrection, we, too, look forward to eternal life in heaven with You! Please send Your Holy Spirit to be with us today as we study Your Word. In Jesus’ great name we pray. Amen.

A Faithful Heart

Read Luke 1:26–38.

Mary’s initial reaction to the angel’s appearance (verses 26–33) might have been:

A. Fear B. Confusion C. Doubt D. Faith E. Concern F. Curiosity

What question does Mary ask Gabriel in verse 34? Is this a question you would have asked? Why or why not?

What truths about Jesus are emphasized by the angel in verses 35 and 37?

Conceived by the _____

Born of the _____

The _____ of the Most _____ is at work

Called the _____ of _____

Jesus’ conception and birth will be a miracle. Nothing is _____ with God!

Gabriel announced to Mary that she would have a miracle child who already had a name and a mission. For many people, this departure from the ordinary expectations of life would have been too much to believe. Often, we think we know how things are supposed to go, and we are not much interested in things that do not fit into our plan. Yes, Mary had questions, and she was not hesitant to ask, “But how can this be?” However, Mary’s heart was faithful; her faith had been nurtured by hearing the Word of God in regular worship. She knew God was able

to do great things because she knew Scripture and the history of God’s love and care for His people throughout previous generations.

In your own words, what is Mary’s response to the angel in verse 38?

What do the following Bible passages indicate about Mary’s (and Joseph’s) intent to nurture godly faith in her very special Child?

See Luke 2:21–24; 39–40; 41–42.

Read Psalm 51:10–12.

What are the means of grace that the Holy Spirit uses to give us new hearts and nurture our faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord?

See 1 Thessalonians 2:13; Romans 6:4; Mark 14:22–24.

A Devoted Heart

Read Luke 1:36–45.

Why did the angel tell Mary about Elizabeth in verse 36? What did the visit to Elizabeth accomplish for Mary?

Mary responded to Elizabeth’s greeting with The Magnificat (Mary’s Song, “My Soul Now Magnifies the Lord,” *LSB* 934) in verses 46–55.

How, specifically, does Mary express her devotion to her Lord God in these verses?

Read Luke 2:1–20. Mary was a devoted mother. She had accompanied her husband on a strenuous journey in the very last month of her pregnancy. We must assume that she took proper physical care of herself so that the birth was a healthy one. She had her long-awaited Child in a town far from home in crude surroundings.

How did Mary respond in verse 19 to the birth of her Child and the subsequent visit from the shepherds?

How would you define the word ponder? What other words could have the same meaning?

Read Matthew 2:13–15.

How does this account further show Mary’s devotion to the safety of her Child?

A Believing Heart

Read John 2:1–11.

What does this account likely reveal about Mary’s belief in her Child as her Lord and Savior?

How was the prophecy of Simeon in Luke 2:34–35 fulfilled for Mary in John 19:25–27, 30?

Read John 20:3–10. It could be assumed that John went home after witnessing the empty tomb and told those in his household what he had seen. Since Mary was now in his household, she might have heard the Good News of Jesus’ resurrection very quickly!

Describe some of the probable feelings that Mary (the mother of Jesus) might have had during the days between her Child’s death and the news of His resurrection.

Read Acts 1:13–14.

What did Mary do after Jesus’ resurrection from the dead?

What do the following passages say about the relationship between a mother and her child? How were these traits demonstrated in Mary’s relationship with Jesus?

Psalm 139:13

Song of Solomon 8:2a

Ephesians 6:1-3

1 Thessalonians 2:7-8

Closing Prayer: Heavenly Father, we thank and praise You for giving us the gift of Your own Son, Jesus Christ. We praise You that our sins are forgiven and we have eternal life because of His death and resurrection. Give us faithful Spirit-filled hearts that read Your Word and participate in Your Sacraments. Give us devoted hearts that cling to You in both good times and bad. Give us believing hearts that are surrounded with Your power and love. Be with our family and friends and keep them in the one true faith. Open opportunities for us to witness about salvation in Jesus to those who do not know You. All this we are bold to pray in the great name of Jesus! Amen.

Sing “Go, My Children, with My Blessing” (*LSB* 922).

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“HEART” MATTERS: A LOOK AT MARY

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide Bibles and copies of the Bible study for attendees.]

Opening Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, we rejoice and thank You for creating us and making us Your children through the waters of Holy Baptism. We confess that we sin daily and destroy our relationship with You. Thank You for the forgiveness we have because of Your Son’s own victory over death. Because of His resurrection, we, too, look forward to eternal life in heaven with You! Please send Your Holy Spirit to be with us today as we study Your Word. In Jesus’ great name we pray. Amen.

A Faithful Heart

Read Luke 1:26–38.

Mary’s initial reaction to the angel’s appearance (verses 26–33) might have been:

A. Fear B. Confusion C. Doubt D. Faith E. Concern F. Curiosity

Answers will vary and may include all of the above.

What question does Mary ask Gabriel in verse 34? Is this a question you would have asked? Why or why not?

“How will this be, since I am a virgin?” — with emphasis on “How will this be....?”

What truths about Jesus are emphasized by the angel in verses 35 and 37?

Conceived by the Holy Spirit

Born of the virgin Mary

The power of the Most High is at work

Called the Son of God

Jesus’ conception and birth will be a miracle. Nothing is impossible with God!

Gabriel announced to Mary that she would have a miracle child who already had a name and a mission. For many people, this departure from the ordinary expectations of life would have been too much to believe. Often, we think we know how things are supposed to go, and we are not much interested in things that do not fit into our plan. Yes, Mary had questions, and she was not hesitant to ask, “But how can this be?” However, Mary’s heart was faithful; her faith

had been nurtured by hearing the Word of God in regular worship. She knew God was able to do great things because she knew Scripture and the history of God's love and care for His people throughout previous generations.

In your own words, what is Mary's response to the angel in verse 38?

I am your servant, Lord — please use me for Your purpose.

What do the following Bible passages indicate about Mary's (and Joseph's) intent to nurture godly faith in her very special Child?

See Luke 2:21–24; 39–40; 41–42.

They presented Him to the Lord and offered a sacrifice as required by the Law of Moses. They were regular in their worship practices, exposing their Child to the Scriptures.

Read Psalm 51:10–12.

What are the means of grace that the Holy Spirit uses to give us new hearts and nurture our faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord?

See 1 Thessalonians 2:13; Romans 6:4; Mark 14:22–24.

Word of God, Holy Baptism, Lord's Supper

A Devoted Heart

Read Luke 1:36–45.

Why did the angel tell Mary about Elizabeth in verse 36? What did the visit to Elizabeth accomplish for Mary?

Answers will vary but could include the encouragement that Mary gained from knowing that God performed a miracle in Elizabeth's life and could do the same in hers.

Mary responded to Elizabeth's greeting with The Magnificat (Mary's Song, "My Soul Now Magnifies the Lord," LSB 934) in verses 46–55.

How, specifically, does Mary express her devotion to her Lord God in these verses?

"My soul magnifies the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ... he who is mighty has done great things for me, ... his mercy is for those who fear him, ... He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud, ... he has brought down the mighty ... and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry; He has helped Israel; He is merciful...even as He said to our fathers." In other words, God is faithful.

Read Luke 2:1–20. Mary was a devoted mother. She had accompanied her husband on a strenuous journey in the very last month of her pregnancy. We must assume that she took proper physical care of herself, so that the birth was a healthy one. She had her long-awaited Child in a town far from home in crude surroundings.

How did Mary respond in verse 19 to the birth of her Child and the subsequent visit from the shepherds?

She treasured all the things that had happened and pondered them in her heart.

How would you define the word ponder? What other words could have the same meaning?

Answers will vary, but other words could include: consider, think about, think over, contemplate, deliberate, wonder about, muse, meditate, ruminate, reflect.

Read Matthew 2:13–15.

How does this account further show Mary's devotion to the safety of her Child?

She was willing to accompany her husband very quickly on another stressful trip from her own country – for the sake of her Child.

A Believing Heart

Read John 2:1–11.

What does this account likely reveal about Mary's belief in her Child as her Lord and Savior?

She knows after all she has seen and heard that He is the Lord!

How was the prophecy of Simeon in Luke 2:34–35 fulfilled for Mary in John 19:25–27, 30?

She had to witness the rejection and death of her first-born Child. In this she also saw the fulfillment of the name she was told to give Him – Jesus – because by His death He was – saving all people from sin and death.

Read John 20:3–10. It could be assumed that John went home after witnessing the empty tomb and told those in his household what he had seen. Since Mary was now in his household, she might have heard the Good News of Jesus' resurrection very quickly!

Describe some of the probable feelings that Mary (the mother of Jesus) might have had during the days between her Child's death and the news of His resurrection.

Answers will vary, but could include: sadness, grief, despair, shock, aimlessness, belief, unbelief, joy, hope

Read Acts 1:13–14.

What did Mary do after Jesus' resurrection from the dead?

She gathered with believers in fellowship and prayer.

What do the following passages say about the relationship between a mother and her child? How were these traits demonstrated in Mary's relationship with Jesus?

Psalm 139:13

For a period of time a mother and child are in one body as the child grows within the mother's womb. Mary carried Jesus and gave birth to him in Bethlehem. Mary LOVED Jesus – He was her Child from the womb. Jesus LOVED Mary as his earthly mother.

Song of Solomon 8:2a

A mother teaches her child. Mary TAUGHT Jesus – He learned life lessons, as well as how to relate within a family. Probably some of the parables and examples in His teaching ministry came from experiences in his early years.

Ephesians 6:1–3

A mother is to be obeyed and honored by her child. Jesus HONORED his mother and since He was sinless, He OBEYED her.

1 Thessalonians 2:7–8

A mother is gentle and caring toward her child. Mary CARED for and LOVED Jesus, both physically and spiritually. Jesus CARED for and LOVED Mary; He showed this concern and love in some of His last words from the cross.

Closing Prayer: Heavenly Father, we thank and praise You for giving us the gift of Your own Son, Jesus Christ. We praise You that our sins are forgiven and we have eternal life because of His death and resurrection. Give us faithful Spirit-filled hearts that read Your Word and participate in Your Sacraments. Give us devoted hearts that cling to You in both good times and bad. Give us believing hearts that are surrounded with Your power and love. Be with our family and friends and keep them in the one true faith. Open opportunities for us to witness about salvation in Jesus to those who do not know You. All this we are bold to pray in the great name of Jesus! Amen.

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LIFE “OUT OF CONTROL”

Bible Study • Study Guide

The term oxymoron is used to describe words that seem to contradict each other but are used side by side. In fact, the word oxymoron is an oxymoron itself, because it is derived from two Greek words meaning sharp and dull. (Examples: alone together, big baby, or living end.)

Think of an example of an oxymoron. Would you consider the phrase “cruise control” an oxymoron? Explain why or why not.

During this Bible study, we will look at the life of Joseph and some of the seemingly “out of control” events that God used to shape his life and ultimately the lives of his family and descendants. We will also see how God uses some of those “out of control” events in our lives for our good and the good of those around us. Yes, our God is in control, and we are thankful for it.

Opening Prayer: Dear Father, You created us and sustain us. We know that even though You have given life to each one of us, often the circumstances of our lives appear “out of control” as a result of our daily sins. We confess those sins and ask Your forgiveness for the sake of Your Son’s perfect life, suffering, and death in our place. We praise You that because our Lord and Savior lives eternally, we can look forward to eternal life in heaven with You. We thank You for sending us Your Holy Spirit who gives us faith and the power to believe and to share our love for Jesus with those around us. Please let the love of Christ control us and use us, O Lord, for Your purposes. Bless our study of Your Word. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Out of Control

The early life of Joseph could appear to be “out of control” from Joseph’s point of view.

Read the following three Scripture accounts and identify (1) what circumstances happened in Joseph’s life; (2) who appeared to be in control of those circumstances; and (3) what sin(s) caused his problems.

Genesis 37:3–5, 8, 23–24, 28

Genesis 39:1, 5–12, 16–20

Genesis 40:1–8, 12–15, 20–23

Read Genesis 4:6–7; Matthew 15:18–19; and James 1:15.

How does sin specifically influence the “out of control” events in life?

Who experiences the effects of sin?

See Romans 3:23; Ephesians 2:1–3; and 1 John 1:8.

Read Psalm 31:9–10 and 32:3–4.

What physical and emotional effects does sin wreak in every life?

God Is in Control!

Describe a time when your life appeared to be “out of control.” Why did it seem that way?

Look at Joseph’s account once more. Read the rest of the story in Genesis 41:38–49; 53–57.

What happened to Joseph?

How did God specifically use the circumstances in Joseph’s life for the good of Joseph, his family, and God’s people?

See Genesis 45:1–15.

How did our Savior take our “out of control” lives due to sin and save us from eternal death?

See Hebrews 4:14–16 and John 3:16–17.

What means (tools) does the Holy Spirit use to sustain our faith until life’s end, as noted in the following verses?

Colossians 3:16

1 Peter 3:21

Mark 14:22–25

Read 2 Corinthians 5:14–15.

Explain what the words of Paul in verse 14a, *For the love of Christ controls us*, mean for you as a Christian.

Make a list of specific ways that you can serve Christ in your home, your church, your community, and into all the world.

Too often we might live as if we are on “cruise control,” allowing sin to freely dictate or control our words and actions. What an oxymoron that is!

How do Paul’s words in Galatians 2:20 and 5:16, 22–25 encourage us to live our lives?

Thanks be to God. By the power of the Holy Spirit, you and I are truly free through the saving work of our Savior Jesus to live lives that glorify our Lord. We are Spirit-controlled. What a blessing that is!

Closing Prayer: Sing or say the hymn “Abide With Me” (*LSB* 878).

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The term oxymoron is used to describe words that seem to contradict each other but are used side by side. In fact, the word oxymoron is an oxymoron itself, because it is derived from two Greek words meaning sharp and dull. (Examples: alone together, big baby, or living end.)

Think of an example of an oxymoron. Would you consider the phrase “cruise control” an oxymoron? Explain why or why not.

Answers will vary, but encourage everyone to share an oxymoron. Make it clear that everything confided within the group stays within the group throughout the study.

Some more examples might include: act naturally, civil war, good grief, jumbo shrimp, old news, original copy, plastic glasses.

Answers will vary. Encourage discussion which might include: “cruise” indicates being free or unfettered; “control” indicates restraint or command.

During this Bible study, we will look at the life of Joseph and some of the seemingly “out of control” events that God used to shape his life and ultimately the lives of his family and descendants. We will also see how God uses some of those “out of control” events in our lives for our good and the good of those around us. Yes, our God is in control, and we are thankful for it.

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Genesis 37:3–5, 8, 23–24, 28

1. Joseph was sold to traders by his jealous brothers and taken to Egypt. 2. The brothers appeared to be in control. 3. Sins of jealousy, hate, and betrayal caused his problems.

Genesis 39:1, 5–12, 16–20

1. Joseph became a trusted slave in Potiphar's household, but he caught the seductive eye of Potiphar's wife. When he refused her advances, she twisted the innocent situation into a lie. 2. Ultimately, Potiphar still appeared to have control over Joseph's life and put him in prison for the supposed offense. Potiphar's wife also took control of Joseph's future. 3. Sins of lust, lying, and anger caused his problems.

Genesis 40:1–8, 12–15, 20–23

1. Joseph was in prison with no hope of getting out. He interpreted the cupbearer's and the baker's dreams correctly, but the baker was hanged and the only one who could help him forgot about him, so Joseph remained in prison. 2. He was in prison, subject to the control of Pharaoh's guard and to the cupbearer's memory. 3. Forgetfulness of a promise and being kept in Egypt and in prison unjustly were the continuing result of the sins of Joseph's brothers and Potiphar and his wife.

Read Genesis 4:6–7; Matthew 15:18–19; and James 1:15.

How does sin specifically influence the “out of control” events in life?

Sin is the reason why life gets “out of control.” It crouches at our door and causes us to become angry, have evil thoughts, murder, commit adultery, be sexually immoral, steal, give false witness, slander others, lie, and have sinful desires. The list could go on.

Who experiences the effects of sin?

See Romans 3:23; Ephesians 2:1–3; and 1 John 1:8.

Everyone.

Read Psalm 31:9–10 and 32:3–4.

What physical and emotional effects does sin wreak in every life?

Physical: eyes are sad, strength fails, bones waste away and become brittle, strength dries up. Emotional: distress, grief, sorrow, sighing, groaning, depression.

God Is in Control!

Describe a time when your life appeared to be “out of control.” Why did it seem that way?

Answers will vary.

Look at Joseph's account once more. Read the rest of the story in Genesis 41:38–49; 53–57.

What happened to Joseph?

Joseph correctly interpreted Pharaoh's dreams [Note: this occurs in earlier verses.] and then gave a plan for preserving the Egyptians during the years of drought. Joseph was given charge of the preservation plan and was second only to Pharaoh in the land. Eventually, all the lands of the earth came to Egypt to buy grain during the drought.

How did God specifically use the circumstances in Joseph's life for the good of Joseph, his family, and God's people?

See Genesis 45:1–15.

Joseph's brothers came to him for food, the family was reunited, and the Children of Israel were preserved and moved to Egypt.

How did our Savior take our "out of control" lives due to sin and save us from eternal death?

See Hebrews 4:14–16 and John 3:16–17.

He lived a perfect life, suffered, and died on the cross to save us from our sin.

What means (tools) does the Holy Spirit use to sustain our faith until life's end, as noted in the following verses?

Colossians 3:16

The Word of God

1 Peter 3:21

Holy Baptism

Mark 14:22–25

The Lord's Supper

Read 2 Corinthians 5:14–15.

Explain what the words of Paul in verse 14a, *For the love of Christ controls us*, mean for you as a Christian.

Make a list of specific ways that you can serve Christ in your home, your church, your community, and into all the world.

Answers will vary.

Too often we might live as if we are on "cruise control," allowing sin to freely dictate or control our words and actions. What an oxymoron that is!

How do Paul's words in Galatians 2:20 and 5:16, 22–25 encourage us to live our lives?

He encourages Christians to live for Christ, using the fruit of the Spirit to serve others. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control* (Galatians 5:22–23a).

Thanks be to God. By the power of the Holy Spirit, you and I are truly free through the saving work of our Savior Jesus to live lives that glorify our Lord. We are Spirit-controlled. What a blessing that is!

Closing Prayer: Sing or say the hymn “Abide With Me” (*LSB* 878).

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THE LIGHT NO DARKNESS CAN OVERCOME

Bible Study • Study Guide

Opening Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, sometimes we feel as if the darkness is everywhere. Please send your Holy Spirit to guide us, so we can see the light of Jesus. In His holy name we pray. Amen.

Jesus Christ is the Light of the World. Light has been a part of His life from creation to His resurrection. Let us explore what that means for our lives.

Light Versus Darkness

The world is full of darkness. We hear about it daily on the news and through social media. We experience it in our lives. But...

Read John 1:4–5, John 8:12, Isaiah 9:2, and Isaiah 60:1–3.

What are the key points you take from these passages? Who will have the light of life? What is the impact of the Light on the darkness?

Light of Creation

Read Genesis 1:1–4 and John 1:1.

What does God create on the first day? What was separated from the light? Who was with God at the time of creation?

Light at Jesus' Birth

The announcement of Jesus' birth to the shepherds is accompanied by light. Read Luke 2:9 and John 1:4.

What is the light given in these passages?

Another form of light accompanies Jesus' birth. Read Matthew 2:1–2, 9–10.

Describe how God used light to draw the Magi to Jesus. How can we relate to that?

Sing or read “Angels from the Realms of Glory” (*LSB* 367).

Discuss the message of this hymn.

Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Light

The birth of Jesus is the beginning of His path to the cross.

Read Romans 3:23 and John 3:16–21. We live in a fallen world.

What gives us hope?

God loves us despite our sins. However, let's be clear, God hates sin. The world tells us to be tolerant of sin, but sin brings God's wrath and death.

Read 1 Timothy 1:15.

What did God do to show He hated sin?

Read Romans 5:9–17.

What does this mean for you?

Sing “Chief of Sinners Though I Be” (*LSB* 611).

Discuss the message of this hymn.

The Word, Spirit, and Light

By the Word and the Spirit, we come to the light.
Read Psalm 119:105, Titus 3:5–8, and 1 Peter 2:9.

What do we do now?

As a closing prayer: sing the Service of Light through the Thanksgiving for Light in the *Lutheran Service Book* pp. 243–245 or “O Word of God Incarnate” (*LSB* 523).

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THE LIGHT NO DARKNESS CAN OVERCOME

Bible Study • Leader Guide

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Opening Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, sometimes we feel as if the darkness is everywhere. Please send your Holy Spirit to guide us, so we can see the light of Jesus. In His holy name we pray. Amen.

Jesus Christ is the Light of the World. Light has been a part of His life from creation to His resurrection. Let us explore what that means for our lives.

Light Versus Darkness

The world is full of darkness. We hear about it daily on the news and through social media. We experience it in our lives. But...

Read John 1:4–5, John 8:12, Isaiah 9:2, and Isaiah 60:1–3.

What are the key points you take from these passages? Who will have the light of life? What is the impact of the Light on the darkness?

Jesus said He is the Light for the whole world.

Darkness cannot overcome His light.

If we follow Him, we will not walk in darkness, but we will have the Light of Life.

Isaiah prophesied that there is a great light that will shine on those who live in darkness.

Even though darkness covers the earth and the peoples, His glory will be seen and nations and kings will come to His light.

Light of Creation

Read Genesis 1:1–4 and John 1:1.

What does God create on the first day? What was separated from the light? Who was with God at the time of creation?

Light was created on the first day. Darkness was separated from the light. The Spirit of God was present. Also, in the beginning, the Word was with God and was God. *The Lutheran Study Bible*, English Standard Version notes for John 1:1 identify the Word as the pre-incarnate Christ.

Light at Jesus' Birth

The announcement of Jesus' birth to the shepherds is accompanied by light. Read Luke 2:9 and John 1:4.

What is the light given in these passages?

In Luke the light comes from the angel hosts illuminating the skies as they tell the shepherds of the birth of Jesus, who is the Light of the world (as we see in John).

Another form of light accompanies Jesus' birth. Read Matthew 2:1–2, 9–10.

Describe how God used light to draw the Magi to Jesus. How can we relate to that?

God gave a star that led the Magi to find Jesus. God usually uses something tangible to draw people to Himself. Today, God draws us to Himself through His Word and Sacraments.

Sing or read "Angels from the Realms of Glory" (*LSB* 367).

Discuss the message of this hymn.

The hymn includes the Infant Light that the shepherds saw at Jesus' birth and the sages seeing the natal star. All creation can join in praising the Triune God and worshiping Christ the newborn King.

(Participants may have other comments.)

Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Light

The birth of Jesus is the beginning of His path to the cross.

Read Romans 3:23–24 and John 3:16–21. We live in a fallen world.

What gives us hope?

Even though we are sinners, we have a Savior. Not only will we not be condemned or perish, but we will have eternal life if we believe in the name of the only Son of God.

God loves us despite our sins. However, let's be clear, God hates sin. The world tells us to be tolerant of sin, but sin brings God's wrath and death.

Read 1 Timothy 1:15.

What did God do to show He hated sin?

He so hated sin that He got rid of its consequences by sending Jesus, who died a horrible death for the guilt of all sin.

Read Romans 5:9–17.

What does this mean for you?

While I am an enemy of God because of my sin, I am reconciled to God by the death of His Son Jesus. His righteousness is a free gift to me.

Sing "Chief of Sinners Though I Be" (*LSB* 611).

Discuss the message of this hymn.

Because Jesus died and lives, I will have eternal life. His love is unfathomable. While I continue to stray, I can pray that he will keep me in the narrow way.

Participants may have other comments.

The Word, Spirit, and Light

By the Word and the Spirit, we come to the light.

Read Psalm 119:105, Titus 3:5–8, and 1 Peter 2:9.

What do we do now?

Let His Word guide us.

Be thankful for the hope of eternal life.

Devote ourselves to good works.

Proclaim that Jesus Christ called us out of darkness into His marvelous light.

As a closing prayer: sing the Service of Light through the Thanksgiving for Light in the *Lutheran Service Book* pp. 243–245 or “O Word of God Incarnate” (*LSB* 523).

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LIVING HOPE IN A GRAVEYARD

Bible Study • Study Guide

Opening Prayer: O Lord of Life, You have given us life, and by Your Son, You have redeemed us and promised us life eternal in Your kingdom. Help us who often sit in sorrow and under the shroud of death to find hope in Your promise of the resurrection. Grant that we may bear witness to Christ's life through the hope You give us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Introduction

When you think about cemeteries, or when you happen to drive by one, what things come to mind? Some people may have a loved one buried there, and memories of that person's life might flood the mind. Others may find a stark reminder of their own mortality which may get them thinking about where they would like to be buried one day. If you have ever seen the movie *A League of Their Own*, you might recall that the players on the bus passing by a cemetery crossed their fingers believing if they did not, they would never get another hit. Some people think that they need to hold their breath while passing by a cemetery otherwise they might breathe in evil spirits. As Christians, we ought to be reminded that cemeteries are a result of mankind's fall into sin.

Read Genesis 3:19, Psalm 89:46–48, and Romans 6:23a.

What do these passages tell us about sin and its consequences?

According to Ecclesiastes 9:1–6, is anyone spared from facing the reality of death? Why?

Hope in a Graveyard?

Graveyards can indeed be places that bring emotions of sorrow and longing but also fear into the lives of people. The fact that our loved ones are often laid to rest in cemeteries, and the fact that one day we shall, too, (barring Christ's return in glory before then, of course!) can make us feel a deep sense of sorrow. However, there is hope to be had, even in a graveyard.

When my daughter was about four years old, we were driving through our town and happened upon the local Catholic cemetery. This was before we had had any serious conversations about

death, even though she had already been to a few funerals of beloved parishioners at church. Death was not a new concept to her; we just had not talked about it much with her at such a young age. On this particular day, however, without any prompting, she said from the back seat, “Daddy, is that where people go to meet Jesus?” Sometimes children have a much better way to see the world than adults do! For her, the cemetery was not a place of sadness and sorrow, but a place where people go to meet Jesus. And, in a way, she had uncovered a very deep theological truth that points us to a living hope, even in a graveyard.

Read Ezekiel 37:1–14.

What does the Lord promise to do for the people of Israel?

What actually brings life to the dry bones?

What story does this bring to mind from earlier in the Old Testament?

How do these stories relate to our hope in the resurrection?

Read the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed in the Small Catechism along with Luther’s explanation. **What do we confess will happen when Christ returns in glory?**

How can this help us overcome our sorrow around cemeteries?

Jesus and Graveyards

As Christians, we have hope, even in the face of death. We confess the “resurrection of the body and the life everlasting” in confidence because on Good Friday Jesus himself underwent our death so that on Easter He could overcome it by His own resurrection. He has walked the way we all must go not because of His sin but because of ours, and He has won the victory for us so that we may have hope. It is true, however, that we still find ourselves sorrowful standing by the grave of someone we love. By His grace, this is also where Jesus meets us to remind us of His eternal promises.

Interestingly, Jesus did not make a grand entrance on Easter announcing to the world that He had risen from the dead. Instead, His first encounter with the world was in a graveyard.

Read John 20:1–18.

Why had the women come to the tomb that Easter morning?

What did they find instead?

Why do you suppose Mary Magdalene was so overcome with grief?

What did the gardener (Jesus!) say and do for her to help her?

How might this account aid you, or someone you know, who struggles with grief?

Before Easter, however, Jesus had encounters in graveyards that foreshadowed the work He would accomplish by His resurrection. Read Mark 5:1–20.

Why do you suppose the man was living among the tombs?

How does his malady relate to the malady of sin?

What does Jesus' healing foreshadow for him and for us?

Hope in a Graveyard!

Many people today want to keep death out of their spiritual life. They know death is coming at some point, but delaying its arrival has become one of the aims of the medical arts, and even the desire of well-meaning Christians. Churches that happen to have graveyards on their property, and even surrounding the church building, actually offer a tangible reminder of the hope we have, even when members confront the reality of death each Sabbath by simply walking into church. Being reminded of the saints that have gone before us and living in the hope of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting is something that should give us a sense of peace and not cause us to remain in sorrow.

Read John 12:20–25.

What does Jesus indicate He is about to undergo?

**What does He say is the result of the seed of His body being tucked into the earth?
What does He mean by fruit?**

Now take a look at Romans 6:1–11.

How are we buried with Christ?

Where does this happen for us?

What is the promise given to those who die with Christ?

How might we continue to find joy in this promise on a daily basis?

Finally, read 1 Corinthians 15:35–38, 42–49.

What is our hope, even as we are laid into our own grave?

How do we know this is true?

How can this help us to give a hopeful witness to those who are caught in sorrow?

Conclusion

Graveyards can be things that are scary or mysterious. For some they are superstitious, and for many they are places filled with sorrow. However, for Christians graveyards are places that speak of the hope we have in Christ and of the resurrection. They are places where our Lord meets those who sit in sorrow and fills them with living hope, and they are places where the faithful await the day of their own raising on the Last Day to the joy of life eternal. That is our hope, even in the face of death, for as Paul reminds us at the conclusion of his great resurrection chapter, *The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ* (1 Corinthians 15:56–57). Christ

has won the victory for us. The grave cannot hold Him, and it will not hold us as Jesus raises us to life eternal.

Closing Prayer: Gracious God, Your Son has overcome death and the grave by His own resurrection from the dead. Fill us with the joy of Easter, and grant that we may live always in the hope of our unending life with You in heaven. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Sing or read the hymn “Jesus Lives! The Victory’s Won,” *LSB* 490, focusing especially on stanza 5.

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Read Genesis 3:19, Psalm 89:46–48, and Romans 6:23a.

What do these passages tell us about sin and its consequences?

The curse of sin is what brings death to humanity and to the creation God has made. Thus, all must undergo death, for that is the wage we earn by our sinfulness. This is also why we understand our time on earth to be short, which is not what God intended for us from the beginning.

According to Ecclesiastes 9:1–6, is anyone spared from facing the reality of death?

Why?

No one is spared from this reality, neither the righteous nor the unrighteous, for all have sinned, and death is the consequence. As Christians, however, we face death with the hope of the resurrection through Jesus Christ.

Hope in a Graveyard?

Graveyards can indeed be places that bring emotions of sorrow and longing but also fear into the lives of people. The fact that our loved ones are often laid to rest in cemeteries, and the fact

that one day we shall too, (barring Christ's return in glory before then, of course!) can make us feel a deep sense of sorrow. However, there is hope to be had, even in a graveyard.

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Read Ezekiel 37:1–14.

What does the Lord promise to do for the people of Israel?

The Lord's promise is that He will raise up His people from their graves. This will take place as the Word of God is proclaimed, calling people away from death and toward the life He gives in Christ.

What actually brings life to the dry bones?

When the breath of God is breathed into the dry bones of Israel, life is fully restored to God's people. This breath is the Spirit of God, who is the Lord and giver of life, as we confess in the Nicene Creed.

What story does this bring to mind from earlier in the Old Testament?

This account from Ezekiel brings to mind the creation of man from Genesis 2.

How do these stories relate to our hope in the resurrection?

In Genesis, God formed man out of the dust of the earth, but it was not until God breathed into him the breath of life that the man became a truly living being. This story from Ezekiel is also a foreshadowing of what shall happen on the Last Day when Christ comes again in glory. At that time, He will wake the dead, raising them in their bodies, changing them eternally, and bringing them into life in His kingdom forever.

Read the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed in the *Small Catechism* along with Luther's explanation.

What do we confess will happen when Christ returns in glory?

On the Last Day, Christ will raise all the dead and will bring His faithful into His kingdom forever, to dwell in righteousness and purity.

How can this help us overcome our sorrow around cemeteries?

When we understand that this is what will happen in the end, we can find comfort to know that our loved ones will be raised and that we are assured we will see them

again in their resurrected bodies. As such, the separation we feel at cemeteries is only temporary. Whatever struggles our loved ones, or we ourselves experience, will give way to eternal healing and life.

Jesus and Graveyards

As Christians, we have hope, even in the face of death. We confess the “resurrection of the body and the life everlasting” in confidence because on Good Friday Jesus himself underwent our death so that on Easter He could overcome it by His own resurrection. He has walked the way we all must go not because of His sin but because of ours, and He has won the victory for us so that we may have hope. It is true, however, that we still find ourselves sorrowful standing by the grave of someone we love. By His grace, this is also where Jesus meets us to remind us of His eternal promises.

Interestingly, Jesus did not make a grand entrance on Easter announcing to the world that He had risen from the dead. Instead, His first encounter with the world was in a graveyard.

Read John 20:1–18.

Why had the women come to the tomb that Easter morning?

The women came to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus, to prepare the body properly, for they had lain Jesus there in haste due to the impending Sabbath. It was a demonstration of care and love for their teacher and friend.

What did they find instead?

They found the tomb open and the body of Jesus missing.

Why do you suppose Mary Magdalene was so overcome with grief?

Finding the body missing is likely what led Mary to such grief, for all she longed for was to see her Lord once more, and to perform this act of care for Him. It is not much different than those who are comforted by seeing their loved one made up and lying in an open casket. They find some sense of relief by seeing them once more, cleaned up, and no longer suffering.

What did the gardener (Jesus!) say and do for her to help her?

The gardener, Jesus, comforted Mary by calling her by name and enabling her to touch His resurrected body, albeit briefly. As such, the reality of His resurrected life became real for her, and perhaps all the words Jesus had said concerning this event began to make sense to her.

How might this account aid you, or someone you know, who struggles with grief?

This account of Jesus’ resurrection can aid people going through grief by assuring them not only of our Lord’s defeat of death but also how He comes to us in our moments of grief to comfort us with His assurance. He fills us with hope by calling us

by name, the name He called us in Holy Baptism. He also grants us the opportunity, briefly, to touch Him as He feeds us in the Lord's Supper. These sacred gifts point us ahead to the eternal promises of being in our Lord's presence forever.

Before Easter, however, Jesus had encounters in graveyards that foreshadowed the work He would accomplish by His resurrection. Read Mark 5:1–20.

Why do you suppose the man was living among the tombs?

In many ways, it was a place where he could get away from others so no one would bother him. Likely, people let him live there because he was out of the way, disconnected from everyday life.

How does his malady relate to the malady of sin?

Symbolically, however, the man was, in a way, dead. His demon possession was a symptom of sin, as it is for us today. We all carry with us the reality of sin in such a way that it takes hold of us, leading us toward darkness and death.

What does Jesus' healing foreshadow for him and for us?

As Jesus heals this man, it sets him free from sin, calling him to a new life outside of the graveyard. So it shall be with us! Christ has cast out our sin by His cross and promises that we shall be given the new life of the kingdom where we shall leave behind death and the grave eternally.

Hope in a Graveyard!

Many people today want to keep death out of their spiritual life. They know death is coming at some point, but delaying its arrival has become one of the aims of the medical arts, and even the desire of well-meaning Christians. Churches that happen to have graveyards on their property, and even surrounding the church building, actually offer a tangible reminder of the hope we have, even when members confront the reality of death each Sabbath by simply walking into church. Being reminded of the saints that have gone before us and living in the hope of the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting is something that should give us a sense of peace and not cause us to remain in sorrow.

Read John 12:20–25.

What does Jesus indicate He is about to undergo?

Jesus is about to undergo His glorification, and yet it is a glory that is far different than the world's. His glorification would be evident as He is lifted up on the cross for all the world to see the salvation of God. In His death, Jesus takes away the sin of the world, and by His resurrection, He overcomes death to give life to all.

What does He say is the result of the seed of His body being tucked into the earth?

What does He mean by fruit?

By His death and burial, like a seed planted in the soil, He will bear much fruit. Such

fruit is faith given to God's people which leads to a new life here and eternal life in His kingdom.

Now take a look at Romans 6:1–11.

How are we buried with Christ?

When we are joined to Christ in our Baptism, we are buried with Him.

Where does this happen for us?

The Old Adam in us is drowned in those waters so the New Adam may arise to live in Christ here and eternally. As a result, death is not something that we need to fear, and it is not something we should do everything we can to avoid. Death will come because of sin, but by the grace of God in Christ, we are buried with Jesus.

What is the promise given to those who die with Christ?

He has overcome death by His resurrection, and if we are connected to Him, we will come through death into the life He gives us eternally.

How might we continue to find joy in this promise on a daily basis?

As Luther suggests, our Baptism is a daily activity where the sinner is put to death so that the saint may be raised to life. As this occurs, we then live in hope that when our last death comes so will come the resurrection to life eternal, following the pattern of Jesus Himself!

Finally, read 1 Corinthians 15:35–38, 42–49.

What is our hope, even as we are laid into our own grave?

Our hope is that what is sown into the earth is something that is perishable, yet the perishable will give way to the imperishable and we will be raised to unending life.

How do we know this is true?

We know this is true because this is what Christ has already undergone for us and before us, promising that we shall follow Him into this eternal life He gives.

How can this help us to give a hopeful witness to those who are caught in sorrow?

As we stand by the graves of those we love, either at their funeral as the casket is lowered into the earth, or in subsequent years as we remember them, we do so in the hope that the perishable will put on the imperishable. That which undergoes death in faith will be raised to life. Christ is the first-fruits of the resurrection, but much more fruit shall follow in the saints of God whom He raises to life. Death, for the faithful, is but the gate to life eternal through Jesus Christ!

Conclusion

Graveyards can be things that are scary or mysterious. For some they are superstitious, and for many they are places filled with sorrow. However, for Christians graveyards are places that speak of the hope we have in Christ and of the resurrection. They are places where our Lord meets those who sit in sorrow and fills them with living hope, and they are places where the faithful await the day of their own raising on the Last Day to the joy of life eternal. That is our hope, even in the face of death, for as Paul reminds us at the conclusion of his great resurrection chapter, *The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ* (1 Corinthians 15:56–57). Christ has won the victory for us. The grave cannot hold Him, and it will not hold us as Jesus raises us to life eternal.

Closing Prayer: Gracious God, Your Son has overcome death and the grave by His own resurrection from the dead. Fill us with the joy of Easter, and grant that we may live always in the hope of our unending life with You in heaven. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Sing or read the hymn “Jesus Lives! The Victory’s Won,” *LSB* 490, focusing especially on stanza 5.

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LIVING IN LOVE

Bible Study • Study Guide

When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:31–35).

One of the most difficult things during the COVID-19 pandemic was the long separations it caused. In many cases gatherings had to be canceled, weddings were put on hold, and even family events were scuttled as the world lived in fear. It created all kinds of divisions in our nation. Fear separates, but love conquers fear.

What are some of the fears with which you personally wrestle?

Read Proverbs 29:25 and Matthew 10:26–33.

What do they tell us about fear?

The most wonderful way of trusting in the Lord is to love — love Him and love others.

To what kind of love does this John 13 theme passage refer?

This selfless love drives us into mission. For instance, few enter ministry professions because of the great pay. Even most ministry volunteers are motivated by love. Many enter into ministry because, on some level, there has been a personal experience of the love of Jesus, which creates a desire to serve Him. Love is a tremendous motivator. Love changes perceptions and attitudes,

and love releases us from the captivity of fear and hatred. Selfless love offers us freedom and joy unparalleled. As Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13, ***Love never fails!*** (13:8a NIV).

How have you seen love transform a situation or even a person?

See 1 Corinthians 13:1–13.

I have always found it fascinating that among the very last words Jesus shared with His disciples prior to His crucifixion were words about love. Notice the concern was not for the disciples to express their love for Jesus. Rather, it was a command for the disciples to love each other. Jesus commands us to love each other, too. Jesus says, “*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another*” (John 13:34).

What are some practical ways we can show love to our fellow Christians?

What are some practical ways we can show His love to those outside of the faith?

Jesus’ love for us motivates us to love Him and each other. This seems so simple, and yet it is sometimes so difficult to put into practice. Jesus understands if we don’t well live out our faith, and therefore don’t love as we should. When we don’t, because He has sent His Spirit to be with and in us, we crave His forgiveness. Once we again realize we have received so much through His grace, we can again strive to love as His wishes for us. The Spirit moves us to want to read His Word more because in it we get to know Jesus on an even deeper level. As the Spirit brings growth, we find that following this simple, even if difficult, command of Jesus directly benefits us and in turn blesses others.

When we walk in love, the Bible says we display the aroma of Jesus. Paul writes, “*For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life*” (2 Corinthians 2:15–16a).

How does the idea of walking in love carry with it the connotation of action? (See also 1 John 3:18 and James 2:17)

How might we practice walking in love?

Read what the Epistle of John, written from the perspective of a lifetime of experience, says in 1 John 4:7–12. Even more convicting words end this chapter in verses 20–21.

**How are we to treat the world when it shows us hatred and indifference?
See Matthew 5:43–44.**

How do we treat those who have hurt us or sinned against us? See Matthew 6 and 7.

How do we deal with those who are different from us, who struggle with their identity, or alternatively, even question our faith?

Jesus tells us to simply love them! He says, *“just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another”* (John 13:34b).

He, Himself, is the example to measure ourselves against. Of course, we could never fully live up to this command, but when we fail we know the power of His forgiveness restores us and enables us to try again.

Read Psalm 51:1–13 and note how forgiveness leads to action.

Read Colossians 3:12–17.

What are the benefits of living as Paul calls us to live?

Jesus said, *“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”* (John 13:35).

Based on this verse, how might we define discipleship?

Years ago, Hal David wrote the song, *“What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It's the only thing that there's just too little of. What the world needs now is love, sweet love. No not just for some, but for everyone...”*¹ We are living in a day when so many people are feeling lost and alone, looking for love in all the wrong places, and feeling rejected by God and by society. God's Spirit is sending each of us to tell the world about Jesus and His love. His love heals the broken hearted and binds up wounds. His love transforms and motivates us to share His love with others. Now is not the time to hide away in fear. Now is the time to live in the bold love of Jesus as the very ones He is sending into the world, always remembering He sends us with His love.

When I was a child I would love finding a penny on the ground. It did not matter if it were dirty, brown, and old or shiny and brand new. It could be scratched or unreadable. It did not really matter to me — it still had value. As a child, it made me feel rich. Of course, in those days you could still buy something for a penny. Today we don't seem to value pennies very much.

In a similar way, we are like those pennies. Some of us are old and worn, and others are shiny and bright. We cannot even begin to imagine where each of us has come from or what we have been through in life. Regardless of any of this, Jesus values each of us so much He was willing to die on the cross for our sins to cleanse us and make us new regardless of our outer appearance. He loves us so much; we are treasured by Him.

On the back of every penny is an important reminder for each of us. I encourage you to keep a penny in your pocket, and each time you see it look at the back. There you will find the words, “ONE CENT.” Let it serve as a reminder that you are **one sent** by Jesus into the world. You may not feel very valuable, but our Heavenly Father who created you cherishes you.

In Isaiah 43:4a CEV God reminds us, “*To me, you are very dear, and I love you.*”

How do we help people recognize they are a treasured possession to the Lord, redeemed in the blood of Jesus from a sacrifice of love?

How might each of us share the love of Jesus with someone in need?

As you share the love of Jesus you will find it means the whole world to the one touched by His love. You see, a little love can go a long way.

Live in His love, loving each other and whomever God places in your path, that they may see the love of Jesus in you. May His love overflow to those around you so that all people can see you are a disciple of our Risen Lord Jesus! You are sent by Jesus into the world, sent in His love. God’s heart for the world is now beating in you, with an eternal love for all. Let His love flow through your life.

Closing Prayer: Dear Jesus, You have shown us such great love, a love which took You all the way to the cross for my sins. Help me now to live in Your love and to share Your love with the world all around me for the sake of Your eternal kingdom. I ask in Jesus’ name. Amen.

¹ Davis, Hal and Bacharach, Burt. Lyrics to “What the World Needs Now is Love,” 1965. Austince.edu

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LIVING IN LOVE

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide Bibles and copies of the Bible study for attendees.]

When he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once. Little children, yet a little while I am with you. You will seek me, and just as I said to the Jews, so now I also say to you, ‘Where I am going you cannot come.’ A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:31–35).

One of the most difficult things, during the COVID-19 pandemic was the long separations it caused. In many cases gatherings had to be canceled, weddings were put on hold, and even family events were scuttled as the world lived in fear. It created all kinds of divisions in our nation. Fear separates, but love conquers fear.

What are some of the fears with which you personally wrestle?

People face all kinds of fears these days — it may include things like finances, health, family relationships, church/other relationships, not having enough food, issues with shelter, etc. There are also fears about spiritual issues, which we easily resolve with faith in Jesus.

Read Proverbs 29:25 and Matthew 10:26–33.

What do they tell us about fear?

These verses point us to trusting in the Lord.

The most wonderful way of trusting in the Lord is to love — love Him and love others.

To what kind of love does this John 13 theme passage refer?

The Greek language of the New Testament has four different words for love. In English, they mean selfish love, family love, friend love, and selfless love. The selfless love is agape love, the sacrificial love, where the good of the other is the one thing that counts, even if it is very difficult for the giver. The word used in John 3:16 is for agape love.

This selfless love drives us into mission. For instance, few enter ministry professions because of the great pay. Even most ministry volunteers are motivated by love. Many enter into ministry

because, on some level, there has been a personal experience of the love of Jesus, which creates a desire to serve Him. Love is a tremendous motivator. Love changes perceptions and attitudes, and love releases us from the captivity of fear and hatred. Selfless love offers us freedom and joy unparalleled. As Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13, ***Love never fails!*** (13:8a NIV).

How have you seen love transform a situation or even a person? Read 1 Corinthians 13:1–13.

Many people have seen love change attitudes or circumstances. Love can change personalities for the positive, and certainly the love Jesus has for each of us is transforming us day by day (2 Corinthians 4:16). Perhaps a silly example, but an easy one to understand, is the Grinch! The great chapter on love shows us the power of God's love at work in us.

I have always found it fascinating that among the very last words Jesus shared with His disciples prior to His crucifixion were words about love. Notice the concern was not for the disciples to express their love for Jesus. Rather, it was a command for the disciples to love each other. Jesus commands us to love each other, too. Jesus says, *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another”* (John 13:34).

What are some practical ways we can show love to our fellow Christians?

Assist those in need, smile more, serve each other, volunteer, etc. Answers may vary.

What are some practical ways we can show His love to those outside of the faith?

Some of the same answers will be true. Additionally, we can share the love of Jesus in tangible ways as we provide for those less fortunate, volunteer time, and share the Gospel in loving ways.

Jesus' love for us motivates us to love Him and each other. This seems so simple, and yet it is sometimes so difficult to put into practice. Jesus understands if we don't well live out our faith, and therefore don't love as we should. When we don't, because He has sent His Spirit to be with and in us, we crave His forgiveness. Once we again realize we have received so much through His grace, we can again strive to love as His wishes for us. The Spirit moves us to want to read His Word more because in it we get to know Jesus on an even deeper level. As the Spirit brings growth, we find that following this simple, even if difficult, command of Jesus directly benefits us and in turn blesses others.

When we walk in love, the Bible says we display the aroma of Jesus. Paul writes, *For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life* (2 Corinthians 2:15–16a).

How does the idea of walking in love carry with it the connotation of action? (See also 1 John 3:18 and James 2:17)

Walking implies movement, and movement implies action. When we walk in love, as powered by the Spirit, it is more than mere words. It will result in action (see also 1 John 3:18 and James 2:17).

How might we practice walking in love?

Love is not just some feeling deep down in our hearts, as the feeling we have for our spouses and children. It is a Spirit-driven decision and action displayed in how we live each day. It shows how we treat one another, living in His grace and sharing His love as the Holy Spirit plants seeds of redemption. We do good for fellow believers, and also for unbelievers, what we would otherwise never do.

Read what the Epistle of John, written from the perspective of a lifetime of experience, says in 1 John 4:7–12. Even more convicting words end this chapter in verses 20–21.

How are we to treat the world when it shows us hatred and indifference? See Matthew 5:43–44.

Jesus clearly calls us to live in love, even to those who hate us or are different from us. The world may accuse “Christians” of all kinds of things, and the world may express differing political viewpoints. Some will just simply reject our faith and values. Jesus calls us to love our enemies.

How do we treat those who have hurt us or sinned against us? See Matthew 6 and 7.

Our natural tendency is to treat them as we have been treated. Jesus says to treat them differently (Matthew 7:12). He calls us to love and forgive those who have hurt us. In Matthew 6, in the midst of teaching the disciples the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus says, “*and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors*” (verse 12). I have often interpreted it as saying “in the same way we have forgiven our debtors.” Imagine if God forgave us as we forgive others! Jesus goes on to say, “*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*” (verses 14–15). Scripturally we know God’s desire is to forgive, so could it be that our unwillingness to forgive prevents us from receiving the forgiveness God desires to give to us? This could be a fruitful discussion.

How do we deal with those who are different from us, who struggle with their identity, or alternatively, even question our faith?

We have so many divides in our nation over a variety of issues, including race, sexual identity and preference, faith practices, politics, and so on. The fact is, we will face differences — within our families, within our churches, and certainly within society in general. The answer to all of them is the same — we love them in spite of the

differences. It does not mean we compromise or change our viewpoint. Jesus loves each of us in spite of our sinfulness. He does not compromise or change His stance, but He also does not reject us because of our sin. We too can love even in the face of differences.

Jesus tells us to simply love them! He says, “*just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another*” (John 13:34b).

He, Himself, is the example to measure ourselves against. Of course, we could never fully live up to this command, but when we fail we know the power of His forgiveness restores us and enables us to try again.

Read Psalm 51:1–13 and note how forgiveness leads to action.

God creates a new and right spirit within us as we approach Him in repentance.

Read Colossians 3:12–17.

What are the benefits of living as Paul calls us to live?

Not only do we bless others, but our lives are blessed as well.

Jesus said, “*By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*” (John 13:35).

Based on this verse, how might we define discipleship?

Discipleship is often defined as following Jesus, which is true. Here, love for Jesus and for each other seems to be a great way of defining how a disciple lives. We are to live in love.

Years ago, Hal David wrote the song, “*What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It's the only thing that there's just too little of. What the world needs now is love, sweet love. No, not just for some, but for everyone...*”¹ We are living in a day when so many people are feeling lost and alone, looking for love in all the wrong places, and feeling rejected by God and by society. God’s Spirit is sending each of us to tell the world about Jesus and His love. His love heals the broken hearted and binds up wounds. His love transforms and motivates us to share His love with others. Now is not the time to hide away in fear. Now is the time to live in the bold love of Jesus as the very ones He is sending into the world, always remembering He sends us with His love.

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have been through in life. Regardless of any of this, Jesus values each of us so much He was willing to die on the cross for our sins to cleanse us and make us new, regardless of our outer appearance. He loves us so much; we are treasured by Him.

On the back of every penny is an important reminder for each of us. I encourage you to keep a penny in your pocket, and each time you see it look at the back. There you will find the words, "ONE CENT." Let it serve as a reminder that you are **one sent** by Jesus into the world. You may not feel very valuable, but our Heavenly Father who created you cherishes you.

In Isaiah 43:4a CEV God reminds us, *"To me, you are very dear, and I love you."*

How do we help people recognize they are a treasured possession to the Lord, redeemed in the blood of Jesus from a sacrifice of love?

Start within the Church by loving each other. When this happens it will naturally overflow to those outside the Church. Actions will often speak louder than words, at least at first. As we show the love of Jesus, people will know the love of Jesus and be more open to hearing His Word.

How might each of us share the love of Jesus with someone in need?

Answers will vary, but most often it is in the things we do. We don't do for others to earn their favor, nor to get God to do something for us. It is simply as a result of Jesus' love first touching our hearts. Often, after doing something good, we have the opportunity to tell of Jesus' love, for then it will make sense to the one we helped.

As you share the love of Jesus you will find it means the whole world to the one touched by His love. You see, a little love can go a long way.

Live in His love, loving each other and whomever God places in your path, that they may see the love of Jesus in you. May His love overflow to those around you so that all people can see you are a disciple of our Risen Lord Jesus! You are sent by Jesus into the world, sent in His love. God's heart for the world is now beating in you, with an eternal love for all. Let His love flow through your life.

Closing Prayer: Dear Jesus, You have shown us such great love, a love which took You all the way to the cross for my sins. Help me now to live in Your love and to share Your love with the world all around me for the sake of Your eternal kingdom. I ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

¹ Davis, Hal and Bacharach, Burt. Lyrics to "What the World Needs Now is Love." 1965, Austince.edu

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STEADFAST IN CHRIST

Bible Study • Study Guide

The dictionary defines "steadfast" as "firmly established, unchanging, not fickle or wavering." Oh, no! If this is so, how do we **become** steadfast in Christ? And how do we **remain** steadfast in Christ? The answer is — we cannot! As human beings we sin daily in our thoughts, words, and deeds against God and our neighbors. The truth is, it is Christ who is steadfast to us! It is a gift! Our Heavenly Father's steadfast love to us flows from the cross of Christ and gives us everything that we need to be steadfast in Him. This truth of Holy Scripture is summarized in the Apostles' Creed. It is a baptismal confession of the early Church and is still used today in the Divine Service throughout the world. Martin Luther's beautifully crafted Meanings of the Three Articles of the Apostles' Creed shows God's steadfastness to us.

The First Article – God's steadfastness: Caring for our physical welfare

[We confess our faith together.] "I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does only out of Fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true."

What does this mean?

God is the Creator and Preserver of all life.

What does our Heavenly Father give us for our earthly existence?

(Psalm 145:15–16; Matthew 6:25–34)

Why does God do this?

(Psalm 103:13; Psalm 145:9)

How is God our Father?

(Matthew 6:8–9; Romans 8:15; 1 John 3:1)

Do we deserve this steadfast love and caring?

(Romans 3:23–24; Genesis 32:10a)

How do we respond to God and our neighbor for these steadfast gifts?

(1 Timothy 4:4; Psalm 116:12–14; Psalm 118:1)

The Second Article – Christ's steadfastness: Becoming man and going to the cross

[We confess our faith together.] “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.”

What does this mean?

In the Incarnation Christ permanently, steadfastly joins Himself to mankind.

Why is this important that He be true man?

(Galatians 4:4–5; Philippians 2:8; Isaiah 53:5–6)

Why is it important that He also be true God?

(Mark 10:45; Hebrews 2:14–15; 1 Corinthians 15: 55–57)

How does Luther describe our natural state?

(Romans 3:10–19; Psalms 14:3; Ecclesiastes 7:20; Isaiah 64:6)

How did Jesus pay for our sins?

(1 John 1:7b; 1 Peter 1:18–19)

How does Luther describe our new life as forgiven children?

(Galatians 2:20; Luke 1:74–75; 2 Corinthians 5:15; 1 Peter 2:24)

What gifts of the cross does Christ's steadfast love give to us?

(Ephesians 1:7; John 11:25–26; Psalm 13:5; Titus 3:3–8a)

**The Third Article – Steadfast in Christ:
Gift of the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament**

[We confess our faith together.] “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.”

What does this mean?

How does Luther describe our own ability to be steadfast to Christ?

(1 Corinthians 2:14; Ephesians 2:1–2)

Who makes us steadfast in Christ?

(1 Corinthians 6:8–11; 1 Corinthians 12:3)

What is another word we could use for being steadfast in Christ?

Read Ephesians 2:8–9.

What does God use to give us faith?

(Mark 1:15; Romans 10:17; Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 6:11)

What gifts do we receive through God's Word and Sacraments?

(Ephesians 1:7; Matthew 26:26–28; 1 Peter 3:21)

Where do we go to receive these gifts that make and keep us steadfast in Christ?

(Acts 2:42; Matthew 28:18; John 20:20–23; Ephesians 2:19–22)

This is most certainly true!

Luther closes his explanations of the three Articles of the Apostles' Creed with words of great comfort and steadfastness: This is most certainly true. We have God's assurance and commitment to His unchanging, unwavering love. We have the absolute truth of God's great steadfastness to us in His Holy Word and Sacraments. We have His gift of faith in the forgiveness of sins making us steadfast in Christ. This is comfort to our trembling hearts. We are not on our own. Jesus has done it all for us. Through Him we are steadfast in Christ. This is most certainly true!

Closing Prayer: Sing together Martin Luther's hymn "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word" (*LSB* 655 or *LW* 334).

Lord, keep us steadfast in Your Word;
Curb those who by deceit or sword
Would wrest the kingdom from Your Son
And bring to naught all He has done.

Lord Jesus Christ, Your pow'r make known, For You are Lord of lords alone; Defend Your holy Church that we May sing Your praise eternally.

O Comforter of priceless worth, Send peace and unity on earth; Support us in our final strife And lead us out of death to life.

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STEADFAST IN CHRIST

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide musical accompaniment for the closing hymn.]

[Answers to the questions can be found in the Apostles' Creed which is a summary of Holy Scripture. The Bible passages are given as references.]

The dictionary defines "steadfast" as "firmly established, unchanging, not fickle or wavering." Oh, no! If this is so, how do we **become** steadfast in Christ? And how do we **remain** steadfast in Christ? The answer is — we cannot! As human beings we sin daily in our thoughts, words, and deeds against God and our neighbors. The truth is, it is Christ who is steadfast to us! It is a gift! Our Heavenly Father's steadfast love to us flows from the cross of Christ and gives us everything that we need to be steadfast in Him. This truth of Holy Scripture is summarized in the Apostles' Creed. It is a baptismal confession of the early Church and is still used today in the Divine Service throughout the world. Martin Luther's beautifully crafted Meanings of the Three Articles of the Apostles' Creed shows God's steadfastness to us.

The First Article – God's steadfastness: Caring for our physical welfare

[We confess our faith together.] “I believe that God has made me and all creatures; that He has given me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, and still takes care of them. He also gives me clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all I have. He richly and daily provides me with all that I need to support this body and life. He defends me against all danger and guards and protects me from all evil. All this He does only out of Fatherly, divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this it is my duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him. This is most certainly true.”

What does this mean?

God is the Creator and Preserver of all life.

What does our Heavenly Father give us for our earthly existence?

(Psalm 145:15–16; Matthew 6:25–34)

He graciously gives us everything that we need to support this body and life.

These verses specifically mention food, drink, and clothing.

Why does God do this?

(Psalm 103:13; Psalm 145:9)

God steadfastly cares for every aspect of our earthly lives out of His great mercy and love for His creation.

How is God our Father?

(Matthew 6:8–9; Romans 8:15; 1 John 3:1)

God is our Father because His Son went to the cross to forgive our sins. It is only through Jesus that we can call God our Father as He has taught us in the Lord's Prayer to pray "Our Father..."

Do we deserve this steadfast love and caring?

(Romans 3:23–24; Genesis 32:10a)

No, we have no merit or worthiness within ourselves. We are children of the Heavenly Father purely through Christ's atoning sacrifice.

How do we respond to God and our neighbor for these steadfast gifts?

(Psalm 118:1; Psalm 116:12–14; 1 Timothy 4:12–14)

We respond in joy by living a life of thanksgiving, praise, service, and obedience.

The Second Article – Christ's steadfastness: Becoming man and going to the cross

[We confess our faith together.] “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.”

What does this mean?

In the Incarnation Christ permanently, steadfastly joins Himself to mankind.

Why is this important that He be true Man?

(Galatians 4:4–5; Philippians 2:8; Isaiah 53:5–6)

Christ must be true man to take our place under the Law and thereby take all of our sin and our death into Himself on the cross.

Why is it important that He also be true God?

(Mark 10:45; Hebrews 2:14–15; 1 Corinthians 15:55–57)

Christ must be true God to be the obedient Son keeping the Law perfectly, die on the cross defeating Satan's power, and rise from the dead.

How does Luther describe our natural state?

(Romans 3:10–19; Psalm 14:3; Ecclesiastes 7:20; Isaiah 64:6)

We are lost and condemned creatures.

How did Jesus pay for our sins?

(1 John 1:7b; 1 Peter 1:18–19)

Jesus paid for our sins with the ultimate price – His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death.

How does Luther describe our new life as forgiven children?

(Galatians 2:20; Luke 1:74–75; 2 Corinthians 5:15; 1 Peter 2:24)

"... that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity."

What gifts of the cross does Christ's steadfast love give to us?

(Ephesians 1:7; John 11:25–26; Psalm 13:5; Titus 3:3–8a)

forgiveness, life, salvation

**The Third Article – Steadfast in Christ:
Gift of the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacrament**

[We confess our faith together.] “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers. On the Last Day He will raise me and all the dead, and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ. This is most certainly true.”

What does this mean?

How does Luther describe our own ability to be steadfast to Christ?

(1 Corinthians 2:14; Ephesians 2:1–2)

On our own we have no power to accept, come to, or believe in Jesus. “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him.”

Who makes us steadfast in Christ?

(1 Corinthians 6:8–11; 1 Corinthians 12:3)

The Holy Spirit makes us steadfast in Christ. It is purely a gift!

What is another word we could use for being steadfast in Christ?

(Ephesians 2:8–9)

faith

What does God use to give us faith?

(Mark 1:15; Romans 10:17; Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 6:11)

Faith is made ours through the Gospel which is His Word and through Sacraments.

What gifts do we receive through God's Word and Sacraments?

(Ephesians 1:7; Matthew 26:26–28; 1 Peter 3:21)

forgiveness, life, salvation

Where do we go to receive these gifts that make and keep us steadfast in Christ?

(Acts 2:42; Matthew 28:18–20; John 20:20–23; Ephesians 2:19–22)

Church – the Divine Service and His Word

This is most certainly true!

Luther closes his explanations of the three Articles of the Apostles' Creed with words of great comfort and steadfastness: This is most certainly true. We have God's assurance and commitment to His unchanging, unwavering love. We have the absolute truth of God's great steadfastness to us in His Holy Word and Sacraments. We have His gift of faith in the forgiveness of sins making us steadfast in Christ. This is comfort to our trembling hearts. We are not on our own. Jesus has done it all for us. Through Him we are steadfast in Christ. This is most certainly true!

Closing Prayer: Sing together Martin Luther's hymn "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word" (*LSB* 655).

Lord, keep us steadfast in Your Word; Curb those who by deceit or sword Would wrest the kingdom from Your Son And bring to naught all He has done.

Lord Jesus Christ, Your pow'r make known, For You are Lord of lords alone; Defend Your holy Church that we May sing Your praise eternally.

O Comforter of priceless worth, Send peace and unity on earth; Support us in our final strife And lead us out of death to life.

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STILLNESS IN THE SEASONS OF LIFE

Bible Study • Study Guide

Stillness. Each season of life provides its own kind of stillness.

As children we had no problem experiencing stillness if adults allowed it. Adults often turn on the radio or television so children have “company” at all times, but children do not need it. Some will play contentedly for quite some time without any outside stimulation. If they have a friend or sibling with which to play, they can be content even longer. Jesus spoke about children.

Read Matthew 18:1–6 and Mark 10:13–16.

What do you think Jesus meant when He said we need to “become like children”?

When you think about stillness and a child's heart, how would a child relate to God differently than an adult?

As we grow from childhood into the teen years, the world invades our peacefulness and we become less content. As teens, we often run away from stillness when it is the very thing we need. We feel we need to run faster, be busier, or multi-task. What will happen if we just do nothing? We will miss out, get left behind, or have to think about things that are deeper than we want — scary things like the future, responsibilities, or decisions to be made. Jesus understands these fears. He lived through very difficult times.

Read Matthew 14:8–14.

What did Jesus do when He received the very sad news of the death of His friend, John?

What did Jesus do when the crowds found Him and brought their sick to Him?

Jesus was able to put aside His grief and care for the crowd.

How might His time spent alone have affected His decision?

Read Luke 22:39–44.

Jesus was aware that the crucifixion lay ahead of Him. He was obviously in great distress.

What was His way of dealing with the stress?

Read 1 Corinthians 9:24–27.

Paul has a message for those who are very busy, especially with things that do not lead them anywhere in particular.

What is that message?

Young families must take quiet time in small increments, whenever they can get it. It may be when a little one is awake in the middle of the night and mom has the privilege of sitting in the stillness, cuddling her little one, with no other sound around. It may have to be time stolen with an extra five minutes in the shower. It may be mom and dad sleepily and quietly conversing and praying together after the little ones are finally in bed.

Read Matthew 14:13 and Mark 1:35.

Jesus had many demands on Him. People constantly pursued Him for healing and for guidance. He surely understands the demands and stresses that young parents feel.

What do you think Jesus would recommend to young parents of today for dealing with their stress?

However, life is crazy!

What are some ways young parents may be able to find the time for these stress relievers?

Read Psalm 4:4.

Even if you feel that the only time you have is at bedtime, try to be diligent in talking to God for

a few minutes, and listening to Him, before you fall asleep. Consider kneeling beside your bed to help you stay focused.

Parents of school-aged children may have to plan stillness — family dinner (or breakfast) time, prayer with children at bedtime, time together as a couple — whenever it is available. Family time usually will not just happen but must be intentionally made. In fact, God commanded us to make that time.

Read Deuteronomy 6:6–9.

When can you teach His commands to your children?

Jesus set an example of finding stillness with friends and family during His life here on earth.

Read Matthew 9:9–10, Matthew 26:6–7, and Luke 22:14–15.

With whom did Jesus “recline at table” in these passages?

Jesus made time to sit down and connect with people, many of whom would have been ignored, much less shared a dinner table with, by most people of His time — people, nevertheless, who really needed to connect with others. Taking the time to connect with family and friends is a way of being still before the Lord. Leaving the hustle and bustle of the world long enough to “recline at table” allows the Lord to work through you and those around you to further His work.

Personal quiet time will not just happen either, but, as we read earlier, Jesus made quiet time with His Father a priority. Finding those moments in the car, before the children get up, or after they go to bed will be well worth the effort as your relationship grows with Christ.

As the children become teenagers and then move into the college years, parents may find that quiet time alone comes more frequently, but they have forgotten how to use it. Using this time to reconnect to one another and to the Lord can be a great benefit to their marriage and family.

Read Genesis 2:18–24.

As God created the earth and all that is in it, *And God saw that it was good* (Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31) was repeated over and over.

However, when God saw that man had no helper, what was His comment?

God did not create mankind to be alone. We are meant to share our lives with someone.

If you are married, taking care of that relationship is important. This can sound like a daunting task to some who are in the midst of child-rearing and the busyness that entails. Date nights are great, but building relationships can happen in snippets of time stolen here and there, too. During those seasons when you are “passing in the night,” a note, perhaps jotted on a Post-it® Note and strategically placed for your spouse to find, can bring a smile and build relationships.

What are some other ways couples can connect, and find the “stillness” that comes from a strong marriage, during this season of life?

Empty-nesters suddenly have stillness thrust upon them. Some tend to resist the stillness. They are often not comfortable sitting in silence. If they find themselves in silence, they turn on the radio or the television or sit down at the computer. It may be difficult for them to be at peace with life without children at home. They may respond by finding things to keep themselves busy. It is good to find new activities so as not to grow stagnant and feel insignificant without the day-to-day responsibilities of parenthood. It is also good to embrace the stillness, for God's Word says, “*Be still, and know that I am God*” (Psalm 46:10a), and He is known through His Word of grace and forgiveness because of Jesus Christ. Thus, stillness can be a blessing for Christians.

Read John 14:27.

What does Jesus promise us if we stay close to Him?

To learn how we can find that peace, read Psalm 46:10.

What is the result when we draw close to God in stillness?

In the NIV version of Jeremiah 31:3, God tells us, “*I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.*” He draws us close to Him through His Word.

The empty-nest season is a great opportunity for drawing close to God, while still having the energy and ability to actively serve Him.

Read Proverbs 17:6.

Grandmas and grandpas are blessed with an awesome opportunity to touch young lives for Christ. Sharing an attitude of “stillness” with children and grandchildren will provide great opportunities to witness for the Lord. The wisdom of age is priceless, providing a perspective completely different from that of young parents.

Read Titus 2:1–5.

Today's world is not very accepting of some of the ideas in this passage.

How would you approach relating these thoughts to today's young mothers?

(Consider Ephesians 5:21–33.)

Though getting older has its challenges, God does not forsake us in our later years. Stillness is more readily available in these years, and through it God sustains us through the power of His Word. We can and should continue to serve Him in whatever capacity we are able. We can serve physically, and when we can no longer do that, we can still tell others about Him and His love for us as long as we have breath.

Read Psalm 71:17–18 and 73:26.

What opportunities might be uniquely available to the elderly to serve the Lord through the stillness He provides?

Each season of life offers its own challenges for finding stillness with the Lord. As we strive to grow closer to Him through each season, may we seek out and recognize the opportunities for stillness He provides.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You for the seasons of life. You have set everything in motion so that each of life's seasons provides us with different opportunities for serving You. Help us to find the stillness in each season and use it to grow closer to You, as well as bring others to a relationship with You, for in You is a stillness that we can find nowhere else. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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STILLNESS IN THE SEASONS OF LIFE

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide Bibles and copies of the Bible study for attendees.]

Stillness. Each season of life provides its own kind of stillness.

As children we had no problem experiencing stillness if adults allowed it. Adults often turn on the radio or television so children have “company” at all times, but children do not need it. Some will play contentedly for quite some time without any outside stimulation. If they have a friend or sibling with which to play, they can be content even longer. Jesus spoke about children.

Read Matthew 18:1–6 and Mark 10:13–16.

What do you think Jesus meant when He said we need to “become like children”?

Children are less likely to have become hardened by life and its sin. They are willing to learn, are less prideful, and have quiet hearts.

When you think about stillness and a child's heart, how would a child relate to God differently than an adult?

Children are often less jaded by life and thus are not as likely to dismiss God's incredible statements as unrealistic.

As we grow from childhood into the teen years, the world invades our peacefulness and we become less content. As teens, we often run away from stillness when it is the very thing we need. We feel we need to run faster, be busier, or multi-task. What will happen if we just do nothing? We will miss out, get left behind, or have to think about things that are deeper than we want — scary things like the future, responsibilities, or decisions to be made. Jesus understands these fears. He lived through very difficult times.

Read Matthew 14:8–14.

What did Jesus do when He received the very sad news of the death of His friend, John?

He went to a desolate place by Himself.

What did Jesus do when the crowds found Him and brought their sick to Him?

He had compassion on them and healed their sick.

Jesus was able to put aside His grief and care for the crowd.

How might His time spent alone have affected His decision?

He spent time in prayer, gathering His thoughts and emotions and receiving strength from His Heavenly Father.

Read Luke 22:39–44.

Jesus was aware that the crucifixion lay ahead of Him. He was obviously in great distress.

What was His way of dealing with the stress?

He prayed.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:24–27.

Paul has a message for those who are very busy, especially with things that do not lead them anywhere in particular.

What is that message?

They should run with a purpose, stay focused on the goal of following Jesus, and strive for the prize that lasts — eternal life.

Young families must take quiet time in small increments, whenever they can get it. It may be when a little one is awake in the middle of the night and mom has the privilege of sitting in the stillness, cuddling her little one, with no other sound around. It may have to be time stolen with an extra five minutes in the shower. It may be mom and dad sleepily and quietly conversing and praying together after the little ones are finally in bed.

Read Matthew 14:13 and Mark 1:35.

Jesus had many demands on Him. People constantly pursued Him for healing and for guidance. He surely understands the demands and stresses that young parents feel.

What do you think Jesus would recommend to young parents of today for dealing with their stress?

Recommended would be prayer, time in the Word, and time with friends in fellowship.

However, life is crazy!

What are some ways young parents may be able to find the time for these stress relievers?

Driving in the car – tune in to Christian radio, or shut it off and pray in the quiet; plan dates with spouse – take the time to pray together (even five minutes makes a difference!); form a Bible study group with people who have children about the same age as yours – for younger kids, parents can take turns doing the babysitting, let the older kids play, you de-stress!

Read Psalm 4:4.

Even if you feel that the only time you have is at bedtime, try to be diligent in talking to God for a few minutes, and listening to Him, before you fall asleep. Consider kneeling beside your bed to help you stay focused.

Parents of school-aged children may have to plan stillness — family dinner (or breakfast) time, prayer with children at bedtime, time together as a couple — whenever it is available. Family time usually will not just happen but must be intentionally made. In fact, God commanded us to make that time.

Read Deuteronomy 6:6–9.

When can you teach His commands to your children?

Possibilities might include at dinner time, during drive-time, or just before bed-time.

Jesus set an example of finding stillness with friends and family during His life here on earth. Read Matthew 9:9–10, Matthew 26:6–7, and Luke 22:14–15.

With whom did Jesus “recline at table” in these passages?

Jesus was at the table with a tax collector, a leper, a woman, and His disciples — those closest to Him.

Jesus made time to sit down and connect with people, many of whom would have been ignored, much less shared a dinner table with, by most people of His time — people, nevertheless, who really needed to connect with others. Taking the time to connect with family and friends is a way of being still before the Lord. Leaving the hustle and bustle of the world long enough to “recline at table” allows the Lord to work through you and those around you to further His work.

Personal quiet time will not just happen either, but, as we read earlier, Jesus made quiet time with His Father a priority. Finding those moments in the car, before the children get up, or after they go to bed will be well worth the effort as your relationship grows with Christ.

As the children become teenagers and then move into the college years, parents may find that quiet time alone comes more frequently, but they have forgotten how to use it. Using this time to reconnect to one another and to the Lord can be a great benefit to their marriage and family.

Read Genesis 2:18–24.

As God created the earth and all that is in it, *And God saw that it was good* (Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31) was repeated over and over.

However, when God saw that man had no helper, what was His comment?

“It is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18a).

God did not create mankind to be alone. We are meant to share our lives with someone.

If you are married, taking care of that relationship is important. This can sound like a daunting task to some who are in the midst of child-rearing and the busyness that entails. Date nights are great, but building relationships can happen in snippets of time stolen here and there, too. During those seasons when you are “passing in the night,” a note, perhaps jotted on a Post-it® Note and strategically placed for your spouse to find, can bring a smile and build relationships.

What are some other ways couples can connect, and find the “stillness” that comes from a strong marriage, during this season of life?

Possibilities might include when doing the dishes together, doing yard work, or preparing meal together.

Empty-nesters suddenly have stillness thrust upon them. Some tend to resist the stillness. They are often not comfortable sitting in silence. If they find themselves in silence, they turn on the radio or the television or sit down at the computer. It may be difficult for them to be at peace with life without children at home. They may respond by finding things to keep themselves busy. It is good to find new activities so as not to grow stagnant and feel insignificant without the day-to-day responsibilities of parenthood. It is also good to embrace the stillness, for God's Word says, *“Be still, and know that I am God”* (Psalm 46:10a), and He is known through His Word of grace and forgiveness because of Jesus Christ. Thus, stillness can be a blessing for Christians.

Read John 14:27.

What does Jesus promise us if we stay close to Him?

Peace

To learn how we can find that peace, read Psalm 46:10.

What is the result when we draw close to God in stillness?

We find peace and God is exalted.

In the NIV version of Jeremiah 31:3, God tells us, *“I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.”* He draws us close to Him through His Word.

The empty-nest season is a great opportunity for drawing close to God, while still having the energy and ability to actively serve Him.

Read Proverbs 17:6.

Grandmas and grandpas are blessed with an awesome opportunity to touch young lives for Christ. Sharing an attitude of “stillness” with children and grandchildren will provide great opportunities to witness for the Lord. The wisdom of age is priceless, providing a perspective completely different from that of young parents.

Read Titus 2:1–5.

Today's world is not very accepting of some of the ideas in this passage.

How would you approach relating these thoughts to today's young mothers?

(Consider Ephesians 5:21–33.)

Answers will vary but might include talking about someone whom they admire or who taught them and how those people taught by their actions.

Though getting older has its challenges, God does not forsake us in our later years. Stillness is more readily available in these years, and through it God sustains us through the power of His Word. We can and should continue to serve Him in whatever capacity we are able. We can serve physically, and when we can no longer do that, we can still tell others about Him and His love for us as long as we have breath.

Read Psalm 71:17–18 and 73:26.

What opportunities might be uniquely available to the elderly to serve the Lord through the stillness He provides?

Being prayer warriors, teaching grandchildren, or volunteering might be examples.

Each season of life offers its own challenges for finding stillness with the Lord. As we strive to grow closer to Him through each season, may we seek out and recognize the opportunities for stillness He provides.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You for the seasons of life. You have set everything in motion so that each of life's seasons provides us with different opportunities for serving You. Help us to find the stillness in each season and use it to grow closer to You, as well as bring others to a relationship with You, for in You is a stillness that we can find nowhere else. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Stillness in the Seasons of Life, by Kris Osler, Andover, Kansas
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SURRENDER — PART 1

Bible Study • Study Guide

Opening Prayer: Lord, be with us as we study Your Word. Help us to surrender our will as You work Your will in our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

How has life been treating you lately – financially, physically, regarding relationships? Are you struggling to keep your head above water? Are you floating on the clouds, or are you just living a day-to-day rather uneventful life?

Take a moment and jot down your uppermost concern today.

(You can use code words if you want to keep it private.)

Merriam-Webster.com defines surrender: To give (oneself) up into the power of another.

On February 2, 2005, as Aletha Voges was preparing to lead an LWML Bible Study on “Peace,” she read Romans 8:6: *The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace* (NIV). She thought that a great question to ask the ladies would be, “How does one’s mind become controlled by the Spirit?” Reflecting upon this question herself, she could not help but be reminded that a life controlled by the Spirit continually surrenders to our Lord’s good and gracious will. Led by the Holy Spirit, she would continue to be reminded that she would be used by God as He saw fit.

Aletha’s life took a drastic turn as three days later her husband Ethan began his 15-month battle with pancreatic cancer. She was allowed to witness God’s miraculous workings as the Holy Spirit led her to surrender and trust in her God who did not work in ways she always wanted, but rather according to His purpose.

Aletha states, “It was a humbling experience to let go of my wants and desires and see God take them away and replace them with His will and purpose for my life. It felt like I was walking in two different worlds. In one I was dealing with Ethan’s roller coaster medical issues and in the other I was allowed to see how God was using our experiences to His glory.”

What relationship would you need to have with other people in order for you to surrender to their will?

Let us look closely at three possible attitudes.

Humility — thinking more highly of others than self — submissive

What do these verses teach us about God's calling us to lives of humility?

2 Chronicles 7:14

Psalm 25:9

Psalm 149:4

Proverbs 3:34

Ephesians 4:1-2

James 4:7-10

Trust — to depend on, rely on, or entrust your will to someone else, surrender

What do we learn from these examples about trust?

Genesis 12:1-8

Genesis 22:1–18

Daniel 3:16–18

Daniel 6:10–13, 16–22

Matthew 26:38–39, 42

Faith — believing what is unseen, trusting what may not be felt

How can these passages enrich our lives lived out in faith?

Matthew 9:2

Matthew 9:20–22

Luke 17:5–6

Romans 1:16–17

2 Corinthians 5:7

Hebrews 11:13

Where is your faith focused? By the power of the Holy Spirit are you looking upward to God and outward to others with trust in God to work good things in the midst of devastating problems? Or are you inwardly focused on only what you can do?

1 Peter 5:6–7 reminds believers to humble (submit, surrender) yourselves, to be lifted up, and to cast your cares on God because He cares about you.

Closing Prayer: Lord, we confess that we do not always come to You first with our problems. We try to handle them by ourselves. May the Holy Spirit strengthen our faith and trust in You that we willingly relinquish our will to You. May our lives reflect Your love, O Lord, and may others see You in us and glorify our Father in Heaven. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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SURRENDER — PART 1

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide all participants with Bibles and a copy of this study guide.]

Opening Prayer: Lord, be with us as we study Your Word. Help us to surrender our will as You work Your will in our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

How has life been treating you lately — financially, physically, regarding relationships? Are you struggling to keep your head above water? Are you floating on the clouds, or are you just living a day-to-day rather uneventful life?

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What relationship would you need to have with other people in order for you to surrender to their will?

[Possible answers]

humility — submissive attitude

trust — letting go and letting someone else lead

faith — believe someone else has the best interest for your welfare

Let us look closely at three possible attitudes.

Humility — thinking more highly of others than self — submissive

What do these verses teach us about God's calling us to lives of humility?

2 Chronicles 7:14

humble selves, pray, submit, surrender, seek God's face

Psalms 25:9

He leads (guides) the humble — teaches

Psalms 149:4

The Lord delights, takes pleasure — adorns with salvation

Proverbs 3:34

He gives favor to the humble.

Ephesians 4:1-2

Humility is considered *a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.*

James 4:6, 10

It's a way of submitting to God. He gives grace and exalts those who humble themselves.

Trust — to depend on, rely on, or entrust your will to someone else, surrender

What do we learn from these examples about trust?

Genesis 12:1-8

Abram left all he knew and followed God to an unknown promised land. He trusted God to lead.

Genesis 22:1–18

Abraham was tested to sacrifice his only son Isaac. He trusted that God knew what He was doing.

Daniel 3:16–18

Three men in the fiery furnace surrendered their lives to God because they trusted His faithfulness.

Daniel 6:10–13, 16–23

Daniel in prayer and the lion's den trusted God would protect him from the lions.

Matthew 26:38–39, 42

Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, trusted His Father's plan all the way to the cross.

Faith — believing what is unseen, trusting what may not be felt

How can these passages enrich our lives lived out in faith?

Matthew 9:2

Jesus noticed the people's faith. Pray for others to be healed.

Matthew 9:20–22

The woman's prayer of faith healed her. Pray in faith.

Luke 17:5–6

Pray for God to increase your faith.

Romans 1:16–17

It reminds us to keep our faith in the Gospel.

2 Corinthians 5:7

We live by faith, not by what we see.

Hebrews 11:13

We may never see the final results of our prayers, but God is working on His time schedule. Heaven is our home.

Where is your faith focused? By the power of the Holy Spirit are you looking upward to God and outward to others with trust in God to work good things in the midst of devastating problems? Or, are you inwardly focused on only what you can do?

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SURRENDER — PART 2

Bible Study • Study Guide

In Part 1 of this study we looked at what it means to surrender our will as God works His will in our lives. We studied what impact humility, trust, and faith play in our lives as we, by the power of the Holy Spirit, surrender all to Christ.

Surrendering our lives to Christ does not mean life is without difficulties. In this part of the study we will look at Job, a man of God, to whom God allowed disaster to strike.

Opening Prayer: Lord, we all have broken areas in our lives. We confess these to You and ask that, as we walk with Job and see how You worked in his life, the Holy Spirit will strengthen our faith and our trust in You. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Read Job 1. God and Satan had a conversation and Job's life was changed forever.

What calamities did Job face?

What might your reaction be if you had to face any or all of the calamities Job experienced?

Any one of them might do us in – financial ruin, loss of prestige, loss of family – and yet Job persisted in faith.

Have you had a time when you doubted God was interested in your wellbeing? How did it turn out?

Read Job 2:1–10. God and Satan had another conversation.

Did God inflict evil upon Job? Does God inflict evil on us?

See Job 2:6.

Read Romans 5:1–5 and Romans 8:1, 28, 31–39.

When we experience troubles and evil in our lives, how does God use these experiences for our benefit?

God allowed Satan to inflict pain on Job’s body but told Satan that he must spare Job’s life.

According to verse 9, what did Job’s wife encourage him to do in the midst of his pain?

What was Job’s response?

What does Job’s response to his wife say about his faith in God?

Think about a challenging time in your life.

How did (do) these challenges affect you physically?

How did (do) these challenges affect you spiritually?

What have you done or are you doing to try to fix the situation?

Read Job 2:11–13.

According to these verses, how did Job’s friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar initially come to help him in his time of suffering?

As these three friends continued to spend time with Job, they each came to some interesting conclusions concerning Job's suffering. Read Job 4:7-9, Job 8:11-13, and Job 11:13-20.

Summarize what Job's three friends concluded as to why he faced so many troubles.

The advice Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar gave to Job was not only distressing, it is against the truth of Holy Scripture.

How does the Bible rightly explain God's intentions for us in each of the references below?

Genesis 50:15-21

Psalms 9:9-12

John 9:1-3

James 1:2-4, 12-18

Read Job 7.

Which of Job's feelings described in this chapter are similar to ones you have felt when you have suffered?

Job did not understand why God was allowing such suffering to befall him. Yet through it all, Job held on to one eternal truth. Read Job 19:25-27.

What is that truth?

How can remembering the truth of Job 19:25–27 anchor us in our own times of suffering?

Jesus, our true Friend and true Savior, fully understands our feelings when we suffer. Read Luke 22:39–42 and 22:63–65.

What was the source of Jesus' suffering?

Despite His dread, what does Jesus pray to His Heavenly Father (Luke 22:42)?

How does God respond to Jesus' suffering (verse 43)?

What does Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane show that our response can be in times of suffering?

As He suffered, Job bombarded God with questions. Then God came to Job and asked him questions that Job could not answer.

Read Job 38–41.

What do God's questions to Job reveal about God and why we can trust Him to help us in any time of need?

Read Job 42:1–9. Job confessed his lack of understanding of God's might and mercy. God led Job to recognize that he was but a man and that God alone is all-knowing and all powerful. The Holy Spirit worked in Job's heart and led him to repent.

Why is repentance such an important element in Job’s surrender to God as well as in our own surrender to Him?

John writes in 1 John 1:9: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

Cleansed and forgiven by God, what was Job now freed to do?

What joy or peace do we miss when we stubbornly hold onto our will instead of surrendering to God that His Kingdom may come among us?

Read James 4:7–10.

What does God promise us when we surrender ourselves to Him?

God did not leave Job destitute. Read Job 42:10–17.

How did God bless Job in his later years?

Read Revelation 21:3–4.

What does God promise all believers no matter what suffering we might experience during our life here on earth?

A final thought: Aletha Voges, the author of this study, walked with her husband Pastor Ethan Voges through his 15-month battle with pancreatic cancer. After much suffering, God took Pastor Voges to his eternal home in heaven. Aletha concludes, “Had I not, through the power of the Holy Spirit, surrendered my will to be used as God saw fit, the outcome of my husband Ethan’s 15-month battle with pancreatic cancer would not have changed, but I would

have missed seeing the power of God working in our lives. I would not be living with the peace I now have. I look back and remember how it felt like I was living in two different worlds. The one included the day-to-day struggles of Ethan’s illness, the other, a view of God working in our lives and in the lives of others touched by our experiences. One day while reading Daniel 2:22, I found these words, ... *he [God] reveals deep and hidden things*. As I read and pondered His Word, God helped me see His hidden messages through the struggles we faced. God has given me the privilege to share with others the insights He has given me. God did not answer my prayers as I wanted. He had a better plan. I now live in forgiveness by the power of the Holy Spirit helping me as I struggle to continue living in surrender to Christ.”

Think about your own times of suffering. How has God worked through these times to strengthen your faith in Him and to enable you to help others in their own suffering?

Closing Prayer: Lord God, You know the difficulties each of us is facing today. Many times, we try to solve the problems on our own before coming to You. Forgive us for not coming to You with even our most finite issues. Help us to daily surrender our will to Your will and to walk step-by-step with You leading us. Through faith in Jesus, our once suffering and now triumphant Savior, we trust You to lead us to our ultimate destination, life in heaven with You. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

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Surrender — Part 2, by Aletha Voges, Kent, Washington

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SURRENDER — PART 2

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide a Bible and a copy of this study for all participants.]

In Part 1 of this study we looked at what it means to surrender our will as God works His will in our lives. We studied what impact humility, trust, and faith play in our lives as we, by the power of the Holy Spirit, surrender all to Christ.

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Read Job 1.

God and Satan had a conversation and Job's life was changed forever.

What calamities did Job face?

Job lost his animals, his servants, and his sons and daughters.

What might your reaction be if you had to face any or all of the calamities Job experienced?

[Encourage participants to share their reactions.]

Any one of them might do us in — financial ruin, loss of prestige, loss of family — and yet Job persisted in faith.

Have you had a time when you doubted God was interested in your wellbeing? How did it turn out?

[If participants feel uncomfortable sharing their times of doubt out loud, encourage them to think about such times as well as the outcome of these times.]

Read Job 2:1–10. God and Satan had another conversation.

Did God inflict evil upon Job? Does God inflict evil on us?

See Job 2:6.

Satan and the consequences of our sins are what cause us pain. God allows these times of suffering in our life.

Read Romans 5:1–5 and Romans 8:1, 28, 31–39.

When we experience troubles and evil in our lives, how does God use these experiences for our benefit?

Romans 5:3–4 tells us that *suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope* — the sure and certain hope we have in God’s forgiveness of our sins and eternal life through faith in Christ Jesus. Because of God working in us to help us through our suffering and to bring about good things, we can even *rejoice in our sufferings* (verse 3). The verses from Romans 8 remind us that those in Christ have *no condemnation* (verse 1); *that for those who love God all things work together for good* (verse 28); and *nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord* (verse 39).

God allowed Satan to inflict pain on Job’s body but told Satan that he must spare Job’s life.

According to Job 2:9, what did Job’s wife encourage him to do in the midst of his pain?

Job’s wife told him to Curse God and die.

What was Job’s response?

He did not sin against God.

What does Job’s response to his wife say about his faith in God?

Job continues to trust in God even though he knows his suffering ultimately comes from God. His response to his wife shows his strong faith, but he does indeed agonize with not knowing why he suffers.

Think about a challenging time in your life.

How did (do) these challenges affect you physically?

Challenges can affect our physical health through headaches, joint and neck stiffness, tension, pain, digestive issues, hives and rashes, as well as various nervous system issues.

How did (do) these challenges affect you spiritually?

Challenges can cause us to doubt God’s goodness and love toward us. They can make us angry with God. They can make us not want to spend time with Him and even to turn away from Him completely in hopelessness. They can also spur us to prayer and reading our Bible and through that grow closer to our Lord.

What have you done or are you doing to try to fix the situation?

As individuals share, point out that solutions not focused on God and on His will for us bring only temporary relief if any relief at all.

Read Job 2:11–13.

According to these verses, how did Job’s friends Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar initially come to help him in his time of suffering?

At first, Job’s friends came to *show him sympathy and comfort him* (verse 11); they mourned with him over his losses (verse 12); and they stayed with him (verse 13).

As these three friends continued to spend time with Job, they each came to some interesting conclusions concerning Job’s suffering. Read Job 4:7–9; Job 8:11–13, and Job 11:13–20.

Summarize what Job’s three friends concluded as to why he faced so many troubles.

The main point of Job’s friends concerning his suffering is that it must be God’s punishment on him for sin. None of Job’s friends offers true empathy or comfort to him in his time of need.

The advice Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar gave to Job was not only distressing, it is against the truth of Holy Scripture.

How does the Bible rightly explain God’s intentions for us in each of the references below?

Genesis 50:15–21

Joseph tells his brothers that while by their actions they intended to bring harm to him, God used Joseph’s situation and suffering to save many lives.

Psalms 9:9–12

God is our stronghold and does not forsake those who pray to Him.

John 9:1–3

Concerning the disciples’ question about the man born blind, Jesus emphasizes that the man’s blindness is not due to a specific sin of the man or of his parents. Instead, Jesus said that through this man, God’s works *might be displayed* (verse 3).

James 1:2–4, 12–18

God works good through our trials and suffering to test us and to strengthen our faith. God cannot be tempted by evil and He tempts no one. We are drawn into sin through our own sinful nature. God is only good.

Read Job 7.

Which of Job’s feelings described in this chapter are similar to ones you have felt when you have suffered?

Job’s feelings as he suffered included grief, pain, bitterness, hopelessness, terror, and exhaustion.

Job did not understand why God was allowing such suffering to befall him. Yet through it all, Job held on to one eternal truth. Read Job 19:25–27.

What is that truth?

Job knew that His Redeemer lives and that in his flesh he would someday see God.

How can remembering the truth of Job 19:25–27 anchor us in our own times of suffering?

Knowing that Jesus conquered sin, death, and Satan through His death and resurrection for us, we know that through faith in Him, we, too, have conquered these things. We know that our earthly suffering is only temporary and will end when we reach our true home in heaven.

Jesus, our true Friend and true Savior, fully understands our feelings when we suffer. Read Luke 22:39–42 and 22:63–65.

What was the source of Jesus' suffering?

The source of Jesus' suffering was the weight of our sins and the sins of the whole world in His body as well as the physical punishment He endured on His way to the cross and when He was crucified on it. As true man, Jesus' suffering had already begun in the Garden of Gethsemane as He dreaded what He knew was to come.

Despite His dread, what does Jesus pray to His Heavenly Father (Luke 22:42)?

Jesus asked God to take the suffering away from Him. However, despite this request, Jesus surrendered His will to His Father's. Jesus knew the only way that we could be saved from our sins was through His death.

How does God respond to Jesus' suffering (verse 43)?

God sent an angel to strengthen His Son.

What does Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane show that our response can be in times of suffering?

Because of Jesus, we can bring our wants and desires and our suffering to God in prayer. Our Lord Jesus surrendered His will to God. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are able to do likewise.

As He suffered, Job bombarded God with questions. Then God came to Job and asked him questions that Job could not answer. Read Job 38–41.

What do God's questions to Job reveal about God and why we can trust Him to help us in any time of need?

God is almighty. He made all things and continues to care for all things. God knows all things and controls all things. We can trust in God because His love and forgiveness of us overcome any evil, suffering, or trouble that we may endure.

Read Job 42:1–9. Job confessed his lack of understanding of God's might and mercy. God led Job to recognize that he was but a man and that God alone is all-knowing and all powerful. The Holy Spirit worked in Job's heart and led him to repent.

Why is repentance such an important element in Job's surrender to God as well as in our own surrender to Him?

Repentance is a turning away from sin and evil and our sinful desires. It is a turning to God and to His good and perfect will. It is recognizing that God knows best and is best. Daily, the Holy Spirit works through God's Word to show us our sin, to help us to turn away from our sinful thoughts and actions, and to remind us that we are forgiven of our sins through faith in Christ Jesus.

John writes in 1 John 1:9: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

Cleansed and forgiven by God, what was Job now freed to do?

Job was freed to forgive his friends for their harmful and false accusations toward him.

What joy or peace do we miss when we stubbornly hold onto our will instead of surrendering to God that His Kingdom may come among us?

When we stubbornly hold on to our will, we hurt ourselves further by trying to do things our own way. We miss opportunities to come to know God better and better through His righteous actions that benefit us. We miss opportunities to show and share His love and forgiveness with others.

Read James 4:7–10.

What does God promise us when we surrender ourselves to Him?

For Jesus' sake, we receive God's forgiveness; a new, eternal life; and a home in heaven with Him someday.

God did not leave Job destitute. Read Job 42:10–17.

How did God bless Job in his later years?

God *blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning* (verse 12). God gave Job livestock, seven sons, and three daughters (verse 13), and gave Job a long life in which he saw four generations of his family (verse 16).

Read Revelation 21:3–4.

What does God promise all believers no matter what suffering we might experience during our life here on earth?

When we reach our heavenly home, we will be with God and He will dwell with us. He will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away (verse 4).

A final thought: Aletha Voges, the author of this study, walked with her husband Pastor Ethan Voges through his 15-month battle with pancreatic cancer. After much suffering, God took Pastor Voges to his eternal home in heaven. Aletha concludes, “Had I not, through the power of the Holy Spirit, surrendered my will to be used as God saw fit, the outcome of my husband Ethan’s 15-month battle with pancreatic cancer would not have changed, but I would have missed seeing the power of God working in our lives. I would not be living with the peace I now have. I look back and remember how it felt like I was living in two different worlds. The one included the day-to-day struggles of Ethan’s illness, the other, a view of God working in our lives and in the lives of others touched by our experiences. One day while reading Daniel 2:22, I found these words, ... *he [God] reveals deep and hidden things*. As I read and pondered His Word, God helped me see His hidden messages through the struggles we faced. God has given me the privilege to share with others the insights He has given me. God did not answer my prayers as I wanted. He had a better plan. I now live in forgiveness by the power of the Holy Spirit helping me as I struggle to continue living in surrender to Christ.”

Think about your own times of suffering. How has God worked through these times to strengthen your faith in Him and to enable you to help others in their own suffering?

[Encourage willing participants to share their insights.]

Closing Prayer: Lord God, You know the difficulties each of us is facing today. Many times, we try to solve the problems on our own before coming to You. Forgive us for not coming to You with even our most finite issues. Help us to daily surrender our will to Your will and to walk step-by-step with You leading us. Through faith in Jesus, our once suffering and now triumphant Savior, we trust You to lead us to our ultimate destination, life in heaven with You. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

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Surrender — Part 2, written by Aletha Voges, Kent, Washington

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TREASURED BY GOD

Bible Study • Study Guide

Opening Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You that we are Your chosen people through our Baptism and Your treasured possession. Thank You for choosing us, sanctifying us, and redeeming us to be Your own. In Jesus' precious name we pray. Amen.

What do you think of when you think of a treasure? Do you think of jewelry made of gold or silver? God's Word tells us that we are His treasured possession.

"For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth (Deuteronomy 7:6).

"They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him (Malachi 3:17).

We are confident through our Baptism that God loves us, He has chosen us, and He treasures us as His beloved children.

How does God see you as His treasure in the following verses?

Deuteronomy 7:6

Isaiah 43:4

1 Peter 2:9

What does God want us to do as His beloved children in the following verses?

Exodus 19:5

Ephesians 4:24

Colossians 3:12

As God's beloved and treasured children, we are to try to keep his commandments, put on compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, which are the fruit of the Spirit. We are also to put off our old self and put on the new self that was created after the likeness of Jesus.

A crown is a circular ornamental headdress worn by a king as a symbol of authority, usually made of or decorated with precious metals and jewels.

What do the following verses say about crowns and those of us who believe in Jesus?

Proverbs 16:31

Isaiah 62:3

We are so blessed to be children of God that we are a crown of beauty in the hand of our Lord and a royal diadem. All the beautiful gray hair some of us have is a crown of glory through Jesus' righteousness. As the Lord blessed King David, He blesses us with a crown of fine gold upon our heads.

What do the following verses say about God and our benefits of being treasured by God?

Psalms 36:7

Zephaniah 3:17

John 3:16

1 John 4:9-10

Our Heavenly Father loves us so much that He sent His one and only Son for us that we might live through Him. He takes great delight in us so He will no longer condemn us, but He will rejoice over us with singing. We take refuge in the shadow of His wings.

Read Psalm 103:2-5.

What benefits do we have because we are treasured by God in the above verses?

What a blessing Jesus forgives all our iniquity, heals all our diseases, redeems our life from the pit, crowns us with steadfast love and mercy, and satisfies us with good, so our youth is renewed like the eagle's.

What do we receive as God's treasured children?

Deuteronomy 31:8

Psalm 32:8

Isaiah 26:3

Isaiah 43:1

Isaiah 54:10

What has Jesus done for us as God's treasured children in the following verses?

John 8:34-36

John 14:27

Galatians 4:5

Philippians 4:19

We have been redeemed by Jesus and have been adopted as His sons and daughters. He keeps us in perfect peace, never leaving us nor forsaking us. He instructs and teaches us in the way we should go, and counsels us with His eye upon us. His steadfast love will not depart from us nor His covenant of peace. He sets us free by His holy, precious blood, and provides for all our needs. What a blessing to be Jesus' treasure!

Closing Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank You for our gift of Baptism and the blessings You so freely give to us as Your dear children. Thank You that we are Your treasured possession and You love us with an everlasting love. We pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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TREASURED BY GOD

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide a copy of this study and a Bible for each participant. Assure the group that all narratives shared within the group stay in the group, unless permission is given.]

Opening Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You that we are Your chosen people through our Baptism and Your treasured possession. Thank You for choosing us, sanctifying us, and redeeming us to be Your own. In Jesus' precious name we pray. Amen.

What do you think of when you think of a treasure? Do you think of jewelry made of gold or silver? God's Word tells us that we are His treasured possession.

“For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth (Deuteronomy 7:6).

“They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him (Malachi 3:17).

We are confident through our Baptism that God loves us, He has chosen us, and He treasures us as His beloved children.

How does God see you as His treasure in the following verses?

Deuteronomy 7:6

The Lord has chosen us to be a people of His treasured possession.

Isaiah 43:4

We are precious in God's eyes and He loves us.

1 Peter 2:9

God sees us as His chosen race, His royal priesthood, His holy nation, and His chosen possession.

What does God want us to do as His beloved children in the following verses?

Exodus 19:5

God wants us to obey His Word and to keep His covenant.

Ephesians 4:24

God wants us to put on our new self, created in the likeness of Him.

Colossians 3:12

God wants us to put on compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.

As God's beloved and treasured children, we are to try to keep His commandments, put on compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, which are the fruit of the Spirit. We are also to put off our old self and put on the new self that was created after the likeness of Jesus.

A crown is a circular ornamental headdress worn by a king as a symbol of authority, usually made of or decorated with precious metals and jewels.

What do the following verses say about crowns and those of us who believe in Jesus?

Proverbs 16:31

Our gray hair is a crown of glory.

Isaiah 62:3

We are a crown of beauty and a royal diadem.

We are so blessed to be children of God that we are a crown of beauty in the hand of our Lord and a royal diadem. All the beautiful gray hair some of us have is a crown of glory through Jesus' righteousness. As the Lord blessed King David, He blesses us with a crown of fine gold upon our heads.

What do the following verses say about God and our benefits of being treasured by God?

Psalms 36:7

How precious is God's steadfast love toward us, and we take refuge in the shadow of His wings.

Zephaniah 3:17

He is always in our midst, He rejoices over us with gladness, He quiets us with His love, and He exults over us with loud singing.

John 3:16

God loved us so much that He sent His one and only Son, and we believe in Jesus and have eternal life.

1 John 4:9–10

God loved us so much that He sent His only Son to live among us in this world, and we live through Him. God sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Our Heavenly Father loves us so much that He sent His one and only Son for us that we might live through Him. He takes great delight in us so He will no longer condemn us, but He will rejoice over us with singing. We take refuge in the shadow of His wings.

Read Psalm 103:2–5.

What benefits do we have because we are treasured by God in the above verses?

God forgives all our sins and heals us of all our diseases. He has redeemed our lives from the pit and crowns us with His steadfast love and mercy. He satisfies us with good so that our youth is renewed like the eagle's.

What a blessing God forgives our iniquity, heals all our diseases, redeems our life from the pit, crowns us with steadfast love and mercy, and satisfies us with good, so our youth is renewed like the eagle's.

What do we receive as God's treasured children in the following verses?

Deuteronomy 31:8

God goes before us and will not leave us nor forsake us.

Psalms 32:8

God will instruct us and teach us in the way we should go, and He will counsel us with His eye upon us.

Isaiah 26:3

God keeps us in perfect peace when we fix our minds on Him because we trust in Him.

Isaiah 43:1

God has redeemed us, calls each of us by name, and we are His.

Isaiah 54:10

No matter what happens in this life God's steadfast love will never depart from us, and His covenant of peace will not be removed.

What has Jesus done for us as God's treasured children in the following verses?

John 8:34–36

Jesus has set us free from sin, and we are free indeed.

John 14:27

Jesus gives us His peace.

Galatians 4:5

We have been redeemed by Christ, and we are no longer under the law but have received adoption as sons through our Baptism.

Philippians 4:19

God will supply our every need according to His riches in Christ Jesus.

We have been redeemed by Jesus and have been adopted as His sons and daughters. He keeps us in perfect peace, never leaving us nor forsaking us. He instructs and teaches us in the way we should go and counsels us with His eye upon us. His steadfast love will not depart from us nor will His covenant of peace. He sets us free by His holy, precious blood and provides for all our needs. What a blessing to be Jesus' treasure!

Closing Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank You for our gift of Baptism and the blessings You so freely give to us as Your dear children. Thank You that we are Your treasured possession and You love us with an everlasting love. We pray all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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TURNING THE SAILBOAT

Bible Study • Study Guide

Opening Prayer: Thank You, heavenly Father, for this opportunity to be together and study Your Word. Help us remember who we are — Your beloved and redeemed children. Guide our thoughts and words that they may be pleasing to You. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

As I write this study, it is summertime and sailboats are everywhere with their colorful spinnakers, racing in the wind across the nearby lake. I learned how to sail as a kid, and one of the earliest lessons — after identifying starboard and port — is how to turn the sailboat. You cannot just sail across the lake. Eventually, you will need to turn the sailboat and come back to port. Alas, turning the boat can be tricky. The skipper yells, “Ready about!” only after she has paid attention to the wind, the waves, the compass point, the boom, the jib, the tiller, and the crew. (As some of you may know, tacking back and forth, coming about at the end of each tack, is the way one can sail into the wind and actually make headway.)

The same is true in our lives, is it not? Turns can be tricky.

A popular song from the 1960s talked about this very thing. “To everything (turn, turn, turn) there is a season (turn, turn, turn) and a time to every purpose under heaven.” [Seeger, Pete, *Turn, Turn, Turn*, 1959.] Maybe you can hear the song as you read those words. Ecclesiastes 3 is clearly the foundation for the lyrics. Though the word turn does not appear in the text itself, the concept is clear. When we leave one season, we turn to another.

Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–8.

Most of us already understand traditional seasons. Winter. Spring. Youth. Old age.

Circle all the seasons you have experienced.

Many of these seasons overlap! You have been or are (a):

- | | | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Student | 8. Grieving over the death of a loved one | 14. Divorced |
| 2. New employee | 9. Longing for little ones | 15. Widowed |
| 3. Broken-hearted | 10. Mom with school-age kids/homeschool | 16. Chronic-pain sufferer |
| 4. Unemployed | 11. Depressed | 17. Retired |
| 5. Newly married | 12. Empty-nester | 18. None of the above. I have _____ |
| 6. Struggling with addiction | 13. Caregiver | going on right now. |
| 7. Mom with little children | | |

How many seasons have you lived through in your lifetime? What does this tell you?

Take some time to reflect on your circled seasons and share with a partner or the group.

Now think about all your seasons as you read Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 one more time.

The Turns

You have already lived through so many different seasons, and you can probably list the challenges and blessings of all of them. However, what about the transitions into those seasons? The shifts? The turns?

Are you about to graduate and make big lifetime decisions? The horizon ahead is big and beautiful and scary. The winds are steady and moving you forward. What job should you take? Where should you move?

Maybe your youngest child just started school, and your house is suddenly quiet. The sea is calmer than it has ever been. You can do whatever you want, but what will you do?

Perhaps your youngest child just finished college and started a new job across the country. Now when you get home from work, you have fewer places to set at the kitchen table. The laundry pile is smaller. There is no goopy toothpaste in the sink anymore. You have more time than you ever imagined. You can watch the sunsets. But what is next for you?

Or sadly, maybe you are facing a dark and stormy sea. You've lost a loved one. You are divorced. You are alone. The waves are big swells, and the sailboat is taking on water. How can you even think about turning the boat now? What comes next?

Maybe this is where you are now. Your parking sticker expired. You do not need to set your alarm for Monday morning. You commuted for the last time. You have turned your sailboat into the wind and things seem way too slow. You are retired. But what is ahead now?

What turn are you trying to make right now? What is the hardest part about this turn?

What are the potential blessings about this turn?

Who am I now?

Let me tell you a story about one of my own life turns many years ago. Many of you may be able to relate. When I was a teenager with pimples and braces, I faced a new season. What should I do with my life? Like all high school students back then — and this will date me! — I clutched my number two pencil and filled in tiny bubbles on a career test. According to the school counselor, this would help me figure it out. The test questions were simple. Would I rather draw a picture of a tree, plant a tree, or chop down a tree? Would I rather write a murder mystery, dig in the garden, or paint my nails? My memory is a little fuzzy on the details, but I pondered each question seriously.

Six weeks later — oh, it was a long six weeks — I ripped open the crinkled envelope. My future was about to become clear. A computer printout page declared this long-awaited wisdom: If you are male, you should be an architect, and if you are female, a floral designer. Seriously. It did not help. I did not become a florist or an architect. In the months ahead, teachers, parents, friends, and guidance counselors tried to help answer my question. What should I study? What career path should I follow? As I look back, the biggest question of all was “Who am I now?”

Today, decades later, as I enter another new season — empty nest and grandchildren — I have reflected on the very same question. Who am I now? You would think at this age I would be wiser, but that is one of the myths of maturity. I still do not know what is best.

It would be lovely if God would sit me down, place His hands on my shoulders, look me in the eyes, and tell me clearly what to do with the minutes and the hours and the days He has given me.

That is what happened to at least two people in the Bible. Let us look at these two who faced new seasons and received God’s clear directions.

Read Exodus 3:1–10.

What was Moses busy doing?

How did he learn about a new season ahead?

What was he called to do?

If time allows, continue reading vv. 11–12 to see how Moses responded to God’s calling. He did not think he was the right man for the job! However, God reassured Moses that He would be with him all the way. Just as with Moses, God is with us always as we make our turns into new seasons.

Read Acts 9:1–22.

What had Saul been busy doing?

How did he learn about his new season ahead?

What was he called to do in his new season?

God gave clear directions to Moses and Paul. They heard specific job descriptions from God Himself. God showed them exactly how to turn their sailboats, so to speak. He came to Moses in the burning bush and told him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses did not have to wonder about his career path. And Paul? At first, he chose his own path. He tried to destroy the church. However, God had another plan. God told him to carry His name to the unbelieving world.

How amazing is this — these men heard God’s very words!

However, wait a moment. Right here, years after Moses and Paul, we can do the same. We can hear God’s very words. We can open our Bible or tap our Bible app. We can go to church on Sunday morning to hear the Scripture readings and the sermon and attend Bible study.

Of course, God does not specifically tell us what to do. It is not as though He says, “Attend this college. Apply for this job. Volunteer at the pregnancy care center or write a few books or sew quilts. Read a Bible story to your granddaughter. Write a long letter to your mother-in-law. Call your sister.” No, He doesn’t address us this way today.

Still, His guidance is clear. He shows us how to make the turn into every new season if we just pay attention.

Look up the following passages and discuss how each one helps us when we are faced with life’s turns.

What can you learn from each passage?

Philippians 4:5–7

1 Peter 4:10

Galatians 6:9–10

Psalms 30:10–12

Vocation

In his book, *The Spirituality of the Cross*, Gene Edward Veith devotes an entire chapter to “Vocation: The Spirituality of Ordinary Life.” [Veith, Gene Edward. *The Spirituality of the Cross*. Concordia Publishing House, 2010.] In it he explains Dr. Luther’s doctrine of vocation. There is a lot more to it, but here is one good summary: “A vocation is not something we choose for ourselves. Rather, it is given by God, who ‘calls’ us to a particular work or station. God gives each individual unique talents, skills, and inclinations . . . Essentially, your vocation is to be found in the place you occupy in the present” (page 103).

Did you catch that? The ordinary is extraordinary in Christ. How exciting! Our lives can be a bountiful buffet of adventures in service to Him and to those around us in every season of life, at every single turn.

When I was a naïve teenager, I was already a student, a daughter, a friend, and a sister. Then I became a teacher, a writer, and an editor. When I married and started a wonderful family, I added wife, mother, chauffeur, and chef, and in the cracks and crevices of life, I have been a maid, a bookkeeper, a volunteer, a caregiver, and so much more.

Everyone has her own list of callings, or vocations. Some of them are exciting or unusual. Most are ordinary. However, they all become extraordinary when done in faithful service to our Lord and to others, even when they are done imperfectly, and they will often be done imperfectly.

Look back at the seasons you circled earlier. Choose one that seems quite ordinary. Take a few minutes to reflect upon how this season was extraordinary in Christ. Share with the group.

Read Luke 9:18–20.

What question does Jesus ask the disciples?

Now, obviously we are not Jesus, but what if we asked this same question of ourselves?
Who am I?

How would you answer that question today?

This is how I would answer. One hot August morning when I was barely two weeks old, I was baptized. I became a redeemed child of God. I am free to use the gifts He has given me to serve in every season of life. What a joy!

Closing Prayer: Heavenly Father, sometimes it is hard to figure out what I am supposed to do. Guide me as I make decisions about my time and my gifts in this new season. Help me to turn my sailboat gracefully. Help me to remember that You gave Your life for my salvation and that being Your redeemed child — and sharing that gift with others — is the most important vocation I can ever have. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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TURNING THE SAILBOAT

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide Bibles and copies of the Bible study for attendees.]

Opening Prayer: Thank You, heavenly Father, for this opportunity to be together and study Your Word. Help us remember who we are — Your beloved and redeemed children. Guide our thoughts and words that they may be pleasing to You. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

As I write this study, it is summertime and sailboats are everywhere with their colorful spinnakers, racing in the wind across the nearby lake. I learned how to sail as a youth, and one of the earliest lessons — after identifying starboard and port — is how to turn the sailboat. You cannot just sail across the lake. Eventually, you will need to turn the sailboat and come back to port. Alas, turning the boat can be tricky. The skipper yells, “Ready about!” only after she has paid attention to the wind, the waves, the compass point, the boom, the jib, the tiller, and the crew. (As some of you may know, tacking back and forth, coming about at the end of each tack, is the way one can sail into the wind and actually make headway.)

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Read Ecclesiastes 3:1–8.

Most of us already understand traditional seasons. Winter. Spring. Youth. Old age.

[Remind the participants that no one is required to share their seasons. Encourage them to take a few minutes to read through the list quietly.]

Circle all the seasons you have experienced.

Many of these seasons overlap! You have been (a):

- | | | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Student | 8. Grieving over the death of a loved one | 14. Divorced |
| 2. New employee | 9. Longing for little ones | 15. Widowed |
| 3. Broken-hearted | 10. Mom with school-age kids/homeschool | 16. Chronic-pain sufferer |
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How many seasons have you lived through in your lifetime? What does this tell you?

Take some time to reflect on your circled seasons and share with a partner or friend. Now think about all your seasons as you read Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 one more time.

We all live through so many seasons in our lifetime. Depending on our age, we may have experienced every single one of these! This is not a contest to see who has collected the most. This is intended to be an exercise for each individual participant to reflect on how much they have experienced, and most importantly, that the many seasons in life are simply part of living in this fallen world. Ask them to consider how the Lord has been with them through each and every season. When reading Ecclesiastes 3:1–8 again, you may want to do so slowly, pausing after each line and giving time for reflection.

The Turns

You have already lived through so many different seasons, and you can probably list the challenges and blessings of all of them. However, what about the transitions into those seasons? The shifts? The turns?

Are you about to graduate and make big lifetime decisions? The horizon ahead is big and beautiful and scary. The winds are steady and moving you forward. What job should you take? Where should you move?

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Or sadly, maybe you are facing a dark and stormy sea. You have lost a loved one. You are divorced. You are alone. The waves are big swells, and the sailboat is taking on water. How can you even think about turning the boat now? What comes next?

Maybe this is where you are now. Your parking sticker expired. You do not need to set your alarm for Monday morning. You commuted for the last time. You have turned your sailboat into the wind and things seem way too slow. You are retired. What is ahead now?

What turn are you trying to make right now? What is the hardest part about this turn? What are the potential blessings about this turn?

[Give participants time to reflect and write about their responses. Allow time for sharing.]

Who am I now?

Let me tell you a story about one of my own life turns many years ago. Many of you may be able to relate. When I was a teenager with pimples and braces, I faced a new season. What should I do with my life? Like all high school students back then — and this will date me! — I clutched my number two pencil and filled in tiny bubbles on a career test. According to the school counselor, this would help me figure it out. The test questions were simple. Would I rather draw a picture of a tree, plant a tree, or chop down a tree? Would I rather write a murder mystery, dig in the garden, or paint my nails? My memory is a little fuzzy on the details, but I pondered each question seriously.

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It would be lovely if God would sit me down, place His hands on my shoulders, look me in the eyes, and tell me clearly what to do with the minutes and the hours and the days He has given me.

That is what happened to at least two people in the Bible. Let us look at these two who faced new seasons and received God’s clear directions.

Read Exodus 3:1–10.

What was Moses busy doing?

Moses was living his ordinary life! He was shepherding the flock of his father-in-law. He led them west and came near to Horeb, the mountain of God.

How did he learn about a new season ahead?

He saw a bush that was burning but it was not being consumed. Of course, he was shocked by this and determined to figure out what was happening. Then the Lord spoke to Moses from the bush. The Lord gave clear instructions to Moses.

What was he called to do?

First, God told Moses to remove his sandals because he was in God’s presence and standing on holy ground. Next, He identified Himself as the God of his fathers. Moses

was afraid because a man could not stand before God and live! Yet the Lord continued and told Moses that He was calling him to bring the children of Israel out of their captivity in Egypt. God gave very clear instructions so Moses could make this turn.

If time allows, continue reading vv. 11–12 to see how Moses responded to God’s calling. He did not think he was the right man for the job! However, God reassured Moses that He would be with him all the way. Just as with Moses, God is with us always as we make our turns into new seasons.

Read Acts 9:1–22.

What had Saul been busy doing?

He hated Christians, so he was persecuting Christians, finding them so they could be imprisoned and executed.

How did he learn about his new season ahead?

He was on the road to Damascus when *suddenly a light from heaven shone around him* (Acts 9:3b) and the Lord spoke to him. Saul was blinded by the light. His companions led him to the nearby city, and he spent three days in Damascus. Meanwhile, the Lord visited Ananias and gave him instructions to go to Saul and lay hands upon him so Saul could see again. When this happened, scales fell from Saul’s eyes, and he was baptized.

What was he called to do, his new season?

God gave clear directions through Ananias that Saul would be the one to carry His name to the Gentiles.

God gave clear directions to Moses and Paul. They heard specific job descriptions from God Himself. God showed them exactly how to turn their sailboats, so to speak. He came to Moses in the burning bush and told him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses did not have to wonder about his career path. And Paul? At first, he chose his own path. He tried to destroy the church. However, God had another plan. God told him to carry His name to the unbelieving world.

How amazing is this — these men heard God’s very words!

However, wait a moment. Right here, years after Moses and Paul, we can do the same. We can hear God’s very words. We can open our Bible or tap our Bible app. We can go to church on Sunday morning to hear the Scripture readings and the sermon and attend Bible study.

Of course, God doesn’t specifically tell us what to do. It is not as though He says, “Attend this college. Apply for this job. Volunteer at the pregnancy care center or write a few books or sew

quilts. Read a Bible story to your granddaughter. Write a long letter to your mother-in-law. Call your sister.” No, He doesn’t address us this way today.

Still, His guidance is clear. He shows us how to make the turn into every new season if we just pay attention.

Look up the following passages and discuss how each one helps us when we are faced with life’s turns.

What can you learn from each passage?

Philippians 4:5–7

Pray! Whenever we are faced with making a decision, a new season, an anxiety, a worry, we are called to pray and *let your requests be made known to God* (Philippians 4:6b). However, this is not simply to find the answer to the question — what should I do? — although God may make your path clear through prayer and His Word. Most importantly, when we bring our requests and worries to God, He will give us real peace. This is so important especially when our life is confusing. God’s peace *will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus* (Philippians 4:7b). What a beautiful gift for our emotional and mental health!

1 Peter 4:10

God gives each of us different gifts to serve others. When we try to figure out what to do in a new season, it may help to reflect on those gifts. Perhaps we have time in this new season to use those gifts in service to others. See also Romans 12:4–8.

Galatians 6:9–10

Look around! Who might need our good works? Perhaps this new season gives us opportunities to serve a neighbor, a new friend, a co-worker. St. Paul encourages the Galatians and all believers to *not grow weary of doing good ... especially to those who are of the household of faith* (Galatians 6:9–10). Sometimes when we are in a season of loneliness, for example, we can find new purpose when we focus on our neighbors, our sisters and brothers in Christ, and those in need. We take the focus off of me, me, me, and turn to those around us. This is not to diminish times of clinical depression or seasons of ill-health where service to others may be impossible. Still, even in the midst of our own challenges, one beautiful and simple act of service we can always do is to pray for others.

Psalms 30:10–12

God turns our mourning into dancing. He takes away our grief and replaces it with gladness. Our soul can praise Him in all things and give thanks to Him.

Vocation

In his book, *The Spirituality of the Cross*, Gene Edward Veith devotes an entire chapter to “Vocation: The Spirituality of Ordinary Life.” [Veith, Gene Edward. *The Spirituality of the Cross*. Concordia Publishing House, 2010.] In it he explains Dr. Luther’s doctrine of vocation. There is a lot more to it, but here is one good summary: “A vocation is not something we choose for ourselves. Rather, it is given by God, who ‘calls’ us to a particular work or station. God gives each individual unique talents, skills, and inclinations . . . Essentially, your vocation is to be found in the place you occupy in the present” (page 103).

Did you catch that? The ordinary is extraordinary in Christ. How exciting! Our lives can be a bountiful buffet of adventures in service to Him and to those around us in every season of life, at every single turn.

When I was a naïve teenager, I was already a student, a daughter, a friend, and a sister. Then I became a teacher, a writer, and an editor. When I married and started a wonderful family, I added wife, mother, chauffeur, and chef, and in the cracks and crevices of life, I have been a maid, a bookkeeper, a volunteer, a caregiver, and so much more.

Everyone has her own list of callings, or vocations. Some of them are exciting or unusual. Most are ordinary. However, they all become extraordinary when done in faithful service to our Lord and to others, even when they are done imperfectly, and they will often be done imperfectly.

Look back at the seasons you circled earlier. Choose one that seems quite ordinary. Take a few minutes to reflect upon how this season was extraordinary in Christ. Share with the group.

[Answers will vary.]

Read Luke 9:18–20.

What question does Jesus ask the disciples?

“Who do the crowds say that I am?” (Luke 9:18b).

Now, obviously we are not Jesus, but what if we asked this same question of ourselves? Who am I?

How would you answer that question today?

[Answers will vary.]

This is how I would answer. One hot August morning when I was barely two weeks old, I was baptized. I became a redeemed child of God. I am free to use the gifts He has given me to serve in every season of life. What a joy!

Closing Prayer: Heavenly Father, sometimes it is hard to figure out what I am supposed to do. Guide me as I make decisions about my time and my gifts in this new season. Help me to turn my sailboat gracefully. Help me to remember that You gave Your life for my salvation and that being Your redeemed child — and sharing that gift with others — is the most important vocation I can ever have. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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Turning the Sailboat, by Beth Foreman, Holland, Michigan
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WE AWAIT HIS COMING

Bible Study • Study Guide

Opening Prayer: Lord, help us to focus our minds on You as we prepare to celebrate Your coming as a baby and as we await Your Second Coming. Thank You for having the perfect plan for saving us from our sins and bringing us into Your kingdom. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Introduction

It seems Christmas arrives faster each year. Decorations appear in the stores and shopping malls before Halloween. The message to prepare for the “perfect holiday season” is everywhere. We spend so much time and energy decorating, planning menus, and choosing the perfect gifts for everyone, and little time preparing our hearts and minds for the coming of the Christ Child.

What part of Christmas preparation do you find the most stressful?

What activities do you enjoy the most?

How do you keep your focus on Christ during your preparations for Christmas?

Getting into the Word

One way to keep the focus of your Christmas celebration on Christ is to observe Advent. The word Advent is from the Latin word *adventus*, which means coming. Advent is a time of preparation and waiting. The use of Advent candles started in Germany before the Reformation, and they have been widely used in Lutheran churches in America for over 100 years. Traditionally, three purple candles and one pink candle were used. Purple is the color of royalty, and the pink candle was used to signify joy. Today many churches use blue candles instead of purple, signifying hope.

Many of the Old Testament lessons read during the Advent season are prophecies about the coming Messiah.

Read the following verses and record the phrases you notice pointing to Jesus as the coming Messiah.

Isaiah 7:10–14

Isaiah 11:1–10

Jeremiah 33:14–16

These verses talk about an earthly descendant of King David, “a root of Jesse.” Jesus was of the family of David. This lineage was the reason He was born in Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary had traveled to Bethlehem to be registered under a decree of Caesar Augustus because they were *of the house and lineage of David* (Luke 2:4b).

Matthew carefully records the family genealogy that shows Jesus was a descendant of David. Read Matthew 1:1–16.

At the time of Jesus' birth the Jews were an oppressed nation longing for an earthly Messiah, a king who would overthrow the Roman rulers.

What was God's plan?

Read Galatians 4:4.

The Jews were looking for a king, not a lowly child born in a stable. Even the wise men were looking for a king. They went to Herod's palace to find the king.

Read Matthew 2:1–12.

Share your impressions with a partner.

Second Coming

We know the story; we know the prophecies were fulfilled. Our Christmas celebrations remind us of Christ's coming to earth as a baby to be with us — Immanuel — God with us. We are not surprised by Christ coming at Christmas time. Our Advent preparation reminds us that He will come again.

Have you ever watched a sporting event where you already knew the outcome? This often happens during the Olympics when results are announced as they happen in a remote location but are televised later. You watch to see how the events unfold even though you know the outcome will not change.

We know Christ is coming back. Read Acts 1:6–11. What we do not know is when. Just as those who waited for the Messiah to come the first time, we wait, not knowing when that day will come.

Read Matthew 24:36–44.

What has God commanded us to do while we wait, as noted in the following passages?

John 13:34

1 Timothy 6:18

Matthew 28:19–20

Final Thoughts

As you prepare for Christmas, keep your heart ready for Christ's Second Coming. During the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season, continue to show God's love to the world around you. Speak kind words to your fellow shoppers and to the store clerks. Be ready to share the Christmas story – the story of a loving God who sent His Son to be our Savior. Do not let the busyness of life keep you from reading the Bible and praying.

Are you ready for Christmas? More importantly, are you ready for the day when Christ will come again?

Close your study by singing “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus” (*LSB* 338; *LW* 22).

Closing Prayer: Dear Lord, thank You for sending Your Son to be our Savior, born as a lowly child in a stable. Help us to share Your love with those around us during the Advent/Christmas season. Strengthen us to remain vigilant and productive as we await that day when He will come again. Amen.

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WE AWAIT HIS COMING

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide musical accompaniment; Bibles, hymnals, and copies of the Bible study for attendees.]

Opening Prayer: Lord, help us to focus our minds on You as we prepare to celebrate Your coming as a baby and as we await Your Second Coming. Thank You for having the perfect plan for saving us from our sins and bringing us into Your kingdom. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Introduction

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What part of Christmas preparation do you find the most stressful?

Answers will vary but may include preparing the home for guests, baking, shopping, decorating, preparing greeting cards, keeping up with a busier social calendar, and/or dealing with loneliness.

What activities do you enjoy the most?

Answers will vary but may include shopping; baking; preparing the home for guests; sending greeting cards; decorating; and attending special events, social and family gatherings, and worship services.

How do you keep your focus on Christ during your preparations for Christmas?

Answers will vary but may include attending Advent worship services, reading Advent devotions, listening to Christ-centered music, sending Christian greeting cards or letters, recalling the meaning behind each decoration you place on the tree or throughout your home, and praying for each person as you prepare personal gifts.

Getting into the Word

One way to keep the focus of your Christmas celebration on Christ is to observe Advent. The word Advent is from the Latin word *adventus*, which means coming. Advent is a time of preparation and waiting. The use of Advent candles started in Germany before the

Reformation, and they have been widely used in Lutheran churches in America for over 100 years. Traditionally, three purple candles and one pink candle were used. Purple is the color of royalty, and the pink candle was used to signify joy. Today many churches use blue candles instead of purple, signifying hope.

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Read the following verses and record the phrases you notice pointing to Jesus as the coming Messiah.

Isaiah 7:10–14

“The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (v. 14b).

Isaiah 11:1–10

a shoot from the stump of Jesse (v. 1); the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him (v. 2a); the root of Jesse (v. 10a).

Jeremiah 33:14–16

“a righteous Branch to spring up for David” (v. 15b); “And this is the name by which it will be called: “The LORD is our righteousness”” (v. 16b).

These verses talk about an earthly descendant of King David, “a root of Jesse.” Jesus was of the family of David. This lineage was the reason He was born in Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary had traveled to Bethlehem to be registered under a decree of Caesar Augustus because they were *of the house and lineage of David* (Luke 2:4b).

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At the time of Jesus' birth the Jews were an oppressed nation longing for an earthly Messiah, a king who would overthrow the Roman rulers.

What was God's plan?

Read Galatians 4:4.

At just the right time God would send His Son to be born as a human and born subject to the Law.

The Jews were looking for a king, not a lowly child born in a stable. Even the wise men were looking for a king. They went to Herod's palace to find the king.

Read Matthew 2:1–12.

Share your impressions with a partner.

Second Coming

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We know Christ is coming back. Read Acts 1:6–11. What we do not know is when. Just as those who waited for the Messiah to come the first time, we wait, not knowing when that day will come.

Read Matthew 24:36–44.

What has God commanded us to do while we wait, as noted in the following passages?

John 13:34

We are to love others just as Jesus first loved us.

1 Timothy 6:18

Do good works, be generous, and share.

Matthew 28:19–20

Make disciples, baptize, and teach.

Final Thoughts

As you prepare for Christmas, keep your heart ready for Christ's Second Coming. During the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season, continue to show God's love to the world around you. Speak kind words to your fellow shoppers and to the store clerks. Be ready to share the Christmas story — the story of a loving God who sent His Son to be our Savior. Do not let the busyness of life keep you from reading the Bible and praying.

Are you ready for Christmas? More importantly, are you ready for the day when Christ will come again?

Close your study by singing “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus” (*LSB* 338; *LW* 22).

Closing Prayer: Dear Lord, thank You for sending Your Son to be our Savior, born as a lowly child in a stable. Help us to share Your love with those around us during the Advent/Christmas season. Strengthen us to remain vigilant and productive as we await that day when He will come again. Amen.

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WELLSPRING OF LIFE

Bible Study • Study Guide

Opening Prayer: O Lord, as we study Your Word today, open my eyes to the well of blessings in my life. Help me explore the spiritual wells of knowledge tucked in Your Word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Importance of Wells

The average adult human body consists of 50–60% water.¹ In areas where rivers and lakes do not abound, wells are the primary source of hydration for people, animals, and agriculture. The importance of wells cannot be overlooked. Wells were gathering places for ancient societies and essential to the livelihood of the inhabitants of the land.

The first well named in Scripture was named by a woman.
Read Genesis 16:7–14.

Who named the well?

What did she name it?

What does the name mean?

Abraham dug many wells and named each of them. They served as landmark designations and sometimes places for business transactions. One such well was named _____ (Genesis 21:25–32), which means “well of seven oaths or well of the oath.”²

Abraham's son Isaac continued in the nomadic lifestyle of his father and maintained such vast wealth that the Philistines felt threatened by his presence. They filled in these wells so Isaac's herdsman could no longer use them in hopes that they would move away.

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- 1 Helmenstine, Anne Marie. “How Much of the Human Body Is Water?” *ThoughtCo*, ThoughtCo, (February 11, 2020), <https://www.thoughtco.com/how-much-of-your-body-is-water-609406#>
 - 2 Halley, Henry H., *Pocket Bible Handbook: An Abbreviated Bible Commentary* (Regency Reference Library, 1965). page 37.

Read Genesis 26:15–25.

What did Isaac do when he found the wells filled in? (Genesis 26:18)

Who quarreled with Isaac's herdsman about the wells? (Genesis 26:20–21)

What did they name these two wells because of the disagreement?

Isaac dug another well where there was no quarrel.

What did he name it? (Genesis 26:22)

Then Isaac returned to _____ (Genesis 26:23).

Not much is told of Isaac's life beyond his relationship with Rebekah and the strife over these wells,³ demonstrating the importance of their existence.

Well Etiquette

Young women drew water from the wells in the evening for the family household needs (Genesis 24:11). Their vessels made of clay or animal skins were attached with ropes. They lowered them into the well and carried the filled vessels back to camp either on their heads or their shoulders.⁴

Some wells were covered by rocks to keep debris or animals from falling into them. Levitical laws made provisions to rescue animals or make restitution for those who had fallen into wells or pits (Exodus 21:33–34).

Joseph was thrown into a dry well for safe keeping before his brothers sold him into slavery.

How much was his life worth to the Midianite traders? (Genesis 37:28)

³ Halley, *Bible Handbook*, page 101.

⁴ Julye Bidmead, "Women and Wells in the Hebrew Bible," n.p. accessed January 29, 2022. Online: <https://www.bibleodyssey.org:443/en/places/related-articles/women-and-wells-in-the-hebrew-bible>.

Were the brothers following the laws of restitution when they sold their brother out of the well?

Wells also provided hiding places. David's men hid in Bahurim's well to escape the pursuit of Absalom's men (2 Samuel 17:18–21).

It was also proper etiquette to offer travelers a drink from your well. Read 2 Samuel 23:15.

Who wanted a drink?

Divine Love Matches at the Well

The fact that young women gathered daily at the wells made these locales the first water cooler places to catch up on all the latest activities. It also made them the perfect places for young men to scope out their love interests without the watchful eyes of the maiden's male relatives. The wells made what the Jews called a "shidduch," bringing together two people for marriage. The term extends to matches between people groups for greater creative and generative power.⁵

The Scripture passages below describe how a wife was found for an important Biblical character.

Name the couples in each instance.

Genesis 24:1–20, 47–51 _____

Genesis 29:1–14, 18–20 _____

Exodus 2:15–21 _____

In Song of Solomon 4:15, the bride's appeal is described as *a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon.*

How does Proverbs 5:15–19 use the well metaphor to warn against adultery?

⁵ Danan, Rabbi Julie Hilton, "Torah Study: Well as Meeting Place," *Wellsprings of Wisdom*, (January 2, 2018), <https://wellspringsofwisdom.com/meet-life-partner-well/>.

Spiritual Living Water at the Well

The only well mentioned by name in the New Testament is Jacob's Well (John 4:6). There is no well given that name in the Old Testament. Scholars believe that this is a well near Shechem where Jacob bought land and lived for a long time (Genesis 33:19). It is logical that he would need a well there. Those in the area would likely call it Jacob's well.⁶



This is the well where Jesus met the Samaritan woman outside the town of Sychar (John 4:5–15). Because most Jews wanted nothing to do with Samaritans, many went out of the way to avoid that area, as seen on the map. Jesus was heading back to Galilee on this trip when he rested at the well.

The woman was not following the standard etiquette of the day. She was fetching water in the midday heat and she was not there when others were there socializing. Nor was she looking for a husband since Jesus pointed out that she already had had five husbands and was not married to the man with whom she was now living (John 4:18).

What does Jesus tell her about his special water? (John 4:13–14)

The concept of God being our Living Water is revealed in both the Old and New Testaments.

What do these verses say about living water?

Jeremiah 17:13

⁶ GotQuestions.org. "What Is the Significance of Jacob's Well?" *GotQuestions.org*, (July 6, 2012), <https://www.gotquestions.org/Jacobs-well.html>.

Zechariah 14:8–9

John 7:37–38

Revelation 7:17

There is great joy when God gives us water from His well. Moses and the Israelites sang praises about it. Read Numbers 21:16–18. If you have sung the camp song “I Have a River of Life Flowing Out of Me,” you may recognize some of the lines and start singing. The Lord wants us to celebrate and share the gift of His Eternal Living Water. He wants us to gather and connect with others at the wellspring of His goodness and mercy. *With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation* (Isaiah 12:3).

We are the bride, the Church, and we wait at the well for our Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, to come back for us. *The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price* (Revelation 22:17).

Drinking from the well of Living Water, we will never thirst again. The Bridegroom, Christ, satisfies our soul.

Closing Prayer: Lord, fill my life with Your living water that soothes the body and refreshes the soul. Help us gather together with others who need the knowledge of Your well of salvation so we can celebrate the wedding of the bride and Bridegroom again when You return for eternity. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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WELLSPRING OF LIFE

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide a copy of this study and a Bible for each participant. Assure the group that all narratives shared within the group stay in the group, unless permission is given.]

Opening Prayer: O Lord, as we study Your Word today, open my eyes to the well of blessings in my life. Help me explore the spiritual wells of knowledge tucked in Your Word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Importance of Wells

The average adult human body consists of 50–60% water.¹ In areas where rivers and lakes do not abound, wells are the primary source of hydration for people, animals, and agriculture. The importance of wells cannot be overlooked. Wells were gathering places for ancient societies and essential to the livelihood of the inhabitants of the land.

The first well named in Scripture was named by a woman. Read Genesis 16:7–14.

Who named the well?

Hagar, the maid of Abram and Sarai, named the well.

What did she name it?

Beer Lahai Roi

What does the name mean?

“Well of the Living One who sees me” (Participants may have other translations in their Bible footnotes. Feel free to compare and discuss why Hagar chose that name.)

Abraham dug many wells and named each of them. They served as landmark designations and sometimes places for business transactions. One such well was named Beersheba (Genesis 21:25–32) which means “well of seven oaths or well of the oath.”²

1 Helmenstine, Anne Marie. “How Much of the Human Body Is Water?” *ThoughtCo*, ThoughtCo, (February 11, 2020), <https://www.thoughtco.com/how-much-of-your-body-is-water-609406#>

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Read Genesis 26:15–25.

What did Isaac do when he found the wells filled in? (Genesis 26:18)

He reopened them and gave them the same names his father had given them.

Who quarreled with Isaac's herdsman about the wells? (Genesis 26:20–21)

Herdsman of Gerar

What did they name these two wells because of the disagreement?

Esek (meaning contention) and Sitnah (meaning enmity)

Isaac dug another well where there was no quarrel.

What did he name it? (Genesis 26:22)

Rehoboth (meaning broad places, or room)

Then Isaac returned to Beersheba (Genesis 26:23).

Not much is told of Isaac's life beyond his relationship with Rebekah and the strife over these wells,³ demonstrating the importance of their existence.

Well Etiquette

Young women drew water from the wells in the evening for the family household needs (Genesis 24:11). Their vessels made of clay or animal skins were attached with ropes. They lowered them into the well and carried the filled vessels back to camp either on their heads or their shoulders.⁴

Some wells were covered by rocks to keep debris or animals from falling into them. Levitical laws made provisions to rescue animals or make restitution for those who had fallen into wells or pits (Exodus 21:33–34).

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How much was his life worth to the Midianite traders?

20 shekels of silver (about \$200 in today's money)

Were the brothers following the laws of restitution when they sold their brother out of the well?

No. It was an act of revenge by the brothers.

Wells also provided hiding places. David's men hid in Bahurim's well to escape the pursuit of Absalom's men (2 Samuel 17:18–21).

It was also proper etiquette to offer travelers a drink from your well. Read 2 Samuel 23:15.

Who wanted a drink?

David

Divine Love Matches at the Well

The fact that young women gathered daily at the wells made these locales the first water cooler places to catch up on all the latest activities. It also made them the perfect places for young men to scope out their love interests without the watchful eyes of the maiden's male relatives. The wells made what the Jews called a "shidduch," bringing together two people for marriage. The term extends to matches between people groups for greater creative and generative power.⁵

The Scripture passages below describe how a wife was found for an important Biblical character.

Name the couples in each instance.

Genesis 24:1–20

Rebekah and Isaac

Genesis 29:1–14, 18–20

Rachel and Jacob

Exodus 2:15–21

Zipporah and Moses

In Song of Solomon 4:15, the bride's appeal is described as *a garden fountain, a well of living water, and flowing streams from Lebanon*.

⁵ Danan, Rabbi Julie Hilton. "Torah Study: Well as Meeting Place," *Wellsprings of Wisdom*, (January 2, 2018), <https://wellspringsofwisdom.com/meet-life-partner-well/>.

How does Proverbs 5:15–19 use the well metaphor to warn against adultery?

Only drink from your own well.

Spiritual Living Water at the Well

The only well mentioned by name in the New Testament is Jacob's Well (John 4:6). There is no well given that name in the Old Testament. Scholars believe that this is a well near Shechem where Jacob bought land and lived for a long time (Genesis 33:19). It is logical that he would need a well there. Those in the area would likely call it Jacob's well.⁶



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What does Jesus tell her about his special water? (John 4:13–14)

"Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The concept of God being our Living Water is revealed in both the Old and New Testaments.

What do these verses say about living water?

Jeremiah 17:13

*O LORD, the hope of Israel,
all who forsake you shall be put to shame;
those who turn away from you shall be written in the earth,
for they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living water.*

⁶ GotQuestions.org. "What Is the Significance of Jacob's Well?" *GotQuestions.org*, (July 6, July 2012), <https://www.gotquestions.org/Jacobs-well.html>.

Zechariah 14:8–9

On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea. It shall continue in summer as in winter. And the LORD will be king over all the earth. On that day the LORD will be one and his name one.

John 7:37–38

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”

Revelation 7:17

“For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

There is great joy when God gives us water from His well. Moses and the Israelites sang praises about it. Read Numbers 21:16–18. If you have sung the camp song “I Have a River of Life Flowing Out of Me,” you may recognize some of the lines and start singing. The Lord wants us to celebrate and share the gift of His Eternal Living Water. He wants us to gather and connect with others at the wellspring of His goodness and mercy. *With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation* (Isaiah 12:3).

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WHO'S NUMBER ONE?

Bible Study • Study Guide

Introduction: In each season of the year there are teams competing in different sports. In summer, baseball is popular. Each team claims to be number one. Yet, in time, only one team can and will win the championship. Only one can come in first! In a similar way, God reminds us that He will not only lead all season, He will be first in the end. Long ago the Lord spoke to Moses and the children of Israel reminding them who was to be first in their lives (Exodus 20:3).

Jesus says, *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and **first** [emphasis added] commandment"* (Matthew 22:37–38), and *"seek **first** [emphasis added] the kingdom of God and his righteousness"* (Matthew 6:33a).

Our Lord would have us consider:

- Who or what is number one in my life?
- Who or what is first in my family?
- Who is number one in our church?

Opening Prayer: Our heavenly Father, You placed us **first** when You made us, and then re-made us through Your only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. As we turn to You and Your Word today, empower us to respond to Your grace by making You number one in our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

God is a God of Firsts

The Greek word for first is *protos* and is used often in the New Testament. In the Greek New Testament as well as in Greek literature of the first century, the word first often describes what is most important.

Read Romans 8:29, Colossians 1:15–18, and Revelation 1:8, 17.

Who is described as first in each of these passages?

God's Word leads us to confess the supreme nature of Christ Jesus as the one and only Son of God, and Savior of the world. In Christ we see God's divine glory and power. Indeed, Jesus is *#1!*

Amazingly, Jesus shares His grace and glory with all who place their trust in Him. God clearly placed us as His first priority when He made us, and then when He sent His only Son to die for us to redeem us from our sins, and then when He rose for us to give us eternal life. In fact, the plural form of firstborn [*prototokoī*] is used in reference to the church. In Hebrews 12:23 believers are called *the assembly of the firstborn*. We are honored to be God's top priority in the universe through Jesus Christ, the One and Only Son of the Father, the First and the Last.

First Things First

Read 1 John 4:19.

What does this tell us about our love?

When we know and experience the love of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who died and rose for us, His love is glowing first in our lives. His love is our love. His life is our life. His grace and power set us on fire once again, so that He can live with us as the number one priority in our lives!

In response to God's first love for us in Christ Jesus, we are compelled to honor and love Him, and place Him first in our lives. God's grace empowers us to place Jesus Christ first in our priorities, our attitudes, our schedules, and in our actions.

Read Matthew 6:33.

Is this easy for you to do? In what areas of your life do you find it challenging to have Jesus Christ as your top priority?

The apostle Paul reminds the young pastor Timothy, *Do not neglect the gift you have, ... Practice these things, immerse yourself in them* (1 Timothy 4:14–15a). The love of Christ Jesus is shining brightly in you when His grace is number one in your life. The gift of your faith, given to you in your baptism, must be renewed daily through God's Word and Sacrament.

Do you ever sense that your faith is in a rut? Do you ever just go through the motions during your worship and prayer life? Does it ever seem like the ministries at church have lost their luster?

Revitalize the Love

In Revelation 2 the Lord Jesus is speaking to the church at Ephesus.

While He commends their perseverance of faith in the midst of hardships, what does He say in verse 4?

In marriage it is far too common for the spark of romantic love to break down. Married couples start taking each other for granted. They get into ruts and routines. Life within the marriage relationship can get dull and boring and become unfulfilling. In a similar way, like the Christians at Ephesus, we can fall away from Jesus as our first love. Other priorities slip in ahead of our love for our Savior.

Couples who desire to keep the spark of emotional and romantic love alive in their marriage have to work at it. They have date nights. They plan getaways. They listen to and encourage each other. They speak tenderly and ‘keep in touch.’

One way we put God first in our lives is by putting others ahead of ourselves.

How is this taught in Mark 9:33–37?

What needs to happen for your faith to be revitalized? In what area of your faith does there need to be a revitalization so that your first love for Jesus Christ is passionate, number one?

Where do you need to set others ahead of yourself? Is there an area of ministry at your church in which God can use you to embrace the passion and love for sharing Christ and His love?

Closing Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank You for treasuring us and making us number one by dying on the cross and rising again. You defeated Satan, sin, and death itself to give us life today and for eternity. Now work in us to respond to Your love by putting You first in all our words, our actions, and our attitudes, and by putting others ahead of ourselves. In Your name we pray. Amen.

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Who's Number One?, by Rev. Luther Brunette, Carmel, Indiana
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WHO'S NUMBER ONE?

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide each participant a Bible and copy of this study.]

Introduction: In each season of the year there are teams competing in different sports. In summer, baseball is popular. Each team claims to be number one. Yet, in time, only one team can and will win the championship. Only one can come in first! In a similar way, God reminds us that He will not only lead all season, He will be first in the end. Long ago the Lord spoke to Moses and the children of Israel reminding them who was to be first in their lives (Exodus 20:3).

Jesus says *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and **first** [emphasis added] commandment"* (Matthew 22:37–38), and *"seek **first** [emphasis added] the kingdom of God and his righteousness"* (Matthew 6:33a).

Our Lord would have us consider:

- Who or what is number one in my life?
- Who or what is first in my family?
- Who is number one in our church?

Opening Prayer: Our heavenly Father, You placed us **first** when You made us, and then re-made us through Your only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. As we turn to You and Your Word today, empower us to respond to Your grace by making You number one in our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

God is a God of Firsts

The Greek word for first is *protos* and is used often in the New Testament. In the Greek New Testament as well as in Greek literature of the first century, the word *first* often describes what is most important.

Read Romans 8:29, Colossians 1:15–18, and Revelation 1:8, 17.

Who is described as first in each of these passages?

Jesus!

God's Word leads us to confess the supreme nature of Christ Jesus as the one and only Son of God, and Savior of the world. In Christ we see God's divine glory and power. Indeed, Jesus is *number one#1!*

Amazingly, Jesus shares His grace and glory with all who place their trust in Him. God clearly placed us as His first priority when He made us, and then when He sent His only Son to die for us to redeem us from our sins, and then when He rose for us to give us eternal life. In fact, the plural form of firstborn [*prototokoī*] is used in reference to the church. In Hebrews 12:23 believers are called *the assembly of the firstborn*. We are honored to be God's top priority in the universe through Jesus Christ, the One and Only Son of the Father, the First and the Last.

First Things First

Read 1 John 4:19.

What does this tell us about our love?

Our love is always a response to God's love for us.

When we know and experience the love of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who died and rose for us, His love is glowing first in our lives. His love is our love. His life is our life. His grace and power set us on fire once again, so that He can live with us as the number one priority in our lives!

In response to God's first love for us in Christ Jesus, we are compelled to honor and love Him, and place Him first in our lives. God's grace empowers us to place Jesus Christ first in our priorities, our attitudes, our schedules, and in our actions.

Read Matthew 6:33.

Is this easy for you to do? In what areas of your life do you find it challenging to have Jesus Christ as your top priority?

Answers will vary but may include things such as family, work, relationships, or finances.

The apostle Paul reminds the young pastor Timothy, *Do not neglect the gift you have, ... Practice these things, immerse yourself in them* (1 Timothy 4:14–15a). The love of Christ Jesus is shining brightly in you when His grace is number one in your life. The gift of your faith, given to you in your baptism, must be renewed daily through God's Word and Sacrament.

Do you ever sense that your faith is in a rut? Do you ever just go through the motions during your worship and prayer life? Does it ever seem like the ministries at church have lost their luster?

[Some participants may wish to share while other prefer to reflect silently.]

Revitalize the Love

In Revelation 2 the Lord Jesus is speaking to the church at Ephesus.

While He commends their perseverance of faith in the midst of hardships, what does He say in verse 4?

“But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.”

In marriage it is far too common for the spark of romantic love to break down. Married couples start taking each other for granted. They get into ruts and routines. Life within the marriage relationship can get dull and boring and become unfulfilling. In a similar way, like the Christians at Ephesus, we can fall away from Jesus as our first love. Other priorities slip in ahead of our love for our Savior.

Couples who desire to keep the spark of emotional and romantic love alive in their marriage have to work at it. They have date nights. They plan getaways. They listen to and encourage each other. They speak tenderly and ‘keep in touch.’

One way we put God first in our lives is by putting others ahead of ourselves.

How is this taught in Mark 9:33–37?

When we humbly welcome the least of God's children with open arms, Jesus Himself is welcomed and elevated among us. Then we are first, because the One who is first is at work in us!

What needs to happen for your faith to be revitalized? In what area of your faith does there need to be a revitalization so that your first love for Jesus Christ is passionate, number one?

Answers will vary and may include time in the Word, prayer, and worship.

Where do you need to set others ahead of yourself? Is there an area of ministry at your church in which God can use you to embrace the passion and love for sharing Christ and His love?

Answers will vary.

Closing Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank You for treasuring us and making us number one by dying on the cross and rising again. You defeated Satan, sin, and death itself to give us life today and for eternity. Now work in us to respond to Your love by putting You first in all our words, our actions, and our attitudes, and by putting others ahead of ourselves. In Your name we pray. Amen.

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WIND AND FIRE

Bible Study • Study Guide

Introduction: Wind and fire are part of our daily lives. A gentle breeze can bring relief from a hot summer sun. Fire heats our homes and cooks our food. That is all good. But maybe you have had to leave your home with only a few belongings because a forest fire was burning nearby. Maybe you have lived through a hurricane, a tornado, or a fierce winter storm driven by the wind. Maybe you have lost your home or the life of a loved one to the destructive forces of wind or fire. Though they provide wonderful benefits, wind and fire can interrupt, threaten, or even take our lives. What can we learn about God and ourselves by looking at the references to wind and fire in Scripture?

Opening Prayer: Holy Spirit, Fire of God, come and be present with us today as we open Your Word to learn more about You. Help us to both respect Your power and also to rejoice that You use it for our good and Your glory. In the name of Jesus our Savior, we pray. Amen.

Read Acts 2:1–13.

What was the evidence of the arrival of the Holy Spirit on the first day of Pentecost after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension? (verses 2–3)

What appeared and rested on each of them as evidence of the Holy Spirit? (verse 3)

How did God use the sound of the wind and the speaking in other languages? (verse 6)

Did the people who ran to see what the noise was about see the tongues of fire? Why or why not?

How is the Holy Spirit like wind? Like fire?

Wind

When Jesus was having His nighttime conversation with Nicodemus, He used the wind as an illustration.

What was Jesus illustrating?

See John 3:8.

Some winds do not have their origin in God the Father or the Holy Spirit.

What in these passages is compared to wind?

Isaiah 64:6

Ephesians 4:14

James 1:6

God sometimes uses wind as a force of nature to do his bidding.

How did God use wind in these passages?

Genesis 8:1

Exodus 14:21

Numbers 11:31

Job 1:19

Ezekiel 37:9–10

Daniel 2:35

Jonah 1:4

Matthew 8:23–27

Read 2 Samuel 22:11, Psalm 18:10, and Psalm 104:3.

What picture of God do these verses give us?

What do you think that means?

The wind of God can be His loving breath that gives us life. It can also be a gale that presents us with a faith lesson or brings God's punishment for sin.

Fire

A dry winter was followed by even drier spring months. One day the wind was blowing fiercely. Someone flicked a cigarette from a car and ignited the grass on the side of the road. The grass fire quickly spread into the forest. In a very short time, hundreds of acres of trees were on fire. Nearby homeowners were told to evacuate. Others waited and watched nervously, warned to be ready at any time to leave their homes. The fire was not extinguished for weeks. Those whose homes were rescued could return home, but the scars remained — for a long, long time.

Read James 3:5–6.

What does James say is like a fire?

How is this like the fire described in the opening paragraph?

Fire, like wind, can be good or destructive. Read Daniel 3:19–23.

What was the intent of Nebuchadnezzar?

How did God show his power over fire?

(verses 26–27)

How did God use fire as a means of judgment in Genesis 19:24–25?

What do the following verses say about fire?

Matthew 5:22, 18:9, and 25:41

Hebrews 12:29

2 Peter 3:7

Revelation 20:14

A person who has been trapped in and rescued from a burning building or forest fire calls the rescuer "my hero!" How much more is Jesus our hero for rescuing us from the fire of hell from which there is no escape except by His grace!

When God comes in fire, it is not always a bad thing.

How did God get Moses' attention as he was tending the sheep?

See Exodus 3:1–2.

How did God use fire when Israel left Egypt and began their journey toward the Promised Land?

See Exodus 13:21.

To what is fire compared in Jeremiah 23:29?

How is God's Word like fire?

What does John the Baptist say about Jesus in Matthew 3:11-12?

What does it mean to be baptized with fire?

Can the destructive power of fire be a good thing?

See Malachi 3:1-3.

Read Zechariah 13:8-9.

What is God's plan for His people?

What does Peter say is the intended outcome of our being tested by fire?

See 1 Peter 1:6-7.

When Asaph wrote Psalm 50, he saw God in both wind and fire (see verse 3). God uses both wind and fire for good and as instruments of judgment. Just as we enjoy the good aspects of wind and fire, and also respect their awesome power to destroy, so, too, can we enjoy God's blessings while respecting Him as the One who has the power to save or destroy. Jude encourages us to *save others by snatching them out of the fire* (Jude 1:23a). Just as firefighters do everything within their power to rescue persons caught in a burning building, so we are tasked by God to do everything we can to rescue unbelievers from the fire of hell.

Closing prayer: Lord of all creation, You are the Master of both wind and fire. When You created Adam, You blew into him the breath of life. We are alive because we breathe. If we stop breathing, we die. Breathe into our hearts Your Word that we may always be ready to breathe out to others a word of encouragement or instruction and, when necessary, a word of correction or rebuke. Set our hearts on fire with love for You and our neighbor. Bridle our tongues so that we never use our mouths to blacken another's life or reputation. Mighty God, we love, honor, and respect You. We praise and adore You. In the wonderful name of Jesus our Savior, we pray. Amen.

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WIND AND FIRE

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide Bibles and copies of the Bible study for attendees.]

Introduction: Wind and fire are part of our daily lives. A gentle breeze can bring relief from a hot summer sun. Fire heats our homes and cooks our food. That is all good. But maybe you have had to leave your home with only a few belongings because a forest fire was burning nearby. Maybe you have lived through a hurricane, a tornado, or a fierce winter storm driven by the wind. Maybe you have lost your home or the life of a loved one to the destructive forces of wind or fire. Though they provide wonderful benefits, wind and fire can interrupt, threaten, or even take our lives. What can we learn about God and ourselves by looking at the references to wind and fire in Scripture?

Opening Prayer: Holy Spirit, Fire of God, come and be present with us today as we open Your Word to learn more about You. Help us to both respect Your power and also to rejoice that You use it for our good and Your glory. In the name of Jesus our Savior, we pray. Amen.

Read Acts 2:1–13.

What was the evidence of the arrival of the Holy Spirit on the first day of Pentecost after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension? (verses 2–3)

The sound of a mighty wind and tongues of fire

What appeared and rested on each of them as evidence of the Holy Spirit? (verse 3)

Divided tongues as of fire

How did God use the sound of the wind and the speaking in other languages? (verse 6)

For the people gathered together to find out what was happening

Did the people who ran to see what the noise was about see the tongues of fire? Why or why not?

Probably not. The people heard the wind and were surprised to hear the disciples speak in their native languages, but there is no mention of them observing the fire.

How is the Holy Spirit like wind? Like fire?

Answers may vary. Like wind: invisible, from where it comes and to where it goes next is not known. Like fire: warms us, gives light, refines.

Wind

When Jesus was having His nighttime conversation with Nicodemus, He used the wind as an illustration.

What was Jesus illustrating? See John 3:8.

The mobility of the Spirit and those born of the Spirit

Some winds do not have their origin in God the Father or the Holy Spirit.

What in these passages is compared to wind?

Isaiah 64:6

Our sins, like the wind, take us away.

Ephesians 4:14

Different doctrines can carry us away from the truth.

James 1:6

A person who doubts is like sea waves driven by the wind.

God sometimes uses wind as a force of nature to do his bidding.

How did God use wind in these passages?

Genesis 8:1

God sent wind to dry up the flood waters.

Exodus 14:21

God used wind to divide the Red Sea so His people could cross over on dry land.

Numbers 11:31

God brought quail on the wind for the people to eat.

Job 1:19

A great wind collapsed the house where Job's children were gathered.

Ezekiel 37:9-10

Wind brought the breath of life into the dry bones in the valley.

Daniel 2:35

The wind carried away the broken pieces of the image Nebuchadnezzar saw in his dream.

Jonah 1:4

God sent a mighty wind to threaten the boat that Jonah was using to try to flee from God.

Matthew 8:23–27

The wind threatened the boat that Jesus and the disciples were in and by calming the wind and waves, Jesus demonstrated that He was truly God.

Read 2 Samuel 22:11, Psalm 18:10, and Psalm 104:3.

What picture of God do these verses give us?

God rides on the wind.

What do you think that means?

Answers may vary. God comes as quickly and unexpectedly as the wind. God comes with power. When God comes, He changes things.

The wind of God can be His loving breath that gives us life. It can also be a gale that presents us with a faith lesson or brings God's punishment for sin.

Fire

A dry winter was followed by even drier spring months. One day the wind was blowing fiercely. Someone flicked a cigarette from a car and ignited the grass on the side of the road. The grass fire quickly spread into the forest. In a very short time, hundreds of acres of trees were on fire. Nearby homeowners were told to evacuate. Others waited and watched nervously, warned to be ready at any time to leave their homes. The fire was not extinguished for weeks. Those whose homes were rescued could return home, but the scars remained — for a long, long time.

Read James 3:5–6.

What does James say is like a fire?

The tongue

How is this like the fire described in the opening paragraph?

Answers may vary. One harsh word can do serious damage, and the scars left on the heart of the person to whom the words were directed may last a lifetime.

Fire, like wind, can be good or destructive. Read Daniel 3:19–23.

What was the intent of Nebuchadnezzar?

He intended to kill Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace.

How did God show his power over fire? (verses 26–27)

The three men walked out of the fire with no harm; they didn't even smell of fire.

How did God use fire as a means of judgment in Genesis 19:24–25?

He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah with fire raining down from heaven.

What do the following verses say about fire?

Matthew 5:22, 18:9, and 25:41

Hell is an eternal fire.

Hebrews 12:29

God is a consuming fire.

2 Peter 3:7

The heavens and earth that now exist will be destroyed by fire on the last day.

Revelation 20:14

When Jesus comes again, He will throw death and Hades (the place of the dead) into the lake of fire that cannot be escaped.

A person who has been trapped in and rescued from a burning building or forest fire calls the rescuer "my hero!" How much more is Jesus our hero for rescuing us from the fire of hell from which there is no escape except by His grace!

When God comes in fire, it is not always a bad thing.

How did God get Moses' attention as he was tending the sheep? See Exodus 3:1–2.

God set a bush on fire and it did not burn up.

How did God use fire when Israel left Egypt and began their journey toward the Promised Land? See Exodus 13:21.

At night He led them and protected them with a pillar of fire.

To what is fire compared in Jeremiah 23:29?

God's Word

How is God's Word like fire?

Answers may vary. The Word lights our way, warms our hearts, refines our character.

What does John the Baptist say about Jesus in Matthew 3:11–12?

He will baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire.

What does it mean to be baptized with fire?

Answers may vary, but may include going through a hard time, being cleansed of our sin, and being purified.

Can the destructive power of fire be a good thing? See Malachi 3:1–3.

Yes, fire can purify and refine gold and silver.

Read Zechariah 13:8–9. What is God's plan for His people?

He will refine and test us. He will call us His people, and we will call Him our God.

What does Peter say is the intended outcome of our being tested by fire? See 1 Peter 1:6–7.

It will result in praise, honor, and glory to Jesus.

When Asaph wrote Psalm 50, he saw God in both wind and fire (see verse 3). God uses both wind and fire for good and as instruments of judgment. Just as we enjoy the good aspects of wind and fire, and also respect their awesome power to destroy, so, too, can we enjoy God's blessings while respecting Him as the One who has the power to save or destroy. Jude encourages us to *save others by snatching them out of the fire* (Jude 1:23a). Just as firefighters do everything within their power to rescue persons caught in a burning building, so we are tasked by God to do everything we can to rescue unbelievers from the fire of hell.

Closing prayer: Lord of all creation, You are the Master of both wind and fire. When You created Adam, You blew into him the breath of life. We are alive because we breathe. If we stop breathing, we die. Breathe into our hearts Your Word that we may always be ready to breathe out to others a word of encouragement or instruction and, when necessary, a word of correction or rebuke. Set our hearts on fire with love for You and our neighbor. Bridle our tongues so that we never use our mouths to blacken another's life or reputation. Mighty God, we love, honor, and respect You. We praise and adore You. In the wonderful name of Jesus our Savior, we pray. Amen.

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WOMEN OF THE BIBLE — WOMEN OF TODAY

Bible Study • Study Guide

Opening Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank You for the gifts You give us, for our faith in You, and for Your Word. Help us learn more about the Bible as we grow in our knowledge of Your Word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

WOMEN OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Look up the following Bible verses and learn more about women of the Bible from the Old Testament.

Eve (Genesis 3; 2 Corinthians 11:3)

Deborah (Judges 4–5)

Ruth and Naomi (her mother-in-law) (Ruth; Matthew 1:5)

David's wife, Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11–12)

Miriam (Numbers 26:59; Exodus 15:20–21; Numbers 12)

WOMEN OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Look up the following Bible verses and learn about women of the Bible from the New Testament.

Answer the questions related to the women.

Mary, the mother of Jesus

How did Mary carry a cross through life?

Before and at Jesus' birth? (Luke 1:29–38, Luke 2:4–7, Luke 2:19)

When He was twelve in the temple? (Luke 2:41–46)

When He was persecuted and led to the cross? (John 19:1–16, John 18:25–27)

At His death? (John 19:28–30)

After His resurrection? (Acts 1:3, Luke 24:36–43, John 20:19, 20:26, Luke 24:31, 1 Corinthians 15:6, John 20:17, 27)

Mary and Martha (the sisters of Lazarus) (Luke 10:38–42)

What did Mary do?

How are you like Mary?

Do you know anyone who is like Mary?

What was Mary doing that upset Martha?

What was Mary doing that Jesus liked?

What did Martha do?

What attributes did Martha have?

How is Martha being hospitable good and how is it bad?

How are you like Martha?

Do you know anyone who is like Martha?

Do you ever complain to the Lord or become worried and anxious? Share an example with a partner. What can you do instead of worrying?

Dorcus — Tabitha (Acts 9:36–41)

Summarize what happened in this Bible account.

GOD'S PLAN FOR TODAY'S WOMEN

What is God's plan for today's women?

Look up the following verses and discuss the statements below.

*They personally know Jesus as Savior and Lord (John 3:16, Ephesians 3:16–19).

*They believe, listen, and use God's Word (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

*They are confident of their eternal life.

1. The Truth shall set you free (John 8:32).

2. Know you have eternal life (1 John 5:13–20).

*They use their spiritual gifts in service to God and others (1 Corinthians 12).

*They are equipped to do the work God has prepared for them to do (Ephesians 4:11–12).

*They share their faith in Christ with others (John 20:18)!

CLOSING PRAYER: Lord, thank You for women who love and serve You and others. Thank You for our faith, a free gift from You, and for the eternal life that You give us! In Jesus' name. Amen.

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WOMEN OF THE BIBLE — WOMEN OF TODAY

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide Bibles and copies of the Bible study for attendees.]

Opening Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank You for the gifts You give us, for our faith in You, and for Your Word. Help us learn more about the Bible as we grow in our knowledge of Your Word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

WOMEN OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Look up the following Bible verses and learn more about women of the Bible from the Old Testament.

Eve (Genesis 3; 2 Corinthians 11:3)

Summary: Adam named his wife Eve because she would become the mother of all the living (Genesis 3:20).

Their sons: Cain, Abel, and Seth

Deborah (Judges 4–5)

Summary: She was a judge, prophetess, and leader who settled disputes. She led people to unite to action and victory.

Ruth and Naomi (Ruth's mother-in-law) (Ruth; Matthew 1:5)

Summary: Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab; Boaz, the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth.

David's wife, Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11–12)

Summary: The wife of Uriah, taken by David, got pregnant and was the mother of Solomon and an ancestor of Jesus.

Miriam (Numbers 26:59; Exodus 15:20–21; Numbers 12)

Summary: Sister of Moses, a prophetess

WOMEN OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Look up the following Bible verses and learn about women of the Bible from the New Testament.

Answer the questions related to the women.

Mary, the mother of Jesus

How did Mary carry a cross through life?

Before and at Jesus' birth? (Luke 1:29–38, Luke 2:4–7, Luke 2:19)

As a young unmarried woman, she would have heard gossip about her because she was pregnant. Having a baby while you travel is difficult. Accept other answers too.

When He was twelve in the temple? (Luke 2:41–46)

Her son was not with the caravan after Mary and Joseph left. They searched for Jesus for three days. Mary and Joseph would have been worried and concerned. They probably prayed for Him and His safety.

When He was persecuted and led to the cross? (John 19:1–16, John 18:25–27)

She would have been very upset to witness Jesus' suffering and death on the cross and the way friends betrayed Him.

At His death? (John 19:28–30)

Family members grieve when loved ones die. So did Mary. Accept all answers.

After His resurrection? (Acts 1:3, Luke 24:36–43, John 20:19, 20:26, Luke 24:31, 1 Corinthians 15:6, John 20:17, 27)

She would have been very happy to see Him alive and know that He had risen from the dead.

Mary and Martha (the sisters of Lazarus) (Luke 10:38–42)

What did Mary do?

Mary sat at the feet of Jesus and listened to him.

How are you like Mary?

Accept the women's answers.

Do you know anyone who is like Mary?

Accept the women's answers.

What was Mary doing that upset Martha?

She was not helping Martha clean, cook or care for their guests. She was listening to Jesus.

What was Mary doing that Jesus liked?

She was listening to Jesus and the Word of God.

What did Martha do?

Martha was busy cleaning, cooking and caring for her guests.

What attributes did Martha have?

She opened her home to visitors, yet because of wanting to do everything right, was distracted from the Word, thinking about serving food, instead of hearing the Word of God.

How is Martha being hospitable good and how is it bad?

It is good since the Bible calls us all to be hospitable and welcoming to others. It is bad when hospitality or anything else becomes more important than being in God's Word. It's hard, yes, to work the proper balance and do so at the correct times.

How are you like Martha?

Accept the women's answers.

Do you know anyone who is like Martha?

Accept the women's answers.

Both women are good examples of women. We probably want to be a little like Mary and a little like Martha.

Do you ever complain to the Lord or become worried and anxious? Share an example with a partner. What can you do instead of worrying?

Encourage the women to pray more and worry less.

Dorcus — Tabitha (Acts 9:36–41)

Summarize what happened in this Bible account.

A woman abounding with deeds of kindness and charity dies, and Peter raises her to life again.

GOD'S PLAN FOR TODAY'S WOMEN

What is God's plan for today's women?

Look up the following verses and discuss the statements below.

*They personally know Jesus as Savior and Lord (John 3:16, Ephesians 3:16–19).

*They believe, listen, and use God's Word (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

*They are confident of their eternal life.

1. The Truth shall set you free (John 8:32).

2. Know you have eternal life (1 John 5:13–20).

*They use their spiritual gifts in service to God and others (1 Corinthians 12).

*They are equipped to do the work God has prepared for them to do (Ephesians 4:11–12).

*They share their faith in Christ with others (John 20:18)!

CLOSING PRAYER: Lord, thank You for women who love and serve You and others. Thank You for our faith, a free gift from You, and for the eternal life that You give us! In Jesus' name. Amen.

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WOMEN WITH JESUS AT THE CROSS AND THE TOMB

Bible Study • Study Guide

Opening Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, be with us as we study Your Word, meditating upon those women who were near You at the cross and the tomb. In Your holy name. Amen.

Beginning with Ash Wednesday and for 40 days following, we are in the period of the church year called Lent, remembering the suffering, death, and burial in preparation for the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As we approach and journey through Lent, let us focus on the women who were present when Jesus was crucified on Calvary and later at His tomb.

Sing: “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” (*LSB* 425 or 426; *LW* 114 or 115)

Standing Near the Cross

Read John 19:25–27.

Four women are mentioned:

- Mary, the mother of Jesus
- His mother's sister — tradition holds this is Salome, mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee
- Mary, the wife of Clopas — the only time she or Clopas are mentioned
- Mary Magdalene

The women took a risk by being present at the cross. They demonstrated courage standing there in the midst of the hatred and ridicule. They were there likely for several reasons, one of which may have been to just be with Jesus as He died. Jesus' mother, Mary, is experiencing what Simeon had predicted years before in Luke 2:35. As she stood there, her grief must have been nearly unbelievable. How did she survive, watching her son die before her eyes? Sometimes our hearts break when our children suffer or experience pain.

Like Mary, how can we demonstrate concern for our child(ren)?

Jesus had delivered Mary Magdalene from demons (Mark 16:9, Luke 8:2). She had an attitude of gratitude and showed it by using her resources to assist Jesus in His ministry. She may have been a single woman as she had the time and resources to travel with the disciples.

Gratitude is not part of fallen human nature; it is a behavior that must be learned.

How can we have a spirit of gratitude?

Watching From a Distance

At the cross:

Read Matthew 27:55–56 or Mark 15:40–41.

Women mentioned:

- Mary Magdalene
- Mary, mother of James the younger and Joseph
 - She followed Jesus and cared for His needs.
 - Her son, James, was one of the twelve disciples.
 - She was married to a man named Alphaeus (Luke 6:15).
- Salome, mother of Zebedee's sons James and John

How do you think Salome felt as she saw Jesus hanging there, especially after asking Him for special favors for her sons earlier?

Where were these women standing?

At the tomb:

Read Mark 15:47 or Luke 23:55–56.

Women mentioned:

- Mary Magdalene
- Mary, the mother of James the younger and Joseph

They came to see where Jesus was laid. That was important as the body had to be prepared with spices for burial. The women were “watching,” first at the cross and then at the tomb.

What can we do as we watch and wait for our Lord's return?

Look for specific ways this week to enhance your “watching” for the Lord.

At the Empty Tomb

Read Mark 16:1 or Luke 24:10.

Women mentioned:

- Mary Magdalene
- Mary, mother of James
- Salome, mother of disciples, James and John
 - John was known as the Beloved and wrote the Gospel of John, Letters of 1, 2, and 3 John, and Revelation.
 - Tradition says Salome was Mary's sister so she would be Jesus' aunt.

These women were last at the cross, first at the tomb.

What would be the emotions of these women as they beheld the empty tomb? Did they come to the tomb expecting to see Jesus alive?

How has your faith upheld you in times of distress? Do you remember to thank the Lord for keeping your faith strong in difficult times?

The Report

Read Luke 24:9–11.

Women mentioned:

- Mary Magdalene
- Joanna, who was a follower of Jesus (Luke 8:1–3)
 - She helped to support Jesus out of her own means.
 - She had experienced healing at Jesus' hand.
 - She was married to Chuza, the manager of Herod's household.
- Mary, the mother of James
- Other devout women

Sharing the good news of the resurrection was the first thing on their minds. Think of someone you can share the Good News with this week.

Appearances

Read John 20:11–18.

One woman mentioned by name:

- Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9)
 - Characterized by some as a prostitute, the Bible says only that Jesus cast out seven demons from her.

- Her response to grace from God was to follow Him.
- She called Him, Rabboni – teacher, master, the strongest expression of respect and therefore also of reverent love.
- Many – read Matthew 28:8–10
- The other women

Jesus' first two appearances after the resurrection were to His women followers.

Given the lowly position of women in society in Jesus' day, what does His appearance to women first say about His understanding of the importance of women?

How does that relate to you as a woman today?

How has God's grace affected your life? How can you give thanks to the Lord for the grace He has bestowed upon you?

These faithful women were honored for their devotion. They came and saw and then went and told. We, too, are invited to "come and see," but this is always followed by "go and tell."

Closing Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank You for our salvation procured for us by Your death and resurrection. May we meditate upon Your passion and then rejoice at the news of Your resurrection on Easter Sunday. Be with each of us this day; guard and protect us at all times. In Your life-giving name we pray. Amen.

Sing: "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" (*LSB* 425 or 426; *LW* 114 or 115)
 or "My Song Is Love Unknown" (*LSB* 430; *LW* 91)
 or "Were You There" (*LSB* 456; *LW* 505)

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WOMEN WITH JESUS AT THE CROSS AND THE TOMB

Bible Study • Leader Guide

[Please provide musical accompaniment, Bibles, hymnals, and copies of the Bible study for attendees.]

Opening Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, be with us as we study Your Word, meditating upon those women who were near You at the cross and the tomb. In Your holy name. Amen.

Beginning with Ash Wednesday and for 40 days following, we are in the period of the church year called Lent, remembering the suffering, death, and burial in preparation for the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. As we approach and journey through Lent, let us focus on the women who were present when Jesus was crucified on Calvary and later at His tomb.

Sing: “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” (*LSB* 425 or 426; *LW* 114 or 115)

Standing Near the Cross

Read John 19:25–27.

Four women are mentioned:

- Mary, the mother of Jesus
- His mother's sister — tradition holds this is Salome, mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee
- Mary, the wife of Clopas — the only time she or Clopas are mentioned
- Mary Magdalene

The women took a risk by being present at the cross. They demonstrated courage standing there in the midst of the hatred and ridicule. They were there likely for several reasons, one of which may have been to just be with Jesus as He died. Jesus' mother, Mary, is experiencing what Simeon had predicted years before in Luke 2:35. As she stood there, her grief must have been nearly unbelievable. How did she survive, watching her son die before her eyes? Sometimes our hearts break when our children suffer or experience pain.

Like Mary, how can we demonstrate concern for our child(ren)?

We can pray with them and for them. Be courageous and be present as much as possible. We often don't even realize how important just being present is for the person we are visiting.

Jesus had delivered Mary Magdalene from demons (Mark 16:9, Luke 8:2). She had an attitude of gratitude and showed it by using her resources to assist Jesus in His ministry. She may have been a single woman as she had the time and resources to travel with the disciples.

Gratitude is not part of fallen human nature; it is a behavior that must be learned.

How can we have a spirit of gratitude?

We can focus on God, not self; be grateful for even small things and even in the midst of suffering. We can pray that the Holy Spirit open our hearts to be more thankful and grateful for what God has done for us.

Watching From a Distance

At the cross:

Read Matthew 27:55–56 or Mark 15:40–41.

Women mentioned:

- Mary Magdalene
- Mary, mother of James the younger and Joseph
 - She followed Jesus and cared for His needs.
 - Her son, James, was one of the twelve disciples.
 - She was married to a man named Alphaeus (Luke 6:15).
- Salome, mother of Zebedee's sons James and John

How do you think Salome felt as she saw Jesus hanging there, especially after asking Him for special favors for her sons earlier?

Her heart was probably breaking, thinking how selfish she had been to ask Jesus to have her sons be at His left and right in His kingdom. Now she understood that they could not “drink the cup” that He was drinking, that is, dying by crucifixion.

Where were these women standing?

They were watching from a distance, whereas earlier, some of them were near the cross when Jesus had spoken to His mother.

At the tomb:

Read Mark 15:47 or Luke 23:55–56.

Women mentioned:

- Mary Magdalene
- Mary, the mother of James the younger and Joseph

They came to see where Jesus was laid. That was important as the body had to be prepared with spices for burial. The women were “watching,” first at the cross and then at the tomb.

What can we do as we watch and wait for our Lord's return?

We can remain in the Word, partake of the Lord's Supper, be diligent in prayer for others and ourselves, and use our time and talents for His glory.

Look for specific ways this week to enhance your “watching” for the Lord.

At the Empty Tomb

Read Mark 16:1 or Luke 24:10.

Women mentioned:

- Mary Magdalene
- Mary, mother of James
- Salome, mother of disciples, James and John
 - John was known as the Beloved and wrote the Gospel of John, Letters of 1, 2, and 3 John, and Revelation.
 - Tradition says Salome was Mary's sister so she would be Jesus' aunt.

These women were last at the cross, first at the tomb.

What would be the emotions of these women as they beheld the empty tomb? Did they come to the tomb expecting to see Jesus alive?

They certainly did not think they would see Jesus alive. They were probably confused and saddened that His body was not there. They were there to anoint His body to fulfill the traditional requirements for caring for a body and also, their last act of love.

How has your faith upheld you in times of distress? Do you remember to thank the Lord for keeping your faith strong in difficult times?

Answers will vary.

The Report

Read Luke 24:9–11.

Women mentioned:

- Mary Magdalene
- Joanna, who was a follower of Jesus (Luke 8:1–3)
 - She helped to support Jesus out of her own means.
 - She had experienced healing at Jesus' hand.
 - She was married to Chuza, the manager of Herod's household.
- Mary, the mother of James
- Other devout women

Sharing the good news of the resurrection was the first thing on their minds. Think of someone you can share the Good News with this week.

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- Her response to grace from God was to follow Him.
- She called Him, Rabboni – teacher, master, the strongest expression of respect and therefore also of reverent love.
- Many – read Matthew 28:8–10
- The other women

Jesus' first two appearances after the resurrection were to His women followers.

Given the lowly position of women in society in Jesus' day, what does His appearance to women first say about His understanding of the importance of women?

Jesus showed that He loves all people, no matter what their social circumstances are.

How does that relate to you as a woman today?

I can know fully that Jesus is there for me no matter who I am or what I do. His love transcends all – something sinful humans struggle to understand.

How has God's grace affected your life? How can you give thanks to the Lord for the grace He has bestowed upon you?

Answers will vary. We can sing praises to our Lord in song and raise our voices in prayers and praise to Him for all He has done for us.

These faithful women were honored for their devotion. They came and saw and then went and told. We, too, are invited to "come and see," but this is always followed by "go and tell."

Closing Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank You for our salvation procured for us by Your death and resurrection. May we meditate upon Your passion and then rejoice at the news of Your resurrection on Easter Sunday. Be with each of us this day; guard and protect us at all times. In Your life-giving name we pray. Amen.

Sing: "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" (*LSB* 425 or 426; *LW* 114 or 115)
 or "My Song Is Love Unknown" (*LSB* 430; *LW* 91)
 or "Were You There" (*LSB* 456; *LW* 505)

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ALPHABETICAL LISTING OF DEVOTIONS

Advent Joy — A — Tude.....	255
Author and Word.....	257
Candy Hearts	259
Creating Wondrous Water Wakes.....	261
Don't Discard Me, God!	263
Fear Not!	265
Fear or...?	267
Figuring It All Out	269
Guaranteed!	271
His Christmas Presence	273
How Do I Do This, Lord?	275
I Know You	277
Immanuel — God With Us	279
It Is Swell!	281
Love Explained.....	283
The Oliver Special, Please!	285
Rejoice in Hope	287
Relationship Requirements	289
The Season of Caregiving	291
Seasons	293
Seasons in Life	295
Sent to the Nations	297
Sowing Seeds in All Seasons of Life	299
Struggles and Challenges — Oh, My!	301
Treasured to Perfection	305
Unknown Number	307
What Am I Worth?	309
You are Priceless and Precious	311

ADVENT JOY — A — TUDE

Devotion

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness’”
(Jeremiah 23:5–6).

*You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore (Psalm 16:11).*

A woman was Christmas shopping with her two children. After many hours of looking at rows of toys and everything else imaginable, her children wanted it all because it would make them happy. Finally, she made it to the elevator with her two children.

She was feeling the pressure that so many of us feel during the holiday season:

- To give the “perfect” gift, no matter the cost, so every person will be happy.
- To go to every event.
- To respond to everyone who sent a card.
- To bake calorie-laden cookies.
- To entertain with a smile, projecting that all is calm.
- To stay within the shrinking budget and not forget anyone on the list.

The elevator doors opened and there was already a crowd in the car. She pushed her way in dragging her children and bags of stuff!

When the doors closed, she could not take it anymore and shouted, “Whoever started this whole Christmas thing and promised happiness should be found, strung up, and killed!” Silence hovered. Then from the back of the elevator a quiet calm voice responded, “Don’t worry, lady. We have already crucified Him.”

Unfortunately, people get so caught up in materialism to find happiness that the one and only “perfect” gift, Jesus Christ, the Lord Our Righteousness, is squeezed into the end of a busy schedule, if it is included at all.

Joy-robber Satan entices us to root our happiness in ever-changing external circumstances. He tries to keep us focused on the immediate so that we blind ourselves to the only permanent source of real JOY, Jesus Christ the King, who will *deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land* (Jeremiah 23:5b).

Rejoice in the Good News of great JOY! When God completed His plan of salvation for us He did not merely give us righteousness; He sent His Son to be our Savior. Promises kept! He went to the cross to endure death so that He might share life with us. Because of Christ's resurrection we live our lives with the knowledge that through faith in Him nothing can ever separate us from the ultimate JOY, eternal life! Let us focus on God's promises and delivery as the center of our Christmas activities and set aside the commercialization with a new Joy — A — Tude. This Advent season and every day, implement a new Joy — A — Tude!

The new Joy — A — Tude grows from being attached to the Vine where we are nourished and strengthened to meet the demands of the holiday season and daily life. We can be contagious with this new Joy — A — Tude because we focus on the fact that lasting happiness springs only from circumstances where the Spirit of God dwells. His real JOY is there sustaining us in spite of circumstances. From Psalm 16:11, we know *in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore*.

Be assured that today you will never run out of the gift of JOY, a fruit of the Spirit — nor will you need to wait until tomorrow for it. God is always in the moment, be that moment hard or easy, painful or happy. Therefore, as you walk with this new Joy — A — Tude, ask the Spirit to guide you as you share the Good News of *'The Lord is our righteousness'* (Jeremiah 23:6b).

Closing Prayer: Heavenly Father, You are an awesome God! Thank You for sending Your Son, our Righteous Branch, so that we can anticipate the ultimate JOY of living with You in heaven! Keep us mindful that Your Son is the only everlasting source of JOY that is ever present to sustain us in all circumstances. We ask for guidance so that we may, with all boldness and confidence, never be afraid to joyfully tell everyone how much You love them. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sing: "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming" (LSB 359)

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Advent Joy—A—Tude, written by Annetta Dellinger, Plain City, Ohio
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AUTHOR AND WORD

Devotion

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:2, NIV).

My children's choir was preparing to perform a song that used this verse word for word in its lyrics. I still remember that tune today. I think part of why it really resonated with me was the phrase *author and perfecter*. As I sit here writing this devotion, I am getting ready to start my second year of work on a master's degree in creative writing. I have been writing and telling stories since I was eight years old. Sitting in that choir room ten years ago was the first time I realized the profession I am currently working toward was one my God already occupied.

I chose the NIV translation of Hebrews 12 because of that single word: **author**. *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith*. That word holds interesting and meaningful theological implications. To begin with, it reminds us that our faith is a type of written story. Still, it is not like the stories I spend my time writing; when it comes to my faith, I am not in control. Writing this devotion, I have to make decisions, make changes, and shoulder mostly by myself any anxieties about the end product. However, in our faith journeys, the plot and the ending are set. We do not make any decisions. All we do is go from one word to the next until we reach the end.

St. John begins his Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (John 1:1–5).

When we acknowledge Jesus as both Author and Word, it becomes impossible for us to have an active role in the creation or success of our faith. Not only does He create the plot, He makes Himself the very building block that creates the story — the Word.

By this I mean, even if the story starts with *In the beginning*, each of those three words and every word after them truly reads *Jesus, Jesus, Jesus*.

When I set out to write a devotion about the seasons of life we face as women of God, so many verses swelled together in my mind. I thought about verses I turn to in times of stress — Psalm 16:5–7, Philippians 4:4–7, and 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18. The more I looked at those verses, the more I realized that the reality of the certainty of our salvation is what allows these and other verses to be of such great comfort. It is this certainty that allows us to rejoice in all circumstances, the security of hope that allows for peace beyond understanding. Without trust in that first building block of faith — the most important Word our Author has ever written — everything else falls short.

So, take a moment to read with me: *The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance* (Psalm 16:6 NIV).

And now, allow me to translate: *Jesus Jesus Jesus Jesus Jesus Jesus Jesus ...*

Do it with any one of the comforting verses I mentioned or any verse that comforts you. It works for any single piece of the Bible. Because every piece of the Bible is built on that same building block.

Jesus is the Author of our faith, the Perfecter of our faith, the Foundation of our faith. He is the building block of the story of our faith, of our lives, of everything that comes next. Therefore, as you go through times of change, whether it be in your twenties, forties, sixties, or beyond, remember that nothing can affect the truth and permanence of your salvation. God has already written that story, and that fact never changes.

Prayer: Dear God, thank You for sending Your Son to do the work of our salvation for us. Help us to remember that He is our sure foundation in all areas of our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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CANDY HEARTS

Devotion

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:16–17).

When it gets close to February, Valentine's Day decorations appear in many stores. A common sight is messages on candy hearts. You may see huge heart messages hanging from store ceilings, others printed on clothes, and some on greeting cards. Bags of the candies show up on store shelves, in candy dishes, and garnishing sweet treats. The messages change from time to time, but most are cute little words to give us warm fuzzy feelings about love.

What messages might we see if God were writing on candy hearts? The Bible gives us some possibilities.

I C U Psalm 139:1–16
MINE Isaiah 43:1–7
PRAY Philippians 4:4–7
TRUST Matthew 6:25–34
LOVE Psalm 136:1–16

After reading the Bible passages above, it is very clear that the love we have from God is so much more than the simple sweet words reflected on Valentine's Day candy. Our God loves us more intensely, more completely, and more faithfully than we can imagine. He also reminds us that His love is to be shared. His loving sacrifice on the cross and triumphant resurrection is for the whole world!

Next time you see a bag of candy hearts with messages printed on them, try to think of what God tells us about His love and let that smile come to your heart, and even your face. God really loves you!

Prayer: Loving God, You have shown us what real love is. You created us and sustain our world. You humbled Yourself and became man to complete a task we cannot. You took the punishment for our sins and declared victory over the devil. You work faith in us so we can believe that it is true for us and one day join You in heaven. Thank You! Give us loving hearts to share You with others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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CREATING WONDROUS WATER WAKES

Devotion

he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, (Titus 3:5–6).

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law (Galatians 5:22–23).

We reside on Bayou DeSiard in Louisiana. Our three sons grew up enjoying water sports and boating, not only on the bayou, which is similar to a lake, but also on the Ouachita River where they learned to ski, wake board, and wake surf. My husband Bill drove the speed boat while I watched in amazement at the athleticism of our sons as they actually surfed behind the boat's large wake, which is almost like a Hawaiian wave created by water-filled FatSacs in the back of the boat. One of my sons would get into the water with his feet resting on a surfboard pointing up, sticking half out of the water and holding onto a short rope attached to the boat. When ready, my son would yell, "Hit it!" and my husband would quickly accelerate so that my son would pop up standing on the surfboard. After getting situated and comfortable on the surfboard on the wake, he would throw the rope onto the boat and surf behind the boat.

Although most of us probably will not be able to surf behind a boat or ride a Hawaiian wave, we can step out of the boat in faith and work in God's kingdom, creating a wondrous wake. As we move through the seasons in our lives, this wake may ebb, but we keep it flowing by sharing His love by doing acts of kindness, encouraging and equipping others, being peacemakers, and extending His kingdom through missions and ministry. God's Word tells us: *let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near (Hebrews 10:22–25).*

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for pouring Your Holy Spirit into me and giving me the gift of faith through the cleansing waters of Baptism. Help me to share Your grace, peace, and joy with others by working in Your kingdom. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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Creating Wondrous Water Wakes, written by Michelle Zollinger, Monroe, Louisiana
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DON'T DISCARD ME, GOD!

Devotion

O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to another generation, your power to all those to come (Psalm 71:17–18).

[Read Psalm 71 as time allows.]

So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me (Psalm 71:18a). Sometimes life is hard even for "more mature" Christians. Health issues and sometimes the rounds of doctor visits are never ending. Visits to hospitals and sick friends increase. Visits to the funeral home occur far more often, and even in the "golden years" Christians may suffer attacks from enemies because of their faith.

God, how could You do this to me? I have taken refuge with You all of my life; You have been with me since before I was born; and now, at my age, I am still dealing with enemies who hate me. Why do I still believe in You, God? Where are You?

The Psalmist writes about these very things. He tells God he is taking refuge in Him. He pleads for rescue and reminds God that He has *given the command to save me* (Psalm 71:3b). He is desperate, just as we become desperate and forsaken by friends and sometimes even by family. However, even in our desperation, as mature, experienced Christians, we can recall the times in our past where God has rescued us, answered our prayers, and provided blessings both large and small.

O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds (Psalm 71:17). It is difficult to proclaim God's wondrous deeds when we are feeling down and out, but this is just what our souls need. We can plead with God to not forsake us for we still need to *proclaim your might to another generation* (Psalm 71:18b). This is God's purpose for us no matter our age or situation.

God has not forsaken us, and though we are for a time or a season lost in darkness, proclaiming God's goodness brings light to our lives once again. The Psalmist uses the words *revive, increase my greatness, comfort me, praise with a harp, sing praises with a lyre, and my lips and soul shout for joy.* In our desperation we also turn to God and sing His praises.

Prayer: O God, today I feel desperate and far from You, but You are my rock and refuge; You will vindicate me. Help me sing Your praises with my lips and my soul so that I can truly shout for joy as I proclaim Your wondrous deeds to the next generation. Amen.

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Don't Discard Me, God!, written by Cindy Trombley, Harrison Township, Michigan
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FEAR NOT!

Devotion

fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand (Isaiah 41:10).

We live in a world with many challenges to face each and every day. Sometimes these challenges can be overwhelming, resulting in distress that creates a sense of fear. This fear may be caused by something real or simply imagined — fear of flying, fear of something bad happening to your child, fear after losing a job, fear of getting a serious illness, and the list goes on and on. That, in turn, often results in worry or anxiety — one of Satan’s favorite tools.

Satan may try to use worry to torment, thereby causing suffering when someone is desperately seeking a sense of peace in a troubled world. However, he cannot stand against the faith our Father has provided us through His Son, Jesus Christ. This faith encourages us to reach out to God in prayer daily and to seek His wisdom and guidance when the cares of this world do not make sense. Through prayer the Comforter will provide peace and contentment amid the trials of this life.

There are times it can be difficult to concentrate when praying. When worry and anxiety seem overwhelming, great comfort may be found by reading God’s Word, and then prayerfully reflecting on His truths revealed in Scripture.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:4–7).

“I will never leave you nor forsake you.” So we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?” (Hebrews 13:5b–6).

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38–39).

It is in God’s Word that we find help for the journey on this earth. His Word reveals His love and comfort provided through the presence of the Holy Spirit. His Word shares the promise of eternal life through faith in His beloved Son, Christ Jesus.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, I thank You that in times of fear and doubt You continue to provide peace and comfort through your never changing promises. Help me to let go and trust in Your care and safety for me in all my earthly life. In Jesus' precious name. Amen.

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Fear Not! written by Edie Norris, Gig Harbor, Washington
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FEAR OR...?

Devotion

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control (2 Timothy 1:6–7).

Paul encourages Timothy *to fan into flame the gift of God* (2 Timothy 1:6a). Timothy's gift was preaching, and he was not to let it die out. An untended campfire will die out unless more fuel is put on it. However, one cannot just throw another log on the fire; first the embers have to be gathered together and some small or intermediate size logs placed on the fire to revive it. Our gift may not be preaching, but we, too, should continue to feed the gifts God has given us to enable us to use them for His good.

Like Timothy, I had become timid at my job. My boss was a nice guy, but for some reason he intimidated me, and I was fearful of having to call or talk to him. But God reminded me through Scripture that, *[He] gave us a spirit not of fear* (2 Timothy 1:7a). Through the power of the Spirit, I was able to speak up and discuss my concerns and develop a better relationship with my boss. The Spirit we have comes from God and is the center of our emotions and character. The Spirit we receive from God is not one of fear but of power (not the power of control but the power of the Holy Spirit) and love (the agape kind of love stemming from God), and self-control (sound mind and wise discretion).

No matter with whom we are communicating — a boss, co-worker, family member, friend, or neighbor — or about what we are communicating — the day's tasks, relaying important information, checking on someone's health, or sharing the Gospel message, we need not be afraid when we have the Holy Spirit, the love of Christ, and the discretion and gifts given to us by God.

Prayer: Dear Father in heaven, thank You for giving us a spirit of power, love, and self-control and not one of fear. *I can do all things through him who strengthens me* (Philippians 4:13). In Jesus' name. Amen.

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FIGURING IT ALL OUT

Devotion

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope (Jeremiah 29:11).

Throughout life it seems things are always being started. When we finish middle school, we start high school. When we finish high school, we start college and careers. In the middle of all that school and work, we start hobbies, projects, relationships — the list goes on and on. It can be overwhelming.

As a recent college graduate, it seems sometimes that I am facing more new beginnings than ever. I have to figure out the beginnings of my career, figure out taking on real adulthood, and one day, when and if marriage and a family are presented to me, figuring out how to proceed so that God is pleased with the decisions I make. Thankfully the Holy Spirit is with me giving me both wisdom and strength so that what I do pleases the Father and that He uses it for the good of the Kingdom. Your new beginnings might be similar — maybe you, too, are choosing where to live and with whom to spend your time. Or maybe you are adding a new member to the family, learning how to be an empty nester, getting ready to retire, or trying to remember how to be single again. It is a lot to have on your shoulders. Praise be to God, the Spirit is with you, too, giving you wisdom and strength to please the Father with all that you do.

Christians who are experiencing feelings of uncertainty and sensing the challenge of making critical life decisions may turn to verses like Jeremiah 29:11 for comfort and help. When you are experiencing a “I have to figure all of this out” time, you may indeed feel like you are walking a tightrope in the dark, that there is only one right path, and one misstep will have dire consequences. But God has not left you alone to be without His help.

Thankfully, “figuring it all out” on your own is not the reality of God’s plan. If we look at the context of Jeremiah 29:11, this promise is part of a letter that Jeremiah sent to Jewish exiles. The plan God had in store was the plan for their salvation from their oppressors and ultimately salvation from sin, death, and the devil — the same plan God spoke through prophets hundreds of years before the exile began. There is nothing unclear about the direction or end goal of His people’s journey.

Our human instinct is to assume that we must “figure out” the steps of completion for God’s plan for our salvation — just like we always think we have to figure out the rest of our lives. Especially in today’s culture, where everything is about “finding yourself” amidst the world’s

madness, it seems obvious that we would have to play a difficult and active role in our salvation. Yet, that could not be further from the truth.

Take a moment to return to the image of walking a tightrope in the dark. Yes, the tightrope has the set path of an already-written story, but it leaves too much pressure on the success of the tightrope walker to be an accurate metaphor for God's grace. John describes Jesus as *the light of men* (John 1:4b), a light that darkness cannot and will not overcome. Therefore, before you walk that tightrope, open your eyes to see that the Light is on and there is no darkness involved. God is not hiding anything. Now step aside and watch Jesus walk the tightrope for you. Better yet, remember that He already has. It is not just that you do not have to "figure it all out," it is that everything has already been done. It is even already public information in the form of the Bible.

As I go through my periods of endings and new beginnings, it is comforting to know that my human fragility cannot mess up the plan God has in place for my salvation. I know that He makes the same promises to us that He made to the Jewish exiles: welfare, future, hope. I know that those promises are unchangeable, which takes a huge weight off my shoulders. I am reminded that the Creator of the universe Himself will be with me, with *us*, always, in all His majesty, and He does that without my having to figure out anything concerning my belonging to Him through my faith in Jesus. Yes, He may have me struggle with some of the "figuring it out times," but I know that He will always be with me and that, at the end, He will bring me to Himself.

Prayer: Thank You, God, for sending Your Son to save us from our sin. Thank you for having already covered the anxieties that we tend to let come upon us. Thank You for being our steady hand and certain promise through all the changes and decisions we face in life. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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Figuring It All Out, written by Allison Maschhoff, St. Louis, Missouri
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GUARANTEED!

Devotion

“I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

There are few guarantees in life — few things of which we can be absolutely sure. There are no guarantees that our health will be good. The purchase of a new appliance with a 100% guarantee warranty does not mean that it will work with no difficulties.

Jesus speaks the words of John 16:33 between the institution of the Lord’s Supper and His betrayal and arrest. He promises there are two guarantees in life: tribulation and peace. Jesus tells His disciples, *you will have tribulation*. He does not say “you **might**”; He says “*you **will**,*” guaranteed. Trials. Troubles. Struggles. We all have them. Paul reminds us, *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23).

Troubles and struggles can result from living in a fallen world. Consider how we struggle from outside influences that may go awry — people might put us in harm’s way, we might emotionally hurt when our loved ones suffer or die, or we might feel betrayed or dishonored by loved ones. Troubles can also result from the inside — our personal sins of pride, jealousy, or anger thereby disobeying God’s Word and commands.

For a Christian, tribulation can also come in the form of persecution. *“If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you”* (John 15:18). Since the world hates Jesus, it will hate His followers, too. The world is a hostile place for Christians. When Christianity identifies aberrant behavior as sin, the world does not agree and publicly proclaims God’s Word as false — written only for a past culture or time. When Christians believe in only Jesus’ righteousness for salvation, the world insists it must add good works in order to achieve that salvation. Christians are ridiculed and derided for giving all authority and honor to God, and only God.

Who knows our sorrow? Who knows our struggles? Jesus does. In John 16:33 He reminds the disciples — and us — that He has overcome the world, and He guarantees us His peace in the midst of tribulation. We are reminded in Hebrews 4:16 *that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need*. Jesus encourages us, His people, to come to Him with all our trials and tribulations. He will give us His peace, guaranteed.

Listen to God’s words of encouragement and comfort as He invites us to give to Him our anxiety and worry in time of trials and tribulations.

- Psalm 50:15: *“and call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.”*
- John 14:27: *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”*

As we have been encouraged and comforted by our Lord, we too can encourage and comfort our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. 2 Corinthians 1:3–4 says, *so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*

Jesus promises *that in me you may have peace* (John 16:33a). Jesus promises His peace. Guaranteed!

Prayer: Dear God of all comfort, thank You for the salvation You give to us because of the merits of Jesus. We thank You for Your Holy Spirit and the gift of faith. Remind us that as we experience tribulation and trials in this world, we have the guarantee of Your peace and the hope of eternal life in heaven. Help us to share God’s peace and hope with those around us as through the Spirit’s power we boldly witness the Good News of salvation in Jesus. In Christ’s name. Amen.

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Guaranteed!, written by Shari Miller, Helena, Montana
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HIS CHRISTMAS PRESENCE

Devotion

*Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle
(Exodus 40:34).*

On Christmas Day, many churches will read the Christmas story from one of the Gospels as well as a section of the book of Exodus. On the surface, it sounds like an odd pairing. Why not use a reading from Isaiah or a Psalm that foretells the setting of Jesus' birth?

The last part of Exodus describes how the nation of Israel, encamped in the desert, erected the Tabernacle for the first time. This tent was movable but beyond important — it was the house for the Ark and the place that God would dwell while among His wandering people. We have been given many details about the design, the size, and the fixtures inside the Tabernacle. However, Exodus 40 ends by describing the most important part — the glory of the Lord was present! It states, *the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle* (Exodus 40:35b). Not only did God lead the Israelites through the desert while they wandered for 40 years, He also physically lived among them. They could visibly see Him fill the tabernacle in a cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night. God's physical presence among them was a blessing and a comfort.

So, why is this portion of Exodus often chosen as the Old Testament reading for Christmas? The amazing physical presence of God in the Tabernacle was a blessing to the Israelites. However, it was just a shadow compared to the amazing blessing of God's physical presence that was prophesied to come. On December 25, we celebrate the best Christmas present of all time — the presence of Jesus, the Son of God. No longer just present in a man-created structure, Jesus is the full physical presence of God in human flesh who came to live a life like ours. He was fully present both as our miraculous God and as a human that suffered pain and temptations just as we do so that His death on the cross would redeem us.

The ancient Israelites saw God present in a cloud and a fire. The Roman world of the first century saw God present in physical flesh. Now all who have faith in Him get to be in the presence of God each day as the Holy Spirit lives in our hearts and guides us as we grow in faith and carry out our mission to tell others the Good News of Jesus. Finally, we have the promise that, as redeemed children of God, we will live forever without the taint of sin and be able to praise God in His full, eternal, and unfiltered presence.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, thank You for loving us so much that You came to earth to pay the penalty for our sins. Thank You for sending the Holy Spirit to guide us and to be present with us daily until we join you in Your full presence in paradise. Amen.

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His Christmas Presence, written by Michele Doel, Burlington, North Dakota
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HOW DO I DO THIS, LORD?

Devotion

*Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace,
that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:16).*

How did I get to this point in life, and how will I keep moving forward, Lord? Not that long ago, life was pretty straightforward. Sure, there were bumps in the road, but they did not last too long, and I always got through them. But now, Lord, I am not sure that I can do this!

Okay, Lord. You tell me in Your Word, *do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God* (Philippians 4:6). I guess I need to talk to You more about how I am feeling about all this. I can do that. But I am not sure I am ready to do it “with thanksgiving.” How am I supposed to be thankful when this is so hard? Maybe I need to ask You for help with that, too. All right then — I will pray more about what is going on in my life, and I will pray that You will give me a thankful heart. Thanks for listening, Lord, even when I am a mess.

Now about this situation itself. I cannot turn back the clock and change a thing that got me to this point. So now what? *Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go* (Joshua 1:9). Well, that is pretty clear! Lord, I think I need to ask You to help me be strong, courageous, and not frightened, because I am sure fear, courage, and strength are going to give me trouble. I love the promise that You will be with me wherever I go. All my life You have been with me, Lord. As I think back, I see so many times when I was not sure how things would turn out, but it is obvious that You led me through every one of them. I think I had better keep this verse in mind to help me remember that even though I do not always feel Your presence with me, You will never leave me.

I am feeling better already, Lord. This situation is not going away so I better get used to leaning on You for everything about it. But, I know I will have those days when I will not be feeling better about this. *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid* (John 14:27). I really needed to hear that. Thank you, Lord, for the peace You promise me, and forgive me when I struggle instead of handing it all over to You.

One more thing, Lord. No matter how much I wonder about why You love me, I will never wonder that You **do** love me. *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16).

Prayer: Lord, I know You are always with me, no matter how hard things get. Keep my eyes focused on You and my mind centered on the promises You have for me in Your Word. With You I can get through anything. Amen.

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How Do I Do This, Lord?, by Mary J. Smith, Goldendale, Washington
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I KNOW YOU

Devotion

But if anyone loves God, he is known by God (1 Corinthians 8:3).

Each of us has a story of our lives, from the moment of our birth until our death. Many people cross our paths and their stories become intertwined with ours. Some stay a short time and others stay throughout our entire life.

Moving through the grieving process for my parents, I thought about this idea of “my story” when one day I found myself mourning not only the loss of my mom and dad, but also the loss of these people who had known me best, throughout my entire life. Others know me well, including my husband, siblings, and close friends, but no one comes close to my parents who held me as a newborn baby, raised me, cried as I cried tears of sadness, and cheered when I succeeded. They were one of the first I went to in all instances for so many years and now they were gone. I felt my heart breaking again as I let this thought move through me. And then, in the stillness of my grief, I heard a whisper in my heart, “I know you.” I was reminded that there is Someone who knows me even better than my mom and dad ever did. Psalm 139 resonates with verse after verse of God’s intimate knowledge of me from the moment I was conceived through each day of my life.

- *O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar (v 1–2).*
- *You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me (v 5).*
- *For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb (v 13).*
- *Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them (v 16).*
- *I awake, and I am still with you (v 18b).*

No matter what your life has been like, no matter who has been part of your life — or not part of it, no matter what you have done or where you have been, the God of the universe loves you and cares more for you than you can ever imagine. He takes your sorrow and pain and makes it His own. He rejoices when you rejoice. He is your heavenly Father who will never leave you. Bask in the knowledge that you are known and loved.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I thank and praise You that You know me and still want to be with me. Comfort me with Your love. Fill me with Your peace. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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IMMANUEL — GOD WITH US

Devotion

*“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel”
(which means, God with us) (Matthew 1:23).*

“God with us” seems like such a simple concept to us Christians. Of course, God is with us. We learned that well in catechism classes, did we not? He is omnipresent, that is, He is present everywhere at all times. His divine presence encompasses the whole universe. It is one of His attributes, self-proclaimed in Jeremiah 23:24b: *Do I not fill heaven and earth? declares the LORD.* He is never not with us.

In the beginning (Genesis 1:1a) He was present, creating the whole universe and walking with man in the Garden of Eden. Isaiah prophesied of Immanuel to the people of Israel hundreds of years before Jesus’ birth, with the very words Matthew references. In the birth of His Son, God came to earth as Immanuel, literally, as Jesus. He became God in the flesh and lived with man. He embodied God’s perfect love. His last words as He returned to heaven brought the Immanuel message one more time – *“And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:20b). The entire Bible is the story of “God with us.”

As we look at what Immanuel means for each of us, let us consider the more personal magnitude of God with me. How does this happen in one’s personal life? It is certainly my nature to look for God and want Him close when I have issues — when I feel the effects of sin in life. Whether it is health problems, financial concerns, relationship struggles, or whatever worries keep me awake at night, I go to the Lord pretty quickly in prayer. I look for my God to come alongside and help solve my problems. I pray earnestly in those times for God to speak to me and I hold to the promises that He will come to me in Word and Sacrament. He wants me to seek Him in times of trouble.

On the other hand, when things are going fine, do I think to look for God in my life? Do I see His hand at work around me? His presence is still there, and His voice can still be heard. Sometimes it sounds very much like the voice of my pastor, a friend, or an LWML sister. It might be the words of a song I hear on Christian radio. It may be a hug from my spouse that is motivated by God’s love. The physical earth is filled with signs of God our Creator in the beauty and simplicity of a flower, a bird or animal, a panoramic scene, or the healing power our bodies have when disease or injury threatens. Do I think of God’s involvement when my day goes well or when disaster has been avoided? When I look for and see God at work in my life, I see that He has been with me all along, even when I’m not looking.

Immanuel is very much a part of your Christian experience every moment of all your days on earth. Be on the lookout for Him each day in your life and see His love and care at work.

Prayer: Dear Immanuel of my life, bring me continual reminders of the many ways You are with me. Help me see the ways You touch my life with Your love and care. May I seek to see the blessings of which You are the source every day so I never feel separated from You by my sin. In Jesus' holy name. Amen.

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Immanuel – God With Us, written by Nancy Kohrs, Lake City, Minnesota
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IT IS SWELL!

Devotion

*And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body.
And be thankful (Colossians 3:15).*

(*Caution!* Reading this devotion could affect your singing of a favorite hymn for the rest of your earthly life! *You've been warned!*)

“How are you doing today, Rick?” I asked one of our congregation’s elders, as I usually do each Sunday. His reply was not so usual. “Just swell!” he said.

“Swell?” Who answers “swell” these days? The more I thought about it, the more I liked it.

Swell is a great word! It is certainly better than “okay.” Okay is, well, ok. Oklahoma used “Oklahoma is OK” on their license plates years ago, which left me asking, “Is that all there is to the great state of Oklahoma?” Swell is also better than “well,” which seems to me to be a clinical, medical, health self-diagnosis. “Good” seems like a moral judgment (as opposed to guilty, evil, sinful, or bad). “Great” has to be a bold, proud, exaggeration. I like swell.

In the Divine Worship service later that morning, we sang an old hymn, with lyrics by Horatio G. Spafford (1828–88): “When Peace Like a River” (*LSB* 763). Then it hit me. Swell is a great word particularly for us as God’s people! I must admit, I have not been able to sing that hymn as written since that day. It is no longer “well with my soul,” as originally written. Now I must sing, “It is swell, IT IS SWELL, with my soul, WITH MY SOUL, It is swell, it is swell with my soul.”

“That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate And hath shed His own blood for my soul” is swell! That “He lives – oh, the bliss of this glorious thought” is swell as well. What could the fact that “My sin, not in part, but the whole, Is nailed to His cross, and I bear it no more” be, but swell, eliciting our chorus “Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!”?

Do you know what else is truly swell for those of us who are in Christ? That we have been washed clean of our sins and made God’s own children in Holy Baptism is swell. That Jesus has redeemed us as His own and called us by His name is the essence of swellness. What could be more swell than to know that God has given us His Holy Spirit to dwell in us, and to gift us, so that He can work through us for the good of others and for God’s greater glory? Because Jesus is risen from the dead, because He lives, we too shall live, forever, with Him, in the room He has prepared for us in heaven. All this is swell. In the words of the hymn, when the Lord hastens “the day when our faith shall be sight, The clouds be rolled back as a scroll, The

trumpet shall sound and the Lord shall descend” even then, perhaps especially then, it will be swell, so swell, with my soul and yours, when we, because of His mercy and grace, see Jesus and He sees us!

Child of God, in what other ways, for what other reasons, can you reply that you are swell, that your Savior is swell? When someone asks you how you are doing, do not just reply with “okay”, “good,” your daily medical self-diagnosis, or even your exaggerated “great!”! Tell them that in Jesus Christ you are swell! Then give them just one reason, in Jesus Christ, why, or just sing them a song. “When Peace Like a River” (*LSB* 763) is a swell one!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, because You have made us Your own daughters and sons through Holy Baptism; because You have told us in Your Word the wonders of Your love for us in the coming life, suffering, death, resurrection, ascension, and the promised return of Your Son Jesus our Savior; and because You have gifted us with the Holy Spirit and His gifts, we have great reason to thank and praise Your holy name and to live life here to the full until we live in heaven with You! Bless us to be a blessing to those around us, that they may join their hearts and voices with ours in proclaiming that because of Your mercy and grace “It is swell, it is swell, with my soul!” In Jesus’ wonder-full name we pray. Amen.

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It Is Swell!, written by Rev. Larry Miller, Helena, Montana
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LOVE EXPLAINED

Devotion

[Please provide: hymnals or copies of "Joy to the World" for each attendee.]

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another (1 John 4:9–11 NIV).

It is beginning to look a lot like Christmas, the most joyous season of the year! Soon we will again celebrate the best gift ever given — the gift of God’s love in His Son, Christ Jesus! As we eagerly await the birth of the Christ Child, our days are filled with preparation. We decorate our Christmas trees and our homes; shop for gifts; send Christmas cards; bake the family-favorite cookies; attend Advent services, choir rehearsals, and program practices; entertain guests; plus a dozen other things!

Growing tired and weary from the stress and busyness of the season may cause us to be less than loving. At those times our attention is often focused on getting everything done just perfectly rather than on the Christ Child, whose birth is the real reason for celebration. Could it be that we are more concerned about children and grandchildren thinking less of us if everything is not up to par, rather than making sure our words and actions reflect God’s great love in Jesus? Are we making ourselves rather than the Babe-in-the-manger the center of the season? Are we giving in to frustration as we begin to think “I will be glad when it is January,” instead of savoring the wonders of Christmas as we rest on Christ the King?

God’s love for us is so awesome! We are so unworthy of this gift of the baby Jesus! As stated in the Scripture, God did not send this wonderful gift from heaven because we loved Him. Our sinfulness disappoints Him greatly. Each day we fail to fulfill His expectations and instead follow the ways of the world and our sinful human nature. How often we succumb to the temptations Satan sets before us. Yet God loves us so much that He sent His only Son to be born a human being and suffer the horrific agony and ultimate crucifixion so that we might once again be His children! We cannot possibly imagine such unfathomable love!

When we keep Christ as the focus of all our Christmas preparations, the joy of the season will fill our hearts and will enable us to keep things in perspective. Daily prayer, thanking God for this wonderful gift of love, and asking Him to send His Holy Spirit to help us respond by loving one another and keeping our mind from getting caught up in the secular celebration of the “holiday” season. By focusing on Christ, we can strive to keep Christ in Christmas!

As we once again prepare for this joyous event, may any effort or inconvenience seem trite compared to the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins. Decorating our homes and Christmas trees with lights, angels, stars, and candles reminds us of Jesus, the Light of the world being born on that first Christmas. The angels sang “Gloria,” and the Magi followed the star and brought sweet-smelling gifts to the Babe-in-the-manger. The shiny tree ornaments reflect the light, just as we are to reflect God’s love to everyone. The Advent wreath and the manger scene in a prominent place remind us to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Christ Child.

Sending Christmas cards with a Christian message is an excellent opportunity to share the Good News. Say a prayer for the person or family as each card is addressed. While shopping, we may consider presenting the clerk or waitress with a *Mustard Seed* or tract inviting them to our church’s Christmas services. We should remember to SMILE and to be polite as we weave through the crowds and are perhaps tempted to become impatient with an inept clerk.

Presenting gifts to those special people in our lives is symbolic of that greatest gift, Baby Jesus. Christmas shopping is not meant to “break the bank” or to buy the favor of our children or grandchildren. The gift will soon be forgotten, but the love of Jesus that we demonstrate in our living and in our giving will be remembered always.

Rather than fretting over every dust ball, let us make some cookies, even if they are the ready-to-bake kind, and take a plate to a person who is lonely or a shut-in. Making the visit will warm our heart, as well as the heart of the person visited.

There are many ways the love of God in Christ Jesus can be shared. Because God has opened our hearts to His great love for us, the love from Jesus brings joy and peace to our souls, as it becomes the motivation in our Christmas preparation.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, we thank You wholeheartedly for Your abounding love for us in sending Your only Son to save us from our sin. We are so undeserving. We plead with You to fill our hearts with Your love so that we can truly love others. Left to ourselves, we can only demonstrate a self-seeking love. Grant us joy and peace that only You can provide as we prepare for the birth of Jesus, our precious Savior, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Sing: “Joy to the World” (*LSB* 387).

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THE OLIVER SPECIAL, PLEASE!

Devotion

*I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you
(Jeremiah 31:3b).*

When our children and grandchildren gather at our home, the time I enjoy the most is breakfast. Grandchildren sit at the counter or the kitchen table waiting for Grandma to cook waffles. As each waffle comes off the waffle iron, Grandma, with a knowing smile, asks a particular child, “What do you want on it?” Each child smiles back and says, “I want the ... special!” The “Hazel Special” is just butter and syrup. The littlest grandchildren get the “Jude Special” — a waffle with nothing on it. But the most audacious special of them all is the “Oliver Special.” This particular set of extras for a waffle would probably never happen outside of Grandma’s house. It includes hazelnut spread, powdered sugar, and a sprinkle of cinnamon and sugar. All the grandchildren’s eyes grow large as they look in awe of this waffle, watching Oliver eat with abandon. As he eats his specialty, his bright eyes and smile fill my heart with joy.

If you could ask God for the “special” that you crave, what would it be? Would it be healing for you or a loved one? Repairing a relationship? Peace in times of trouble? Even more than a grandmother giving her beloved grandchildren what they want, God wants to give us, His treasured possessions, more than we could ever hope for or imagine. What He wants to give us is even more audacious than an “Oliver Special!” *Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen* (Ephesians 3:20–21).

After we go to God with our requests, we need to leave them in His gracious hands and trust Him. *And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you* (Psalm 9:10). We do not need to struggle in the waiting, wondering if God hears us. *But know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself; the LORD hears when I call to him* (Psalm 4:3). We need to remember that God knows what is just right for each one of us. Maybe the waiting is just as important as getting what we desire! *Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him* (Isaiah 30:18). When, in God’s timing, we receive what God has for us, know that He rejoices with us. *The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing* (Zephaniah 3:17).

God always gives us His best, and in the end, those who believe in Jesus as their Savior will receive the best “special” of all. Because of His great love for us, He sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins on the cross. We are forgiven for all the wrongs we have done. Heaven will be our home, and we will have no more worries or struggles. I’ll take that “special”!

Prayer: Lord, help me to remember all that You have done for me. Let me put my worries and struggles in Your hands, knowing that You love me with an everlasting love. Thank You for giving me the most special gift of all — eternal life in Your Son, Jesus. In His name we pray. Amen.

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The Oliver Special, Please!, written by Mary J. Smith, Goldendale, Washington
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REJOICE IN HOPE

Devotion

Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer (Romans 12:12).

Throughout the Bible we are reminded that amid our struggles, we persevere in prayer and rejoice in HOPE.

Tribulations are a distress or suffering resulting from oppression or persecution. While our struggles may not be at those levels, we all have felt beaten down or afflicted by something.

Of the three things mentioned in our Bible verse above, **being constant in prayer** seems the easiest for us to do during these trials. Prayers may be spoken, cried, sung, yelled, or whispered. There are times when prayers are unspoken because the hurt is so deep and we cannot seem to find the words to utter. However, Romans 8:26 reminds us that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness and intercedes for us. What a blessing and privilege we have to make prayer the habit and pattern of our lives!

Being patient during these times of tribulation may be difficult, and at times it feels impossible.

Digging into the Word through devotions and Bible studies will help pass the time and give us the tools to assist and encourage us through our struggles. Reading about the tribulations of others like Joseph, Moses, Job, David, Esther, and Paul can give us perspective on what we are facing and provide a reminder that we are not in our trials alone. The Lord is with us! Be strong and courageous. *“It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed”* (Deuteronomy 31:8).

We usually use the word hope with wanting or wishing. “I hope it doesn’t rain today,” or “I hope my package arrives on time.” What about **rejoicing in hope**? Unlike worldly hope, biblical hope is not based on our effort; it is something received. The God of hope pours hope into us through the Holy Spirit. Hope in the Lord is forward-looking faith. It is a confident belief, based not on things we understand or feel but on the Word of God and the things He promises will happen. Paul tells us that we can rejoice in hope even as we endure suffering, looking forward with confidence and joy to the Lord’s return and the glory to follow. (See Romans 5:1–5.) The nature of our hope is joyful because it rests on Christ. His love, forgiveness, and salvation are sure and certain and give us hope and joy.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus, thank You for being our source of hope. Remind us daily that You are

with us and that Your promises are certain and are a cause for great rejoicing. Help us to be in constant contact with You in all seasons of our lives that we may rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, and be constant in prayer. Amen.

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Rejoice in Hope, written by Joy M. Anderson, Prior Lake, Minnesota
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RELATIONSHIP REQUIREMENTS

Devotion

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8).

Relationships come with expectations. Too many rules to follow or requirements to meet make a person want to give up. "Take a bath. Don't get fat. Be pleasant." Taking a bath is no problem; avoiding peanut M&M's is quite a bit harder. Being pleasant while putting up with other peoples' interruptions, noise, and misunderstandings is quite another matter. I want hugs, dishes done, and trash taken out. A large dose of kindness and patience also helps.

What does God want? Our Bible verse tells us that God wants us to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. According to *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* definition 2a, to do justice means "acting or being in conformity with what is morally upright or good." It is to do the right thing. When faced with a challenge, what do I do? Look to Jesus. Jesus totally did the right thing. *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them"* (Matthew 5:17). When I fail, I look to Jesus who never failed.

To love kindness, from *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, is defined as "to be of sympathetic nature, of a forbearing nature, gentle, arising from or characterized by sympathy or forbearance." It is to be willing to forgive. When I am hurt, how do I deal with it? Lean on Jesus. Jesus forgives me. Romans 5:8 assures us that *God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*. Jesus purchased forgiveness with His blood. Because He forgives, I can forgive and extend kindness.

To walk humbly with your God, the third requirement, means to confess, give credit, take correction, and ask for help. Humility does not mean putting myself down. It means realizing I am not perfect; I do not know it all; I do not have it all; *being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross* (Philippians 2:8). When I offend someone, I need to apologize and ask for forgiveness. I can do this in confidence because God loves me and forgives me because of what Jesus did on the cross.

If I keep justice, kindness, and humility in mind, my relationship with God and others is built, repaired, and grown. Is this simple to understand? Yes. Is this easy to do? No. God's indwelling Spirit makes it possible for me to obey Him and relate to others. He is doing the right thing in

me, cleansing me with His forgiveness, and strengthening me and equipping me for my task. Because of what He did and does, I can do.

Jesus fulfilled the relationship requirements between God and man by living the perfect life, dying the perfect sacrificial death, and rising to new life. Now I am covered in His love, empowered to obey, and assured of life forever. All I can ever hope for or be is found in relationship with Him.

Prayer: Lord, help me grow in love toward You and others in all I think, say, and do. Help me to do what is right in Your sight. Make me willing to forgive and to realize I have a lot of room for improvement. Thank You for Your goodness, mercy, and grace. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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Relationship Requirements, written by Martha Gregory, Lancaster, California
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THE SEASON OF CAREGIVING

Devotion

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience (Colossian 3:12).

Jesus' example of compassion is seen many times in Scripture, and we can use those examples in caregiving. *When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things (Mark 6:34).* We may see our loved one as a sheep without a shepherd as he or she begins to lose memory, strength, and ability. This is difficult to watch and can cause distress, and even at times anger. However, we cling to God and His promises. *"Do not fear or be in dread of them, for it is the LORD your God who goes with you. He will not leave you or forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:6b).* What comfort we have knowing that God does not forsake our loved one nor us.

While we care for others God takes care of us. *You have granted me life and steadfast love, and your care has preserved my spirit (Job 10:12).*

Though we make mistakes on our caregiving journey, God forgives us. *He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us (Psalm 103:10–12).*

Every day, but especially on a difficult day, God gives us what we need to care for our loved one. *Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful (Colossians 3:12–15).* You may have not chosen to be a caregiver, but you are God's chosen one, holy and beloved. He will give you what you need to accomplish the task at hand. There may/will be times when your loved one complains about their care, or when you may complain about caring for your loved one. Because Scripture teaches us that we've been forgiven and we are to forgive others as God has forgiven us, we can find that peace which binds everything together in perfect harmony. We are forgiven, and we forgive, so we can be thankful for the care we are able to give, as well as the compassion we get to share with our loved one and all those surrounding the caregiving experience.

God instructs us to care for each other and for ourselves. *Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God* (Acts 20:28a). Study Bibles note that this verse refers to pastors. Just as pastors need to care for themselves as they care for their flock, so we also need to care for ourselves as we care for our loved ones. God has chosen us to give care and be their guardian in this life and we want to care for them the best way possible. Acts 20:28a cautions everyone to not neglect your own health and spiritual well-being, or you risk being unable to administer the care others need.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, grant us peace and strength as we care for the loved ones You have placed in our lives. Amen.

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The Season of Caregiving, written by Carrie Brumbaugh, Lyman, Wyoming
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SEASONS

Devotion

*For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a
time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast
away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain
from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love,
and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace (Ecclesiastes 3:1–8).*

Here in the Midwest, changes are seen when the flowers bloom; when animals have their babies, grow or lose hair, or change what they eat; and when fruits and vegetables are available to eat from the garden (peas, tomatoes, squash/pumpkins). However, the biggest indicator of the coming change of seasons is the change of light. I think of winter as a season of darkness, and summer as a season of light. Fall is the season I become very aware of the shortened days and of moving into a darker season, whereas I look forward to the days of spring when I get to go to work when it is light and come home when it is light, that movement into a lighter season.

Our seasons of life can be much like the seasons of the year. We may have seasons of darkness where it feels as though God is far away and unconnected from what we are going. These hard seasons may include the loss of a loved one, health challenges, changes in a career, or other things that make life in this world hard. Seasons of life often do not begin or end quickly — they often transition, slowly becoming lighter or darker. We are told in God’s Word that we should *Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour* (1 Peter 5:8).

The devil is always prowling, be it in our dark seasons or not; however, he takes our dark seasons and uses them to his advantage to devour us. The devil watches us and through many avenues in today’s society, he would have us focus on the things that make us “feel” good, and that are “acceptable” from a world’s point of view. However, these focuses can often lead us to the darkness. The devil would have each of us believe that feeling good and doing all that the world would tell us is good, but really that continued seeking for feeling good and being acceptable is just seeking after the devil’s means and ways.

Flipping our focus from those things of the world to Jesus and what He has done for us is what God desires of us. It is not always easy to switch our focus, especially when we are in a dark season of life. However, no matter the challenges, *The light shines in the darkness, and the*

darkness has not overcome it (John 1:5). Yes, praise be to Jesus Christ that He has conquered sin, death, and the devil through His death on the cross. He does not promise us that all our life will be always times in the light, but He does promise to be the light for all times in our lives no matter what our challenges are.

When I am looking for God in any season of life, spending time in His Word, partaking of His Sacraments, and surrounding myself with His people help me to focus on the Light and recognize that He is the One shining in the darkness of the world. When you are having trouble finding the Light, here are a few verses that provide assurance of God's presence and provision for us, no matter the season:

- *But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me* (2 Corinthians 12:9).
- *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it* (John 1:5).
- *Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!* (Psalm 139:23–24).
- *For you are my lamp, O Lord, and my God lightens my darkness* (2 Samuel 22:29).
- *For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope* (Jeremiah 29:11).

You may have your own verses that bring you closer to God in those times that seem darkest, to bring you the Light and peace. Take time to write them down so that you can keep them where you will see them often, or spend the time to commit them to memory, so that you can have them with you whenever you are in need of them. God goes with you always through all seasons of life. What a joy it is to know He has conquered the dark and we have the victory of everlasting life through Him.

Prayer: Dear Heavenly Father, come alongside each of us in the current season of life. Give us Your power to withstand the evil one in the bad seasons and to always remember You in the good seasons. We thank You for the sacrifice of Your Son to die on the cross for our sins. May we always remember His sacrifice and resurrection no matter what our current season of life looks like. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

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SEASONS IN LIFE

Devotion

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven
(Ecclesiastes 3:1).

In what season are you? Age groups are sometimes associated with the seasons: youth for **spring**, young adulthood for **summer**, middle age for **fall**, and elderly or advanced years for **winter**. No matter the season, we all face challenges and frustrations. God says, “*I will never leave you nor forsake you*” (Hebrews 13:5b). Therefore, we have confidence that, no matter what the situation, He is in control and guiding our way. *For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope* (Jeremiah 29:11). That is His promise to us. We can have a positive and calm outlook and demeanor that the world cannot understand.

Or the seasons could refer to our mindset for the day. How was your day? **Spring** for everything is rosy and going my way, **summer** for a good day — tasks completed with minimal challenges faced and overcome, **fall** for a hard day with many frustrations and cares to overcome, or **winter** for a tough day, struggling to just complete normal daily requirements with unending frustrations, failures, and defeats. It is a fact that we will experience these seasons throughout our life, but praying for God’s will to be done and acknowledging and relying on His promises no matter our season at the time provides opportunity for us to deal with and accept the results. *I sought the LORD, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears* (Psalm 34:4).

What about the seasons in the life of a Christian?

Spring — As a first-time believer in Jesus as our personal Savior and Redeemer, we learn to rely on Him as we live our life and seek His guidance. *All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work* (2 Timothy 3:16–17 NIV).

Summer — As we grow in faith, we continue to learn more about Jesus and God’s plan and care for all. We seek to make Him our life’s priority, relying on the Means of Grace to nurture and strengthen our growing faith. *Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer* (Romans 12:11–12 NIV).

Fall — As we continue to mature in faith, we are confident in knowing and trusting that Jesus is in control as He guides and protects us. We rely on Jesus even more in life's challenges and struggles as we delve into His Word to strengthen our faith. *Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life* (Jude 21 NIV).

Winter — As mature Christians who depend on Jesus in times of light and times of dark, we stay in God's Word and use His Means of Grace to firm and strengthen our faith in Jesus as our Savior. We are confident that God always has us in the palm of His hand. *fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand* (Isaiah 41:10).

How we respond to any season of our life is sometimes a big challenge. As Christians, are we sometimes more seasoned than at other times? Rest assured that Jesus faced and conquered the challenges of sin, death, and the devil in our stead so that we, by grace through faith, may one day live in the perfect season with Him eternally. *For in the day of trouble he will keep me safe in his dwelling* (Psalm 27:5a NIV). We know that, whether spiritually or physically, *weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning* (Psalm 30:5b NIV). Until we live forever in that perfect season with Him, we can have hope, joy, and contentment in knowing that He is in control.

Prayer: Dear Lord, please be with us in all our seasons. Guide and direct us so that those around us will come to know Your love and that all our words and actions will be to Your glory and for our good. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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SENT TO THE NATIONS

Devotion

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 7:9–14).

What a joy to share a devotion with the Lutheran Women's Missionary League, women who have God's own mission heart beating within them. Over the years I have been privileged to work with the LWML in various capacities, and what I have learned is if you want to get something done, give it to the women of the LWML. Their passion for mission is an example to the Church of the calling God has placed on all of us as His sent ones.

In our text, we have this beautiful picture painted for us by the Apostle John showing the multicultural nature of God's love for the whole world. We know it well: *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16). He loved the whole world! That includes everyone! Here, in our text, God is gathering His family. People from every tribe and every nation are coming together to worship the Risen Jesus! It was beyond John's ability to even count them all. What a vivid reminder of God's call and desire for His chosen people to reach out to people of every tribe and nation, to reach all people with the good news of Jesus. This reflects the heart of God, *who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth* (1 Timothy 2:4). Now we find God's heart for the world beats through people just like you and me.

It does not take much research to discover that almost every part of the United States has experienced population growth over the last decade, and the growth is projected to continue as new people come to our country from all over the world. It is also no surprise that in many places the growing population is made up of people from all tribes and nations. Friends, this simply reminds us that all around us the fields are wide open for harvest and God is sending each of us to reach out in the name of Jesus, the very Lamb of God.

Jesus sends us into the world with such a powerful message of hope. It reflects the words in our text: “*Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!*” (Revelation 7:10b). As we hear it, this is a proclamation. In our text, though, it is the affirmation of the truth of God’s Word. In John’s setting no one needs to be convinced or converted. They are all gathered because someone told them about Jesus, the very Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. We get to share this message with a world mired in darkness and despair.

The text goes on: *Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”* (Revelation 7:13–14). The elder knew who these people were! They were those made clean through the blood of Jesus. This includes each of us! But it is more than just us. It is all who have believed the promises of God, who have received His grace and forgiveness, and who have faith in Jesus and all He accomplished for us on the cross.

This great multitude of believers is gathered around God’s throne because someone took the time to share the love and forgiveness of Jesus with them. Somebody took the time to go in the name of Jesus and share the hope we have in Him. In John’s vision, this awesome congregation of believers, gathered in unity of heart and mind, focused on Jesus. Is it any wonder they were rejoicing? As we live as missionary people, as we live as Lutheran missionary people, He fills us with His Spirit and with His joy. He gives greater purpose to our lives as we are inspired and enriched by His Word to connect people to Jesus and to build His Kingdom. This is the true work of the Church. It is all about Jesus.

What joy one day to be part of that multitude gathered around the throne of the Lamb worshiping Jesus together! Who in your family, your neighborhood, your workplace, your school, your grocery store, or who, dare I say it, even in your church, needs to know Jesus and His salvation? He is sending you! I pray you can answer His call with joy.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, by grace You have made us part of the multitude which will one day gather at Your throne. Help us be responsive to Your Spirit as You send us into the world to share Your love, hope, and joy! We pray this in Your name. Amen.

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SOWING SEEDS IN ALL SEASONS OF LIFE

Devotion

The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy (Psalm 65:12–13).

One year, I received a gift certificate to a local spa via email from our eldest son. The certificate specified the value amount, the six-month expiration date, and this message: Hope you can use this to relax and have a great birthday! Wow, what a wonderful gift! If only I had time to redeem it. At the time I received the certificate, I was busily preparing to host an LWML booth, preside at an LWML district convention, participate in a wedding, and celebrate multiple family graduations. I tucked away the gift certificate in our kitchen drawer, awaiting a time when I was not so “busy” so that I could redeem the gift and relax. Does this scenario sound familiar to you?

Our Lord granted blessings upon blessings with the handling of the aforementioned events. With the perceived break in the action, I decided that now may be a good time to open the drawer and look for the spa gift certificate and redeem it for a relaxing facial. I called the spa to schedule an appointment, stating that I was available any time except Thursday morning — our group LWML meeting. She replied, “How about Wednesday at one o’clock?” I responded, “Oh, and except Wednesday from 1 – 2 because of weekly Bible class at church.” Thus, we agreed that I would come after Bible class.

That Wednesday our class studied Mark 4. The following verses stood out to me: *But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold (Mark 4:20). It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade (Mark 4:31–32).* Our leader also referenced Galatians 5:22–23. *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.* Wow! The wonderful gift of God’s grace brought peace as we fed on God’s Word. We received nourishment, hydrated on living water, and the class discussed cultivation and instruction to bear fruit as well as to sow seeds.

As I lay on the soft, warm bed to receive my relaxing facial, the clinician asked me if I wanted a “Dermaplaning/blading Facial,” where the dead skin cells would be most effectively

exfoliated. This sounded quite ominous, and since I did not think that it would remove my wrinkles, I replied, “No, I’ll just have the good old-fashioned facial.” My facial was to increase the circulation, decrease the toxins, and add moisture to my face. After a brief massage and the application of a masque, the clinician had me inhale lavender to help relax me for the 20-minute absorption period. In Biblical times, lavender was often referred to as nard, an expensive perfume and precious ointment. *Mary therefore took a pound of expensive ointment made from pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume* (John 12:3).

In a relaxed state, I reflected on Bible class and how Mark, Chapter 4 related to the goals and results of this facial. We are to sow God’s seeds which our Lord may germinate. We are to bear good fruit in all seasons of life, wrinkles and all. We are to be in His Word and receive His Sacraments, and we are to serve as a pleasantly fragrant and a calming balm to others.

Prayer: Thank you, Lord, for each one here. If there is a physical need, grant healing. If there is a spiritual need, grant peace of mind. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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Sowing Seeds in All Seasons of Life, written by Michelle Zollinger, Monroe, Louisiana
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STRUGGLES AND CHALLENGES — OH, MY!

Devotion

I will never leave you nor forsake you (Joshua 1:5b).

Abide with me, fast falls the eventide.
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide.
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.
Abide with Me (LSB 878:1)

Life has a perplexing way of presenting all kinds of challenges and struggles for us. Though we understand that God is with us every moment of our lives, we, as humans, tend to need support, comfort, and encouragement. Isaiah 41:10 is a passage that offers all three: *So do not **fear**, for I am with you; do not be **dismayed**, for I am your God. I will **strengthen** you and **help** you; I will **uphold** you with my righteous right hand.* [emphases added] Many times, though our head knows the “right” answer, our heart is slow to follow, but we believe God’s promises are true and that we can fully rely on Him to keep His word to us. Illnesses and family and work struggles have a way of causing us to doubt ourselves and others. When we are feeling our lowest and most isolated, we can trust that God is there with us. We do not have to “feel” it; we need only to believe it. He tells us to *Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you (Deuteronomy 31:6).*

Through Word and Sacrament, we have confidence in His promise to nourish and strengthen us at all times in our life — *that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:16–19).* As we gather together as brothers and sisters in Christ to be in His Word and Sacrament, God provides opportunities for us to “lean on” and receive support within our church family as we face life’s challenges so that we mature not only in faith, but are also strengthened emotionally — *not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another (Hebrews 10:25a).*

I need Thy presence ev’ry passing hour;
What but Thy grace can foil the tempter’s pow’r?

Who like Thyself my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, O abide with me
Abide with Me (LSB 878:2)

We need God constantly. How reassuring to know that God is with us 24/7. It is easy to be positive and happy when we feel that our lives are calm and headed in the direction we have chosen. But life is not always like that, is it? During the unplanned disruptions and turmoil we experience, we can lay our cares and anxieties before our Lord and look to Him to chart our path. *Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you* (1 Peter 5:7). *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls"* (Matthew 11:28–29). By faith, we are confident that, as He is in control, no matter what challenges we face, Jesus redeemed us through His death and resurrection, and we know our final destination is our heavenly home with Him. This “peace” that the world cannot give is ours, because Jesus made it so.

Come not in terrors, as the King of kings,
But kind and good, with healing in Thy wings;
Tears for all woes, a heart for ev’ry plea.
Come, Friend of sinners, thus abide with me.
Abide with Me (LSB 878:3)

Jesus has promised us that He will return and take us to live with Him forever in Heaven. *In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also* (John 14:2–3). *At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens* (Mark 13:26–27). All who believe that Jesus is their personal Savior from sin, death, and the devil are part of the “elect.” That is you! God’s promise is CERTAIN!

This hymn reminds us that there will be challenges and obstacles throughout our life, but Jesus has overcome them all and is always with us! With certainty and joy we know He personally takes care of us and has promised to take us to heaven to live with Him eternally! We can cling to His promises with certainty. “In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.”

Prayer: *Abide with Me (LSB 878:6)*

Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom, and point me to the
skies. Heav’n’s morning breaks, and earth’s vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide
with me. Amen.

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Abide with Me text and music: public domain

Struggles and Challenges — Oh, My! written by Sylvia Bean, Clovis, New Mexico
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TREASURED TO PERFECTION

Devotion

*“Behold, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel;
I will never again pass by them” (Amos 7:8b).*

Throughout my life, I have called myself a perfectionist. I usually do this with a shrug, a chuckle, or a shake of the head — something to show that I know perfectionism may not be the perfect way to live, and really is not even possible. Many of us treat it like it is an illness we have been born or raised with, or something we cannot control. I am not sure I have ever met a person who was thankful to be a perfectionist. But, God loves us with or without our perfectionism.

In the book of Amos, God gave Amos various visions to show what the fate of the Kingdom of Israel would be. The images are so terrifying that Amos cried out, *“O Lord GOD, please cease! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!”* (Amos 7:5). Twice he cried out this way to God, and twice God promised to spare His people. However, the third vision ended differently, as shown in our theme verse.

When I first read this story, I had to ask what a plumb line was. For anyone like me who does not know, a plumb line is used to tell whether a wall has been built perfectly straight. A weight, usually one with a pointed bottom tip, is hung from a string to make a sort of vertical straightedge. A good craftsman pays attention to the plumb line and tears down the crooked wall.

That puts a whole new spin on things when God shows Amos a vision of a plumb line. God can withhold plagues of locusts and fire, but He cannot ignore the plumb line. He cannot allow the crooked wall to stay standing.

In our world, where so many sins feel justifiable, where so many “good” people do not-so-good things, it is easy to wish God used a different sort of plumb line. It is easy to say, “Why can’t He just ignore a few things? Why is a small white lie thrown into the same pile as murder or rape? Surely, there are times when lying is acceptable, aren’t there?”

We look out at the world around us and it seems so much easier for the people who do not have to consider the plumb line. They live amongst crooked walls and they do not seem to notice; it does not seem to bother them. The world accepts them with open arms for it.

However, then I watch the news or go on social media and see just how frustrated, sad, and spiteful people are, I see how confused they are by the world around them and how strange

they find it when their crooked walls start to crumble. Then I realize how blessed we are to know the truth of the broken nature within us. The explanation of original sin, while it does not excuse us, opens the door to salvation.

Jesus once told the scribes and Pharisees, “*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners*” (Mark 2:17b). It takes symptoms of illness for a person to go to the doctor. In our case, it is the law of the plumb line that allows us to see how unhealthy and crooked we are.

When God showed Amos the plumb line, He said He would not pass by the marker of Israel’s crookedness any longer. Amos did not argue or cry out as he had before. He knew his God was unable to ignore sin, and that has not changed in the 2500 years or so that have passed since then.

Since Adam and Eve first disobeyed, God has not been able to ignore sin. After the fall, God assigned an angel to guard the Garden of Eden because He did not want humans to be able to eat from the Tree of Life. At first, this seems like a curse to punish Adam and Eve for their sin, but in truth it was a great blessing. If Adam and Eve had eaten of the Tree of Life as sinful beings, they would have been left to live forever in slavery to sin. While they (and we) may not have thought ahead far enough to stop from eating the fruit, God did. He understands the grave consequences of sin better than we do — just like He understands how wrong it is to pass by a plumb line and leave a crooked wall standing. God knows *the wages of sin is death* (Romans 6:23a), and He loves us too much to leave us to our own brokenness.

I do not know if my human perfectionism is a blessing or a curse, but I do know this — God’s holy perfectionism leads to our salvation. He has treasured His creation since the very beginning, to the point of sending His Son to die for us on the cross. He knew our crookedness could not stand in the presence of His holiness, but He also did not want to leave us living in separation from Him. Therefore, out of love, He takes a look at the plumb line measuring our lives and knocks down the crooked wall so that He can build it right back up again and give us an eternity with Him.

Prayer: Dear God, thank You for blessing us even when we struggle to understand Your gifts. Thank You for Your dedication to our salvation and for being our perfect craftsman. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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Treasured to Perfection, written by Allison Maschhoff, St Louis, Missouri
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UNKNOWN NUMBER

Devotion

Then the LORD called Samuel, and he said, “Here I am!” and ran to Eli and said, “Here I am, for you called me.” But he said, “I did not call; lie down again.” So he went and lay down (1 Samuel 3:4–5).

Samuel was called by the Lord when he was only a lad, but he did not recognize who was calling him. He had not built a personal relationship with God and did not recognize His voice when the Lord called. We know Samuel’s mother Hannah relied on God. After the Lord blessed her with the baby Samuel, she willingly gave him back to God.

And she said, “Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the LORD. For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the LORD. As long as he lives, he is lent to the LORD” (1 Samuel 1:26–28).

However, Hannah could not believe for her son. When Samuel lived at the temple with the priest Eli, he assumed the voice he heard in the night must be that of his mentor. Samuel tried to be obedient to the voice and ran immediately to Eli. Sorry, wrong number. Eli had not called. After a few misguided attempts to answer the presumed Eli’s summons, Eli knew to steer Samuel to the real source of the voice.

Therefore Eli said to Samuel, “Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, LORD, for your servant hears.’” So Samuel went and lay down in his place. And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times, “Samuel! Samuel!” And Samuel said, “Speak, for your servant hears” (1 Samuel 3:9–10).

The Lord then was able to tell Samuel His plans for him and the nation. Communication was now open between them.

Did God ever call you? What did it sound like? The women in my weekly Bible study hypothesized if Jesus would ever call us on a cell phone, we might not answer. Often, the only numbers we answer are those from people we know. No one wants to answer a call from a solicitor or a scam, so we usually ignore those unrecognized calls. God did call you through the Gospel in the Holy Scripture and your Baptism. He calls all believers through His Word and gave you the ability to respond to His call when He created your faith in Him. When you recognize His voice, you answer His call.

Faith is strengthened through Christian fellowship, worship, and reading the Word. Every time His Word is shared, whether in the Absolution or Sermon or Sacrament, we hear the call again. God is not an unknown caller anymore.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me always recognize and respond to Your voice when You call me to action for the advancement of Your kingdom. Have me answer with “Speak, for Your servant hears” every time You call me. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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Unknown Number, by Terri Bentley, Garden Valley, Idaho
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WHAT AM I WORTH?

Devotion

“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows”
(Matthew 10:28–31).

The morning sun streams through the back windows. Birds flit and flutter to secure prime perch spots on the feeder. Blue jays, vivid red cardinals, and an occasional confused woodpecker provide a striking palette of color. And then there are the sparrows.

Sparrows win the award for most numerous breakfast guests. Sparrows are small, brown, and plentiful. They sometimes blur together merely providing a background for the more colorful larger birds — *like somehow the sparrows are less valuable.*

The current global population is over seven billion people. *Talk about a blur.* How can God possibly take notice of you or what you are going through? He can because He does not see as we see. He carefully wove us together (see Psalm 139:13) and planned every day of our lives before one of them came to pass (see Psalm 139:16). God sees you individually with each hair numbered and your name written on the palm of His mighty hand (see Isaiah 49:16). *You are valuable.*

The God who created the heavens and the earth and everything that fills it created YOU in His image (see Genesis 1:27). Regardless of the exterior criteria that culture deems valuable, God validates your worth because you are His. You need not fear about becoming lost in the blur. You were bought with the price of His Son’s blood to reconcile you back to Himself. He does not care what you have done or where you have been. *He cares about YOU.*

Ponder: When you view your worth through God’s eyes, how does it change your self-perception?

Prayer: Father, I am so thankful that You ascribe value to me, because some days I do not feel very valuable. Give me the strength to look to You alone to gauge my purpose and guide my steps. I pray that You fill me with encouraging words to tell others about their value in You as well. Please guard my heart and mind this day. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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What Am I Worth?, written by Donna Snow, Montgomery, Texas
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YOU ARE PRICELESS AND PRECIOUS

Devotion

*For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him
(Psalm 103:11).*

YOU are priceless and precious. But maybe you don't think of yourself that way. Maybe you are depressed and sad. Maybe you wish your husband would give you more of his undivided attention. Maybe you have experienced the pain of losing a job. Maybe you feel lonely. Maybe you feel crushed because your heart has been broken by someone who didn't really love you. Maybe you feel sad because your children don't call you enough. Maybe you have lost hope for a better future. Maybe you wish you could return to happier days.

Do not despair, my friend! There is hope! There are better days ahead! God loves you! God loves you with a **perfect** love. God sees. God cares. Not a single heartbeat or heart cry escapes His notice. YES! God loves YOU! God, the Creator of the universe, the all-powerful, all-knowing God, loves you and calls you precious!

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, (Isaiah 43:1–4a).

God loves you and He knows you. In fact, He made you. *For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well (Psalm 139:13–14).*

God loves us, warts and all. He knows we are sinners. He knows that we daily sin in thought, word, and deed. But God loved us so much that He sent His Son, Jesus, to suffer and die on a cross, to take the punishment that we deserved for our sins. *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed (1 Peter 2:24).*

So, don't look down and despair. Look up and rejoice! Your sins are washed away and YOU are holy and beloved in God's eyes. *The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin* (1 John 1:7b).

YES! YOU are priceless and precious to God! God is with you now! Because of His great love for you, an eternity of joy awaits you! *You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore* (Psalm 16:11).

Prayer: Dear God, I am awe-struck by your great love for me! Help me to look up to You, my source of perfect, unending love! Thank you for sending Your Son, Jesus, to pay the price for my sins so I can spend an eternity with You in heavenly peace, joy, and love! Help me to be assured again and again of Your great love by reading Your Word and partaking of Holy Communion. Help me to tell others that You love them, too! In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

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ALPHABETICAL LISTING OF LITANIES, SKETCHES, AND PROGRAMS

Litanies

King of Time and Eternity	315
Pleasing Thoughts and Words	319
Riding the Waves with Jesus	321
Women of the Bible	325

Sketches

At the Innkeeper's House	329
Clean House, Clean Heart	333
Return to Jesus	339
Where Do I Find That?	341

Program

All Things Work Out For Good — Advent By Candlelight	345
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KING OF TIME AND ETERNITY

Litany for Easter

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen (1 Timothy 1:17 NIV).

[Please provide: leader, group divided in half, copies of the litany for everyone, piano, accompanist, hymnals, or copies of the hymn.]

Sing: “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today” (*LSB* 469).

Leader: Lord Jesus Christ, King of time and eternity, we praise You, beloved Son of God, for taking on our human form and being our brother in flesh and blood.

Group 1: To the King who is eternal,

Group 2: who will never die,

Group 1: who cannot be seen,

Group 2: the only God,

All: be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Leader: Lord Jesus Christ, King of time and eternity, we praise You for living in this time and place, walking obediently according to the Father’s will in our stead.

Group 1: To the King who is eternal,

Group 2: who will never die,

Group 1: who cannot be seen,

Group 2: the only God,

All: be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Leader: Lord Jesus Christ, King of time and eternity, we praise You for Your compassion, showing us how to love the poor, the abused, and the forgotten.

Group 1: To the King who is eternal,

Group 2: who will never die,

Group 1: who cannot be seen,

Group 2: the only God,

All: be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Leader: Lord Jesus Christ, King of time and eternity, we praise You for calling us into the Father's kingdom and equipping us for discipleship and service by the power of Your Spirit.

Group 1: To the King who is eternal,

Group 2: who will never die,

Group 1: who cannot be seen,

Group 2: the only God,

All: be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Leader: Lord Jesus Christ, King of time and eternity, You have suffered the punishment we deserved — the sinless sacrifice for sinners.

Group 1: To the King who is eternal,

Group 2: who will never die,

Group 1: who cannot be seen,

Group 2: the only God,

All: be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Leader: Lord Jesus Christ, King of time and eternity, You have won the victory for us in the battle with Satan, sin, and death through Your dying and rising again.

Group 1: To the King who is eternal,

Group 2: who will never die,

Group 1: who cannot be seen,

Group 2: the only God,

All: be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

Leader: Risen Lord Jesus Christ, King of time and eternity, rule in our hearts each day while we wait in time for eternity, when we will see You face to face at last.

All: To the King who is eternal, who will never die, who cannot be seen, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

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King of Time and Eternity, written by Donna Streufert, South Bend, Indiana
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PLEASING THOUGHTS AND WORDS

Litany

[Please provide: leader, reader, copies of the litany for everyone.]

Reader: *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer (Psalm 19:14).*

Leader: What is in your heart and coming out of your mouth? Is it acceptable to God?

All: *Let the words of my mouth*

Reader: Lord, guide my words so they are pleasing and encouraging, not condemning and negative.

All: *and the meditation of my heart*

Reader: Lord, help me to keep You in my heart and meditate on Your Word daily.

All: *be acceptable in your sight,*

Reader: Lord, I pray that all I do and say will be acceptable to You, bringing honor and glory to Your name.

All: *O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*

Reader: Lord, guide my life completely. Help me to stand firm on You, my Rock and my Foundation, my Lord and Redeemer.

Leader: As we go through life with our valleys, rocky places, caves, and mountain highs, let us keep our thoughts, words, and actions focused on God. He is our Rock, solid and strong; our Foundation supporting us; our Redeemer, Savior of our sinful lives.

Rest on Christ our King! He is our Rock! He is our guide and our Lord. We can always thank and praise Him and give Him the glory.

All: *Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer (Psalm 19:14).*

Leader: Let us pray.

Dear Lord God our King, we thank and praise You for what You have given us. We ask You to always guide our thoughts and words. Help us to focus on You as our Rock and strong Foundation. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

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Pleasing Thoughts and Words, written by Melody Rosenwinkel, Alpine, Wyoming
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RIDING THE WAVES WITH JESUS

Litany

[This litany calls for three readers and group responses. The *Lutheran Service Book* contains the closing song, “Eternal Father, Strong to Save.”]

Introduction by Reader Three:

Some people are water sports people. They love to ride the waves on a wave runner or on a jet ski. They are exuberant in the water, as playful as dolphins and flying fish. However, sometimes when the wind disturbs the surface as in hurricanes, typhoons, and floods, water can be a dangerous and fearful thing. Today we will meditate on waves and how we can ride them out with Jesus, our Savior.

Reader One:

Let us consider Noah. What kind of man spends years building a huge boat in his backyard to the jeers of his neighbors and lets God chart his course? Surely, he had questions. How long will this expedition last? Where are we going? As the rains came down and the waters rose, was there any trepidation in Noah’s soul? Thousands of years later, do we wonder — what about us? What will each new day bring? Where are we going, and what is God’s purpose for us?

Response:

The flood continued forty days on the earth. The waters increased and bore up the ark, and it rose high above the earth. The waters prevailed and increased greatly on the earth, and the ark floated on the face of the waters (Genesis 7:17–18).

Reader One:

Noah trusted and obeyed and built the ark and filled it with animals just as God instructed. Then he trusted God as the rains came down. The ark rolled upon the waves for a hundred and fifty days (Genesis 7:24) and then it stopped on the mountain of Ararat. Noah and his family, the wild animals, and the livestock descended out of the ark and were spared from the flood that had devastated the whole earth. Noah was rewarded for his faith.

Response:

Each morning we put the little vessels of our personal lives upon the water of life and sail out into unknown seas. Our best reaction is to be like Noah and have confidence in the navigation plan of God.

Reader Two:

Now, let us consider another story of the power of the waves as related in Mark 4:35–41. Near the Sea of Galilee, Jesus and His disciples decided to take a boat and go to the other side. While Jesus was napping on a cushion in the back of the boat, *a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling* (Mark 4:37). The disciples were scared and cried out to Jesus, “*Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?*” (Mark 4:38b). Jesus got up and rebuked the wind and everything calmed down. *He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?”* (Mark 4:40).

Response:

Jesus is in our boats, too! He quiets our anxious souls, assures us of His love and faithfulness, and bids us to merely trust and obey. He calms the wind and waters of our lives, if we will listen for His voice in the storm.

Reader Two:

In another incident on the sea recorded in Mark 6:47–51, Jesus revealed His authority over rough waters. This time the disciples were in the boat and Jesus was on the shore. Jesus gazed out and saw the seamen straining against the oars as a strong wind had risen. He walked out upon the whipping waves, and the disciples were terrified because they thought He was a ghost walking toward them. *But immediately he spoke to them and said, “Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid”* (Mark 6:50b). The disciples were shocked, amazed, and could hardly believe their eyes.

Response:

Is the wind whipping you about with dangers and troubles on every side? Do you fear for today and tomorrow? Do the heavy waves of life threaten to submerge you? Then hear the words of Jesus spoken for you, just as for the disciples long ago on the sea of Galilee, telling you not to be afraid. We need to fortify our hearts with God’s promise: *fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand* (Isaiah 41:10).

Reader Three:

Let us now consider another incident from the high seas, a terrific storm in which John Newton, a young man on a slave ship, was jolted awake on the night of March 9, 1748. A brutal storm descended suddenly. In great peril, he cried to the Lord, and as he reported, “The Lord came from on high and delivered me out of the deep waters.” Newton repented of his sins and eventually “became one of the most powerful evangelical preachers in British history, a powerful foe of slavery, and the author of hundreds of hymns,” among them the immortal “Amazing Grace.” [Morgan, Robert J. *Then Sings My Soul*. Thomas Nelson Publishing, 2003, p.163.]

Response:

“Amazing grace — how sweet the sound — that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see!” [Newton, John. “Amazing grace.” *Lutheran Service Book*, Concordia Publishing House, 2006, p. 744.] Newton’s words resound in us, for we, too, were sinners, lost in storm-tossed seas, but now we rejoice because, *In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace* (Ephesians 1:7).

Reader Three:

Another man affected by storms at sea was Horatio Spafford. He had sent his wife and four daughters ahead on a voyage to Europe while he tended to some business matters at home. The ship they boarded, the *Ville du Havre*, went down in a storm. The four daughters, Tanetta, Maggie, Annie, and Bessie, drowned; only his wife survived. Later, as he crossed the ocean in the area where the ship went down and his dear daughters left this earthly life, Spafford was able to write: “When sorrows, like sea billows roll; it is well, it is well with my soul.” [Spafford, Horatio. “When peace like a river.” *Lutheran Service Book*, Concordia Publishing House, 2006, p. 763.] His faith was seeing him through an unimaginable, soul-wrenching disaster.

Response:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble (Psalm 46:1).

Whatever besets us, whatever our lot, with faith in Christ we can be confident and echo in our hearts the words from the refrain to Spafford’s beautiful hymn, “it is well with my soul.”

Reader Three:

Whatever our plight as we sail these earthly seas, we too, like the bards of old, can rest assured that Christ our Lord is with us still. He tames the raging waters, speaks peace into the maelstrom, and assures us of His love, for He died for you and me. Let us close our meditation today by prayerfully singing “Eternal Father, Strong to Save” (*LSB* 717), also known as the Navy Hymn.

Readers One, Two, and Three speaking together:

Amen. Sail on in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Response:

We rest our souls in thee, dear Jesus, as we ride the waves of life. Amen.

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Riding the Waves with Jesus, written by Marcia Schwartz, Falls City, Nebraska
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WOMEN OF THE BIBLE

Litany

[Six readers are needed for the “Who Am I?” portion of this devotion. One reader is needed to lead the litany which follows.]

1. I am the beautiful, outgoing daughter of Bethuel and the sister of Laban. One evening I went to the town well, as did all the women, to draw water. A stranger with ten loaded camels approached, came up to me, and asked for a drink of water. I graciously handed him my jar and even offered to draw water for his animals. Little did I know that I was passing the test, for the man was there to find a bride for Isaac, son of Abraham. The servant had been sent to Abraham’s home country because Abraham did not want his son married to a woman from Canaan where the family now lived. My family left the decision to me as to whether or not I would accompany the servant back and marry a man that I had never lain eyes upon! Can you believe that I said “Yes!”? This was not just a blind date but a blind life commitment. Fortunately, Isaac approved of me, and we loved each other. I was a great comfort to him after the death of his mother, Sarah. We were blessed with twin boys, Esau and Jacob, and I admit that I favored Jacob. I was very manipulative when I helped Jacob to get his father’s blessing deceitfully when Esau and Jacob were grown men. The blind old man thought he was giving the blessing to the first-born of the twins, Esau, but I had helped my son Jacob cover his arms with skins so Isaac thought it was the hairier brother he was blessing. Somehow I wonder if God also favored Jacob, for through Jacob’s lineage the Savior Jesus was eventually born! Who am I?

[Let the group respond. The answers will become evident in the litany which follows.]

2. I was an unknown Jewish girl who became the queen of the Persian King Ahasuerus. He reigned over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia. The Jewish people were despised by a wicked man in the court, Haman, who was trying to get all of us Jews put to death. I was chosen to be one of those considered as queen, and let me tell you, I went through rigorous beauty treatments for nearly a year before the pageant took place. Lo and behold, the king selected me for the prestigious position of Queen of Persia. When the wicked Haman had maneuvered the king into issuing a death decree to all Jews, my uncle Mordecai urged me to speak up for our people. I was scared to death to approach the king. He could even have had my head for my audacity. You see, the king did not know that I was a Jew. However, Mordecai challenged me by saying, *who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?* (Esther 4:14b). I prayed and God gave me wisdom and courage to speak to the king, and our people were spared. Who am I?

3. My Egyptian husband was a high officer of Pharaoh and a very wealthy man. A young, handsome Israelite man, who had been sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, came to serve my husband, Potiphar. This young Israelite man, Joseph, was admired and trusted by my husband and he put Joseph in charge of the household. I could not take my eyes off Joseph and tried to seduce him, but he rejected my advances, so I accused him falsely and had him imprisoned. Joseph later regained favor with the Pharaoh by interpreting dreams and obtained a high place in the kingdom. His acquisition of grain enabled Egypt to withstand a famine. Joseph's brothers came asking for aid, unaware that they were dealing with the brother they had betrayed. Out of our abundance, and Joseph's generosity and forgiveness, his father's household and flocks were saved. Now I can see how this God of the Israelites had provided for His chosen people through Joseph! I'm an old woman now and am not proud of my former seducing ways, but maybe even I was a part of God's plan! Who am I?

4. I was the wife of a Levite, Elkanah, and I wanted a baby, but I was barren while Elkanah's second wife, Peninnah, bore my priest husband several children. She ridiculed me and pranced about taunting me with her children in tow. I went to the temple day after day, got down on my knees, and pleaded with God for a child. I vowed that if God gave me a son I would devote him to the Lord's service. Hosanna in the Highest, He answered my prayers, and gave me a beautiful son, Samuel, who later became a prophet. Oh, how I loved that little boy! I put off taking him to the temple to be raised in godly things by the prophet Eli, but finally, after he was weaned, I took him to the temple. However, in future days, God did reward my faithfulness by giving me three more sons and two daughters. My psalm of Thanksgiving recorded in 1 Samuel 2:1–10 is similar to the song of Mary when she learned that she would be the mother of Jesus. Who am I?

5. I am a Jewish woman who fled our homeland with my husband and two sons when famine hit. While we were in the land of Moab, our sons married Moabite women. My husband and sons died in Moab, and I decided to return to my homeland in Judah. My daughters-in-law said they would accompany me, but I declined and told them they should remain with their people and their gods in Moab. Orpah ultimately decided to remain, but Ruth would not be deterred. She said, *"For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God"* (Ruth 1:16b). She made the difficult trip with me and truly was a great help to me on that journey. When we arrived in Judah I told my friends and family that they should now call me "Mara," which means "bitterness," since I had lost my beloved husband and sons. My name had formerly meant "pleasantness," but I did not feel that way after my sad misfortunes. I urged Ruth to be a gleaner in the fields of Boaz, who was a kinsman of mine. He was struck by the character, demeanor, and beauty of my daughter-in-law. They married and she bore a son named Obed, who became a forerunner of Jesus. My heart felt joy once more when I held Obed in my arms! Who am I?

6. I was just a young teenager when I was chosen by God to carry and birth His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah. I was scared and humbled when God chose me out of all the young women in the Holy Land to bear His Son, but, oh, what an honor! The days grew near to my delivery date, but Joseph and I had to journey to Bethlehem to pay those pesky taxes! What a long and grueling trip! Then, when we at last arrived, we could not find a room anywhere until an innkeeper took mercy on us and offered his stable. Giving birth in a rough stable that smelled of animals and without proper attendants was not ideal, I can assure you! What unfathomable joy I felt holding my newborn babe in my arms. I am often asked, “Did you know that you were holding the Savior of the World?” The answer is: Yes, I did! As for you, good Christian women, you will easily know who I am!

Leader: Let us now join in the litany based on these women.

“Who Am I?” A Litany of Thanksgiving

Leader: Dear God, You did not call me to be exactly like these aforementioned women of the Bible who were all given a role in Your plan of redemption. I am not at all like some of them, but I bear certain traits in common with all of them.

Response: I am not a Hannah, or a Naomi, or a Rebekah, but I am a woman, and as such I have endured loss, known joys, and have also, in my own way (though I will never be written about in the pages of the Bible), been a part of Your plan. Through Baptism, my name is written in the Book of Life. Thank you, Jesus!

Leader: Dear Lord, just as with Hannah and Esther, You have had mercy upon those who have called upon You in righteousness and truth, have succored them, and given them comfort in sorrows and hope in times of discouragement. As with them, You give us strength and faith!

Response: Truly, with hearts filled with thanksgiving, we sing a psalm of praise and thanksgiving to the One who answers our prayers, just as He did for Hannah and Mary. We sing to You, our Father who blesses us and redeems us! Thank you!

Leader: We, too, have stumbled at times, giving in to sin, though maybe not like Potiphar’s wife and Rebecca who were knowingly deceitful, but in other ways. We ask the Lord to make us aware of sins which sadden Him and to forgive us.

Response: Dear Father, help us to change our thoughts, desires, and actions to be in accordance with Your will, and please forgive us! We know You love us for You sent Your dear Son to die for our sins and made it possible for us to live with You eternally in heaven. How can we ever thank and praise You enough?

Leader: We hope to be brave and courageous like Esther who spoke up for a nation of people; Ruth who followed Naomi to a foreign land; and of course, Mary, the young girl who despite being an outcast and object of ridicule (unmarried and pregnant), trusted God. Help us to be as courageous in whatever mission the Lord sets before us!

Response: We rejoice in the Word of God and all the role models, for better or for worse, that He shows us in His Holy Word — in Biblical days, and beyond! Help us to be like the strong and faithful women who have followed His bidding, in history, and in the present day.

Leader: We want to thank You, God, for making us a part of Your kingdom and including even us in Your plan of salvation!

Response: Who am I? I am a rare and beautiful creation, a child of God, an heir of the kingdom! I am blessed beyond knowing, chosen to be His today and always! Praise to You, my Lord and my God! In Jesus' name. Amen.

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AT THE INNKEEPER'S HOUSE

Sketch

[Please provide: four actors — a narrator, an innkeeper and his wife in their home and a shepherd boy; copies of the sketch; two chairs, a table, and some dishes; piano, musician, and hymnals or words to “Oh Little Town of Bethlehem,” “Hark the Harold Angels Sing,” “Angels We Have Heard on High,” and “Silent Night.”]

Narrator: Visualize a night many, many years ago. The town named Bethlehem is swarming with disgruntled, tired people who have come to pay their taxes as ordered by the government. Every room in town is filled. We meet an innkeeper and his wife in their home which is part of the inn.

Wife: Are you ready to lock up so we can eat our supper? It is really late.

Innkeeper: Yes, after a busy day dealing with all these people, it will really be good to sit and relax for a while before going to bed. **[Knock on the door.]** I hope that is not someone looking for a room at the inn. People are almost hanging from the rafters.

[While the wife busies herself preparing the table, the innkeeper goes to the door offstage, returning a short time later.]

Wife: Who was it, dear?

Innkeeper: A young couple looking for a room. She is expecting a child and they have traveled a long way today. I told them I had nothing left — there is **no** room at the inn.

Wife: We could let them use our room, and we could sleep in here on the floor.

Innkeeper: **[emphatically]** No! I am not giving up my bed for anyone! **[calmly]** I suppose we could let them sleep in the stable.

Wife: Are you sure? It would not be very comfortable if she is with child?

Innkeeper: Well, the girl does look terribly tired. I do not think it will be too long before the baby is born. She needs some place to rest.

Wife: I guess we could let them stay there. I will get supper on the table while you

show them to the stable. **[Innkeeper leaves; wife finishes setting table; innkeeper returns.]**

Innkeeper: I have them settled in the stable. The girl surely looked tired. She is so young! I hope she will be okay and can rest.

Wife: **[impatiently]** Well, come and eat. We cannot worry about all these people who have come to stay here. **[Both sit down at the table and begin to eat.]**

Innkeeper: I guess you are right. I have been so busy that I am almost too tired to eat. **[pause]** She really is young.

Wife: It has been a pretty rough day. Maybe we can get a good night's rest, if nothing else happens. **[They finish eating; both get up from the table.]**

Innkeeper: I want to go and check to see how things are in the stable before I go to bed.

Wife: You are so tired, you go to bed; I will go out and check on everything.

Innkeeper: Thank you! Take this leftover food to them. It sure is going to feel good to rest.

[Wife exits; innkeeper sits in chair.]

All Sing: "O Little Town of Bethlehem" (*LSB* 361).

[Wife enters.]

Innkeeper: Was everything all right?

Wife: Yes, they are comfortable. They both enjoyed the food I took to them. She really is young ... looks about the same age as our daughter, Esther.

Innkeeper: Yes, I thought the same thing. I certainly hope she is going to be alright.

[Soft music starts to play "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." There is a knock on the door.]

Innkeeper: I hope no one else is looking for a room. **[Innkeeper goes to the door offstage. Voices offstage all talk at once. Innkeeper returns.]**

Wife: Who was there? What has happened? What is all the commotion?

Innkeeper: Samuel, the shepherd boy that is a friend of Esther's, just told me that the young girl in our stable has had a baby boy. She wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in the manger. He said that there is a bright star shining right over the stable and that an angel spoke to the shepherds.

Wife: Well, invite him in. I want to hear his story.

[Innkeeper invites the boy to come in.]

Shepherd Boy: I have been out with the older shepherds learning how to care for the sheep. As we sat around the campfire, everyone was talking about how crowded the town is. All these people have come to pay their taxes. All the inns are full.

As I sat with the shepherds, I was gazing at the winter sky and the stars, which seemed so cold. They made me think of the summer stars, which seem very friendly and hang low in the sky. However, there is one star we have been watching for the last few nights — it seems to give a softer, more brilliant light than the others. I wondered about this star and talked to your daughter, Esther, about it. She had seen it, too.

Suddenly all the stars shone a thousand times more glorious than the sun bursting over the mountains at dawn. It seemed as though their glory was beyond containing. All the shepherds were talking excitedly, wondering what this meant.

Wife: Yes! Yes! Go on! Tell us what happened then.

Shepherd Boy: At once in the sky an angel appeared. I was scared. I knew it was an angel, even though I had never seen one before. The angel told us not to be afraid, and *"I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."* And then more angels came and were singing and praising God. They sang *Glory to God in the highest*.

All Sing: "Angels We Have Heard On High" (LSB 368).

Shepherd Boy: The older shepherds were still a bit uneasy because they did not know what this was all about. They did not understand what they had heard and

neither did I, but we all decided to go see what the angel told us. When we got here to Bethlehem I went into the stable with the other shepherds. There we found the baby, just as the angel had told us. We bowed down and worshiped Him. The Messiah had come, and I just had to come and tell Esther the good news!

All Sing: “Silent Night, Holy Night” (*LSB* 363).

Scripture quoted above are Luke 2:10b–12 and Luke 2:14a.

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CLEAN HOUSE, CLEAN HEART

Sketch

[Please provide: two actresses, Mary and Tammy, two copies of the sketch, a table, two chairs, and two coffee cups.]

[Setting: Two retired women who are LWML friends meet for coffee to discuss what's been on their mind.]

Mary: Hi, Tammy. I am so glad you were able to meet for coffee today. It is a beautiful day, isn't it?

Tammy: Yes, it is nice out here on the patio. I surely hope the wind doesn't pick up, though. Has the weather been windy at your house?

Mary: Goodness, yes. My garden flags have been getting a workout.

Tammy: You said you had something you wanted to discuss with me today. I bet it was not wind or garden flags.

Mary: Correct. I have this — well — problem.

Tammy: I see, what is on your mind?

Mary: Let me give you some history. When I grew up my mother cleaned everything in the house in the spring. Curtains came down and were washed, floors were waxed, furniture was polished. You get the idea.

Tammy: It sounds like a major project.

Mary: It certainly was! Spring break from school meant we had to help my mother, too. I never liked it, but I have to admit that after my bedroom was all clean and I went to bed with the smells of wax and polish and line-dried sheets and blankets — well, I **did** like that. **[Pause]** Anyway, I never did learn to enjoy cleaning, yet I **do** enjoy a clean house.

Tammy: So, what is the problem?

Mary: I find I really have a hard time motivating myself to start cleaning. I would rather do almost anything else.

Tammy: Maybe you are too hard on yourself. Every time I have been to your house, things looked pretty good to me.

Mary: That is because I never let you visit unless I know a day or two in advance. Company coming usually motivates me.

Tammy: Well, maybe you should have company over more often! **[Both women laugh]**

Mary: Maybe. And during COVID restrictions there weren't many people coming over. So now when I think about having company, I look around thinking, "It will take me days to have this place clean enough!" Then I do something else — bake, sew on a quilt, read a book, or even go for a walk. The trouble is, none of that gets the cleaning done.

Tammy: What do you think God thinks about it?

Mary: Well, I know "Cleanliness is next to Godliness" is not in the Bible. However, I think God expects us to take care of our homes — to be a good steward and all that.

Tammy: Does being a good steward mean your furniture is never dusty and there are never any dishes in the sink?

Mary: God probably does not demand **that** of me.

Tammy: Probably not. The Bible does speak of how God makes us clean on the inside, though. No matter how dusty our furniture is or how sweaty and dirty our bodies get on the outside, we can take heart that our sins have been forgiven and we have been washed clean in the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ.

Mary: Yes. God is always gracious and merciful to me — a poor, miserable housekeeper. **[Chuckles]** I should keep that in mind. Do you have any other wise practical advice for me?

Tammy: One thing that helps me is to **limit my commitments**.

Mary: That is for sure. Sometimes I make too many commitments. I get into the mindset that retirement means I have unlimited time, but that is just not true.

Tammy: The other thing is **accountability**. You said that company coming usually motivates you. Do you think having someone you could touch bases with — say once a week — would help? You could report what you got done the previous week and then maybe also say, "This is what I think I can accomplish in the coming

week." That would be like a commitment to someone other than yourself. I would be willing to be your accountability partner if you would like.

Mary: You would? That would be fantastic! Thanks a lot. You are a good friend. Thanks again for taking the time to help me. **[Short pause]** Now what was it **you** wanted to discuss?

Tammy: Well — I have a problem, too. It is similar to yours, but different. Unlike you, I am pretty comfortable with my cleaning routine. **My** problem comes with having a consistent quiet time. You know — time to pray and read Scripture every day.

Mary: What have you tried?

Tammy: Well, I know most people recommend a quiet time first thing in the morning. I am a morning person, but when I get up, my mind is buzzing with things to do that day. When I sit down to have a quiet time, I just cannot sit still or shut my mind off. I feel I am wasting time just sitting there.

Mary: Do you believe that?

Tammy: Of course not. I know that spending time with the Lord is not a waste of time. It just feels that way.

Mary: Have you tried a different time of day?

Tammy: Yes, I have tried in the evening before I go to bed. I start to pray and then I promptly fall asleep. I have thought about mid-day, but then I am usually trying to finish something — like cleaning, **[Grinning]** or my mind is on all the jobs I want to accomplish before starting supper. It just seems there is not a good time for me.

Mary: It sounds like clearing your mind of other distractions so you can focus on the Lord is the major difficulty.

Tammy: **[Pauses to consider]** I think you are right about that.

Mary: Do you have that same problem when you go to church or Bible study?

Tammy: Sometimes, but usually not as much as at home. At church or Bible study there are not as many distractions. I know what I am there for, and it is not like I can just get up and say, "I have got to go do — **[Shrugs]** whatever."

Mary: True. Do you have a place in your home you can make into a "this is where I meet with the Lord" space?

Tammy: Maybe. Do you have such a place?

Mary: I do. It is the recliner in the living room. I have my Bible, a laptop computer, a good light, my glasses, a pen and pencil, paper, and a place for my coffee cup all within reach. Since Jeff is not a morning person, I get up before he does. The living room is a comfortable and quiet place for me to meet the Lord. Some women use another room of the house — like a spare bedroom. Some sit at a desk rather than a comfy recliner. You should probably experiment to discover what works best for you.

Tammy: Yes, probably so. However, then there is the other problem of how to settle my mind as well as my body.

Mary: That can be the harder task. Some people light a candle as a visual reminder of what they are there to do. Do you keep a prayer list? Do you use a devotion book? **[suddenly remembers]** Do you know you can subscribe to get an LWML Mustard Seed devotion emailed to you each morning?

Tammy: Really? That could be a help. I have also heard some of our LWML women say that they are reading through the Bible this year — LWML has published a reading guide. However, that seems a bit much for me. I am afraid there will be too many mornings when I just say, "I do not have time to read that much today!" Then the next day I will have twice as much to read, and pretty soon I will just give up.

Mary: If you are not used to setting aside time each day, that **would** be too much. The Mustard Seed devotions only take a few minutes — five at most. That might be a better way to start.

Tammy: That is probably better than opening my Bible to a random page and poking my finger at a verse, right?

Mary: **[Laughs]** Right. **[Pause]** You know, something just occurred to me. You suggested having an accountability partner to help me with my cleaning problem. Well, I wonder if having an accountability partner to encourage you to set aside a quiet time with the Lord would be helpful.

Tammy: Are you giving me my own advice?

Mary: I am just saying ...

Tammy: I suppose it would be a good idea. I am just not sure whom I would ask.

Mary: Well, since you volunteered to be my accountability partner for cleaning, it would be simple for us to also talk about how you are doing with your quiet time in the same conversation. I would be happy to do that for you, my friend.

Tammy: Let's do it! When would work best for you? **[Both get up to leave.]**

[Both walk off stage together discussing a good time to talk.]

Clean House, Clean Heart, written by Jan Schmidt, Florissant, Colorado
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RETURN TO JESUS

Sketch

[Please provide: a table and two chairs for two co-workers hustling for their lunch break, opening lunch bags, and pulling out their food.]

Worker 1: Wow! What a morning! It just flew by. It is unbelievable how many claims we have had to process. I feel sorry for those hospitalized and their families at Christmas time.

Worker 2: Yes, it is a shame. **[Worker 1 nodding, slowly]** During the flu season so many hospitals limit the number of visitors. It is too bad so many had to spend Christmas alone.

Worker 1: Hopefully, they are now home recuperating and giving thanks to God.

Worker 2: Our Sunday School Christmas program at church was nice. They worked hard to welcome Baby Jesus and it showed. Your two children were happy to perform.

Worker 1: They did love it, and we practiced their parts at home, too. It was such a busy time. I am glad it all worked out so well.

Worker 2: After all this celebrating, our own stress level should be less now. We can get back to whatever our “new normal” is these days.

Worker 1: I don't know how you manage every morning getting five kids off to school, making breakfasts and lunches, and getting them out for the various school bus pick up times. I am a wreck and I only have two children! Trying to get my little guy to wear matching clothes some days is a battle. I wonder what some teachers must think on the days I leave it up to him. I am just thankful he has not picked out his own clothes on a school picture day!

Worker 2: Admittedly, some mornings are a trial, but often the older ones help the younger children. We have always encouraged them to help each other and that is also taught in Sunday school. I also start each day with God. Before getting out of bed I say Luther's Morning Prayer. Would you like to pray that together?

Worker 1: I'd love that.

Worker 1 and Worker 2:

I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

[*An Explanation of the Small Catechism* copyright © 2017 Concordia Publishing House; *Luther's Small Catechism* copyright © 1986 Concordia Publishing House; St. Louis, Missouri; pp. 30–31.]

Worker 2: Handing over whatever comes my way during the day, I know God will guide me. He gives me the strength I need. I also get strength from our Sunday service and Bible study. Why don't you come with me and participate in the church service while your children are in Sunday School? It is such a great start to the week. It also helps me to pray the Lord's Prayer when I'm stopped at a red light or on my breaks.

Worker 1: You are right. I have a Luther's Small Catechism at home that I will read and study. It has been so good to talk to you, guiding me to what I need to do — to return to Jesus.

Worker 2: Solace and comfort can be found in the Bible. As Jesus says in Matthew 11:28, "*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.*" Boy, this lunch time surely goes fast. It is almost time to return to work.

[Looking at the audience]

Let us pray for both patients and medical staff:

Lord, as only You can, please look upon those ailing in the hospital.
In Your mercy, grant them healing.
Give rest to the medical personnel as they return to work energized each day.
Keep them all safely in your loving care.
We ask this in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Return to Jesus, by Sue Novak, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
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WHERE DO I FIND THAT?

Sketch

[Please provide: two actors — President Jane and Vice President Marla — and two copies of the sketch.]

[Please note: The scene opens with two women, President Jane and Vice President Marla, of a group, zone, or district, sitting at a table with papers scattered, pens/pencils in their hands, and a computer or tablet.]

President Jane: So I was asking some of the ladies in our group (zone/district) to find a devotion to use for our next meeting. I couldn't believe the response I got! They looked at me as if I was crazy! I told them they didn't need to write a devotion — just find one from the LWML resources. They still looked at me like I was crazy!

[VP Marla is keeping her eyes focused on the table, not looking at the President.]

President Jane: I wasn't sure what the problem was. LWML has so many wonderful resources — devotions and Bible studies, even sketches and retreats! What is so difficult in just finding something to use? Maybe they didn't know what the topic should be? I should have helped them decide on a topic, I suppose.

[VP Marla continues to keep her head down, working away.]

President Jane: Now Marla, I know that you would have no trouble finding a devotion to use. And the rest of the board would jump at the chance to choose something. Marla, you seem awfully quiet. What's going on?

VP Marla: Well, I would love to find a devotion to use, but, umm, you know, maybe someone else would be better **[She still won't look the president in the eye.]**

President Jane: Don't be silly. You do the next devotion. You can even pick the topic to make it easier for you.

VP Marla: **[Hesitantly]** OK ... well ... umm ... I might be gone for that meeting!

President Jane: Marla! What is going on? You do know where to find LWML resources like devotions, don't you?

VP Marla: [Sighing] Actually I don't know where to look. Could you help me?

President Jane: Oh, Marla! I'm so sorry! I didn't realize that you didn't know where to look! I'll bet that was the problem the other ladies had as well when I asked them about having the devotion. I know! We can look it up right now on *lwml.org*. There are so many things to find that are so helpful. Let's start with the planner that gets put together each biennium. Let me get my computer (tablet) started.

[President Jane starts her computer or holds up her tablet, with Marla looking on.]

President Jane: All right. Here we are on *lwml.org*. Now to get to the Two-Year Planner we can click on The Word, which is to the right of the LWML logo. Look at the options we have there on the drop-down menu! We are going to want Program Resources. So, I will click on that. Look at that! The planner is at the top right so we can't miss it. Now we can click on the planner, which is called *Equipping Saints to Serve*, and it will take us to the page where we can get our own free copy to download.

VP Marla: Wow! Look at the table of contents! There are devotions, Bible studies, sketches, and more! This is great — why didn't I realize LWML had this available? I'll bet even our Lutheran school would find things to use in this planner. Or my ladies Bible study group! I think we need to make sure all our LWML women know this is available.

President Jane: You're right, Marla. Our ladies do need to know about the planner. I think we had better talk about the planner, *Equipping Saints to Serve*, and how to find it at our next meeting. So, will you lead the devotion at our next meeting?

VP Marla: I would love to, and I will let them know how easy it is to find. Also, we can brainstorm about all the others we know that would benefit from this planner. No sense in letting it sit on a website without being used!

President Jane: Great idea, Marla. I will add that to the agenda for the meeting.

[Both women start to gather their things as they then walk out ...]

VP Marla: Thanks for showing me where to find the planner, Jane.

President Jane: I just wish I had thought about showing you and the other ladies sooner. We are certainly blessed to have others share their gift of writing with us through the planner. See you Saturday at our meeting!

[The instructions on the next page can be copied and distributed to the audience.]

Where Do I Find That?, by Mary J. Smith, Goldendale, Washington
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lwml.org

To find the Two-Year Planner at *lwml.org*:

1. Go to *lwml.org*.
2. Click on The Word to get its drop-down menu.
3. On that menu, click on Program Resources.
4. On the top right side of the page you will find a link to the downloadable two-year planner. The link also appears below the Featured Devotion and Bible Study.
5. Another option is to use the search bar. Type in “planner,” which takes you to the link.

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ALL THINGS WORK OUT FOR GOOD

Advent by Candlelight Program

Advent by Candlelight programs are designed to help women keep their focus on Christ in the busy weeks of the Advent season. The program might include prayer, Scripture readings, songs, and a devotion or a sketch to help the participants reflect on the anticipated celebration of Christ coming in the flesh. The evening begins or ends with all the women singing a hymn such as “Silent Night” together by candlelight. To add a period of fun fellowship to the program, a dinner or dessert time can be included with tables decorated to create a beautiful ambience.

You will need 10 women to act each of the parts. If possible provide the characters with microphones. Props needed include a manger, a baby doll wrapped in swaddling clothes, a podium, a Bible, a Christ Candle or other large candle on a stand, possibly a crucifix, and small individual vigil type candles for each participant.

Leader: During our program, we will be using the *Lutheran Service Book (LSB)* for the opening hymn. The next four songs will be from *All God’s People Sing (AGPS)*. The remaining songs are in the *LSB*. Let’s begin by singing “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” verses 1 and 2 (*LSB* 384).

[Eve, wearing a simple black outfit, stands at the lectern.]

Eve: Welcome, dear sisters in Christ Jesus. It is Advent, a time in the church calendar year when our attention is focused on the fulfillment of God’s promise of the birth of the Christ Child. Tonight, we will celebrate how Christ arrived as promised to redeem mankind. Soon we will meet some of the women involved in the family tree of our Savior. When you look in your Bible you will find they are recorded in the books of the Old Testament and mentioned in the lineage of Joseph, as recorded in the New Testament book of Matthew. This evening it is our goal to recognize that God personally called each of them. God called them out specifically, both Jews and Gentiles. Their lives were filled with mistakes caused by impatience, sinfulness, regrets, hopelessness, discouraging circumstances, and consequences beyond their control. God’s Gospel of saving grace and mercy is evident in each of their lives. May we all recognize this same gift of grace and mercy at work in our lives this Advent season.

Leader: Let us join our hearts and voices as we sing “All Things Work Out for Good” (*AGPS* 58).

[During the song, Eve steps off stage to add accessories, such as a scarf or blouse, to identify her as Eve. As the song ends, Eve approaches the lectern.]

Eve: I am Adam’s wife, Eve. God created this world and everything in it was good. Satan, a prominent angelic being, fell from God’s grace in the heavens by presuming to be another god, one of equal stature to the true God. Satan then, in trying to be God, did not create, but began to deceive and destroy all mankind. Satan did indeed succeed in getting us to question God’s Word. Those thoughts led to actions of disobedience. These actions led to consequences beyond our control that destroyed the holiness of the oneness between God and all of humankind. For the first time in our lives, we felt shameful before our Heavenly Lord. In His love, He sought us out and initiated a plan of redemption. God proclaimed to Satan, *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel”* (Genesis 3:15). The Advent season began here, filling Satan with terror and humankind with hope.

[Eve pauses to look at the empty manger.]

Eve: Through the prophecy of the birth of the Christ Child, God promised Adam, Eve, and all mankind the most gracious gift of all, the hope of being saved from eternal separation and condemnation. God is just; there were punishments and consequences. Sin had entered the world to stay. The Lord’s gracious promise of redemption through Christ gave us all hope – hope in gifts of His forgiveness, love, and mercy. In His perfect time, God’s promise of humanity’s Savior was indeed fulfilled as prophesied in Isaiah. *Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call His name Immanuel* (Isaiah 7:14).

[Mary appears from the side. She is rocking the Christ Child in her arms and sits down beside the manger. Mary is totally immersed in the beauty of her baby, Jesus. She holds him closely.]

[Mary sweetly hums “Away in a Manger” (LSB 364 or 365) so all can hear. While Mary hums, Eve cautiously and slowly approaches them at the manger. Eve bows down on her knees in awe and worship. As Mary notices her presence, she stops and looks lovingly at Eve.]

Mary: Eve? Eve? Please, come and sit. Would you like to hold Jesus?

[Eve slowly sits down.]

Eve: Oh, yes! Yes, I would like very much to hold my Redeemer!

[Mary gently places the Christ baby into Eve's arms. The musician introduces "God Loves Me Dearly" (AGPS 109). Eve continues to adore the baby in her arms as she begins to sing along with the group.]

Leader: Join Eve and Mary as we sing "God Loves Me Dearly" (AGPS 109)

[Eve continues to adore the baby in her arms and Mary sits next to her as Sarah approaches the podium.]

Sarah: I am Abram's wife, Sarah. Join us now, as we look back and remember God's gracious faithfulness. Watch as He carefully calls out the men and women, sinful though they might be, who would create the lineage of His only begotten Son, Jesus. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. He is the Promised One, the Messiah, the Savior, and the Redeemer of all who would believe in Him. While Satan preyed on all the conceivable weaknesses of sinful human nature, the generations passed. One generation after another, Satan tried desperately to thwart God's plans for the redemption of mankind. Christ's genealogy began with Adam and Eve's son, Seth. Noah was a descendent of Seth, and many generations followed until God selected Abram.

Mary: *Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"* (Genesis 12:1–3).

Sarah: Now, I know I have a reputation for laughing in Chapter 18 when God appeared to us in the desert as three travelers and predicted I would be with child by that time next year, but did any of you ladies catch Abraham's reaction to God in Genesis 17:17? Abraham laughed too. It just seemed so impossible in human terms. In the book of Zephaniah, God's Word says: *The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; He will exult over you with loud singing* (Zephaniah 3:17).

[Sarah looks up and smiles.]

[Mary stands and takes the Christ Child from Eve. She brings Him over to Sarah at the podium. As Sarah adores and embraces Jesus the piano plays “I Love You Lord” (AGPS 129). Mary and Eve stand and signal all the ladies present to stand. Then, accompanied by the piano, Sarah leads the singing. Optionally this could be done as a round.]

Leader: You may be seated.

[Mary, Sarah, and Eve sit down around the manger as people are once again seated. Rebekah takes her place at the podium.]

Rebekah: Sarah and Abraham did give birth to a son of their own flesh and blood. When he was born, they named him Isaac, which means, “He laughs.” Isaac and I married; my name is Rebekah. Have you ever felt like Abraham and Sarah – wanting to believe and trust with all your heart, yet, thinking this is not humanly possible? I sure have. Have you ever asked God for more and more details to somehow make it seem more realistic to you? Did you ever ask God, “What are you waiting for?” Let us take the time right now to pray as David prayed by reciting together Psalm 139:1–6 and 23–24.

Spoken together: *O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it . . . Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!* (Psalm 139:1–6 and 23–24).

[As Sarah presents the child to Rebekah the piano starts to play as they are seated.]

Leader: We will now sing “Take My Life O’ Lord Renew” (AGPS 223).

[Leah takes her place at the podium.]

Leah: I am Leah, Jacob’s first wife. My father tricked him into marrying me. Jacob did not love me, no matter how many sons I bore him. He was in love with my younger sister, Rachel. You can find it all recorded in Genesis 29. God’s covenant promise continued through Jacob’s

offspring. Rachel was the apple of Jacob's eye, but God looked on me with His gracious favor and I became the mother of Judah. Judah was God's choice for continuing the lineage of the Christ Child. Genesis 49:9–10 reads *Judah is a lion's cub; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He stooped down; he crouched as a lion and as a lioness; who dares rouse him? The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.*

[The Christ Child is presented to Leah. The women around the manger welcome Leah with gentle looks and touches as she takes her seat.]

Mary: *The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Ram, and Ram the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the king. And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, (Matthew 1:1–6).*

In verses 7 through 11, Matthew continues listing the generations that passed during the period of the monarchy; NO women are named. Verses 12 through 15 occur during Israel's dark ages; again, NO women are named. Verses 16 and 17 conclude the genealogy: and *Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.*

[Tamar takes her place at the podium.]

Tamar: Matthew 1:1–16 reveals the family lineage. There God places special honor on some of the most unlikely female additions to His earthly family tree. This was not the custom; usually only the names of the many generations of fathers were recorded. I am Tamar; you can read all the details of my sad story in Genesis 38. I gave birth to twins, sired by my father-in-law, Judah. Their names are Perez and Zerah. Like Leah, I was scorned and unloved. However, God looked upon me with His favor through our son, Perez.

[The child is passed to Tamar after she sits down. Tamar's face lights with joy as she cuddles the babe in her arms.]

[Rahab takes her place at the podium.]

Rahab: I am Rahab; in my young adult years I was a harlot. I was living within the walls of the city of Jericho. When the people of Jericho first heard about the Israelites approaching, all the people of our city were filled with fear. You see, they had come to claim the lands that their God had promised them. On the day that Joshua sent two men as spies to Jericho, well, they came right to my door! Somehow, God filled me with trust in these men and their God. We protected each other from harm and death. God reveals His love and mercy to sinners like me. Even though I was not an Israelite, here I am, one of a number of Gentiles in Jesus' family tree. A-maz-ing!

[Rahab takes her seat and beams, as the Christ Child is gently passed to her. Ruth appears from the side and attempts to hold the baby before speaking. Rahab points to the podium, indicating that Ruth needs to speak first. Ruth takes her place at the podium. She makes it clear that she is anxious to hold the Christ Child.]

Ruth: I do not mean to brag ladies, but you can find my story in the book of Ruth. You will love it. Look in your Bible; it is right after the book of Judges. I am King David's great-great-grandmother. I want you to meet one of my favorite great-great-granddaughters-in-law; her name is Bathsheba.

[Ruth reaches to the side to pull Bathsheba to the podium.]

Ruth: Oh, can I hold him now?

[Rahab, bewildered from the brevity of her time to hold Jesus, begrudgingly, but gently, releases the child into Ruth's arms.]

Bathsheba: David and I began a sinful relationship. Along with punishment, God showered us with His most precious gifts of forgiveness and grace. It is the very same amazing grace that began with the promise of Jesus' birth in Genesis. **[The child is passed to her.]**

Leader: Let's sing "O Sing of Christ" (*LSB* 362).

[During the last verse, Bathsheba passes the Child to Mary. After gently caressing the Child and kissing His forehead, Mary places the Child in the manger. She stands, focusing her gaze on the Christ Candle. All the women begin to fix their gaze on the Christ candle.]

[Eve goes to the podium and opens the Bible. She reads Luke 1:26–38.]

[Mary steps forward and speaks with joyful gladness.]

Mary: The power of the Holy Spirit came upon me, just as the angel had spoken! I was found to be with Child, the Christ Child. Before Jesus’ returned to heaven, He promised us a teacher and helper. Through Baptism, the power of God’s Holy Spirit dwells in the hearts of all believers in Jesus Christ.

[As the piano begins to play, Mary takes out a candle from the manger and lights it from the flame of the Christ candle. She begins sharing the flame with the others. Some go out to share the flame with all the guests. Lights dim leaving just enough light so people are still able to read.]

Leader: We will sing three hymns “Holy Spirit, Light Divine” (*LSB* 496), “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” (*LSB* 384, verses 3–5), and “Silent Night” (*LSB* 363).

[Candles are extinguished. Lights are brightened. All stay standing.]

Leader: Join me in prayer.

Prayer: Dear heavenly Father, thank You for the gift of Your sure Word, and for reminding us this day of Your constant love, mercy, forgiveness, and saving grace. Thank You for calling out women in need of forgiveness in Jesus’ family lineage. Thank You for calling us out in our Baptism and daily through Your Word. Send Your Holy Spirit to keep us in the true faith until You call us home or come again. In Your name we pray. Amen.

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ALPHABETICAL LISTING OF ALL RESOURCES

Abiding in Christ (Bible study).....	11
Advent Joy — A — Tude (devotion).....	255
All Things Work Out For Good — Advent By Candlelight (program).....	345
An Age of Grace (Bible study).....	23
At the Innkeeper’s House (sketch).....	329
Author and Word (devotion).....	257
Candy Hearts (devotion).....	259
Chosen and Treasured (Bible study).....	31
Chosen. Treasured. Redeemed. (Bible study).....	41
Clean House, Clean Heart (sketch).....	333
Created for God’s Work (Bible study).....	49
Creating Wondrous Water Wakes (devotion).....	261
Destroying Walls (Bible study).....	61
Don’t Discard Me, God! (devotion).....	263
Family Matters — Women in Christ’s Genealogy (Bible study).....	75
Fear Not! (devotion).....	265
Fear or...? (devotion).....	267
Figuring It All Out (devotion).....	269
Guaranteed! (devotion).....	271
“Heart” Matters: A Look at Mary (Bible study).....	83
His Christmas Presence (devotion).....	273
How Do I Do This, Lord? (devotion).....	275
I Know You (devotion).....	277
Immanuel — God With Us (devotion).....	279
It Is Swell! (devotion).....	281
King of Time and Eternity (litany).....	315
Life “Out of Control” (Bible study).....	91
The Light No Darkness Can Overcome (Bible study).....	99
Living Hope in a Graveyard (Bible study).....	107
Living in Love (Bible study).....	119
Love Explained (devotion).....	283
The Oliver Special, Please! (devotion).....	285
Pleasing Thoughts and Words (litany).....	319
Rejoice in Hope (devotion).....	287
Relationship Requirements (devotion).....	289
Return to Jesus (sketch).....	339
Riding the Waves with Jesus (litany).....	321
The Season of Caregiving (devotion).....	291
Seasons (devotion).....	293
Seasons in Life (devotion).....	295
Sent to the Nations (devotion).....	297

Sowing Seeds in All Seasons of Life (devotion)	299
Steadfast in Christ (Bible study)	131
Stillness in the Seasons of Life (Bible study).....	141
Struggles and Challenges — Oh, My! (devotion).....	301
Surrender — Part 1 (Bible study).....	153
Surrender — Part 2 (Bible study).....	161
Treasured By God (Bible study).....	173
Treasured to Perfection (devotion)	305
Turning the Sailboat (Bible study).....	181
Unknown Number (devotion).....	307
We Await His Coming (Bible study).....	197
Wellspring of Life (Bible study)	205
What Am I Worth? (devotion).....	309
Where Do I Find That? (sketch)	341
Who’s Number One? (Bible study).....	217
Wind and Fire (Bible study).....	225
Women of the Bible (litany)	325
Women of the Bible — Women of Today (Bible study).....	237
Women with Jesus at the Cross and the Tomb (Bible study)	245
You are Priceless and Precious (devotion).....	311

EQUIPPING SAINTS TO SERVE

A Two Year Planner

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