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F O R G I V E N E S S

A N D

R E C O N C I L I A T I O N

Reconciliation

INTRODUCTION

One of the most crying needs of this whole, crying world is reconciliation. People need reconciliation with God, reconciliation with each other, even reconciliation within their own souls. The Bible describes Jesus' whole mission to earth as "God in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19). If we, as Christians, want to have a serious and enriching effect on the world around us, we can do no better than to become, as that same chapter calls us to be, "Ambassadors of Reconciliation."

This is a complicated subject. Reconciliation requires forgiveness, and forgiveness is sticky. Some things seem too small to need forgiveness, and other things seem too big to be forgivable. Some people seem irredeemable to our human eyes. What is reconciliation, anyway, and how do we do it?

At its simplest, to reconcile means to bring together, to bring back into balance. The word can be used of finances—to reconcile accounts means to do the math to be sure two balances (what you think you have in the bank and what the bank thinks you have in the bank, for instance) agree.

So, when we look at human reconciliation, it helps to think that what is needed is restoration of balance. One online dictionary uses terms like this: "restore friendly

relations between, cause to coexist in harmony, make or show to be compatible... bring (back) together (again), bring to terms.”

<https://www.google.com/search?q=dictionary&oq=dictionary&aqs=chrome..69i57j0l5.1375j0j3&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#dobs=reconcile>

Our words for justification and righteousness come from the same roots as our words for right angles or justified margins. To be reconciled is to be squared up, to be true—another word that has come from construction, meaning straight or level—to daily life, meaning to live with honesty and integrity.

God created a world of perfect balance—a universe made from Love, as found in the very voice of the Creator. (Throughout this series, the word Love, capitalized, will represent this unfathomable love of God, out of which and for which all was created, in which we “live and move and have our being” Acts 17:28.) Father, Son, and Holy Spirit walked in complete harmony with angels and other created beings.

Lucifer and his followers chose to deliberately wreck that balance by trying to sway things their way. I believe this caused a literal breach in the time/space/matter God created. When Adam and Eve chose to listen to the voice of Lucifer through the serpent, they tipped our earth into the void. Only God could close that breach, but in so doing, He would lose a world of humans He loved, even though there were only two of them so far.

The Son, as had been planned in the dim past we can't even imagine, chose to throw Himself across the gap, creating a way out for those who wanted to live in God's universe of Love. That way, when the breach was permanently closed and the sinful

world destroyed, only those humans who had refused reconciliation would die. This would be an unimaginable loss for God, since He loves every one of His created children, but it would save all those who chose to be saved.

Therefore, the single most important message every human needs to hear is that God loves him or her as much as if they were the only person who ever lived. God gave Himself to save that one small being. God wants to reconcile.

With you! Pass it on!

INSIDE THE STARTER KIT

Each starter kit will include

- a presentation of the subject for that night
- a set of discussion questions and suggested activities
- a short story which may be read together or sent home for each one to read
- a set of “soul food” activities for individuals to take home and do each day of the week.

Our goal is that these principles of forgiveness and reconciliation become an integral part of each Christian’s life.

The theme passage for the year is 2 Corinthians 5:17-21.

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Because of this decision we don't evaluate people by what they have or how they look. We looked at the Messiah that way once and got it all wrong, as you know. We certainly don't look at him that way anymore. Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it! All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other. God put the world square with himself through the Messiah, giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins. God has given us the task of telling everyone what he is doing. We're Christ's representatives. God uses us to persuade men and women to drop their differences and enter into God's work of making things right between them. We're speaking for Christ himself now: Become friends with God; he's already a friend with you. How? you ask. In Christ. God put the wrong on him who never did anything wrong, so we could be put right with God.

—The Message (MSG)

This passage will come up frequently, though not in every session.

You may wish to read or recite it every night.

- You could also create a song about the principles in this passage.
- If you have written a theme song for the *Week of Prayer*, you may use it all year.

NOTE:

The 24th lesson will go into “Forgiving the Unforgivable.” You may need to have counselors on hand for that night.

The 25th lesson recommends a special ceremony to invest young people as Ambassadors of Reconciliation. Be sure to read in advance and be prepared for these sessions.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Embrace of Reconciliation

Begin by reading or have someone read Luke 23:34 and Matthew 6:12.

In 1984, a man named Miroslav Volf, living in what was then communist Yugoslavia, was required to spend a year in military service, even though he was a Christian theologian. It turned out nearly his whole unit was involved in spying on him. He was a Christian, he was the son of a pastor whom the communists almost killed as an enemy of the people after World War II, and he was married to an American citizen. All these things must mean he was a spy.

So, for several long months, he was interrogated. His interrogators, especially a man he calls “Captain G.,” did their best to break down his mind and will and to get him to “confess” to being and doing things he was not and did not do. They threatened him with imprisonment or worse. They never actually tortured him physically, but he lived in the fear that they would.

Unless I admitted everything, they assured me they already knew, I was doomed. And so, it went, session after session, week after week. I was force-fed large portions of terrifying threats with an occasional dessert of false hope. Except for Captain G., who was always present, new interrogators kept coming, their ranks reaching all the way up to that of general. [The End of Memory, 2006, by Miroslav Volf, p. 5.]

The interrogations ended as abruptly as they began and Volf was set free. Free in body, that is. His mind was far from free. As a dedicated Christian, he wanted to be able to let go and forgive. He knew he had been treated better than many others who have been horribly tortured or even killed. But he felt “cold, enduring anger that even vengeance, if it were possible, would not alter” (p. 6).

Volf managed to get his memories and his thoughts of his abusers, especially Captain G., into the sidelines of his mind and keep living his life. But he knew his only freedom, not to mention mental health, lay in somehow learning to forgive. But how? He thought of all those others who had been tortured and treated worse than he had been. It would be even harder to forgive that. Yet, the One to whom Volf had dedicated his life and his heart, Jesus Christ, had been tortured to death. And He had left the example of forgiving even in that extremity.

Volf wrote the book, *The End of Memory*, he says, to explore the issue of “the *memory of wrongdoing suffered by a person who desires neither to hate nor to disregard but to love the wrongdoer*” (p. 9, italics original). The subtitle of his book is *Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* because Volf says that forgiving does not mean forgetting. But how can we “remember rightly”?

Miroslav Volf is now Dr. Volf, and he is known worldwide for his work on forgiveness and reconciliation. I once heard him speak and he used an image I can't find in the book, but it meant a lot to me. He said reconciliation is like an embrace. When you think about it, there are three steps to an embrace. First, one person opens his or her arms. Then the second person accepts the embrace, stepping into it and returning it.

Finally, the two let go and go on about their lives. If the embrace stops at any one of these steps, it is not complete.

Forgiveness is only that first step—opening arms. Jesus did that for His torturers as they nailed Him to the cross. He offered forgiveness. Then, on the cross, He was raised between earth and heaven with His arms outstretched in an offered embrace that encircled all the sinful earth—all the billions who have ever lived.

The thief on one side of Him accepted. The women at the foot of the cross accepted. It is possible that the Roman centurion accepted.

The second thief did not accept. The other soldiers and most of the priests and people did not accept.

Jesus is not on the cross now. But His sacrifice still hangs there between earth and heaven, offering His love and forgiveness.

Read or have someone read 2 Corinthians 5:17-21.

Millions, including some of the people and priests who were present that day, have accepted the offered forgiveness and completed the embrace of reconciliation with God. And the first thing every one of them did was to begin to learn to be an Ambassador of Reconciliation and pass it on. Even if no one accepts, you can open your arms.

It is not easy. And it does NOT mean just letting the sin go by and pretending it never happened, or that the person doesn't need to face consequences. This year we will begin to learn about the complicated subject of forgiveness and reconciliation by examining, first, God's plan and how Jesus accomplished it, how He opened His arms in forgiveness every day of His life on earth. Then we will consider how His followers, those early Ambassadors of Reconciliation, learned to do it with each other. In each lesson there will be ways to bring what we learn into our own daily lives, and the last lessons will also consider forgiveness and reconciliation in today's contemporary world.

God wants to reconcile—with *you!* Pass it on!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What kinds of feelings came up in you as you listened to this story?
2. Do you know people who have been imprisoned or interrogated, or even tortured?
3. Do you think they need to forgive, or even learn to love their enemies? Why or why not?
4. How can it be possible to love those who deliberately harm you?
5. What difference does it make if we do or don't?
6. Share a time in your life when it was easier or harder to forgive. Are there things you still need to forgive or be forgiven for?
7. Have you tried to maintain that difficult position of offering forgiveness when someone doesn't accept it?
8. Has someone been offering you the gift but you haven't accepted it? What is stopping you?

EXTRA RESOURCE

Dr. Volf has written many books. Some are directly about reconciliation, but even those which are not bear a strong reference to that which has so strongly influenced his life. If you look him up online, you can find a list of the books and see if you can find some of them to read. The one referenced in this lesson is *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*. Volf, Miroslav. 2006. Michigan, US and Cambridge, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

ACTIVITY

Remember, throughout this year, that the most important activities for reconciliation are to incorporate what you learn into your daily life. It will not be easy. It requires commitment, and hard work. No matter what you do, physically, mentally, or emotionally, ask the Holy Spirit to help you learn to make being an Ambassador of Reconciliation an automatic part of your life.

The Embrace that Began all Embraces

1. Working together or in teams make a poster of Jesus hugging the world.
2. Draw individual pictures to take home, of Jesus hugging you.

This Week's Story

[All stories, unless otherwise stated, are unrecognizable, fictionalized composites of characters and situations. Discuss, ponder, or write about the thoughts and feelings they raise in you. In particular, each time, ask yourself what you would have done in the characters' place, and what advice you would give them.]

This week's story is taken from *The End of Memory*, pp. 229-230.

Background: At the end of his book, Volf relates his attempts to find Captain G. and try to complete reconciliation. He never has found him, and Volf describes himself as both relieved and also dissatisfied. He decides that at least he could imagine a completed reconciliation. He shares several of his imagined attempts at reconciliation with Captain G. In the first few Volf couldn't get past his anger very well, but he kept trying, imagining different ways that such a conversation might go, if he could ever have a real one with Captain G. This is the last part of his last imagined attempt. He calls it "After the Judgment."

"Imagine," I said to Captain G. one day, "that we both find ourselves on the other side of that Divine Courtroom, the place through which all mortals must pass before they can enter God's new world, which Christian tradition has always described as a world of love. What do you think would happen then?"

“That scenario strains my atheist imagination. And besides, God wouldn’t want atheists there.”

“If you were there, you wouldn’t be an atheist. As to your atheist imagination, you don’t have to be a Christian—or even believe in God—to imagine a world of love.”

“You tell me what would happen,” he responded, unwilling to venture on the path down which I was pointing him.

“Okay. I’ll answer my own question by borrowing from Franz Kafka.”

“I’m not familiar with him,” he said.

“He’s a Jewish writer. His book *The Trial* might interest you. It is about being treated as guilty without ever being told what you are guilty of. At one point in the book Kafka distinguishes between an ‘actual acquittal’ and an ‘apparent acquittal.’ In what he calls ‘apparent acquittal,’ the court certifies the innocence of the accused, but no file is ever lost and the court forgets nothing, so the case can be resumed at any time. It is different in the case of an actual acquittal. ‘In an actual acquittal,’ writes Kafka, ‘the files relating to the case are completely discarded, not only the charge, but the trial and even the acquittal are destroyed, everything is destroyed.’”*

“So let me guess—“Captain G. said, “if I were to be counted among the eternally blessed, at the Last Judgment I would receive an ‘actual acquittal.’”

“Yes. I would too—as would everyone who ever entered the coming world of love. And in addition to the destruction of everything pertaining to the wrongdoing, the *conditions* that made the wrongdoing possible would also from that point on be nullified.”

“That seems an absolutely extraordinary vision—every wrongdoing of the past simply eradicated and all wrongdoing in the future made impossible. I can imagine that. What then?”

“To tell you the truth, I’m not sure. That’s the point at which we all need to rein in our imagination. I figure I’ll just let myself be surprised. But I think of that life as like being absorbed in a piece of arrestingly beautiful music—music that captivates my entire being and takes me on an unpredictable journey. That’s what that world of love will do for its inhabitants. It will bar the pathways through which the wounded past, a past marred by wrongdoing and suffering, enters the present, and it will set them free to explore the truth, the goodness, and the beauty of that world—each on their own and all together.”

In a tone that seemed to oscillate between incredulity and longing, he said, “I hope you are right.”

**Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Breon Mitchell (New York: Schocken books, 1998), 158.

DISCUSSION QUESTION FOR THIS STORY:

As Adventists, we do not believe all future sin will be “made impossible.” If God could make it impossible for us to sin, He could have done that to begin with. It seems that a new world in which wrongdoing was impossible would negate all Christ did to protect our freedom and teach us how to *choose* love.

What do you think?

Seven days of soul food

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind (Luke 10:27). To put it another way, **body + heart + mind = one living soul.**

We can't really divide ourselves into different sections, but it's useful to look at these different aspects of ourselves and be sure we have a well-balanced faith that uses all the avenues of a soul. Each of these starter kits will include a week's worth of food for your soul in each of these four methods of understanding and expression.

Write about each of the following in your prayer journal this week. Strive to use language of emotion, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY 1

Write your feelings about forgiveness and reconciliation. Try to be as detailed as possible and keep this writing so that you can revisit it and discover if your feelings change or grow through this year.

DAY 2

Heart: Think of a time when you needed forgiveness. What happened? Think of a time when you needed to give forgiveness. What happened? Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in and through your heart this week.

DAY 3

Mind: Think of the times from yesterday when you received or gave forgiveness. Consider how or if the two situations are connected in your mind. Is it harder to receive or to give forgiveness, or is it about the same? How does receiving forgiveness help us to give it? How does God want to work toward reconciliation in your mind this week?

DAY 4

Strength/body: Our minds and hearts live in our bodies, and unhealthy bodies make it very difficult to think clearly or even to follow God effectually. What kinds of effects might persistent mistreatment of a person's body have on their ability to think and feel, and therefore on their ability to forgive or love their enemies?

What are the ways you could use your body for God and others this week?

DAY 5

Soul/spirit: As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you so far this week, give particular attention to the image of the “embrace of reconciliation.” How does this image make use of your heart, mind, and body all at once? What is its effect on your whole self—your soul?

DAY 6

Consider your family, community, church, school, etc.—all the different “neighborhoods” you are part of. Find ways to begin to open your arms in forgiveness, and to encourage others to do so as well.

DAY 7

Use day 7 to create something beautiful that reflects what you have learned.

- Write a poem or song or story.
- Create a poster.
- Write a letter.
- Paint or draw a picture.
- Make a sign.
- Do some sidewalk chalk art or writings. Build something. Create a podcast or blog post or other social media post(s).
- Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something. Share the love!

CHAPTER TWO

God's Choice

Have you ever tried to imagine what it was like before *anything* was created? When there was just God, and nothing else? It's impossible! But kind of cool to try. So here is this one, united, unbelievably powerful Being, but this Being has, somehow, three Personalities. We call them Father, Son, and Spirit, but those are human names. Three other human names are Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit, but nothing really makes it clear to us. Take "Creator," for instance. All three created, just as all three, who are really One, do everything. We can imagine God speaking, Jesus making, and the Spirit "hovering," as it says in Genesis, but that still makes it seem like three separate Beings, which They are not. When humans try to describe it, as Moses did in Genesis, for example, we get tangled up in our words. Genesis 1:1 says "God created," and "God spoke," but then verse 26 has God saying, "Let *Us* create humans in *Our* image (emphasis supplied).

It's impossible. If human brains could comprehend God, God wouldn't be God.

Here's what we know: God lives in community as one Being with three Persons. At some point before the dawn of time, this Being made two choices. The first choice was to create other beings to love, and to give them freedom of will. There wouldn't be much point in creating people who were like robots, programmed to obey and to "love." Love isn't love if you don't choose it—if there's nothing else you *could* do. God wanted

children who could reflect back the love they were given—the love they were created from.

Just think—God created stars, planets, entire galaxies (millions of them!) with a word. He made our planet and all the land and water and plants and trees, all the kingdoms of animals and fish and insects, all the gases in the air that we all need, all the nutrients in the plants that would build animal and human bodies and bones and blood—all with just a word.

Let it be so.

That's all it took.

God could have created humans by speaking the word, too. Yet the Bible shows a beautiful story of God kneeling down to mold the soil of the earth into a human being—made of the same elements everything around him was made of, but with one extremely important addition. Into the newly molded nostrils of this being, God breathed *His own breath!*

Most of us have heard this story so often we lose sight of how astonishing it is. A spark of God's own breath is in each of us, and makes us, not just alive, but “in the image and likeness” of God.

That breath makes us self-aware in a way that even the most intelligent animals are not. It makes us capable of thinking, imagining, planning, and even creating (in our own small ways) as animals cannot. Most of all, that breath makes us capable of worship. It gives us the power to choose.

As Adam and Eve stood from the hand of their Maker, they could look up at Him and respond in love. Or they could decide to go their own ways, like Lucifer and his followers before them.

Which would it be?

And what would happen if they chose wrongly? It would tear open the very Love that space and time were made from. It would kill them.

But God had made a second choice, back in that decision before time began. Knowing that it was inevitable that, sooner or later, one of those created beings would choose to act in a way contrary to Love, God made a contingency plan. If—when—someone chose to turn away from Love toward sin and selfishness, then, in the Person of the Son, God would (somehow!) come down and be a baby human, grow up, live a perfectly loving life to show people what that looks like, then die to save that sinner and all like them; all who would accept the plan, anyway.

No human has a full conception of what actually happened on that cross at Calvary. We know a man died—in some ways, just the same as thousands of others had died. But this was not just a man. This was God, in flesh. Somehow, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Galilee, God worked to begin to close the breach that existed once humans chose to go a different way than the Love they were created for.

It is in the context of that life, death, and resurrection that Paul writes to the Corinthian church that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, and that He calls us to be His ambassadors in that effort.

Read or have someone read 2 Corinthians 5:17-21.

This will be our theme passage for this year, though we will study many other scriptures as well. If Jesus was our original Ambassador of Reconciliation, and if the Bible is all about Jesus from beginning to end, then the Bible is all about reconciliation.

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Because of this decision we don't evaluate people by what they have or how they look. We looked at the Messiah that way once and got it all wrong, as you know. We certainly don't look at him that way anymore. Now we look inside, and what we see is that anyone united with the Messiah gets a fresh start, is created new. The old life is gone; a new life burgeons! Look at it! All this comes from the God who settled the relationship between us and him, and then called us to settle our relationships with each other. God put the world square with himself through the Messiah, giving the world a fresh start by offering forgiveness of sins. God has given us the task of telling everyone what he is doing. We're Christ's representatives. God uses us to persuade men and women to drop their differences and enter into God's work of making things right between them. We're speaking for Christ himself now: Become friends with God; he's already a friend with you. How? you ask. In Christ. God put the wrong on him who never did anything wrong, so we could be put right with God.

—The Message (MSG)

This will be our theme passage for this year, though we will study many other scriptures as well. If Jesus was our original Ambassador of Reconciliation, and if the Bible is all about Jesus from beginning to end, then the Bible is all about reconciliation.

Get ready to become an ambassador!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss your ideas, opinions, and insights on God's choice to create the plan of salvation. Have you accepted it? How can you tell?
2. What does it mean to you that God created humans with His own hands, and put a spark of His own breath—even in you?
3. Do you agree that one must have choice to truly love? Why or why not?
4. How does it make you feel to look around at the world, and the universe, and think of it as being made out of the Love of God? Would that change the way you live? How?

ACTIVITY

Remember, throughout this year, that the most important activities for reconciliation are to incorporate what you learn into your daily life. It will not be easy. It requires commitment, and hard work. No matter what you do, physically, mentally, or emotionally, ask the Holy Spirit to help you learn to make being an Ambassador of Reconciliation an automatic part of your life.

Contingency Plans

In teams of two, share any goal you have going right now.

Tell your teammate what you hope to accomplish. It can be a school or work goal, a personal goal, anything you like.

- Now ask each other, “What if that doesn’t happen as you hope?”
- What will you do? What kind of contingency plan can you make now?
- How will that help your planning and your attitude as you work toward your goal?”

Consider the stakes—what will be lost if you don’t meet your goal? Goals vary widely in importance and impact. Some of your goals are more important than others. Consider your goals in the light of God’s goal to create beings to love, and your contingency plans in the light of God’s immeasurably great contingency plan to save us.

This Week's Story

[All stories, unless otherwise stated, are unrecognizable, fictionalized composites of characters and situations. Discuss, ponder, or write about the thoughts and feelings they raise in you. In particular, each time, ask yourself what you would have done in the characters' place, and what advice you would give them.]

Josh didn't mean to be a bad person. He just wanted to be liked. To feel important. He found himself drawn to a young man in his neighborhood who seemed powerful and important. Others, especially other young men, seemed to look up to this Peter. Josh began to hang around near Peter, hoping to be noticed, hoping to become someone important, too.

When Peter goaded the boys around him into playing some pranks on unsuspecting people, Josh went along. He told himself the pranks were harmless. Nobody got hurt, and if some property were a little damaged, it wasn't that bad.

But over time, the pranks became petty theft, then robbery, then armed robbery. Josh began to have to work harder to silence the voice of his conscience. By now, he was one of Peter's trusted confidants, and he couldn't seem to turn away from that.

Josh first went to jail when he was 19. Again at 22, and by 24 he had killed someone. He knew he could go to prison. But somehow, he didn't

get caught. The others laughed and congratulated him, and Josh laughed, too. He tried to ignore how sick he felt inside. He began drinking more and more, to make the bad dreams go away, the ones where he saw the face of the man he'd shot, begging him for mercy.

Somehow, Josh happened to be hanging around when a street preacher was telling the story of Jesus' crucifixion. He meant to walk on, but he didn't. There was something about the face of the preacher.

Going closer, but trying to stay out of sight, Josh realized the kind of power and magnetism he had found in Peter was far stronger in this anonymous preacher. His eyes glowed when he looked at his listeners, as if he truly cared for each one of them. Josh knew in his heart that Peter didn't care for him like that.

Well, probably this guy didn't, either. He was just faking it.

But the story was interesting. Josh couldn't believe a Man would ask God to forgive people who were busy nailing Him to a cross. Why would anyone do that?

Then the preacher reached the point where there were two thieves crucified on each side of Jesus. One made fun of Jesus and cursed him. Josh had a kind of sick feeling in his stomach, just like the one he had when he thought about the man he'd killed. Some part of him knew he'd be the one to make fun of Jesus, too, if he were nailed on a cross next to Him.

He tried again to walk on, but the voice of the preacher changed as he told of the other thief. “We deserve everything we’re getting, but this Man is innocent! Stop cursing Him!”

What Josh had been fearing (for some reason he couldn’t quite understand) happened—the preacher’s eyes found his. Josh couldn’t look away.

“The thief turned his head toward the silent Man on the center cross and gasped for breath. ‘Lord,’ he managed to say, ‘remember me when You come into Your kingdom.’ Can you imagine?” the preacher asked. He seemed to be talking directly to Josh. Josh couldn’t move, couldn’t look away. “How could this dying thief possibly believe that the dying Man next to him was going to have a kingdom? That’s the Spirit of God at work. The Holy Spirit was whispering to both the thieves, trying to get them to turn to God before it was too late. One refused. But this one didn’t. He turned, and he believed. And when Jesus looked back at him, blinking blood from His loving eyes, the thief knew that even he, with all the evil he had done—even he was forgiven.” Josh couldn’t breathe as the preacher said slowly and clearly, “Jesus told him, ‘Son, I promise, you’ll be with Me in paradise.’ And even though he had hours of torment ahead of him still, longer than Jesus, in fact, the thief could die in peace, knowing he was forgiven and saved.”

There was a moment of silence. Josh and the preacher stared at each other, and Josh thought the preacher was staring right into his heart. What was this feeling he had? Could it be the Holy Spirit the preacher had spoken of? Was it possible that Josh could be forgiven? Healed? Saved from his own worst self?

And...could he find here the sense of importance and belonging he had been seeking in his gang?

Josh felt the first tears coming down his cheeks, and he did not turn away.

Seven days of soul food

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind (Luke 10:27). To put it another way, **body + heart + mind = one living soul.**

We can't really divide ourselves into different sections, but it's useful to look at these different aspects of ourselves and be sure we have a well-balanced faith that uses all the avenues of a soul. Each of these starter kits will include a week's worth of food for your soul in each of these four methods of understanding and expression.

Write about each of the following in your prayer journal this week. Strive to use language of emotion, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY 1

Write your feelings about God's choice to create you and place a spark of His own breath within you. What do you think of His contingency plan to save you from the break we humans have all made in the Love from which God created the universe?

DAY 2

Heart: Did you find feelings rising in you as you listened to the stories of God's plans and of Josh? What were they? Do you

identify with God's desire to have others to love? Do you identify with Josh's desire to be loved and seen as important? How about with his mistaken methods in seeking his desires? What did Josh really need? How does God answer these desires in your life? Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in and through your heart this week.

DAY 3

Mind: What do you think of what you learned this week? Did you find principles you can put to work in your own life? Are there ways you can share what you think with others and find out what they think? How does God want to work toward reconciliation in your mind this week?

DAY 4

Strength/body: Consider how God created your body. Our bodies today are far removed from the perfect ones He intended us to have, but there are still many wonders. What is your favorite physical ability? Have you thanked God for it? Are there ways you could improve your faith by improving your health? What are the ways you could use your body for God and others this week?

DAY 5

Soul/spirit: As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you so far this week, you may find that your soul feels more whole and settled. Consider those principles which

you have not addressed in heart, mind, or body, and ponder how they affect your whole self—your soul.

DAY 6

Consider your family, community, church, school, etc.—all the different “neighborhoods” you are part of. Whenever and wherever you see evidence of forgiveness and reconciliation at work, make a note of it, and mention it if it is practical to do so.

DAY 7

Use day 7 to create something beautiful that reflects what you have learned.

- Write a poem or song or story.
- Create a poster.
- Write a letter.
- Paint or draw a picture.
- Make a sign.
- Do some sidewalk chalk art or writings. Build something. Create a podcast or blog post or other social media post(s).
- Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something. Share the love!

CHAPTER THREE

Jesus' Boyhood: Gentle, but Firm

Begin by asking someone to read Romans 12:14-18. Make a special point of verse 18. If you like, begin by asking for a few ideas on what it means.

When the fullness of time finally came, Jesus arrived on this earth amidst much fanfare. An angel—not just any angel, but Gabriel himself, covering cherub to God—announced His birth to Mary. Signs accompanied Mary's meeting with Elizabeth, miraculously pregnant with John the Baptist. Gabriel came again to tell Joseph not to be afraid to marry his fiancée. Circumstances were arranged so that the Baby would be born in Bethlehem as prophesied, far from His parents' hometown. Heaven emptied as thousands of angels sang the holy birth to shepherds on a hillside. And Gabriel intervened once again to get the little family safely away from Herod's rage.

Then...all the music stopped. Mary and Joseph cared for their Baby as they would any other baby, feeding, bathing, clothing, teaching, loving. When He was around three years old, they went back to Nazareth, and He grew up there, like other children, playing, learning, praying (more than other children), and coming to realize His unique role in the world—entirely unlike other children!

It was those other children (and some adults, too) who began to make His life difficult.

I am certain most children, especially small ones, or ones whose lives were difficult in some way such as sickness, disability, or poverty, loved Jesus. But many, including His own brothers, made fun of Him. He didn't like some of the games some of them liked. He didn't want to play pranks on people; He didn't think it was funny. He didn't want to waste time or get away with doing less than His best when given chores to do. He didn't want to run away entirely from the work His family needed Him to do. And He *definitely did not* like tormenting animals or small children, jeering at beggars, blind people, or lame people, or making fun of *anyone*. In fact, He put a stop to that when He saw it.

He did like to take time off when He could, hiking into the peaceful hills, or sitting beside water and praying. He liked to sing, especially praises to God. He probably began apprenticing with Joseph when He was quite young, and liked making things, doing His best to make His wooden items both practical and beautiful. I am sure He spent extra time sanding rough edges, and was careful to make joints straight and even. No doubt He invited other children to hike or sing or pray with Him, and perhaps, sometimes, to work with Him as well.

Mrs. White says, "As Jesus worked in childhood and youth, mind and body were developed. He did not use His physical powers recklessly, but in such a way as to keep them in health, that He might do the best work in every line. He was not willing to be defective, even in the handling of tools.... The approval of God rests with loving assurance upon children and youth who cheerfully take their part in the duties of the household..." DA 72.

But she also says His brothers were hard to live with. For one thing, as He grew older, and perhaps especially after He came back from His first visit to the Temple at twelve, the Pharisees began to try to make Him be just like them. By this time Judaism had been adding requirement to requirement for hundreds of years, adding human tradition to God's law, and the Pharisees wanted Jesus to follow all of these. He obeyed God's law with peace and joy, but He refused to follow added human details. Jesus' brothers agreed with the Pharisees. "They insisted that the traditions must be heeded, as if they were the requirements of God. They even regarded the precepts of men more highly than the word of God, and they were greatly annoyed at the clear penetration of Jesus in distinguishing between the false and the true" (*ibid*, p. 86).

There is a very interesting statement here, and it speaks to our goal in learning about reconciliation. "In every gentle and submissive way, Jesus tried to please those with whom He came in contact" (*ibid*, p. 85).

In other words, Jesus lived the values of forgiveness and reconciliation, not getting angry or quarreling even with those He knew were straying from God's plan. Sometimes when we try to live like that, we go too far and end up either going along with things we know are not right or becoming "doormats" for others to push around. After all, there was nothing *wrong* with the Pharisees' precise rituals for washing hands, right? So why not just go along to get along?

But more follows that statement about Jesus' gentleness and desire to please. "Because He was so gentle and unobtrusive, the scribes and elders supposed that He would be easily influenced by their teaching."

They supposed incorrectly!

“They urged Him to receive the maxims and traditions that had been handed down from the ancient rabbis, but He asked for their authority in Holy Writ.....Jesus seemed to know the Scriptures from beginning to end, and He presented them in their true import. The rabbis were ashamed to be instructed by a child. They claimed that it was their office to explain the Scriptures, and that it was His place to accept their interpretation” (*ibid.*, p. 85).

Jesus was the same way with His brothers. He loved them and wanted to be at peace with them. He did things with them when He could and invited them to do things with Him. But He would not compromise principle.

Our first lesson in reconciliation, then, from the Master of Reconciliation whose whole purpose was to reconcile the world to God, is that even as young people, while we want to be at peace with others as far as it depends on us, we must also gently, kindly, but firmly hold true to principle.

Sometimes that is easier said than done, but like Jesus, we have the Holy Spirit at our side to help. Don't forget to ask!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss Romans 12:18, sharing what you thought it meant at the beginning of the evening and whether your ideas have changed or broadened now.
2. What are some of the things that make it difficult to live in peace with people who refuse to follow God and are not interested in the same things you are?
3. Do you have friends or family who are hard to get along with? What kinds of counsel can you give and receive here in your discussion group to help you be gentle, hoping for reconciliation, but firm, refusing to compromise principle?
4. “Compromise” is not a bad word. There are times when it is very helpful and healthy. Name some of those times. List some things you will compromise on and some things you won’t.
5. Have you known adult church leaders who, like the Pharisees, said their job is to interpret Scripture and yours is to hear and obey? How can you respectfully confront that attitude, and when should you confront or refrain?

ACTIVITY

Remember, throughout this year, that the most important activities for reconciliation are to incorporate what you learn into your daily life. It will not be easy. It requires commitment, and hard work. No matter what you do, physically, mentally, or emotionally, ask the Holy Spirit to help you learn to make being an Ambassador of Reconciliation an automatic part of your life.

Put the following role play situations on cards or pieces of paper and pass them out to pairs.

- Allow 3 minutes to act them out, then 3 more to discuss what they learn.
- If your group is small enough, you could come back together and discuss as a group. It would be even better if your young people are willing to share real situations of peer pressure that they meet and share insights with each other about how to handle them. Notice that all situations say “a friend.” Would the peer pressure be different if it weren’t a friend? If so, how?

SCENARIO

1. A friend wants you to do an activity that you would rather not do on Sabbath.
2. A friend wants you to join in an unkind prank in your neighborhood.
3. A friend laughs at someone in the street who is walking awkwardly and may be either intoxicated or physically challenged.

4. An adult order you to do something you know is wrong. (You can vary your responses by deciding if this is someone you love and respect, someone in authority over you, or just a random adult you don't know.)
5. A friend tries to get you to take "just one puff" of a cigarette.
6. A friend offers you drugs.
7. A friend gets pushy, trying to force you to do drugs.
8. A boyfriend or girlfriend gets pushy about sex.
9. A friend shows you a way to cheat your employer and not get caught.
10. A friend wants you to cheat on a test.

This Week's Story

[All stories, unless otherwise stated, are unrecognizable composites of characters and situations. Discuss, ponder, or write about the thoughts and feelings they raise in you. In particular, each time, ask yourself what you would have done in the characters' place, and what advice you would give them.]

Jogging through the park, Maria barely noticed the sunshine and singing birds. She dodged other walkers and runners automatically but didn't really see them. She was thinking hard, and her thoughts weren't happy ones. A bike flashed by her from behind, its bell ringing and its rider calling, "Hey, look out, will you?"

Maria jumped aside and became aware of her surroundings. "Sorry!" she called after the biker. She bent over, her hands on her knees, panting. She must have started running faster than she'd realized.

Straightening, Maria noticed a figure slumped on a park bench. She squinted against the sunshine. Wasn't that--? "Hey, Jacqui!" She ran over to the bench. "What's wrong?"

Jacqui raised her face. It was wet with tears and her eyes were red. "It's nothing."

Maria sat down beside Jacqui. "It's obviously not nothing!" She put an arm around her friend's shoulders. "You can tell me."

Jacqui blew her nose and wiped her eyes. "I'm so stupid!"

“Hey, that’s my friend you’re calling names!” Maria said. “Remember, we promised each other not to put ourselves down anymore.”

“I know, but this time I really am,” Jacqui insisted.

“Maybe you *did* something stupid,” Maria said, “but that doesn’t make *you* stupid. Come on, tell me about it.”

Jacqui sighed. “You know that party last night? You were smart not to go! I did, and...” She hung her head, clearly having trouble saying the words. “They wanted me to just try some pills. I said no, but they kept on pushing me. I said God didn’t want any of us to use that stuff. They said I thought I was better than everyone else and wanted to be a saint, and then they all started chanting, ‘Saint Jacqui, Saint Jacqui!’ Then...” Jacqui hesitated again. “Joe said—Joe said—well, he said Jesus lived among the real people, and ate with them and stuff, and Jesus never got self-righteous around others and wouldn’t judge things without knowing for sure what He was talking about. Maria, for a minute, I really thought he might be right! I didn’t want to be preachy or put them down and I thought maybe I should—you know, live where they live...” Jacqui put her face in her hands. “I’m so stupid!” she wailed, crying again.

Maria put both her arms around her friend. “Jacqui, you are *not* stupid! One thing you can know for sure that Jesus would not do is call you stupid! To tell you the truth, I’m tempted to call Joe stupid! I’m really mad at him, but Jesus loves him, too, and I know He wouldn’t call him stupid. So, you tried the pills?”

“Just one. It was horrible! I got sick and threw it up.”

“Well, that’s a good thing, anyway.” Maria thought for a minute. “Listen, can I tell you something?”

Jacqui looked up, forgetting her own troubles for a minute. “Of course!” She wiped her face again.

It was Maria’s turn to look down at her lap. “I was running just now, and I just about caused a bike wreck because I was feeling so guilty. Last night, when I didn’t go to the party, I went out with Marcus. And he—well, we—”

Jacqui’s mouth opened. “You didn’t!”

“No, no!” Maria said hurriedly. “But, well, we went farther than we should have. I feel pretty bad today. And I know what you mean about feeling stupid, too.”

Jacqui shook her head. “Remember what Mrs. King told us—sex is a powerful thing that God made, and it has power over us, especially at this age, so we—”

“I know, I know, we shouldn’t put ourselves in positions where it can get a hold on us.”

Both girls were silent for a moment, and then in unison, both said, “If only you’d been there—” and stopped and laughed.

“I have an idea!” said Mara. “Couldn’t we help each other, really? Even if we aren’t always together? If we know the other is praying for us to stay strong—”

“—and if we don’t go to parties where there are drugs,” put in Jacqui.

“—and we don’t go to lonely places with our boyfriends!” added Maria.

“I’ll bet we could. Let’s make a pact.”

“Yes! And while we’re at it, let’s pray for forgiveness.”

After they prayed together, the girls were quiet for a few minutes. Then Maria said, “I have to ask Marcus to forgive me, too, both for what I did and for yelling at him afterwards, blaming him for the whole thing.”

“Yeah, and I have to talk to Joe, and the other kids. I do want to be their friend. I do want to do things with them when I can. How will they ever learn better ways to have fun if someone doesn’t show them? Do you suppose they would come to Youth Group? Maybe on an activity night?”

Seven days of soul food

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind (Luke 10:27). To put it another way, **body + heart + mind = one living soul.**

We can't really divide ourselves into different sections, but it's useful to look at these different aspects of ourselves and be sure we have a well-balanced faith that uses all the avenues of a soul. Each of these starter kits will include a week's worth of food for your soul in each of these four methods of understanding and expression.

Write about each of the following in your prayer journal this week.

Strive to use language of emotion, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY 1

Write your feelings about this week's lesson. What relationship do you have with your siblings, if you have any, or with your close friends? What kinds of peer pressure do you have trouble with?

DAY 2

Heart: The fact is that God created us to long for connection with each other, so there's actually a positive side to peer pressure. You can be encouraged to do good things by Christian friends, just as Hebrews 10:24 says. When others are trying to pressure you to do wrong, try to figure out if there's a way you can connect with them while refusing their sin. But if you're in danger, just leave! Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in and through your heart this week.

DAY 3

Mind: What do you think of what you learned this week? Did you find principles you can put to work in your own life? Are there ways you can share what you think with others and find out what they think? How does God want to work toward reconciliation in your mind this week?

DAY 4

Strength/body: Maria had the right idea, going out jogging while she considered her mistakes and worries. How can your physical health affect your ability to stand against peer pressure? Are there ways you could improve your spiritual strength by improving your physical strength? What are the ways you could use your body for God and others this week?

DAY 5

Soul/spirit: As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you so far this week, you may find that your soul feels more whole and settled. Consider those principles which you have not addressed in heart, mind, or body, and ponder how they affect your whole self—your soul.

DAY 6

Consider your family, community, church, school, etc.—all the different “neighborhoods” you are part of. Find ways to walk the sensitive line between being connected, in community with others, urging them to be part of God’s community, without falling to the false “unity” that the devil wants you to mistake for real community.

DAY 7

Use day 7 to create something beautiful that reflects what you have learned.

- Write a poem or song or story.
- Create a poster.
- Write a letter.
- Paint or draw a picture.
- Make a sign.
- Do some sidewalk chalk art or writings. Build something. Create a podcast or blog post or other social media post(s).
- Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something. Share the love!

CHAPTER FOUR

A Well of Reconciliation

Begin by asking someone to read John 4:3-30; 39-42. Have everyone keep their Bibles open and follow along as we go through the story; not all details will be included in this telling and it will be good that they are reminded of all those details in the Bible.

Jesus had been teaching and healing for a while, and He was gaining more followers than John the Baptist. This was exactly the way it should be; John had said from the beginning that he was here to prepare the way for the true Messiah, and in John 3:30 he had said in so many words, “He must increase and I must decrease.” The Pharisees hadn’t been in favor of John’s ministry anyway, so it’s hard to understand why they cared that Jesus’ disciples were now baptizing more than John, but apparently, they put enough pressure on Jesus that He left Judea for Galilee for a while,

But he also had another purpose. While He was here on earth, Jesus was in connection with God the same way we are in connection with God, so we don’t know for sure if

He knew in advance that He would meet the woman at the well. Sometimes it's clear He knew things in advance, but sometimes perhaps God set up "divine appointments" for Him as He does for us.

At any rate, there they were, Jesus and His disciples, walking—around 100 kilometers!—from Judea to Sychar. No wonder Jesus was tired! His disciples had gone to buy food, and Jesus sat by the well, resting. When He saw a woman coming, in the heat of the day, alone, to get water, He knew His divine appointment had arrived.

This lonely woman needed reconciliation in the worst way. She had been cast aside by five men, one after the other—we have no way of knowing how many years that had been going on. She was living with one now, most likely because it was the only way she could be supported other than begging or becoming a prostitute. She may or may not have loved this man. She was estranged from the other villagers, from herself, and from God.

Did Jesus preach? Did He scold? No. He asked her for a favor.

One of the most important facets of human life is the need to be needed. In fact, in that society and time, when a woman was only valued for the work she could do in the family and to bear children, this woman may not have had her value and abilities honored at all. To have someone ask her for a favor might have felt like an honor.

She was certainly surprised. Men didn't speak to women in public. There was no one around at the moment, but the fact that He was a Jew made it even more surprising. "You, a Jewish man, are asking me, a Samaritan woman, for water?!"

In a desert land, as some of you may know, water is the one thing no one can ever refuse another.

But now that she had opened a dialogue, Jesus could get into the subject He had on His heart, which was her spiritual welfare. “If you knew who I was, you’d have asked Me for water.”

Imagine the look on her face. “You don’t have a bucket or even a dipper. How are you going to get this water?”

Jesus must have smiled. “Actually, My water will keep you from ever getting thirsty again! It will become a spring in your heart, flowing to eternal life!”

She surely could figure out by now that He was speaking figuratively, but she said, “That sounds good—I’d like some of that! No more walking out here to draw water and carry it home!”

In her society, it was not surprising to her that the Man asked her to bring her husband before He told her more. She probably assumed no great gift would be given to a woman alone—she wasn’t important enough. But that’s not where Jesus was going with His request. By talking with her, gaining her trust, and then touching gently on the topic He knew was a sore spot in her heart, Jesus got her to open up to Him. She admitted that she wasn’t married (a great shame in those days) and He told her He knew all about it.

What must that nameless woman have felt when this strange Man, talking with her right out in public, offering her a gift that would somehow lead to eternal life, said all

those things to her but still looked at her with love, as if she mattered? As if she was important!

She said eagerly, “I can tell you are a prophet!” And she asked a question of vital importance to Samaritans. Jews had always looked on them with disgust. They were the descendants of those poor people who stayed in the land when the Israelites were carried away and they also intermarried both with northern tribes and with other local ethnicities, so strict Jews considered them mongrels and not quite human. But those who remained behind had held onto their faith, too, and the Samaritans worshiped not at Jerusalem (Mt. Zion) but at Mt. Gerazim. Here was her chance to get a real Prophet to settle the question once and for all!

She must have been surprised when Jesus said neither mountain mattered, what mattered was the heart. “The days are coming, and are here already, when true worshipers will worship in spirit and in truth.”

The woman trembled. “I know there’s a Messiah coming, who will teach us all about it...”

And Jesus said something He was never recorded as saying directly to anyone else: “I am He.”

By this time, the disciples were nearing. The woman, her heart pounding, turned and raced away to the town and brought a crowd of villagers back with her. Unlike Judea, which argued with Jesus at every turn, these people begged Him to stay. He did, and they listened. It must have been balm to His soul, since so many Jews did not!

There are several layers of reconciliation here: the woman was made more whole within herself, she was brought closer to God through Jesus, she was reconciled with the townspeople, and then they were reconciled with God!

All because the Messiah walked 100 km., sat on a well that was a symbol of the oneness of Jewish and Samaritan roots, and asked a lonely woman for a drink.

(The funny part is, we don't even know whether He ever got that drink or not!)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you think Jesus' heart responded when He first saw the woman of Sychar coming toward the well?
2. What difference do you think it would make if we began relationships with those who are or may be in trouble by asking them for help? If we saw others as people we can learn from, and not just as people we can teach, what would that do for society?
3. Why do you think Jews and Samaritans argued over something as basic as which mountain was the "right one" to worship on? What kinds of issues were they avoiding by focusing on this? Can you think of opposing groups or religions today that do the same kind of thing?
4. Trace the reconciliation going on in this story. What facts in the Bible show you reconciliation going on within the woman, with God, or with the community? How do you think life in Sychar changed after this experience?

Here is an interesting note about today’s Samaritans and their history, taken from Wikipedia’s article, “Samaritans.” <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samaritans>

The Samaritans are adherents of Samaritanism, a religion closely related to Judaism. Samaritans believe that their worship, which is based on the Samaritan Pentateuch, is the true religion of the ancient Israelites from before the Babylonian captivity, preserved by those who remained in the Land of Israel, as opposed to Judaism, which they see as a related but altered and amended religion, brought back by those returning from the Babylonian Captivity. The Samaritans believe that Mount Gerizim was the original Holy Place of Israel from the time that [Joshua](#) conquered Canaan. The major issue between Jews and Samaritans has always been the location of the Chosen Place to worship God: The Temple Mount of Moriah in Jerusalem according to the Jewish faith or Mount Gerizim according to the Samaritan faith.

ACTIVITY

Remember, throughout this year, that the most important activities for reconciliation are to incorporate what you learn into your daily life. It will not be easy. It requires commitment, and hard work. No matter what you do, physically, mentally, or emotionally, ask the Holy Spirit to help you learn to make being an Ambassador of Reconciliation an automatic part of your life.

The Gossip Game

This woman's life, like many others, was made miserable by gossip and judgmentalism. She may have moved from man to man because she really was promiscuous, or she may have done what she did only to survive. Would either of these things make a difference to Jesus' love for her?

This game works even better with large groups than small ones. If you can all get into a circle, do so, but if not, just pass the word down the rows. The leader will whisper a sentence into the ear of the first person, who will whisper it into the ear of the next one, and so on. When it reaches the end of the room, the last person stands up and repeats what he or she heard. Then the leader will tell the group what was really said first. You will be astonished how it's changed, even when people did their best to pass on exactly what they heard.

This is funny in a game, but not funny in life. Discuss the way stories do this in real life, in social media, or even in the news. How can we prevent our facts from becoming twisted? How can we keep from judging people, period?

This Week's Story

[All stories, unless otherwise stated, are unrecognizable, fictionalized composites of characters and situations. Discuss, ponder, or write about the thoughts and feelings they raise in you. In particular, each time, ask yourself what you would have done in the characters' place, and what advice you would give them.]

This week's story is completely factual. Names and details have been changed.

Maggie had always wanted a big family, and she got one. In fact, she became pregnant 11 times in 9 years, although she and her husband tried all kinds of birth control methods. Her health suffered, but worse than that, her heart suffered. Five times the pregnancies ended in miscarriage. Five times, Maggie went through the physical pain of that and five times she grieved the loss of a baby she wanted to love.

Worse yet, one baby made it all the way to seven months and then was born too soon to live. Maggie gave the baby a name, made him tiny clothes to be buried in, and cried beside a tiny casket the size of a bassinette.

Five children lived. One was ill his whole life, but all were beloved.

Then Maggie's husband, who had never been true to her, left.

Now she was a single mother of five children, one of whom required constant care and much hospitalization. The family could only manage this because of a charity fund. Maggie couldn't drive because her eyesight was so poor that glasses could not give her strong enough vision to get a license. So, she walked 8 miles one way to get to the job she found. Her oldest, a daughter, stayed home from school to take care of the rest of the children.

They moved many times, trying to find places that were big enough for all of them, but which they could afford on the pittance Maggie could make. Once, they moved hundreds of miles because the father had said he wanted them back, but then he left again. Now they were alone in the slums of an unfamiliar city.

Through all this heartache, Maggie clung to her strong faith. She *knew* God loved her, loved her children, loved even her unfaithful husband. She knew He had a plan and was taking care of them. She went about her home singing songs she made up, or scripture passages she set to music. She was the “mother away from mother” for all the kids in whatever neighborhood she lived in. Because of all this, she kept her health and her youthful looks. Little did she know the trouble that would cause her.

Thanks to help from their church, the children were offered the opportunity to attend church school. For a while, they rode many miles with a friend, but then Maggie found a house right in the neighborhood of the academy and elementary school. It was one of the nicest houses they'd lived in. Maggie was now making and selling crafts to help ends

meet. The oldest daughter was working 30 hours a week to stay in academy, all while carrying a full class load. Now she would be able to save money by living at home instead of the dorm.

She brought dorm friends home to eat with the family. As always, Maggie became a mother to them. Their mothers were miles away, and it was lovely to have an understanding ear or a shoulder to cry on, and to join in family worship and listen to Maggie's songs. Maggie even made pretty dresses for those girls who couldn't afford to buy dresses for the school's special activities.

They had lived in the new house for some months when the landlady came to the door, angry. "Where is your mother?" she demanded of Maggie.

Maggie was used to being thought younger than she was. She smiled and said patiently, "I am the mother of this house."

"Don't think you can lie to me, young lady!" raged the landlady. "I've been hearing stories about this place—a bunch of kids in and out all the time!"

Maggie tried to remain calm. "My five children live here, and sometimes bring their school friends home—"

The landlady would not listen. "I never would have rented this place to you if I'd known you didn't have an adult with you!"

"Do you want to see my birth certificate?"

But the woman simply refused to hear any other facts than the ones she had decided, from hearsay, were true. She evicted the family. Possibly Maggie could have gone to the law, but she wasn't that kind of person. She found another place and her family moved again.

God keeps count. God knows the trials Maggie and her family faced. God knows the truth about the landlady, who was in dire need of reconciliation from somewhere. Perhaps she later repented and became a loving person. Perhaps she and Maggie will meet in heaven.

Be careful what you believe—and what you repeat. People's lives may depend on the truth.

Seven days of soul food

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind (Luke 10:27). To put it another way, **body + heart + mind = one living soul.**

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wrong, try to figure out if there's a way you can connect with them while refusing their sin. But if you're in danger, just leave! Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in and through your heart this week.

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Strength/body: Maria had the right idea, going out jogging while she considered her mistakes and worries. How can your physical health affect your ability to stand against peer pressure? Are there ways you could improve your spiritual strength by improving your physical strength? What are the ways you could use your body for God and others this week?

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- Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something. Share the love!

CHAPTER 5

Shame and Forgiveness

Begin by asking someone to read John 8:1-11. *Ask the youth to keep their Bibles open to this passage.*

Imagine the feelings of this terrified woman as she is thrown at the feet of Jesus, caught in the act of sin. She probably has a whole tangle of mixed feelings—anger, guilt, pain, resentment (since Mrs. White says it was these very men who led her into sin to create a trap for Jesus), shame (because she did choose to do what they tried to get her to do), but most of all, fear. Stomach-clenching, heart-stopping knowledge that she was about to die. Have you ever been caught in the act of doing something you were ashamed of? Then you can relate, at least a little.

Try to put yourself in her place as she cowers, right in the middle of the court of the Temple itself. It is the Feast of Booths, one of the high holidays of the year, and there are crowds of people, mostly men, drawing near as people do when something exciting or unusual happens.

Imagine if you heard the hard, accusing voices of the church leaders telling Jesus that *you* were caught red-handed—guilty! How might you feel in the silence that follows?

Do you peek through your hands, covering your face, and see Jesus writing on the ground? Do you, like the watchers, wonder what He is writing?

Now you hear Him say, “Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone.” Despairing, trying not to cry out your anguish and horror, you fold your arms over your head, waiting for the first stone to hit your body, cringing from the bruises...and slow, agonizing death...that will follow.

You know you are guilty. You deserve it.

But still the silence stretches. Feeling sick, you wish it were over quickly. Gasping for breath, tears streaking your face, you wait through what seems like an hour, but can only be moments. Finally, you hear Jesus ask, “Where are your accusers?”

Hesitantly peering through your hands, then moving your arms from over your head, you stare around in stunned bewilderment. They’re gone? They’re all gone! The crowd is still gathered, gazing in curiosity, but those church leaders who accused you have disappeared.

The gentleness in Jesus’ voice draws your eyes to Him. “Is there no one left to condemn you?”

Somehow, you find a shaky voice. “N-no one, Lord.”

Jesus’ eyes hold yours. “I do not condemn you, either. Go, and sin no more.”

It's hard to imagine such a powerful roller-coaster of emotions. From shame, guilt, and terror to confusion and probably a numb sense of unreality, to growing shock, wonder, and finally, joy. Can you imagine her face?

In *The Desire of Ages*, on page 462, Ellen White tells us that the woman “cast herself at the feet of Jesus, sobbing out her grateful love, and with bitter tears confessing her sins.” She also says that this woman became “one of His most steadfast followers.”

This story is even more important if you understand its context. In John 6 and 7, Jesus had been claiming to be the bread of life that comes down from heaven. He had claimed to be equal with God. John 7:43-44 says that there was a division because of Him, some more determined than ever to follow Him, and some turning away—some even wanting to kill Him. In that watershed moment of His ministry, what a balm it must have been to Jesus to find this faithful follower, weak though she might be!

Then, the very next thing, Jesus keeps right on teaching in the Temple courts. What does He say? **Have someone read John 8:12-16.** Jesus is not willing to draw back—yesterday He said He was the bread of heaven, now He says He is the light of the world. People are going to have no excuse to say they didn't understand, even if it kills Him (which, eventually, it will).

But notice especially verses 15 and 16, concerning judgment. Jesus has just been asked to not only judge but pronounce a death sentence on a guilty woman. Here, He says He is not here to judge anyone (yet—in other places He says He will judge humanity in the end), but that His judgment will not be “by the flesh,” as the teachers' judgment was, and that it will be true, because it is in line with God's judgment.

God had one and only one goal for this woman. It was the same as His goal for the leaders, too, if only they would allow it. *He wanted to reconcile her to Himself.* Jesus would have been just to punish this woman, wouldn't He? If He had the idea we have, that somehow punishment "fits the crime," "pays a debt to society," and evens out the balance, He would have done so. But that was not His goal. His goal was to get her back, to take her into His heart, and to set her trembling feet back on the path of health, happiness, and safety.

In the same passage in *The Desire of Ages*, Mrs. White goes on to add two sentences that are essential to understanding how to judge the way Jesus would, not the way we do. Here is the first sentence: "It is not Christ's follower that, with averted eyes, turns from the erring, leaving them unhindered to pursue their downward course." This speaks to those who "don't want to get involved," who are afraid of being honest with someone they see in trouble.

On the other hand, there are people who are all too ready to point out others' sins, all "in the spirit of love," of course. The second sentence is for them: "Those who are forward in accusing others, and zealous in bringing them to justice, are often in their own lives more guilty than they." That was the Pharisees' problem.

Mrs. White goes on to point out how Jesus did it and wants us to do it: "Christian love is slow to censure, quick to discern penitence, ready to forgive, to encourage, to set the wanderer in the path of holiness, and to stay his feet therein" (all from DA 462).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the feelings you think the woman had before, during, and after this event. Have you had these feelings?
2. Have you been caught doing something wrong? What did you do?
3. Has there been a time that you did wrong and weren't caught, but still felt guilty and ashamed? What did you do?
4. Have you caught someone else sinning? What did you do?
5. Discuss the differences between guilt and shame. What do you think happens when shame becomes chronic? Do you have advice for people who are trying to let go of shame and recover self-respect?
6. How do you think forgiveness and reconciliation bring healing to shame and guilt? Try to be as specific as you can, as to what happens in the heart and mind.

ACTIVITY

Remember, throughout this year, that the most important activities for reconciliation are to incorporate what you learn into your daily life. It will not be easy. It requires commitment, and hard work. No matter what you do, physically, mentally, or emotionally, ask the Holy Spirit to help you learn to make being an Ambassador of Reconciliation an automatic part of your life.

PLAY A GAME

Here is a good way to seriously test your resolve to be an Ambassador of Reconciliation for Christ.

In every group, there are likely to be people who are good friends and other people who don't get along as well. Possibly there are even people who actively dislike each other.

Choose a physical game your group likes. Then, instead of choosing your best friends for your team, deliberately set up the teams so that people who don't get along are on the same team. Try to set aside entirely whatever issues you have with each other for the duration of the game. You are not saying the issues don't exist, or that you don't have feelings about them; you are only setting aside those issues and feelings and finding common ground in something that has nothing to do with your sore spots.

Do your very best to help your teammates to succeed. Then take some time to sit and talk about what you have learned. Have your feelings changed at all? Do you have some new ideas about how to resolve your issues together?

The best way to get rid of an enemy is to make a friend out of him or her!

This Week's Story

[All stories, unless otherwise stated, are unrecognizable, fictionalized composites of characters and situations. Discuss, ponder, or write about the thoughts and feelings they raise in you. In particular, each time, ask yourself what you would have done in the characters' place, and what advice you would give them.]

Abdul sat with his shoulders hunched and his head in his hands. How could he have done it? What on this earth had made him think this would be a good thing to do? He didn't want to go home. He didn't want to face his family or his friends ever, ever again.

He felt a presence next to him, and then a weight joined him on the stone where he sat. Abdul didn't look up. He willed the person, whoever it was, to go away.

"Abdul," said a voice, and he recognized his older cousin, Abraham.

"Go away," he muttered.

"I want to talk to you."

"Forget it. Just go away."

"I just want to hear your side of it. Can't you tell me?"

Abdul sighed. He raised his head and looked at Abraham. His face didn't *look* like he hated Abdul. But he probably did. "I don't want to talk about it."

Abraham just waited.

Abdul sighed again, louder than before. "Fine. If I tell you, will you go away?"

Abraham waited.

"It wasn't just that I wanted to get into the university," said Abdul. "It was for my family. They were all so excited—Father, Mother, even Grandfather. I would have been the first in my family. The whole family's honor was at stake. I *had* to get in." To his dismay, Abdul felt his throat closing around the tears he had so far refused. He swallowed hard and waited a minute, breathing carefully. "Now, of course, my family's honor has been broken far worse than if I had just failed the entrance exam. And I'll never be allowed to try again. They told me so. They said I was lucky not to go to jail."

Abraham waited some more, but Abdul didn't say anything further. Abraham could tell he was fighting tears. "I understand all that," he said quietly. "What I don't understand is why you thought you had to cheat. Your grades have always been good. I'm sure you could have passed the test."

"My grades have been good only because I've worked like a donkey for them," Abdul said through his teeth. "It's always been so hard! I

thought—I was afraid—I didn’t know for sure if I could do it, and I was desperate not to let my family down.” He put his head back in his hands. “Now I’ve let them down much worse—the worst way possible. I keep seeing the professor’s face when he caught me, and Mother’s face when she heard about it. I’m so ashamed.”

Abraham was quiet. He knew it was true that Abdul would not be allowed to try again for the most prestigious university in their region. He also knew that Abdul’s family was overcome with shock, grief, and anger.

“I’m sure your family will forgive you,” he said, but in truth he wasn’t certain.

“Even if they did, I don’t deserve it,” said Abdul.

“Of course not. Forgiveness isn’t a thing that can be deserved,” said Abraham.

Abdul lifted his head and looked at him. “What do you mean?”

“How can sin *deserve* forgiveness? If we could deserve it, Jesus wouldn’t have had to come.”

Abdul frowned. “I guess so, but...well, I mean, there are things that aren’t so bad...”

“Sin is sin,” said Abraham firmly. “And you’re right that this is a big one. I can understand that you feel guilty. In fact, I understand that you feel

ashamed, too. But if you let that overcome you, if you go on living in shame, you won't be able to do better."

"Easy for you to say," accused Abdul.

"Not easy at all," said Abraham. "Do you think I've never been ashamed of myself? Do you remember what Jesus said to the woman taken in adultery? 'I don't condemn you.' And then Paul repeats it in Romans 8:1: 'There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.'"

"But I'm not in Christ Jesus," said Abdul.

"Why?"

"What do you mean, 'why'? Look what I've done!"

"Yes, and look what the thief on the cross had done. Look what Peter did. Look what Mary Magdalene or King David did. What determines if you are in Christ is what you decide. Do you want Him to forgive you and restore you? Do you *want* to go on in Him and let Him help you with the hard, hard work of facing up to what you've done and making a new start, trying to rebuild a trusting relationship with your family?"

Abdul couldn't hold back the tears anymore. "Yes," he whispered, "Yes, I do. But it's going to be so hard!"

"I know. That's why you need Jesus to help you. And I'm with you, too."

Abdul hugged Abraham and let the tears fall.

Seven days of soul food

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind (Luke 10:27). To put it another way, **body + heart + mind = one living soul.**

We can't really divide ourselves into different sections, but it's useful to look at these different aspects of ourselves and be sure we have a well-balanced faith that uses all the avenues of a soul. Each of these starter kits will include a week's worth of food for your soul in each of these four methods of understanding and expression.

Write about each of the following in your prayer journal this week. Strive to use language of emotion, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY 1:

Write your feelings about this lesson. With whom did you most identify in the Bible story? With the woman? With one of the accusers? With a bystander? Why?

DAY 2:

Heart: Does shame play a role in your life? Guilt can be helpful, simply to show you where you have gone wrong. But when you repent and ask forgiveness, the guilt should lift. Shame is a

different thing. It implies that you are a bad or unworthy person. No one is bad or unworthy in God's eyes. Their actions might be. If shame is a part of your life, can you think of a godly person you could talk to about it? Prayerfully consider how God wants to work in and through your heart this week.

DAY 3:

Mind: To the brain, the idea of “just punishment” seems to make sense. The Pharisees thought that the law which said to stone an adulterer was a good law. (They misused it in this instance, bringing in only the woman, not the man. Only a husband could accuse his wife even in the Old Testament law.) Think about how Jesus seemed to view this woman and her sin. How can you use your mind to learn to judge more like He does this week, showing love and compassion to those caught in sin?

DAY 4:

Strength/body: This story centers around an act which used God-given bodies in a harmful way. In what way did Jesus use His body to respond to this situation? What are the ways you could use your body for God and others this week?

DAY 5:

Soul/spirit: As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you so far this week, think about the healing power of forgiveness and reconciliation. The goal is

oneness—oneness within one’s self, oneness with brothers and sisters in the human family, and oneness with God. Consider those principles which you have not addressed in heart, mind, or body, and ponder how they affect your whole self—your soul.

DAY 6:

Consider your family, community, church, school, etc.—all the different “neighborhoods” you are part of. Find ways to show compassion and forgiveness to someone this week.

DAY 7:

Use day 7 to create something beautiful that reflects what you have learned. Write a poem or song or story. Create a poster. Write a letter. Paint or draw a picture. Make a sign. Do some sidewalk chalk art or writings. Build something. Create a podcast or blog post or other social media post(s). Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something. Share the love!

CHAPTER SIX

From Total Possession by Satan to Total Possession by Christ

The Bible's information about Mary Magdalene is scanty. From it, from early traditions, and from what Mrs. White was shown, including the fact that Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene were the same person, we can build a basic framework of her life, and from that we can learn a great deal indeed about forgiveness and reconciliation.

Read or have someone read Luke 8:1-3.

This small passage shows both the sin and redemption of Mary's life. First, tempted and seduced by a church leader, no less, (as we'll see later) and by continuing wrong choices, she fell into Satan's power and became the abode of seven demons. Like many women in her position, then and now, Mary may have believed she was unredeemable. She may have let shame take over her life. Apparently, she moved to Magdala and gave herself up to a life of promiscuity. In the Bible, seven is the number of perfection or completeness. Mary was completely possessed by the devil, in his complete control. Except for one very, very important thing—as we can see from other Bible stories, even a person in Satan's possession has, by the grace of God, freedom to choose to cry out to Him for help. Mary did that. Mrs. White says that Mary “heard Jesus' strong cries to the Father on her behalf,” (DA 568). The Father gave His aid eagerly, and Mary went

from being completely the possession of the devil to completely the possession of God. *(Some even speculate that the woman taken in adultery, from our last lesson, was Mary.)*

She went back to the bosom of her family, who must have thought they had lost her forever, and began to live as Christ would have her live. Luke 10:38-42 tells the familiar story of her sitting at Jesus' feet, learning with the disciples. In John 11, we have the long story of Lazarus' illness and death and are shown a picture of his sisters' love and faith and the reward when Jesus raised their brother back to life.

Our Luke 8 passage also lists Mary among the women who funded and supported Jesus' and His disciples' wandering ministry. Apparently, she had saved up a considerable amount of money during her time living sinfully. Now, she wanted that money to go for the building of the kingdom of God. And near the end of Jesus' life, she found another way to use some of her savings.

Read or have someone read Luke 7:36-50. In Luke's version, the woman is unnamed, but John 12 names her clearly as Martha's sister, Mary. Here is one of the central teachings of Jesus' earthly life on forgiveness and reconciliation, acted out in a beautiful story that has never been forgotten and never will.

Mary, Jesus agreed, had sinned much. She had reason for guilt. And no doubt she had experience of what it meant to live in unending shame. That was what led her, after her early fall, to go right on living in sin and shame—what was the use of trying to do otherwise? She thought she was a bad person, that God no longer loved her and could never forgive her. Have you ever felt that way?

Somehow, though, Mary had heard of Jesus. She had come to Him, and miracle of miracles, He had cleansed and healed her! Mary was never going to forget, and certainly never going to turn away from this amazing Redeemer. All she wanted was to somehow show Him the depth of her love. When she first began to wash His feet with her treasured perfume, it didn't even occur to her that others would notice. She didn't think about the fact that the scent would fill the room, calling all eyes to her. Probably when others began to look and whisper she shrank with embarrassment. People who have lived in shame for years find it easy to slip back into the old feelings. Would Jesus spurn her?

Never. She must have known He wouldn't. Instead, He told a story of forgiveness and the love it leads to. He could have embarrassed Simon in front of his friends by pointing out that he was the very one who had first led a young Mary into sin, but He didn't. His story must have reminded Simon, though, not only of that fact, but also that he had been healed of leprosy and ought to be able to understand mercy.

Forgiveness is only the beginning of the story. Full reconciliation, as we will learn this year, happens when the person to whom forgiveness is offered accepts that forgiveness and the restored relationship it offers, and seeks to live in the love she or he has found. Mary was doing that. And what was the result?

Mary and the other women didn't run away as the men did when Jesus was arrested, tried, and executed. They clung close to the foot of the cross, comforting Him with their presence even though they felt so helpless, horrified, and drowning in sorrow.

Mary and the other women were first at the tomb on resurrection morning, found the tombstone rolled away, and received the message of angels. They told the apostles all about it but weren't believed.

And Mary went back to the garden, stayed to grieve, and was the very first to see the risen Lord. Mary, once a great sinner, became the first evangelist and a leader in the early church.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever found that feeling ashamed makes you continue to sin, which makes you think less of yourself, which makes you continue to sin, and so on? How does one break this cycle?
2. What was Mary Magdalene's first mistake? What was her first step in repentance?
3. What do you think are some of the problems faced by Mary Magdalene and others who have "sinned much" when they try to make a new start? How can you help someone like that (or yourself) to begin anew?
4. We don't know what happened when Mary first came back to her family as a healed sinner. How do you think they felt? Do you know of stories where wandering ones have or have not been welcomed back home? How does trust begin to rebuild?
5. Have you ever reconciled with someone who had gravely broken your trust, or you had broken theirs?

ACTIVITY

[Remember, throughout this year, that the most important activities for reconciliation are to incorporate what you learn into your daily life. It will not be easy. It requires commitment, and hard work. No matter what you do, physically, mentally, or emotionally, ask the Holy Spirit to help you learn to make being an Ambassador of Reconciliation an automatic part of your life.]

A TWO-SIDED COLLAGE

Create a double-sided poster of Mary Magdalene's life. You may use cut-out pictures from magazines, or drawings, words, poetry, or whatever you like to symbolize what you want to illustrate. On one side of the poster, show Mary's life before Jesus. On the other, show her life after Jesus. Hang it so that both sides can be seen, but the After side is more prominently visible. You could write an invitation or encouraging words to anyone who may think they are too bad to be forgiven and hang it where it can be seen by many who might be influenced to turn to Christ.

PRIVATE SUGGESTION

If you know someone who has fallen badly and is trying to make a new start, especially if you know others are not accepting and forgiving them as Jesus wants them to, ask God to show you ways to encourage and help that person. Be careful. Treat them as you think you would like to be treated in the same situation.

This Week's Story

[All stories, unless otherwise stated, are unrecognizable, fictionalized composites of characters and situations. Discuss, ponder, or write about the thoughts and feelings they raise in you. In particular, each time, ask yourself what you would have done in the characters' place, and what advice you would give them.]

This week's story is completely factual. Names have been removed and details have been changed.

It was a special day at church. There was no sermon; instead everyone had been invited to share a song, story, poem or testimony.

A man played his guitar and sang a song of God's love.

Two people played an instrument called a "courting dulcimer," (which you may be able to look up online. It's an American stringed instrument that can be played by two people at once.)

A young girl recited a poem.

A trio sang a hymn with beautiful harmonies.

A little boy played his violin.

Between all these offerings, the congregation would sing hymns together.

Then a young woman stood up. She said, “I can’t sing, and I don’t know any poems. I just want to share what’s on my heart. I want to say how grateful to God I am for this church. I was a teenage, unwed mother. I had done foolishly, and I knew it. I was ashamed and guilty. It was hard for me to even come to church. But I was invited to come over and over, and finally, I came. This church accepted me and loved me. Not one person told me what I sinner I was, or even looked at me as if I was a bad person. I already knew I was a sinner. I knew my child and I would have to live with the consequences of my choices for the rest of my life. I wasn’t sure if God could forgive me.

“But after I was here for a while, I began to realize that you all really loved me, that you forgave me and didn’t think I was a bad person. You believed in me. You knew that I could start again, and you were here to help me do it, and make better choices this time.”

By this time, the young woman was crying, and so were several others in the congregation.

She continued, “I will never know what made you accept me as I was, but I will always be grateful. Because of you, my relationship with God and my relationship with myself are healed. Because of you I can know that Jesus saves me. Because of you I can raise my son to know that God loves him and that he can hold up his head and not be ashamed. I thank you, and I thank God for you!”

The young woman went back to her seat, but not without being offered several hugs on the way.

What they didn't know was that the older woman in the back row was a visitor that day. She had recently moved into the area and was looking for a church home. She had visited other nearby churches and had come to see if this one was right for her. She was so impressed with what she heard that she decided this was where she would stay and become a member.

It wasn't the way the people looked nice and well-dressed—though they did. It wasn't even that they were kind to her as a visitor—though they were. It was how she learned that they had treated someone who had done wrong and was ashamed of herself.

A few years later, that young woman found a man who believed in her, too, and she married him. He adopted her son and gave her another baby. Their life was not perfect. Neither the couple nor the other members of the church were sinless. There were problems from time to time. But the little family was a living picture of God's grace and forgiveness, flowing out onto the people who needed it most.

Seven days of soul food

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind (Luke 10:27). To put it another way, **body + heart + mind = one living soul.**

We can't really divide ourselves into different sections, but it's useful to look at these different aspects of ourselves and be sure we have a well-balanced faith that uses all the avenues of a soul. Each of these starter kits will include a week's worth of food for your soul in each of these four methods of understanding and expression.

Write about each of the following in your prayer journal this week. Strive to use language of emotion, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY 1:

Write your feelings about the difference between forgiveness and full reconciliation. Remember that you will learn more this year, and what you think now may change. If there has been a time you were forgiven and reconciled, write about that.

DAY 2

Heart: Is there someone you have been judgmental toward, or whom you need to forgive? Honestly share your feelings with God,

even if they include anger, pain, or resentment. Ask what your first step should be. Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in and through your heart this week.

DAY 3

Mind: What we feel has an impact on what we think, and vice versa. Do you find yourself thinking that people should somehow deserve forgiveness, or “be sorry enough” before they can be reconciled? How sorry is sorry enough? Are you expecting yourself or others to pay for their sins? What does Jesus’ death teach about that? How does God want to work toward reconciliation in your mind this week?

DAY 4

Strength/body: Mary Magdalene misused her body—and so did all her customers, beginning with Simon the Pharisee. We don’t know the details about his leprosy, but it might have been, at least in part, because of the wrong choices he made—certainly with Mary, perhaps with other women as well. When we are healed and reconciled with God, it doesn’t make the past go away. Have you ever misused your body, and are you paying the price now? How can you make different choices, or how can you prevent that? What are the ways you could use your body for God and others this week?

DAY 5

Soul/spirit: As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you so far this week, pray and ask God for special insight on what you may need to learn. Consider those principles which you have not addressed in heart, mind, or body, and ponder how they affect your whole self—your soul.

DAY 6

Consider your family, community, church, school, etc.—all the different “neighborhoods” you are part of. Find ways to make steps to bring others together with themselves, others, and most of all, with God.

DAY 7

Use day 7 to create something beautiful that reflects what you have learned. Write a poem or song or story. Create a poster. Write a letter. Paint or draw a picture. Make a sign. Do some sidewalk chalk art or writings. Build something. Create a podcast or blog post or other social media post(s). Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something. Share the love!

CHAPTER SEVEN

Infinite forgiveness

[Tell the attendees that today's lesson will use a good portion of Matthew 18, and to keep their Bibles open to that chapter. To begin, ask someone to read verses 21 and 22.]

When someone asks what Jesus taught about forgiveness, this passage often comes to mind. The usual understanding taken from these verses goes something like this: Seventy times seven is four hundred ninety times. Jesus can't be saying we should keep track, forgiving only 490 times and no more. We could never remember, and certainly must not keep a record book of offenses! So, Jesus must mean to forgive forever. Seven, after all, is the number of perfection and completion. Seventy times seven must be infinite forgiveness.

There is much truth in this. God keeps on forgiving—how many times has He forgiven *you* so far in your life? —and God wants us to develop and maintain a forgiving spirit, too. However, this is not a complete picture. Some people have taken it to mean that Christians should be doormats, letting others walk all over them and never holding anyone to consequences for their actions. Someone can keep on treating you cruelly hundreds of times, and you just keep saying, “I forgive you.” Or, worse yet, “That’s all right.”

We've covered this before—forgiving is *not* excusing! Continued cruelty *is not* all right! So, aside from saying we ought to cultivate compassion and keep on forgiving when our brothers and sisters keep on failing, what else was Jesus trying to say? Fortunately, we don't have to guess or imagine. We simply have to look at context.

Have someone read verses 15-17.

This is what Jesus had just been talking about when Peter asked his question. This step-by-step teaching on how to deal with sin can save a lot of heartache if it is followed carefully.

Step one is to quietly go to the person who has hurt you and “tell the truth in love.” This means saying just what has hurt you and why, but not saying it in an accusing or angry way. Show the person by your words and attitudes that you still love them and are hoping for reconciliation, not vengeance or punishment. A good pattern is, “When you (did/said that specific thing), I felt (specific *feeling*—angry, sad, afraid, etc.) because I thought (the inner thoughts that you have prayed over and figured out before you came to the person). Example: “When you shouted, ‘I hate you!’, I felt sad, because I thought maybe you really meant it.” Or, “When you hit me, I felt frightened and angry because I thought you don't value me and don't think that I'm worthy of treating with respect.”

If the person is capable of listening and really hearing you, they may first try excusing, (“You made me so mad!”) but you can hope that they will honestly accept responsibility for their action, ask forgiveness, and perhaps the two of you can work out a way to prevent its happening again. Reconciliation is complete. Praise God!

Step two is to take another trusted person or two with you. If the person didn't listen the first time, or—*this is very important*—if the person is dangerous, start here! Don't confront them by yourself. This could be a wise family member or friend, or it could be a pastor or other leader, or both. These observers' function is to facilitate. They help both parties to the disagreement to speak what is on their hearts, be heard, and also to listen to each other. Sometimes this third party is able to be more objective and help get to the heart of the matter and help complete the reconciliation.

Step three, if one and two did not work, is to make a group matter of it. Bring the problem to the church, *not for punishment or judgment, but for a larger pool of compassion, mercy, and desire to help!* Remember, this is Jesus talking. He didn't disfellowship even Pharisees. Together, the loving church family has great power. Perhaps someone will be able to reach this erring one in a way that others haven't been able to.

Finally (and this doesn't happen that often if the first steps were followed with Christlike love), if the person simply refuses to repent, change, or even admit they've done anything wrong, then we come to the part of this counsel that is easiest to get entirely wrong. "Let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector," says Jesus. And throughout the ages, Christians have taken this as permission to cast out, to shun, to ostracize, and even to declare the person's sins to the world.

Before deciding what this instruction means, ask yourself one simple question: *How did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors?*

He ate with them, He talked with them, He healed them, He loved them. In other words, Jesus completes His instructions for dealing with sinners by saying, if a person really can't be reasoned with, then you have to go back to square one, assuming that they have not, after all, been reached yet by God's grace and the Good News of the gospel. Set yourself to win them all over again.

Now let's look at the verses in between. **Have someone read verses 18-20.**

In light of what we have learned, what do you think Jesus is saying we pray to be "loosed" or "bound"? Wouldn't that be the sinner's soul? We long for this person to return to covenant relationship with God and with us. We pray for the devil to be bound away from them and for their spirits to be loosed from anger and evil. But while we wait, we do not leave ourselves in the power of this unconsecrated one.

Peter recognized what Jesus was saying with the above instructions. He knew that if he followed them, he would end up having to forgive the person instead of "getting even." So, he said, "But Lord, how many times do I have to do that?"

And Jesus said, "There is no end date. As your Father keeps forgiving you, so you must keep forgiving others. All humans are weak. You know how often you fail—again. Others will, too." And then He told a cautionary tale about taking this forgiveness for granted, and not passing it on. **If you have time, you may wish to discuss the final story, from verse 23 to the end of the chapter.**

I'm so glad God is merciful with me! I want to be merciful with others, too.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss (without giving away any private details) times when you have had to forgive over and over, and what you have done.
2. Do you think Jesus meant to keep forgiving someone who kept doing the *same* sin over and over, or only people who keep making mistakes? Do you think there is a difference, or different limits?
3. Can you share a time when you tried to put the Matthew 18 principals, or similar ones, into practice? What was the result?
4. Have you seen these instructions misused to hurt and judge people? What was the result?
5. How do you feel when *you* keep making mistakes, and how do you want people to help you?

A further resource you may find helpful: *Non-Violent Communication: A Language of Life*, by Marshall B. Rosenberg. Puddle Dancer Press. Available widely, both new and used. Dr. Rosenberg is active all over the world, helping to reconcile very difficult, even violent, situations by truly listening to the hearts of people who are acting out in sinful ways. He has a whole system, including books, worksheets, and group activities, for teaching others to do the same.

ACTIVITY

Remember, throughout this year, that the most important activities for reconciliation are to incorporate what you learn into your daily life. It will not be easy. It requires commitment, and hard work. No matter what you do, physically, mentally, or emotionally, ask the Holy Spirit to help you learn to make being an Ambassador of Reconciliation an automatic part of your life.

TRY IT OUT

(Divide larger groups into teams of no more than 10 for this activity.)

Choose a Bible character you are all familiar with, who did something very wrong. You may reread the story from the Bible to familiarize yourself with the details. Choose one person to play the part of this Bible character, and others to play the part(s) of those wronged by him or her.

Using the principles found in Matthew 18, act out all the steps. Let the person who plays the sinner respond as he/she thinks the original character really would have. In other words, the person may immediately ask forgiveness when first approached, or may be more reluctant. He/she may even refuse all overtures. In that case, the rest may try to find ways to reach him/her for God.

This Week's Story

[All stories, unless otherwise stated, are unrecognizable, fictionalized composites of characters and situations. Discuss, ponder, or write about the thoughts and feelings they raise in you. In particular, each time, ask yourself what you would have done in the characters' place, and what advice you would give them.]

This week's story is completely factual. Names and details have been changed. I have told it as it affected me. It is a good example of how *not* to use Matthew 18.

Sara and I worked together, so sometimes, during lunch hours or when there were few customers, we were able to talk. I knew that Sara had a difficult marriage and tried to be a listening ear. She was a Christian, so I could pray with her, or recommend encouraging Bible passages. One day she told me she had a big problem. There was a man who worked at her church, and the two of them had gotten to talking.

"We talked for hours! He's so understanding! I know I'm not supposed to talk to another man like that, but I can't help it."

I tried to gently help Sara to see that she was in danger, and she would agree, but as the weeks passed, it was clear that she and this man, John, were becoming closer and closer.

"He says I understand him as his wife never could!"

The temptation of feeling that someone understands and needs you cannot be overstated. Both John and Sara were in marriages where they needed to put into practice the principles of Matthew 18 and try to reconcile their differences in ways that would be healing to both spouses. Their marriages were not terrible, just floundering. But it was much more pleasant to spend time daydreaming with this new friend who seemed to understand. John and Sara didn't have to see each other in the day-to-day nitty-gritty of living. He didn't know whether she threw her socks on the floor; she didn't know how he acted when he didn't get enough sleep. They were free to spin air castles and tell each other how special they were and that their spouses didn't understand them.

The day came when Sara told me she and John were going to try to stop seeing each other. I applauded this choice and promised to pray for them to be strong, but I had been saying they should do that from the beginning, when it would have been relatively easy. Now, it was going to be very hard to cut the bonds that had grown around them.

Sure enough, they couldn't remain faithful to their promises to themselves, God, and each other. They began stealing time together outside of church work.

Naturally, someone found out.

Their church began to take the steps they *thought* they saw in Matthew 18. One person called another person, and the gossip spread. Finally, someone called the pastor. He went to both and rebuked them. He didn't listen or make any attempt to understand or offer compassion or forgiveness. He simply told them how wrong they were and demanded they give each other up immediately.

They tried...again. The rebuke hadn't given them any more strength or determination than before.

The pastor brought the board and everybody scolded and rebuked. This time, John and Sara didn't even try to submit. The pain and anger rose up in their hearts and they said they belonged together, and nobody could separate them.

So the board took it to the church. They stood John and Sara in front of the congregation, where they harangued them about their sin, told the congregation to look on them and see an example of evil, and threatened them with hellfire. They told John and Sara that they were henceforth cast out, "to be as a Gentile or a tax collector." If they ever came to their senses and repented, they could come crawling back, and they *might* find mercy.

John and Sara left. Any remaining spiritual desire to do the right thing by their marriages and God had now been driven from their hearts. Feeling the whole world against them, they convinced themselves that God really wanted them to be together and this was a test of their faith. They divorced their spouses and got married. I don't know if they went to church anywhere after that. I still tried to be a good friend and a listening ear, but Sara knew I believed she had done wrong. In her heart, she knew she had, too.

The marriage broke up a few years later.

I've always wondered what would have happened if their church had taken Jesus' teachings, read them in the light of *His* actions, attitudes, and words, and used Matthew 18 to try to bring healing, restoration, and reconciliation rather than scathing rebuke, punishment, and finally, ostracism.

Seven Days Of Soul Food

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind (Luke 10:27). To put it another way, **body + heart + mind = one living soul.**

We can't really divide ourselves into different sections, but it's useful to look at these different aspects of ourselves and be sure we have a well-balanced faith that uses all the avenues of a soul. Each of these starter kits will include a week's worth of food for your soul in each of these four methods of understanding and expression.

Write about each of the following in your prayer journal this week. Strive to use language of emotion, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY 1

Think of someone who frequently irritates you. Write your feelings about having to forgive over and over again. What steps can you take to build a better relationship?

DAY 2

Heart: Think of mistakes you have made over and over, even after promising yourself and others to do better, and asking God for strength. What is stopping you from accepting His overcoming

power? If you don't know, find a godly counselor to talk to about it. How much does it mean to you that Jesus' forgiveness is infinite? Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in and through your heart this week.

DAY 3

Mind: What do you think about Jesus' step-by-step plan for reconciliation? Has your idea of this chapter changed, and if so, how? Perhaps you'd like to make a chart to remind you of the steps. Try using them in a real situation. How does God want to work toward reconciliation in your mind this week?

DAY 4

Strength/body: Both the bitterness of refusing to forgive and the ongoing guilt of continuing to sin sap the physical strength. When you think about John and Sara, or about other stories like theirs, including ones in the Bible, there is a strong physical component in that temptation. How can our bodies trip up our best intentions, and how can we strengthen ourselves to prevent that? What are the ways you could use your body for God and others this week?

DAY 5

Soul/spirit: As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you so far this week, watch for any areas

where you think Satan might be trying to gain power over you. Use God's grace and the scriptures to head him off before he gets any closer. Remember that Jesus fights the battles, not you. Just stay behind His shield. Consider those principles which you have not addressed in heart, mind, or body, and ponder how they affect your whole self—your soul.

DAY 6

Consider your family, community, church, school, etc.—all the different “neighborhoods” you are part of. Find ways to put the principles of Matthew 18 into practice to bring people closer together.

DAY 7

Use day 7 to create something beautiful that reflects what you have learned. Write a poem or song or story. Create a poster. Write a letter. Paint or draw a picture. Make a sign. Do some sidewalk chalk art or writings. Build something. Create a podcast or blog post or other social media post(s). Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something. Share the love!

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Forgive Them...”

We began this year by recognizing that God’s greatest desire, ever since sin broke His carefully constructed universe, is to reconcile *all* humankind with Himself. We then spent some weeks exploring just a few of the ways that Jesus lived out God’s character of mercy and forgiveness while He was here as a human. Tonight, we will prayerfully ponder the greatest prayer of forgiveness ever made, and the moment when Jesus fully fleshed out the story He had been telling all along: “God made you. God loves you. God wants you back. Yes, *you*, really!”

Have someone read Luke 23:33-38.

Interestingly, this is only found in Luke’s portrayal of the crucifixion. One of the best things about the four gospels is that they tell the story of Jesus’ life and death from different viewpoints, and different people notice different details. This way, we get a more complete picture. There is a tradition that, because Luke was a physician and therefore had more contact with women than most men of his era, he tells more stories from women’s point of view. Certainly, he mentions women more than the other gospel writers do. We can’t know this, but it seems reasonable that Jesus’ mother and the other women who stayed near the cross saw more close-up details than the men who stayed farther away, and possibly they were the ones who told Luke this important story.

One thing we do know—God made sure it was recorded, because He wants us to know it! This incredibly powerful story takes us to a whole new level of understanding of what forgiveness can really mean.

Just imagine it: Roman soldiers are *at that moment* hammering great spikes through Jesus' hands and feet! How can He even speak? And what words might He say if He did speak? No one can have expected *these* words!

“Abba,” He gasps, “Daddy, forgive them!”

Could you do that? Have you ever asked God to forgive someone who was in the process of hurting you? Some people have, and you can, if you are living your life inside of Christ.

More than that, Jesus adds, “They don't know what they're doing.”

Let's look more closely at this.

When it came to the mechanics of crucifixion, Roman soldiers certainly knew exactly what they were doing. They did it all the time. They had crucified thousands of people in previous years. So Jesus couldn't mean that.

As for their responsibility for their actions, the defense “I was just following orders” does not excuse wicked behavior, as many, many soldiers, then and now, have learned the hard way. It's true that they couldn't choose not to obey their commanders unless they left the army, and it's probably also true that they didn't have the freedom of choice that most of us do today, so they may well have felt trapped into doing this, but that doesn't excuse them. Nailing people to wood and hanging them up to bleed and asphyxiate to death is sin. Period.

What, then, did they not know they were doing?

There is only one thing remaining: they did not know they weren't killing just another man but were killing the Son of God—the true Messiah who had been promised ever since Eden. Not until afterwards, anyway. The centurion realized it after Jesus died. He may have suspected it before that.

That's what they didn't know. What they were doing was actually participating in God's Great Act of History—the death and resurrection of God, which would provide for every single human who ever lived a way out of final and permanent death, lost to the universe forever, lost to the heart of God.

Acceptance of and trust in this death and resurrection, choosing to live in the light and joy of the Holy Spirit, would create complete and total reconciliation for all—with themselves, with others, and with their Creator. And yet...the worst tragedy of all is that uncounted numbers of those billions (counted only by God, who weeps over each one)...say no! How can they say no to an offer like that? How can *we* say no to an offer like that?

We, here in this room, can choose to live in that light and to be Ambassadors of that Reconciliation, so that God loses as few of His beloved children as possible. And it begins with living so far inside Christ that we can say, with Him, "Forgive them," even while they hurt us.

Close by going to our theme chapter, 2 Corinthians 5, and reading verses 14 and 15.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever asked forgiveness for someone even while they were hurting you? How did it feel? How did you find the grace and strength to do that? If you can, share part of your story so that others can find that strength, too.
2. Have you been forgiven when you hurt another? How did that make you feel?
3. Imagine being one of the soldiers. How do you think you would have felt and reacted in that situation? Wouldn't it be great if some of those soldiers, having watched Jesus' last hours, were saved after all, and we meet them in heaven and see them reconciling with Jesus?
4. How does it make you feel to realize you helped to create the giant burden of sin and shame that killed Jesus? Share your feelings with each other, but don't spend too long on the guilt and sorrow. Move to the next question.
5. How does it make you feel to realize *Jesus did that for you? By choice!*

ACTIVITY

[Remember, throughout this year, that the most important activities for reconciliation are to incorporate what you learn into your daily life. It will not be easy. It requires commitment, and hard work. No matter what you do, physically, mentally, or emotionally, ask the Holy Spirit to help you learn to make being an Ambassador of Reconciliation an automatic part of your life.]

PRACTICE FORGIVING EVIL

- From local newspapers, broadcast news, and/or web-based news, find some stories of people who have done great wrong. If you know them, even a little, and/or are one of the ones harmed by them, this will be an even more powerful activity.
- Spend a few minutes discussing seriously the size of this debt to humanity and to God. Recognize how evil the action, whatever it was, truly is, and that the idea undoubtedly came from the devil.
- Now, bow in prayer and ask God to forgive, reconcile, and save this person or persons. If there is anything your group can do, such as send letters or pamphlets to them, consider doing that, too.

DISCUSS YOUR FEELINGS AFTER THE PRAYER.

This Week's Story

[All stories, unless otherwise stated, are unrecognizable, fictionalized composites of characters and situations. Discuss, ponder, or write about the thoughts and feelings they raise in you. In particular, each time, ask yourself what you would have done in the characters' place, and what advice you would give them.]

Long ago, in the 19th century, there was a one-room schoolhouse where perhaps fifteen or twenty students of all ages from small ones just learning letters and numbers to teenagers nearly ready to graduate were taught by one schoolmaster. As was often the case in those days (and still is in many places) this master was very strict and sometimes harsh. He saw his duty as rigidly forming the children under his authority to be obedient, no matter what. He did not understand about forgiveness or reconciliation; he thought that was weakness. He also did not want his students to think for themselves, but only to obey whatever rule he laid down, with no question. It did not occur to him that this would not prepare them well for future life.

To his credit, the rules he made were generally fair and just, though the punishments were extreme. For example, students were required to work and study and learn their lessons well—a good rule. But if they did not know their lessons, he might switch or cane them, and he wouldn't make any allowance for weakness or inability in any individual.

He also made no allowance for physical weakness for other causes. Children who are hungry, or who didn't get enough sleep and are tired, will not do well in school regardless of their abilities.

There was, at one point, a problem that happened several times over some weeks. Someone was getting into school lunches and stealing parts of them. Lunches and coats were kept in a closet at the back of the room. No one knew who was stealing; they never saw it happen, they just discovered it at lunchtime when they went to eat. No one's lunch was completely gone, but there would be bread missing here, and a piece of fruit there. Perhaps a bottle of milk would be partly empty.

The schoolmaster lectured the students angrily about the wrongs of theft. He demanded that someone tell him if they knew anything, but no one did. In truth, no one would have been likely to admit anything to this master, even if they had known something.

The master announced that if he ever discovered who was doing it, that student would be thrashed within an inch of his life. And they knew he meant it.

For a week, no food was stolen. The master assumed he had succeeded in driving out the evil from his domain.

Then one day, the master himself caught a boy getting into a lunch. He grabbed the boy and dragged him, whimpering, into the classroom. "I found our thief!" he shouted. The students stared as he hauled the shivering boy to the front and reached for his cane.

Everyone's eyes widened. Timmy was the smallest boy in the school, even though he was not the youngest. He was skinny and dirty, coming to school with matted hair and ragged clothing. Everybody knew his family, and that they barely survived on what labor the mother could get and on handouts. It was obvious that the boy had stolen only because he was starving. They all watched in terror and pity as the master pulled off the boy's shirt to beat his back. Then they saw that there were marks and bruises already there. Even the master hesitated. This boy was obviously beaten on a regular basis. But he had made a rule. He felt he couldn't back down from it, or he would lose all respect. (It never occurred to him that changing the system and providing for those who couldn't provide for themselves would have brought not only more respect but more love, obedience, and self-respect, too.) After hesitating, he frowned mightily and raised his cane.

"Wait, master!" cried a voice.

The master looked up, even angrier that someone dared to interrupt. The speaker was Thomas, the oldest and largest boy in the school, one who would graduate in a matter of weeks and go out to make his living.

"Whose lunch did he steal?" asked the older boy.

The master glared. "The one in the red pail. Yours, I believe! Why? Do you want to discipline him yourself?"

"No. He can have my lunch," Thomas said. "I have plenty. He is hungry. Please don't beat him."

“I will not break my word!” said the master. “I have said the thief would be beaten, and so he shall!” He raised his cane again and brought it down in a whistling slash toward the quivering, bruised, small back.

But before it could make contact, Thomas was there, between. He grabbed the cane, and the schoolmaster’s face grew purple with rage. “I made the rule and I will keep it!” he raged.

“Yes, master,” said Thomas submissively. He turned and pulled off his shirt. Then he bent down and took shivering Timmy in his arms. He put his own strong back over Timmy’s so that the cane would strike only him.

The master was so angry that he made a point of beating Thomas especially hard and long. Many children were crying before he was through. Timmy cried the most. He tried to twist out of Thomas’ grasp, crying, “No, no, it’s not fair! I did it! You did nothing!”

But Thomas held on, and when the master’s rage was spent, he gingerly put his shirt back on over his bruised and bleeding back. Then he took Timmy to his own seat, and from that moment on, the two were fast friends, and Timmy never went hungry again.

Seven days of soul food

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind (Luke 10:27). To put it another way, **body + heart + mind = one living soul.**

We can't really divide ourselves into different sections, but it's useful to look at these different aspects of ourselves and be sure we have a well-balanced faith that uses all the avenues of a soul. Each of these starter kits will include a week's worth of food for your soul in each of these four methods of understanding and expression.

Write about each of the following in your prayer journal this week. Strive to use language of emotion, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY 1

Write the feelings that rose in you as you heard and read this week's stories. You could write them as a letter to Jesus if you want to.

DAY 2

Heart: What things make your heart feel more like Christ's heart when He saw people as "sheep without a shepherd"? How can you strengthen and develop your relationship with the Holy Spirit so you can live like this? Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in and through your heart this week.

DAY 3

Mind: Some people, on hearing a story like the one about Timmy stealing food, put God the Father in the place of that angry schoolmaster. He made laws, and decreed death for breaking them, so now He had to kill His own Son so He wouldn't have to kill people. But think it over. What if God's laws are deeper than that? What if His moral laws are like gravity—you can't break them, you can only break yourself on them? What if breaking God's law of love literally *causes* death, and God threw Himself in the way so we wouldn't die? Does this change your thoughts and attitudes? How does God want to work toward reconciliation in your mind this week?

DAY 4

Strength/body: What are the ways you could use your body for God and others this week? How, especially, can your strength shelter someone else?

DAY 5

Soul/spirit: As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you so far this week, pray about how they can all build you into one whole, integrated child of God. Consider those principles which you have not addressed in heart, mind, or body, and ponder how they affect your whole self—your soul.

DAY 6

Consider your family, community, church, school, etc.—all the different “neighborhoods” you are part of. Find ways to begin to change systems which leave people feeling powerless so that even those who would not choose to live in anger or break laws might do so from sheer desperation.

DAY 7

Use day 7 to create something beautiful that reflects what you have learned. Write a poem or song or story. Create a poster. Write a letter. Paint or draw a picture. Make a sign. Do some sidewalk chalk art or writings. Build something. Create a podcast or blog post or other social media post(s). Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something. Share the love!

CHAPTER NINE

Mission accomplished!

[Begin by asking someone to read Luke 24:1-8.]

For all the centuries, God's plan, made in heaven before the earth was even created, had stood. After sin entered this planet, it was put into execution, and Adam and Eve were promised a Redeemer who would crush the head of the evil being who had deceived and seduced them to ruin and death. Many more centuries passed, full of decay and despair, but at last the time came for God to be born as a human baby. For 33 years, that Baby, then Boy, then Man had lived the truth of God's love out before all those around Him. He had not just told them (over and over!) but had *shown* them that God's great desire was for complete reconciliation with every person on earth. The final cup of sorrow had been drained in Gethsemane, the full submission of self to die for sinful, uncaring humanity made. Jesus had died.

We are so used to the story that we may miss how powerful this was for His friends and family. His mother was at His feet as His life bled away. Can you conceive of what that was like for her? Perhaps you live in an area where war, disease, or famine kill the sons and daughters of women on a daily basis. Perhaps you have experienced it closely, yourself. Add to your knowledge of that grief the despair that would come from fearing

that all your hopes and dreams of a Messiah had been for nothing after all. Try to be with the disciples in your imagination as they wrap Jesus in linen and put His body away in the tomb that Joseph of Arimathea has made available.

Spend a moment considering the darkness of that Sabbath, a high Passover Sabbath, but full of nothing but grief and fear for the followers of Jesus, most of them huddled away for fear of their own arrest and possible execution.

Now go to that tomb on Sunday morning. Your plan is to embalm the body, wrapping it with spices in its shroud. There was no time on the Preparation Day, and it's not work for Sabbath. This morning, early, the women will do the tearful work.

But...the tomb is empty! There is no body! Angels send the women away, announcing that Jesus is not dead, but alive! Mary even sees Him and speaks to Him! The men are slow to believe what the women assert, but eventually, all learn that it's true.

He's alive!!

What would it have been like to be there?

All the gospels carry stories of this event, and as usual, they differ as to details, depending on the point of view of who wrote them. But Luke's account gives more detail that applies to our subject—complete reconciliation between God and fallen humanity. There are two stories here which give us hints.

First is the story of the two disciples on their way to Emmaus, disconsolately talking over all that had happened, not sure if they can believe that Jesus is truly risen. Jesus appears to them, and even though at first they don't recognize Him, notice what He

talks to them about. **Read or have someone read Luke 24:25-27.** Jesus opens to these two people's eyes the Bible's story of the plan of salvation. "Don't you know it all *had* to happen?" He asks.

In the related, second story, the two rush back to Jerusalem (apparently without even eating that supper Jesus blessed) and tell all the gathered followers of Jesus their story. And suddenly, Jesus appears in their midst. Once He calms everyone's fears and proves His is really alive by eating some fish, He again opens the whole plan to them. **Read or have someone read verses 44-49.** What specific reason does He give that all these things had to happen? (Verse 47.)

On the cross, when Jesus said, "It is finished," and bowed His head and died, the hard part of the plan was complete. On Sunday morning, when He spoke to Mary Magdalene, He said He hadn't yet ascended to His Father, but He would be back, and meet them in Galilee. Of course, God had been in and with Him throughout, but when Jesus reported back at the throne of heaven, in a sense the total Plan of Salvation was finalized once and for all. And then, He still came back down here to earth and spent another 40 days with His followers, appearing to many, teaching them more specifics from the long laying-out of the plan that had filled the Bible to that point—just the Old Testament, so far. He commissioned them—and through them, us—to carry this story to the farthest reaches of the world. To be Ambassadors of Reconciliation, telling every single human being, *"God loves you! God wants to forgive you, cleanse you, recreate you, and live in complete reconciliation with you—forever!"*

Have you told anyone this week?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you tried to clearly imagine, in detail, what it would have been like to be at Jesus' trial, death, and resurrection? Sister White says to "let the imagination grasp each scene." In other words, take time, pray, imagine as clearly as you can—try to really "be there" in your heart. Share with each other the insights you gain from this exercise.
2. How does it make you feel to think of Jesus dying for you? If it overwhelms you with guilt and shame, remember that is not the reaction He wants. Turn all that over to Him, thank Him for His love, and accept His forgiveness.
3. Take Luke 24 and discuss your way, scene by scene, through the Emmaus story and the story of Jesus' appearance. Try to imagine what it would be like to be there and share your insights with your group.

ADDED RESOURCES:

To see how all four gospel stories of the resurrection can be put together into a cohesive whole, read *The Desire of Ages*, the chapter entitled "He is Risen," pages 779-787.

ACTIVITY

Remember, throughout this year, that the most important activities for reconciliation are to incorporate what you learn into your daily life. It will not be easy. It requires commitment, and hard work. No matter what you do, physically, mentally, or emotionally, ask the Holy Spirit to help you learn to make being an Ambassador of Reconciliation an automatic part of your life.

A PSALM TRIPTYCH

A triptych is a three-part piece of art used in worship. It is often a set of paintings, created on three panels, with the center one larger. You can find images online.

I once heard a pastor preach on Psalm 22, 23, and 24 as a kind of triptych of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension.

Psalm 22 is the one Jesus quoted from on the cross when He cried, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" It is one of the most powerful and obvious messianic psalms. When you read the whole thing, try to figure out if you think Jesus was sending any messages to those around His cross. If so, what were they?

Psalm 23, of course, is the well-known Shepherd's Psalm. This pastor used it as an example of Jesus' quiet rest in the tomb—for once, He was the sheep and His Father was the shepherd, and even though His followers were distraught, Jesus was safe.

Psalm 24 depicts the antiphonal chorus of angels welcoming the conquering King of Glory back into heaven. This scene is depicted gloriously on pp. 833-835 of *The Desire of Ages*. I have used this as our story for this week, so you can read it there.

Read these psalms together and create either music or art (or both) to depict this triptych.

This Week's Story

[This week, instead of a contemporary story, I have chosen to quote Ellen White's glorious scene of Jesus ascending to His Father, from pages 833-835 of The Desire of Ages.]

All heaven was waiting to welcome the Saviour to the celestial courts. As He ascended, He led the way, and the multitude of captives set free at His resurrection followed. The heavenly host, with shouts and acclamations of praise and celestial song, attended the joyous train.

As they drew near to the city of God, the challenge is given by the escorting angels,—

*“Lift up your heads, O ye gates;
And be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors;
And the King of glory shall come in.”*

Joyfully the waiting sentinels respond,—

“Who is this King of glory?”

This they say, not because they know not who He is, but because they would hear the answer of exalted praise,—

*“The Lord strong and mighty,
The Lord mighty in battle!
Lift up your heads, O ye gates;
Even lift them up, ye everlasting doors;
And the King of glory shall come in.”*

Again, is heard the challenge, “Who is this King of glory?” for the angels never weary of hearing His name exalted. The escorting angels make reply,—

“The Lord of hosts;

He is the King of glory.” Psalm 24:7-10.

Then the portals of the city of God are opened wide, and the angelic throng sweep through the gates amid a burst of rapturous music.

There is the throne, and around it the rainbow of promise. There are cherubim and seraphim. The commanders of the angel hosts, the sons of God, the representatives of the unfallen worlds, are assembled. The heavenly council before which Lucifer had accused God and His Son, the representatives of those sinless realms over which Satan had thought to establish his dominion,—all are there to welcome the Redeemer. They are eager to celebrate His triumph and to glorify their King.

But He waves them back. Not yet; He cannot now receive the coronet of glory and the royal robe. He enters into the presence of His Father. He points to His wounded head, the pierced side, the marred feet; He lifts His hands, bearing the print of nails. He points to the tokens of His triumph; He presents to God the wave sheaf, those raised with Him as representatives of that great multitude who shall come forth from the grave at His second coming. He approaches the Father, with whom there is joy over one sinner that repents; who rejoices over one with singing. Before the foundations of the earth were laid, the Father and the Son had united in a covenant to redeem man if he should be overcome by Satan. They had clasped Their hands in a solemn pledge that Christ should become the surety for the human race. This pledge Christ has fulfilled. When

upon the cross He cried out, “It is finished,” He addressed the Father. The compact had been fully carried out. Now He declares: Father, it is finished. I have done Thy will, O My God. I have completed the work of redemption. If Thy justice is satisfied, “I will that they also, whom Thou hast given Me, be with Me where I am.” John 19:30; 17:24.

The voice of God is heard proclaiming that justice is satisfied. Satan is vanquished. Christ's toiling, struggling ones on earth are “accepted in the Beloved.” Ephesians 1:6. Before the heavenly angels and the representatives of unfallen worlds, they are declared justified. Where He is, there His church shall be. “Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.” Psalm 85:10. The Father's arms encircle His Son, and the word is given, “Let all the angels of God worship Him.” Hebrews 1:6.

With joy unutterable, rulers and principalities and powers acknowledge the supremacy of the Prince of life. The angel host prostrate themselves before Him, while the glad shout fills all the courts of heaven, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing.” Revelation 5:12.

Songs of triumph mingle with the music from angel harps, till heaven seems to overflow with joy and praise. Love has conquered. The lost is found. Heaven rings with voices in lofty strains proclaiming, “Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb forever and ever.” Revelation 5:13.

From that scene of heavenly joy, there comes back to us on earth the echo of Christ's own wonderful words, "I ascend unto My Father, and your Father; and to My God, and your God." John 20:17. The family of heaven and the family of earth are one. For us our Lord ascended, and for us He lives. "Wherefore He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them." Hebrews 7:25.

Seven days of soul food

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind (Luke 10:27). To put it another way, **body + heart + mind = one living soul.**

We can't really divide ourselves into different sections, but it's useful to look at these different aspects of ourselves and be sure we have a well-balanced faith that uses all the avenues of a soul. Each of these starter kits will include a week's worth of food for your soul in each of these four methods of understanding and expression.

Write about each of the following in your prayer journal this week. Strive to use language of emotion, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY 1

Write your feelings about Jesus' death and resurrection, bearing in mind that He would have done it all for you, if you were the only one who ever sinned!

DAY 2

Heart: What kinds of emotions well up in you when you consider this story? Write them all, comfortable or uncomfortable, positive or negative. Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and ask God

to help you separate the genuine calls of His Spirit from any emotions that may be either dragging you down or making light of the great sacrifice made for you. Ask Him to help you discard the latter and truly live by the former. Consider how God wants to work in and through your heart this week.

DAY 3

Mind: The logical mind boggles at the concepts in this great Plan of Salvation. You can look at it from all sides, but not really “figure out” how on earth God did this. How does God die? How does God even come to earth as a baby? If He came back to life, was He really dead? We can go around and around, and it will avail us nothing. Mrs. White says we’ll be studying this story for eternity, and never quite understand it. So just choose to accept, and ask, how does God want to work toward reconciliation in your mind this week?

DAY 4

Strength/body: This is a very physical story. Jesus went through torments we can barely imagine (and don’t want to!) Yet, physically speaking, His torture was no different from thousands of others who have been, and still are, tortured to death. His great and unique torment, never experienced by any other being, was in bearing the sin of all humankind, and in being torn from God, which we definitely cannot imagine. Why do you think it was important for God to play out His great Plan in physical, human flesh? What are the ways you could use your body for God and others this week?

DAY 5

Soul/spirit: As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you so far this week, what new insights or callings do you hear in your heart and soul? Are there different ways God is calling you to live for Him? Consider those principles which you have not addressed in heart, mind, or body, and ponder how they affect your whole self—your soul.

DAY 6

Consider your family, community, church, school, etc.—all the different “neighborhoods” you are part of. Ask God to show you ways to share this amazing story in language that hasn’t been deadened by long usage so that people who are resistant can’t even hear it.

DAY 7

Use day 7 to create something beautiful that reflects what you have learned. Write a poem or song or story. Create a poster. Write a letter. Paint or draw a picture. Make a sign. Do some sidewalk chalk art or writings. Build something. Create a podcast or blog post or other social media post(s). Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something. Share the love!

CHAPTER TEN

Feed my lambs

Three men who were close to Jesus at the time of His death and resurrection can give us three viewpoints concerning forgiveness and reconciliation. The first is Peter. We will look at the beginning, middle and end of this story of the disciple who had something of a rocky road toward full commitment. **Read or have someone read John 13:37-38; Mark 14:71-72; and John 21:17.**

Do all here know this story? First, on His last night with the disciples, Jesus warned Peter, despite his protests, that he would betray his Lord. Then, in the courtyard of the high priest's house, Peter did deny Jesus, three times. When he heard the rooster crow, he was struck to the heart, and Mrs. White tells us that he ran back to the same spot in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus had prayed, and wept bitterly. He must have been one of the most sorrowful of that whole, sorrowful group on that black Sabbath day when his Master lay dead, because his sorrow was compounded with guilt and shame.

Then Jesus came out of His tomb, glorified. Peter ran to look when the women said the angel had told them He was risen, but all he found was graveclothes. He was there when Jesus appeared to the disciples, and in fact, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:5 that Jesus appeared privately to Peter (Cephas) at some point. But Peter clearly still feared that

he was not fully reconciled with Jesus—and perhaps was not worthy of being so. It is in this context that we must look at John 21. Three times, before others, Peter had insisted, even to swearing about it, that he didn't know Jesus. Three times, before his brother disciples, Jesus led him to confess that he did truly love Him.

Then Jesus gave Peter a particular command. He had told all the disciples that they were to share the gospel story all over their known world. To Peter, though, He says, "Feed my lambs."

Babies, whether people or animals, require particular care in feeding. Jesus' "babies," His "lambs," may be new believers, or may be people who, like Peter, have fallen hard and lost confidence in their own faith. Jesus doesn't just make a point of reconciling completely with His dearly loved friend, Peter, He also sends him to go and do likewise. Now that Peter knew what it felt like to fail spectacularly—and to be freely forgiven and restored to relationship—he would know how to encourage others who had failed. If you take the time to read Peter's letters in the New Testament, you will see signs of this gentleness and compassion that will surprise you when you compare them with the boisterous fisherman Peter used to be.

The second story is shorter. **Read or have someone read John 20:24-29.** Poor Thomas! We are pretty hard on him. Would *you* believe it if someone told you they had seen your dead grandmother up and walking around? It's not the same, of course; your grandmother never promised to rise again, but still, we should have a little respect for Thomas' honest doubts. "I'll believe it when I see it!" he tells them. More than that, he says he wants to touch the scars for himself. Have you ever tried to put yourself in Thomas' place and feel what he must have felt when Jesus appeared before him, held

out His hands, and said, “Okay, Thomas, put your fingers here. Now do you believe me?”

To his credit, Thomas didn’t argue or excuse himself. He immediately accepted the truth and worshiped Jesus as Lord and God. Jesus reminded him that those who have faith that doesn’t have to be proven are better off, but He also had compassion on Thomas’ doubts and reassured him. He reconciled with Thomas.

The third story is a sad one. **Read Matthew 27:3-6.** Let me ask you—did Jesus love Judas just as much as He loved Peter and Thomas and the rest? Of course He did! Had he tried to reach Judas’ heart? For three years or more! On the night of the Last Supper, when He washed Judas’ feet, Jesus was still reaching out to him, still longing for him to be reconciled. But Judas was so sure he was right and knew what Jesus should do. He was certain that if he saw to it Jesus was arrested, Jesus would have to use His power to save Himself, and all would know that He was the Messiah and King (and of course, Judas would be His chief councilor). Nothing Jesus could say convinced him of anything else, and in the end, nothing could have convinced him that Jesus could forgive him. Just think how the story might have ended if Judas, like Peter, had wept bitterly for his sin and had humbly asked for pardon. He would have been reconciled, too, and what a witness he could have made for Christ in the early years of the Christian movement!

Three men. Three offers of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Two acceptances and one refusal.

On which side are you?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. With which of these three men do you most identify? Why? Does it change depending on the condition of your heart at any given time?
2. Do you accept reconciliation when it is offered?
3. Do you offer reconciliation when it is needed?
4. Have you found that being forgiven for your own weaknesses gives you compassion with other people's weaknesses?
5. What do you think would have happened if Judas had honestly repented? Share your speculation on how the story could have unfolded from there.
6. What can you do to try to increase the forgiveness and reconciliation in your sphere of influence?

ACTIVITY

Remember, throughout this year, that the most important activities for reconciliation are to incorporate what you learn into your daily life. It will not be easy. It requires commitment, and hard work. No matter what you do, physically, mentally, or emotionally, ask the Holy Spirit to help you learn to make being an Ambassador of Reconciliation an automatic part of your life.

Feeding Lambs

For this week's activity, why not take real life and love outside your church environment? There are many ways you can feed God's lambs. Volunteer to work with children in your church or community. Volunteer at a soup kitchen or other organization which feeds the hungry. Volunteer to work with refugees in your region. Ask ADRA (Adventist Development and Relief Agency) what you can do in your area.

While you work in all these practical ways, give thought and prayer to how you are also feeding souls.

This Week's Story

[All stories, unless otherwise stated, are unrecognizable, fictionalized composites of characters and situations. Discuss, ponder, or write about the thoughts and feelings they raise in you. In particular, each time, ask yourself what you would have done in the characters' place, and what advice you would give them.]

This week's story is completely factual. You can find more details by looking up search terms such as "the story of Bill W."

In 1895, Vermont, United States, a boy named Bill was born. He came into a troubled family; his grandfather was an alcoholic and his parents abandoned him when he was only a baby. He and his sister were raised by their other grandparents, but life was hard for Bill, who was rebellious, neglected his schoolwork, tormented animals sometimes, and went through serious depression at 17 after his first love died. Despite his difficulties, it is clear that Bill had many gifts; he was both an athlete (captain of his football team) and an artist (principal violinist in his school orchestra).

In his early college years, Bill still had trouble managing his life. He suffered from depression and panic attacks, and even got suspended among a group of students involved in a hazing incident. By this time, he was engaged, but before he could marry, he was mobilized as part of the Vermont National Guard to fight against the Mexican Revolution. It was during this time that he had his first drink. Within just a few times

of drinking, he began to get drunk enough to pass out. He had found a “medicine” that would take away—temporarily—his bad feelings.

From then on, he drank. He married in 1918, went to World War I, came home and went to law school, but failed to graduate because he was too drunk to pick up his diploma. He went to work in the stock market, and his wife, Lois, traveled with him all over the country, evaluating businesses for potential investment. She hoped that these trips would keep him from drinking, but nothing did that. His drinking was constant now, and it ruined both his reputation and his ability to do business.

In 1933, at only 38 years of age, Bill was committed to a hospital for treatment of alcoholism three times. The alcohol was destroying his brain and the rest of his health, and he was told he would die from it or have to be locked up because of brain disease.

Bill was desperate. The following year, he had a visit from an old drinking buddy named Ebby. Only...Ebby wasn't drinking anymore! Bill learned that Ebby had found success by using the methods developed by a Christian group called the Oxford Group. They followed four practices: the sharing of sins and temptations with another Christian, surrender of the life past, present and future, into God's keeping and direction, restitution to all whom they had wronged directly or indirectly, listening for God's guidance, and carrying it out.

Bill was interested, but didn't really commit at that time. Then he went into the hospital for the fourth time. On December 11, 1934, Ebby visited Bill in the hospital. He urged him to give himself over to God, the only One who could deliver him. That night, lying

alone, feeling depressed and despairing, Bill cried out, “I’ll do anything! Anything at all! If there be a God, let Him show Himself!”

Sometimes God has special mercy on people who are in extreme crisis. Bill felt a bright light surrounding him, and feeling of joy and peace such as he had never known before. He never drank again.

That makes it sound easy, but it wasn’t. Later, on another business trip, Bill almost drank again. He became convinced that the only way he could remain sober was if he could help another alcoholic. He called phone numbers in a church directory, and eventually found another alcoholic, named Bob. Bill shared his story and Bob was able to obtain a religious experience, too. He had one brief relapse, but then stayed sober the rest of his life.

Having been so weak themselves, those two men *knew* what it was like to fight this demon disease of alcoholism. They began working with other alcoholics and went on to found Alcoholics Anonymous, which has spread all over the world and to this day uses the principles of submitting fully to God, sharing stories, and helping others—all anonymously.

Today, we know many details of Bill’s life only because journalists who didn’t understand the importance of anonymity put his full name in his obituaries when he died. He stands as an example, like Peter, of what can happen when one weak person puts their faith in Christ and holds out a hand to help another weak person.

Seven days of soul food

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind (Luke 10:27). To put it another way, **body + heart + mind = one living soul.**

We can't really divide ourselves into different sections, but it's useful to look at these different aspects of ourselves and be sure we have a well-balanced faith that uses all the avenues of a soul. Each of these starter kits will include a week's worth of food for your soul in each of these four methods of understanding and expression.

Write about each of the following in your prayer journal this week. Strive to use language of emotion, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY 1

Has there ever been a time when you betrayed Jesus? (If you have betrayed anyone, you have betrayed Jesus.) Write your feelings about this and about its results. If you have not asked forgiveness and tried to make restitution, ask God what first steps to take. And be sure to accept His freely offered forgiveness.

DAY 2

Heart: Have you ever been the betrayed one? Write about this and its results. Have you offered forgiveness and, if possible, reconciliation? If not, ask God what your next steps should be. Full reconciliation may not be possible if the person is still dangerous to you, but you may maintain an attitude of forgiveness toward them while keeping yourself safe. Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in and through your heart this week.

DAY 3

Mind: List your best and worst qualities. See if you can figure out ways to turn your worst qualities upside-down to become some of your best ones. How does God want to work toward reconciliation in your mind this week?

DAY 4

Strength/body: When Peter was in distress and mental turmoil, even after he knew Jesus had been resurrected, he went fishing. Sometimes going and doing a physical thing can be the best way to help ourselves and others. What are the ways you could use your body for God and others this week?

DAY 5

Soul/spirit: As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you so far this week, think about the ways in which your good choices help keep you whole and integrated, and your unwise

choices pull you apart. Consider those principles which you have not addressed in heart, mind, or body, and ponder how they affect your whole self—your soul.

DAY 6

Consider your family, community, church, school, etc.—all the different “neighborhoods” you are part of. Find ways to share the compassion that God has shown to you.

DAY 7

Use day 7 to create something beautiful that reflects what you have learned. Write a poem or song or story. Create a poster. Write a letter. Paint or draw a picture. Make a sign. Do some sidewalk chalk art or writings. Build something. Create a podcast or blog post or other social media post(s). Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something. Share the love!

CHAPTER ELEVEN

*The First Ambassadors***Begin by asking someone to read Acts 1:12-14 and Acts 2:1-4.**

The hundred and twenty people (Acts 1:15) gathered in that upper room must have felt like they'd been on a roller coaster. It's no wonder that it took them another ten days of praying, studying, and discussing to get their minds around all that had happened. First, they were just living their ordinary lives, then this amazing Preacher/Healer came along and turned their lives upside-down so that many of them had now been traveling and working with Him for three years or more. Next, the Healer was arrested, put through a mockery of a trial, and violently executed. Just as they were beginning to get past the shock enough to grieve, He had turned up alive again! He spent several weeks, apparently not always with them in the sense He had been before, but coming and going unexpectedly, appearing, teaching, showing them that this all had been prophesied long ago to their forefathers and foremothers.

And then He left! He told them to go to Jerusalem, wait for "power from on high," whatever that might mean, and then to prepare to change the world for God. And He floated into the sky.

So, probably feeling stunned, they went back to the upper room where they'd had their Last Supper with Jesus, and they started to talk together. The Bible says it was all eleven remaining disciples, the women including Jesus' mother, and others, for a total of about 120, so it must have been a pretty big room. They told the stories over and over to each other—stories of healing, stories of His teachings, stories of working with Him. The women repeated what they had seen when they went to the tomb, and what the angel said. Mary Magdalene was probably asked over and over about her early morning meeting with Jesus. Peter no doubt kept exclaiming over Jesus' forgiveness and mercy toward him.

Then the two from Emmaus would start sharing what Jesus had taught them from the Old Testament (except they didn't know that was "Old" yet; the New had not been written!) and everybody would begin reciting and comparing scriptures, reminding each other of the other things Jesus had taught about the messianic prophecies and Himself. It's unlikely they had access to scriptures—many of them probably couldn't even read—but it's possible that a scroll or two were available to them. But they, especially any who had been to the schools that taught the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) had a lot memorized, and the Holy Spirit helped them remember what they needed.

Most of all, they prayed. The Bible says they were "continually devoting themselves to prayer."

Everything was different. Even the idea of men and women studying and praying together was different for them, though Jesus had been introducing them to it for a while, with the women who traveled with them and supported His ministry, and making a point of saying that Mary had "chosen the better part" when she sat at His feet with the men (Luke 10:42). But far more than that had changed. Their ideas about life and God and love and forgiveness had changed. It must have seemed that the very

air felt different. Their lives would never be the same. And what, they wondered, would this promised “power from on high” be like?

And then...it came. A powerful wind, like a tornado or a storm, but not damaging. Flames like little tongues of fire hovering over their heads. And suddenly, the ability to speak powerfully in front of crowds of people they’d been terrified of a few weeks earlier, and have people from all lands understand in their own tongues! The Spirit—the Comforter Jesus had promised—was here! With them! Giving them, yes, power from on high!

Pay close attention. What was the very first sermon preached that very day? You can read the whole sermon right there in Acts 2, and it begins by showing from the prophecies, just as they had gotten it clear in their own minds, that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Then notice especially verses 36-38:

“You crucified Him,” Peter says.

Cut to the heart, the people cry, “What shall we do?”

Surely Peter could have been tempted to be angry and push them away. Probably many of those same people had been in the mob a few weeks earlier, shouting “Crucify Him!” But no, Peter has been called to be an Ambassador of Reconciliation. He has been told to feed the lambs. And he says gently, “Repent. Be baptized. The gift of the Spirit is for you and for your children, not just for us.”

Three thousand in one day. Think about it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Take a few moments and try to put yourselves in the place of the people in the Upper Room. What kinds of feelings would you have had if you'd lived through that time with Jesus, then without Him, then with Him again, then seeing Him go off to heaven and knowing you wouldn't see Him again? Discuss together what you would have wanted to talk about and pray about in the Upper Room. Can you think of some Old Testament scriptures that would have been helpful?
2. Look together at Peter's sermon in Acts 2. Why do you think it begins with prophecies? Why do you think the people were "pierced to the heart"? How does it offer reconciliation?
3. The Bible says they were "of one mind." We sometimes have a lot of trouble differentiating between unity and uniformity. God did not call us to be the same. He called us to live together with love and humility *as different as we are*. Discuss the differences, as you see them, between unity and uniformity. Give specific, local examples of each, if you can.

ACTIVITY

Remember, throughout this year, that the most important activities for reconciliation are to incorporate what you learn into your daily life. It will not be easy. It requires commitment, and hard work. No matter what you do, physically, mentally, or emotionally, ask the Holy Spirit to help you learn to make being an Ambassador of Reconciliation an automatic part of your life.

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

- Choose a song you like and sing it in unison, everyone singing the same notes together. Have any accompanists also play only the melody line. Try to even make your voices sound alike if you can. Sing the whole song, all verses, that way. Talk about how it sounded and what you liked or didn't like.
- Now sing the same song, all verses, with all the harmony and richness you can. If there are any instruments, use them all to the widest range they are capable of. Use percussion, even with just your hands or feet. Now discuss how it sounded and what you liked or didn't like.

It was the same song. It carried the same message. The same people sang and played.

What was the difference?

How can you carry this ability to create harmony out of difference into your everyday life?

This Week's Story

[All stories, unless otherwise stated, are unrecognizable, fictionalized composites of characters and situations. Discuss, ponder, or write about the thoughts and feelings they raise in you. In particular, each time, ask yourself what you would have done in the characters' place, and what advice you would give them.]

This week's story is a modern parable. See what you can learn from it.

Once upon a time there were three sisters. Their names were Pansy, Daisy, and Violet, and they loved flowers. More than anything, they wanted to have the best and most beautiful gardens they could possibly have.

In their country, there was a great and beloved king, and he was coming to their town! Everyone was painting and fixing up their houses, and sweeping their walks, and mending their fences, and weeding and trimming all their gardens so the king would be impressed with their village and see how beautiful it was.

One night, Pansy had a glorious dream. She saw a garden made all of white flowers, with the most delicious fragrances imaginable. Then the king came, and said, "What a lovely garden! Well done!" And Pansy woke up.

At first, she was terribly disappointed that it had only been a dream. But then she realized what it must mean. She woke up her sisters and told them all about it. “Don’t you see? It’s instructions from the king. He wants us to have a beautiful white garden!”

“But wait!” said Daisy. “I had a dream, too, and it was almost like yours, except the flowers were all purple! I’m sure the king wants us to have a purple garden!”

The two sisters began to argue. Their voices got louder and louder, so that they couldn’t hear what Violet was trying to say.

Violet was the youngest, and she was shy. She didn’t like loud voices, and she put her hands over her ears and shut her eyes. When the other two ran out of breath, she said timidly, “Maybe the king wants us to have purple flowers *and* white flowers!”

“Oh, what do you know?” Pansy asked rudely. “I’m the oldest, and the king *told* me we should have white flowers! Don’t you want to obey the king?”

Grumpily, Daisy gave in, and the two went out to dig up all the flowers that were any other color but white.

Sadly, Violet watched as the orange marigolds and the yellow and red roses, and all the many-colored petunias were dug up and flung to the side of the road. Since her older sisters were not paying attention to her, she went and rescued as many as she could and replanted them on the other side of the house. Her garden was rather jumbled, with different

sizes and colors and shapes of flowers all together, but she liked it. The flowers seemed to like it, too; they grew like mad, especially when a nice rain fell every few days.

Pansy scolded mightily when she realized what Violet was doing, but Violet went right on doing it. So Pansy banned her from the white garden. She watched it very closely, and at the first sign of any other color, she rooted it out. She didn't seem very happy. It was as if she didn't get any joy from her garden.

Daisy didn't feel very happy, either. She liked the white flowers, especially at night when they seemed to glow. But she liked other colors, too, especially purple irises and violets. But when she brought up any suggestion of variety, Pansy would accuse her of creating disunity and disobeying the king. Daisy tried to point out that she had dreamed of purple flowers and of the king complimenting them, but Pansy said the dream was a deception. And she *was* the oldest. Perhaps she knew better. Anyway, Daisy didn't like arguments. She wanted to get along. She wanted to please Pansy, and she especially wanted to please the king.

The day the village had been waiting for finally arrived and the king's procession wound through the streets, admiring all the shining houses, mended fences, neat roads, and beautiful gardens. He stopped in front of the three sisters' house. On one side of the house was a beautiful white garden. In front of it, looking proud and happy, stood Pansy, and at her side, trying to look happy, too, was Daisy. On the other side of the house

was a big jumble of flowers of all different colors, and in the middle of it, just like one of the flowers herself, was little Violet. The king smiled at her and she smiled back. “It’s kind of mixed up,” she said timidly.

“It’s beautiful!” said the king. “Just what I had in mind.”

He looked at Pansy, whose face was falling into a dismayed look. “But—didn’t you send me the dream of the white flowers?” she asked.

“Yes, I did,” said the king, “and I sent your sisters dreams of other colors. I wanted you to put all your dreams together into one harmonious garden that would be a rainbow of color. Your white garden is lovely, but I’m sorry that your little sister had to make the rainbow garden all by herself.”

Pansy hung her head. “I’m sorry. I misunderstood.”

The king came right up to her and lifted her chin. “You did not misunderstand *your* dream. Your mistake was to think your dream was the only dream.”

He turned to Daisy. “And your mistake was to let someone else think for you. Where are your purple flowers?”

Both girls had tears running down their cheeks. “I’m sorry,” they said together.

Violet ran over and put her arms around both her older sisters. “It’s okay. You can have some of my flowers!”

The king smiled.

The next time he came to town, the sisters had created a garden that was the showcase of the whole village. They had a white garden, a purple garden, a red garden, a yellow garden, and all around the edges, a garden with every color of the rainbow.

Seven days of soul food

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind (Luke 10:27). To put it another way, **body + heart + mind = one living soul.**

We can't really divide ourselves into different sections, but it's useful to look at these different aspects of ourselves and be sure we have a well-balanced faith that uses all the avenues of a soul. Each of these starter kits will include a week's worth of food for your soul in each of these four methods of understanding and expression.

Write about each of the following in your prayer journal this week. Strive to use language of emotion, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY 1

Write your feelings when you try to put yourself into the place of those early followers and feel what they felt.

DAY 2

Heart: Has there been a time in your life when you went through a “roller coaster” of feelings because there were several changes in a short time? How did you feel? How did you deal with your feelings? What would you do differently now? Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in and through your heart this week.

DAY 3

Mind: Consider the point of unity versus uniformity. In what ways are you the same as your other Adventist friends? In what ways are you different—even unique? Can you find ways to play up both of these strengths? How does God want to work toward reconciliation in your mind this week?

DAY 4

Strength/body: What kind of strength do you think it took in Acts to go out and begin the first moments of what became the Christian church? What kind of strength does it take today to be a missionary and Ambassador of Reconciliation? What are the ways you could use your body for God and others this week?

DAY 5

Soul/spirit: As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you so far this week, pray about your personal role as an Ambassador of Reconciliation. What are you called to do that others around you are not called to do? Consider those principles which you have not addressed in heart, mind, or body, and ponder how they affect your whole self—your soul.

DAY 6

Consider your family, community, church, school, etc.—all the different “neighborhoods” you are part of. Find ways to work toward greater unity while also honoring diversity.

DAY 7

Use day 7 to create something beautiful that reflects what you have learned. Write a poem or song or story. Create a poster. Write a letter. Paint or draw a picture. Make a sign. Do some sidewalk chalk art or writings. Build something. Create a podcast or blog post or other social media post(s). Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something. Share the love!

CHAPTER TWELVE

The First Ambassadors

Begin by asking someone to read Acts 1:12-14 and Acts 2:1-4.

The hundred and twenty people (Acts 1:15) gathered in that upper room must have felt like they'd been on a roller coaster. It's no wonder that it took them another ten days of praying, studying, and discussing to get their minds around all that had happened. First, they were just living their ordinary lives, then this amazing Preacher/Healer came along and turned their lives upside-down so that many of them had now been traveling and working with Him for three years or more. Next, the Healer was arrested, put through a mockery of a trial, and violently executed. Just as they were beginning to get past the shock enough to grieve, He had turned up alive again! He spent several weeks, apparently not always with them in the sense He had been before, but coming and going unexpectedly, appearing, teaching, showing them that this all had been prophesied long ago to their forefathers and foremothers.

And then He left! He told them to go to Jerusalem, wait for "power from on high," whatever that might mean, and then to prepare to change the world for God. And He floated into the sky.

So, probably feeling stunned, they went back to the upper room where they'd had their Last Supper with Jesus, and they started to talk together. The Bible says it was all eleven remaining disciples, the women including Jesus' mother, and others, for a total of about 120, so it must have been a pretty big room. They told the stories over and over to each other—stories of healing, stories of His teachings, stories of working with Him. The women repeated what they had seen when they went to the tomb, and what the angel said. Mary Magdalene was probably asked over and over about her early morning meeting with Jesus. Peter no doubt kept exclaiming over Jesus' forgiveness and mercy toward him.

Then the two from Emmaus would start sharing what Jesus had taught them from the Old Testament (except they didn't know that was "Old" yet; the New had not been written!) and everybody would begin reciting and comparing scriptures, reminding each other of the other things Jesus had taught about the messianic prophecies and Himself. It's unlikely they had access to scriptures—many of them probably couldn't even read—but it's possible that a scroll or two were available to them. But they, especially any who had been to the schools that taught the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) had a lot memorized, and the Holy Spirit helped them remember what they needed.

Most of all, they prayed. The Bible says they were "continually devoting themselves to prayer."

Everything was different. Even the idea of men and women studying and praying together was different for them, though Jesus had been introducing them to it for a while, with the women who traveled with them and supported His ministry, and making a point of saying that Mary had "chosen the better part" when she sat at His

feet with the men (Luke 10:42). But far more than that had changed. Their ideas about life and God and love and forgiveness had changed. It must have seemed that the very air felt different. Their lives would never be the same. And what, they wondered, would this promised “power from on high” be like?

And then...it came. A powerful wind, like a tornado or a storm, but not damaging. Flames like little tongues of fire hovering over their heads. And suddenly, the ability to speak powerfully in front of crowds of people they’d been terrified of a few weeks earlier and have people from all lands understand in their own tongues! The Spirit—the Comforter Jesus had promised—was here! With them! Giving them, yes, power from on high!

Pay close attention. What was the very first sermon preached that very day? You can read the whole sermon right there in Acts 2, and it begins by showing from the prophecies, just as they had gotten it clear in their own minds, that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Then notice especially verses 36-38:

“You crucified Him,” Peter says.

Cut to the heart, the people cry, “What shall we do?”

Surely Peter could have been tempted to be angry and push them away. Probably many of those same people had been in the mob a few weeks earlier, shouting “Crucify Him!” But no, Peter has been called to be an Ambassador of Reconciliation. He has been told to feed the lambs. And he says gently, “Repent. Be baptized. The gift of the Spirit is for you and for your children, not just for us.”

Three thousand in one day. Think about it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Take a few moments and try to put yourselves in the place of the people in the Upper Room. What kinds of feelings would you have had if you'd lived through that time with Jesus, then without Him, then with Him again, then seeing Him go off to heaven and knowing you wouldn't see Him again? Discuss together what you would have wanted to talk about and pray about in the Upper Room. Can you think of some Old Testament scriptures that would have been helpful?
2. Look together at Peter's sermon in Acts 2. Why do you think it begins with prophecies? Why do you think the people were "pierced to the heart"? How does it offer reconciliation?
3. The Bible says they were "of one mind." We sometimes have a lot of trouble differentiating between unity and uniformity. God did not call us to be the same. He called us to live together with love and humility *as different as we are*. Discuss the differences, as you see them, between unity and uniformity. Give specific, local examples of each, if you can.

ACTIVITY

Remember, throughout this year, that the most important activities for reconciliation are to incorporate what you learn into your daily life. It will not be easy. It requires commitment, and hard work. No matter what you do, physically, mentally, or emotionally, ask the Holy Spirit to help you learn to make being an Ambassador of Reconciliation an automatic part of your life.

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

1. Choose a song you like and sing it in unison, everyone singing the same notes together. Have any accompanists also play only the melody line. Try to even make your voices sound alike if you can. Sing the whole song, all verses, that way. Talk about how it sounded and what you liked or didn't like.
2. Now sing the same song, all verses, with all the harmony and richness you can. If there are any instruments, use them all to the widest range they are capable of. Use percussion, even with just your hands or feet. Now discuss how it sounded and what you liked or didn't like.
3. It was the same song. It carried the same message. The same people sang and played. What was the difference? How can you carry this ability to create harmony out of difference into your everyday life?

This Week's Story

[All stories, unless otherwise stated, are unrecognizable, fictionalized composites of characters and situations. Discuss, ponder, or write about the thoughts and feelings they raise in you. In particular, each time, ask yourself what you would have done in the characters' place, and what advice you would give them.]

This week's story is a modern parable. See what you can learn from it.

Once upon a time there were three sisters. Their names were Pansy, Daisy, and Violet, and they loved flowers. More than anything, they wanted to have the best and most beautiful gardens they could possibly have.

In their country, there was a great and beloved king, and he was coming to their town! Everyone was painting and fixing up their houses, and sweeping their walks, and mending their fences, and weeding and trimming all their gardens so the king would be impressed with their village and see how beautiful it was.

One night, Pansy had a glorious dream. She saw a garden made all of white flowers, with the most delicious fragrances imaginable. Then the king came, and said, "What a lovely garden! Well done!" And Pansy woke up.

At first, she was terribly disappointed that it had only been a dream. But then she realized what it must mean. She woke up her sisters and told them all about it. "Don't you see? It's instructions from the king. He wants us to have a beautiful white garden!"

“But wait!” said Daisy. “I had a dream, too, and it was almost like yours, except the flowers were all purple! I’m sure the king wants us to have a purple garden!”

The two sisters began to argue. Their voices got louder and louder, so that they couldn’t hear what Violet was trying to say.

Violet was the youngest, and she was shy. She didn’t like loud voices, and she put her hands over her ears and shut her eyes. When the other two ran out of breath, she said timidly, “Maybe the king wants us to have purple flowers *and* white flowers!”

“Oh, what do you know?” Pansy asked rudely. “I’m the oldest, and the king *told* me we should have white flowers! Don’t you want to obey the king?”

Grumpily, Daisy gave in, and the two went out to dig up all the flowers that were any other color but white.

Sadly, Violet watched as the orange marigolds and the yellow and red roses, and all the many-colored petunias were dug up and flung to the side of the road. Since her older sisters were not paying attention to her, she went and rescued as many as she could and replanted them on the other side of the house. Her garden was rather jumbled, with different sizes and colors and shapes of flowers all together, but she liked it. The flowers seemed to like it, too; they grew like mad, especially when a nice rain fell every few days.

Pansy scolded mightily when she realized what Violet was doing, but Violet went right on doing it. So Pansy banned her from the white garden. She watched it very closely,

and at the first sign of any other color, she rooted it out. She didn't seem very happy. It was as if she didn't get any joy from her garden.

Daisy didn't feel very happy, either. She liked the white flowers, especially at night when they seemed to glow. But she liked other colors, too, especially purple irises and violets. But when she brought up any suggestion of variety, Pansy would accuse her of creating disunity and disobeying the king. Daisy tried to point out that she had dreamed of purple flowers and of the king complimenting them, but Pansy said the dream was a deception. And she *was* the oldest. Perhaps she knew better. Anyway, Daisy didn't like arguments. She wanted to get along. She wanted to please Pansy, and she especially wanted to please the king.

The day the village had been waiting for finally arrived and the king's procession wound through the streets, admiring all the shining houses, mended fences, neat roads, and beautiful gardens. He stopped in front of the three sisters' house. On one side of the house was a beautiful white garden. In front of it, looking proud and happy, stood Pansy, and at her side, trying to look happy, too, was Daisy. On the other side of the house was a big jumble of flowers of all different colors, and in the middle of it, just like one of the flowers herself, was little Violet. The king smiled at her and she smiled back. "It's kind of mixed up," she said timidly.

"It's beautiful!" said the king. "Just what I had in mind."

He looked at Pansy, whose face was falling into a dismayed look. "But—didn't you send me the dream of the white flowers?" she asked.

“Yes, I did,” said the king, “and I sent your sisters dreams of other colors. I wanted you to put all your dreams together into one harmonious garden that would be a rainbow of color. Your white garden is lovely, but I’m sorry that your little sister had to make the rainbow garden all by herself.”

Pansy hung her head. “I’m sorry. I misunderstood.”

The king came right up to her and lifted her chin. “You did not misunderstand *your* dream. Your mistake was to think your dream was the only dream.”

He turned to Daisy. “And your mistake was to let someone else think for you. Where are your purple flowers?”

Both girls had tears running down their cheeks. “I’m sorry,” they said together.

Violet ran over and put her arms around both her older sisters. “It’s okay. You can have some of my flowers!”

The king smiled.

The next time he came to town, the sisters had created a garden that was the showcase of the whole village. They had a white garden, a purple garden, a red garden, a yellow garden, and all around the edges, a garden with every color of the rainbow.

Seven days of soul food

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind (Luke 10:27). To put it another way, **body + heart + mind = one living soul.**

We can't really divide ourselves into different sections, but it's useful to look at these different aspects of ourselves and be sure we have a well-balanced faith that uses all the avenues of a soul. Each of these starter kits will include a week's worth of food for your soul in each of these four methods of understanding and expression.

Write about each of the following in your prayer journal this week. Strive to use language of emotion, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY 1

Write your feelings when you try to put yourself into the place of those early followers and feel what they felt.

DAY 2

Heart: Has there been a time in your life when you went through a “roller coaster” of feelings because there were several changes in a short time? How did you feel? How did you deal with your feelings? What would you do differently now? Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in and through your heart this week.

DAY 3

Mind: Consider the point of unity versus uniformity. In what ways are you the same as your other Adventist friends? In what ways are you different—even unique? Can you find ways to play up both of these strengths? How does God want to work toward reconciliation in your mind this week?

Day 4

Strength/body: What kind of strength do you think it took in Acts to go out and begin the first moments of what became the Christian church? What kind of strength does it take today to be a missionary and Ambassador of Reconciliation? What are the ways you could use your body for God and others this week?

DAY 5

Soul/spirit: As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you so far this week, pray about your personal role as an Ambassador of Reconciliation. What are you called to do that others around you are not called to do? Consider those principles which you have not addressed in heart, mind, or body, and ponder how they affect your whole self—your soul.

DAY 6

Consider your family, community, church, school, etc.—all the different “neighborhoods” you are part of. Find ways to work toward greater unity while also honoring diversity.

DAY 7

Use day 7 to create something beautiful that reflects what you have learned. Write a poem or song or story. Create a poster. Write a letter. Paint or draw a picture. Make a sign. Do some sidewalk chalk art or writings. Build something. Create a podcast or blog post or other social media post(s). Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something. Share the love!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Ambassadors' School**Begin by asking someone to read Acts 2:4-12.**

The only sermon we are given from this day of Pentecost when the Spirit came in power is Peter's, so we tend to forget these important verses we just read. How many does the Bible say received the tongues of flame? How many does it say "began to speak in other tongues"? That's right, *all!* Verse 7 uses the phrase, "all these who are speaking," and then lists 15 languages that were being heard! So how did it happen? Were all these people speaking at once? Did they take turns? It would have been difficult for 3,000 people to hear one man (though the Spirit could have made that happen, too) so perhaps there were a number of smaller groups scattered through the street, and different ones of the 120 from the Upper Room speaking with them. Or perhaps Peter spoke to the whole group and then the other disciples spoke to smaller groups. However, it happened, the results were cataclysmic. Just imagine what would happen in your church if 3,000 people became members in one day! And mind you, 3,000 people from at least 15 different cultural backgrounds!

How could this new movement possibly cope with this kind of influx? Well, for one thing, most of these people were in Jerusalem for the Feasts. Many went back home, taking the astonishing stories with them. That is how the gospel began to take over the whole known world in one generation.

But those that remained in Jerusalem and its environs had to figure out how to get along together. At first, it might have been easy, since they all had one exciting, astonishing, amazing thing in common—not just the stories, but the personal experience of the Holy Spirit with all that power, peace, and love.

Read or have someone read verse 42.

This verse lists four things the new believers devoted themselves to. [**if you have a small enough group, let the attendees list them, and perhaps use a scribe to put them on the board.**]

Let's take a look at each of these four, and then at the results.

Apostles' teaching—The *disciples* of Jesus were all 3,120 people. You, if you have committed yourself to following Jesus, are one of His disciples. The *apostles*, so far, were the twelve (including the new addition, Matthias, chosen in the end of Acts 1), though others would be called, and still are being called. These are the “messengers,” the “sent-out ones” who are called to break new ground for God's kingdom. All the disciples, new and old, spent time listening to the teaching of those who had lived and worked with Jesus throughout His ministry and had learned a lot (sometimes the hard way!)

Fellowship—Listening to teaching is only the beginning. A church is made up of people. So the second thing these 3,120 people (and more every week) did was spend a lot of time together. They loved to tell and retell, not only the stories of Jesus' life, but

the stories of what He was doing *now*, through the Spirit, in their own lives. There must have been lifelong friendships made in those early days of the church.

Breaking of bread—We think of this as Communion, but in those days, they were really eating together, not just having a little symbolic bread and grape juice. They made sure all the poor had enough—and then as now, the poor and needy, both physically and emotionally, are always the first to run to Jesus’ arms as soon as they find out He wants them, so there were probably many poor among the new believers. Eating together is a powerful thing for humans. It cements bonds of love and trust. God made us that way.

Prayer—Listed last, but most important of all, they devoted themselves to prayer. They prayed alone, in pairs, in small groups, and in large groups. Prayer was what kept them connected to this amazing Holy Spirit that had brought them all together, and in so doing, kept them connected to each other as well.

This early church was like a school in how to be ambassadors of peace.

And what were the results? **Read or have someone read the rest of the chapter: verses 43-47.**

They discovered true unity. Let’s see how many hints there are in these verses of what unity meant to them. “*Everyone*” kept feeling awe; “*all* those who believed were together and had *all things* in common”—even their possessions. People who had too much were selling it and sharing with those who had too little. What would that be like? They went to church and praised *together* as one great congregation, but they also

spent a lot of time *together* day by day in smaller groups, eating together, praying together...and growing together. People were drawn to this kind of community.

They still are!

Close by reading our theme passage: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you like best about the early church?
2. Is there anything you think would be easier to say than to do?
3. What do you think would happen if those in your church or neighborhood who had property sold it, and everybody shared alike?
4. How often do you eat and pray with believing friends outside of church or school?
5. What do you think drew people to the early church?
6. Are people drawn to your Christian experience? If you can, try to think why or why not.

ACTIVITY

Remember, throughout this year, that the most important activities for reconciliation are to incorporate what you learn into your daily life. It will not be easy. It requires commitment, and hard work. No matter what you do, physically, mentally, or emotionally, ask the Holy Spirit to help you learn to make being an Ambassador of Reconciliation an automatic part of your life.

The Ideal Church

1. You will need a large paper or cardboard poster for a background, and magazines and scissors for cutting out pictures, glue (spray glue would work well if you have access to it), markers, paints, crayons, pens, and so on, and even small items you could glue to your poster.
2. Make a collage entitled “The Ideal Church” (or any title you like better) that depicts the characteristics of the early church, which you would like to have more of in your own church. Discuss ways of beginning to make this come true in your community. Start with small steps.

This Week's Story

[All stories, unless otherwise stated, are unrecognizable, fictionalized composites of characters and situations. Discuss, ponder, or write about the thoughts and feelings they raise in you. In particular, each time, ask yourself what you would have done in the characters' place, and what advice you would give them.]

This is the first part of a story that will go for two weeks. It is based on a true story. Names and details have been changed. The church was not an Adventist one, but it could teach us some good lessons about how to be godly people.

PART 1

Dan was a middle-aged man. He had not been very religious in his youth, but now, as many people do when they grow older, he was thinking more about God and the things of God. He started attending church sometimes. He would visit different churches in his town or in nearby towns, looking for one that met the needs he felt.

Early on, he wasn't even sure what his needs were. He knew he wanted good friends, ones he could talk to about spiritual things. He knew he wanted to know more about God, and maybe about the Bible, though he wasn't sure if that old book was still very relevant to contemporary life. But he really didn't know why he felt as if there was something missing in his life. He wondered if it was just because he was growing older, and

perhaps was afraid to die, in case there really was a God. But that didn't seem like it, either. He just felt a longing for...*something*. So, he tried out churches.

Some churches he attended talked a lot about the Bible, but the people seemed cold and judgmental. Sometimes he never went back a second time. Others didn't talk about the Bible or about God very much at all; they just had fun together, which was nice, but didn't meet Dan's need for whatever that *something* was. Even if he didn't know what he needed, he knew when it wasn't met. He assumed he would also know when the hole was filled.

Eventually, he began to attend a church that drew him. The people were amazingly friendly and welcoming. He felt at home from his very first visit. They weren't just friendly in church, either. Some of them became friends, and he would see them or talk to them during the week.

The preaching stirred him in ways preaching rarely had. It was amazing how, in a 15-20-minute sermon, the pastor would say things that would stay with Dan all week, and actually make a difference to his days. The sermons were short enough that he could remember the points to share them with other people, and to his own surprise, sometimes he did. Better yet, the pastor was the most loving man Dan had ever seen. He said, as all preachers say, that he cared, and you could call him any time. But this one really meant it. Dan overheard the pastor giving his cell phone number to a woman who had just begun to attend and had to have major surgery.

The music was wonderful; this church was near a college, and there were many talented musicians and a choir who sang with such feeling that it sometimes brought tears to Dan's eyes.

The church was also very active in the community, working in dozens of different ways to make lives better, with little or no fanfare. They had a lot of mission projects of their own, but they also partnered with other local operations, such as food pantries, women's shelters, and preschools. They also funded various overseas missions and sometimes sent groups of people on short-term mission trips.

Another thing impressed Dan. In this church, every Sunday the sermon, the music the choir sang, the readings, and even the art and the things on the altar were all centered around the Bible passage for that day. The hangings changed colors and styles throughout the church year, and there were special displays that brought home the lessons of the Bible passages. The worship team believed that the church must reach out to all kinds of people: young and old, experienced with the Bible or not experienced, thinkers, makers, artists, educated or not, people who learned by listening or by seeing, or even by doing. Some weeks, congregants were invited to come to the front for a blessing, or to take a small stone to remind them of a blessing they wanted to carry with them, or to write down a prayer. Dan especially liked the time that the pastor preached on the "bread of life," and there was real bread dough on a table for everyone to come and knead, while considering prayerfully what God was "baking" into their heart. Another time, for the passage where Jesus wept over Jerusalem, saying He wished He could gather

them under his wings, a local artist set up the altar with a stuffed hen surrounded by little prickly balls from a sweet gum tree. The artist's statement was in the bulletin, explaining that the prickly sweet gum balls instead of fluffy chicks represented that Jesus wants to gather us like a mother hen, but we hurt Him instead.

Dan thought a lot about that. The odd "hole" in his soul began to feel a little smaller. Had he found the place where he could fill it completely?

To be continued...

Seven days of soul food

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind (Luke 10:27). To put it another way, **body + heart + mind = one living soul.**

We can't really divide ourselves into different sections, but it's useful to look at these different aspects of ourselves and be sure we have a well-balanced faith that uses all the avenues of a soul. Each of these starter kits will include a week's worth of food for your soul in each of these four methods of understanding and expression.

Write about each of the following in your prayer journal this week. Strive to use language of emotion, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY 1

Write the feelings that come to you when you read about the early church. In what ways are your feelings for your own local church the same or different?

DAY 2

Heart: Consider how important it is to human beings to be connected in families and communities. Does your church enfold you like a loving

family? What role do you play in this? Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in and through your heart this week.

DAY 3

Mind: List the characteristics and actions of the early church. Choose one or two that you think connect with your own gifts and interests and pray about ways you can encourage that characteristic and action in your church. How does God want to work toward reconciliation in your mind this week?

DAY 4

Strength/body: One of the most important actions of the early church was to feed and clothe those who need it. We can't use our minds or spirits well, or hear God clearly speaking to us, if our bodies are weak, sick, and in need. What are the ways you could use your body for God and others this week?

DAY 5

Soul/spirit: As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you so far this week, think about the ways that the characteristics of the church can be active in an individual—in you. Consider those principles which you have not addressed in heart, mind, or body, and ponder how they affect your whole self—your soul.

DAY 6

Consider your family, community, church, school, etc.—all the different “neighborhoods” you are part of. Find ways to make your church inviting to all kinds of people.

DAY 7

Use day 7 to create something beautiful that reflects what you have learned. Write a poem or song or story. Create a poster. Write a letter. Paint or draw a picture. Make a sign. Do some sidewalk chalk art or writings. Build something. Create a podcast or blog post or other social media post(s). Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something. Share the love!