

2017

Weeks 15-22

STARTER

KIT

for your youth group or small group meetings



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and seeking to apply what we learn to our own lives.

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INTRODUCTION

UNDERSTANDING THIS STARTER KIT

Five hundred years ago, on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses disagreeing fundamentally with the Catholicism of the time to the door of the cathedral in Wittenberg, Germany. This act is generally seen as the real start to the Protestant Reformation. In honor of that brave act, General Conference Youth Ministries has chosen Reformation as the theme for the whole year of 2017.

We will study Luther and other reformers, but most importantly, we will study all the varying meanings of this word, what it meant to many people throughout the Bible, and what it means to us. If what we study at church, in Sabbath school, and in youth meetings does not change our lives, then it is useless.

So what does “reformation” really mean? Looking more closely, we see that the word is based on “form,” which just means to make. God formed Adam from dirt. You can form things from clay or pipe cleaners.

Re-form takes another step. It takes something that has been formed and forms it differently. It is usually necessary to take apart the original thing to make something new of it.

When we use “reformed” about a person, we usually mean someone who was “bad” is now “good.” A drug addict becomes a loving mother. A murderer becomes a Christian and shares the Good News of the gospel with other prisoners.

But reformed doesn’t necessarily mean from bad to good. It can just mean re-formed. My mother used to make dresses for me out of my father’s old shirts. She cut up the shirts into pieces of cloth and cut new pieces to be put together into a little girl’s dress.

All this year, we will be examining different kinds of reformation in people of the Bible, and seeking to apply what we learn to our own lives.

What did Martin Luther reform?

First of all, it is very important to understand that there are millions of Catholics, both priests and laypeople, who are godly, loving Christians. It is the system, also called the papacy, which has a lot to answer to God for.

Luther had no intention of starting a whole new church or church movement. He hoped the church he loved could be reformed. And though he worried that he was not the right one to do something, he also knew God calls each of us to stand for truth wherever we are.

For several hundred years, the Catholic Church, or rather, the highest authorities in that church, including popes, the highest priests, called cardinals, and local archbishops and bishops, had most of Europe in a choke hold. They claimed that the pope stood in the place of Christ on earth, and that he had the power to determine not just if you lived or died, but whether you went to heaven or hell. (Or purgatory, which was an in-between place where supposedly a person was tortured until he or she had paid for all the sins of his or her life and could then go to heaven.)

In Luther's time, a decree had been made that people could be forgiven for all their sins and get to go straight to heaven when they died, if they bought an "indulgence." The pope was literally saying, "Give me money, and I will indulge your sinfulness. You don't have to actually change."

For centuries, people had been so heavily trained to obey the church in all things that they gave up, in some cases, their entire life savings. You could buy indulgences for people who had already died, too, getting them out of purgatory early. Can you imagine? If your mother had died, and you believed her spirit was spending years, or even centuries, in purgatory being tortured for everything she had ever done wrong (as determined by a strict, authoritarian church) wouldn't you give or do anything to get her out? People did—and they grew poorer and poorer while the pope, cardinals, priests, and churches grew richer and richer.

Martin Luther had been trained to obey the church, too. In fact, he became a monk—a man who gave up all possessions to the church and gave over his entire life to live only for God—no wife, no family, no job except whatever the abbot (the leader of the monks) told him to do. He loved his church.

But Luther was educated, able to read Latin, and could read God's word for himself. And he didn't see a God who indulged sin in that Bible. He also didn't see a God who tortured people to make them pay for their sins. He preached about the God he found in the Bible—a God who loved people so much He gave Himself up for them. A God who sent His Son to die so that people wouldn't have to. People loved to listen to Dr. Luther. But as time went on, he started to say some shocking things. The church leaders started to try to make him back down.

Then he posted those 95 theses.

The first four said that repentance should be from the heart and should lead to real change. If there was no change, then there was no repentance.

In theses # 5 and 6, Luther said the pope didn't have the power to forgive anything except the breaking of rules he made himself. He said the pope could "declare and show" to the people that God had forgiven their sins, but he couldn't do it himself. Only God could.

In # 27 and 28, Luther said that when people preach "as soon as the money clinks into the money chest, the soul flies out of purgatory" were only preaching human doctrines, not God's. Instead, he added, "It is certain that when the money clinks in the money chest, greed and avarice can be increased; but when the church intercedes, the result is in the hands of God alone."

You can imagine what the church authorities thought. Luther was arrested more than once, and they did their utmost to make him "recant," that is, give up his beliefs.

Luther was tempted. What if he was wrong? He had always been taught to love and obey his church. He wrote that he was almost in despair as he thought of himself in opposition to this powerful organization. What if God had not sent him to try to change things?

But he kept falling back on what had become his favorite Bible verse: "The just shall live by faith" Romans 1:17. God alone was to be obeyed, above all earthly powers. Luther would stand on the Word of God alone.

His story is a long and dramatic one. If you want to read the whole story, there are many, many resources online, but a good telling of the whole story can be found in *The Great Controversy*, chapter 7.

In the end, Luther was excommunicated and so were thousands of those who believed he was telling the truth. People in those days believed excommunication meant one would burn in hell forever. It was a scary time. But Luther found peace, satisfaction, joy in the Lord, and even a family! Luther later married a woman who had been a nun. He had to break his monk's vows, and she her nun's vows in order to marry. We can only imagine how difficult that was—and how joyful it made them once they realized it was God's will. Luther later wrote, "There is no more lovely, friendly, and charming relationship, communion, or company than a good marriage."

His whole life had been taken apart and re-formed.

A whole new church movement began and hasn't ended yet. The Seventh-day Adventist denomination, formed officially in 1863, is one of those who are still protesting church leaders (and not just Catholic ones) who insist on taking to themselves powers that belong to God alone. No one—not your teacher or pastor, not even your parents—is to be your conscience for you, once you have reached an age where you can read and understand the Bible for yourself. All of these persons are meant to be leaders and mentors and good sources of education and faith for you, but your conscience is between you and God.

HERE IS WHAT WE PROVIDE IN EACH SESSION:

1. A brief reading on the topic. This can be read, but of course should be shared instead in the leader's own words, adding or subtracting details that fit your group. Usually, there are Bible readings and questions worked into the text.
2. A short devotion that brings home the principles of the topic of the week. This is intended to be shared with the whole group.
3. An activity suggestion. These are simple, requiring few, if any, materials, but we all learn and retain better if we do something physical with what we've heard and seen.
4. A short skit. If you have time to rehearse and learn, these can be done on different weeks, or even for other meetings such as church services. But they can also be and done in impromptu fashion, each person reading his/her part expressively. Always allow time to discuss people's reactions after skits.
5. Very important: Each week's starter kit includes a page called "7 Days of Soul Food." Print these out and give copies to each person, or give each person the link if they have online access. These are personal applications that will carry the devotion through the whole week. It is highly recommended that each person begin some sort of prayer journal and use it all year. We general think of journals as being full of writing, but if you don't like to write, you can draw, doodle, paste in pictures that bring the lessons of the week to mind—anything that helps you draw closer to God.

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PASSION FOR THE CHURCH

Do you think you have a “passion for the church”? What does that mean? [Allow a few moments for answers.] We have many people who are considered to have a passion for building up a particular congregation or a particular denomination. Is that what passion for the church is?

During Martin Luther’s time, there were plenty—a very great deal, in fact—of this kind of passion for the church of the time. The hierarchy of the church, from the pope to the lowliest monk or nun, was intent on building up Roman Catholicism to a worldwide body that would cover the planet. Luther was one of those who had that same passion.

But as he studied the Bible for himself and learned that the leaders had left the path of God in some very important ways, his passion began to change—to re-form, to transform—into something different. First, he found himself filled with a passion for God and His magnificent free grace. As we saw in an earlier lesson, Luther said he felt as if he had been completely born again and entered into paradise already.

That passion for God led to a passion for people. (Which, after all, is what “church” means. People, not a building or a system of belief.) Over time, Luther saw that the church he loved refused to change and instead tried to threaten and intimidate him into turning against the truths he had learned (which meant turning against God). Reluctantly, he had to let go of his passion for the belief system or denomination of his childhood and youth.

His passion for God and for God’s truth and God’s faithful people led to a new and different form of worship that came to be called Lutheranism. Luther didn’t like this name. He is quoted as saying, “The first thing I ask is that people should not make use of my name, and should not call themselves Lutherans but Christians. What is Luther? The teaching is not mine. Nor was I crucified for anyone. How did I, poor stinking bag of maggots that I am, come to the point where people call the children of Christ by my evil name?” [Ebeling, Gerhardt. *Luther: An Introduction to His Thought*. Translated by R.A. Wilson. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 31.]

That passion for God, for truth, for grace, and for people swept the world in what we now call the Protestant Reformation, leading to the foundation of many new “churches,” that is for many new systems of doctrine and practice, but all true believers in the world are part of the body of Christ. Jesus said that He had “many sheep not of this fold,” meaning outside of Judaism (John 10:16). He could say the same of every human denomination.

So yes, passion for your denomination, so long as it does not depart from God or grace, is part of passion for the church, but more important is a passion for the ecclesia, the called-out ones—the body of believers. All believers. Passion for the church means a passion for people.

If we look at Christ’s life, we find that passion on display every single day of His life. We will look more deeply into His passion in our devotion.

DEVOTION

If you look through the gospels you will not find many (if any) places where Jesus seeks to build up Judaism. That's strange, when you think about it. He was, after all, the One who set up that system in the first place, giving the basics of sacrifice and prayer to Adam and Eve and their descendants, and then the full tabernacle system to Moses and the Israelites. Read Ex. 25:8, 9 and Heb. 8:5. What was the earthly tabernacle (or tent of meeting) a copy of?

By Jesus' time, the Jewish system had long since become merely a daily round of rituals, the same as they had been for hundreds of years, with very little sense of the inner meaning of the services. Of course, God has always had faithful ones, and there were always a minority, both among the priests and among the people, who did understand and seek to make God's love a reality in their lives, through the rituals and services. The rest seemed to think that there was some kind of magic power in the rituals themselves, and as long as you did them perfectly according to the rules, it didn't matter how you lived, or how loving you were—or weren't.

Jesus did much to combat this rule-keeping formality, and in that sense, did seek to purify and reform the Judaism of His day. In John 3, He asked Nicodemus why he, as a leader in Israel, didn't understand these eternal truths. But read what He said to the woman at the well, in the very next chapter. Read or have read John 4:23, 24. In what way does this build up the church? Was it the way they (or we) would expect?

God only instituted the sacrificial system as a temporary method of pointing toward the sacrifice of His Son as the true Lamb of God. It was a shadow, a sort of living, acted-out parable. The blood of lambs and goats had no power to save anyone. See Hebrews 10:4, also verses 12 and 13. Soon, that whole system would be obsolete.

So did Jesus have a passion for His church? Of course He did! His passion for those He loves is greater than we can even imagine, let alone imitate. All you have to do is look at how He showed love.

For church leaders: John 3, whole chapter; Luke 10:25-28. The term "lawyer" means a man versed in Jewish law. He was a leader in the church to whom Jesus reached out in love.

For church members: Luke 4:16 and onward, preaching in His home synagogue; all His sermons to the thousands who followed Him.

For those on the fringes: women with bad reputations, John 4, John 8, Luke 7:36-50; lepers, Matt. 8:1-4; Samaritans; Luke 17:11-19; demon-possessed people, Mark 5 and Luke 8.

We could find many, many more, and if we look to stories of our own time, there are thousands. Jesus has a passion for His church, revealed in His passion for people, including people who are not visibly members of His body—yet.

May God reform us to the point where we share that passion, and show it.

ACTIVITY SUGGESTION

1. Brainstorm some ideas of ways to share and show Jesus' passion for people.
2. Choose three, and go and do them.
3. Come together again at some point to share results.

SEVEN DAYS OF SOUL FOOD

SEVEN DAYS' WORTH OF DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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 emotions, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY ONE: In your prayer journal, write your thoughts about passion for the church as it was before and after Luther, and as it is now. Do you have it? How do you show it? Is your passion for an institution, or for the God it worships and the people in it?

DAY TWO: *Heart:* Read 1 John 2:9-12. How does verse 12 make you feel? If you have been less loving than you wish, let this text comfort you. Now picture in your mind a person with whom you have a difficult relationship. Imagine that person when he/she was born, as an innocent baby, beloved of God. Would it help you to love that person if you remember that? Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in your heart this week.

DAY THREE: *Mind:* Read Luke 10:25-37. As an expert in Jewish law, this man was a thinker. He was used to rules, and he probably wanted Jesus to give him a simple rule to add to his list so he could check it off and feel good. What story did Jesus answer with? Why do you think He did that? How does God want to work in your mind this week?

DAY FOUR: *Strength/body:* If you have access to the internet, look up “love and health” and see what you can learn about love making you healthier. Read Isaiah 58:11 and Prov. 14:30. What are the ways God wants to use your love for others to strengthen your body (and theirs) this week?

DAY FIVE: *Soul/spirit:* As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you so far this week, write about why you think passion for others reforms us and makes us more whole.

DAY SIX: Passion for the body of Christ means passion for your family, community, and church, as well as for those outside those circles. What can you do this week to open the door to at least one person to enter that circle of love?

DAY SEVEN: 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 Twitter post(s).
- Make food and give it to someone in need.

Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something.

Share the love!

a short skit

PASSION FOR THE CHURCH

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A SHORT SKIT (ABOUT 10-15 MINUTES)

[References for this story are scattered, instead of being in one place as most of our skit stories have been, so they are listed here: Acts 18:1-3, 18-26; Rom. 16:3; 1 Cor. 16:19-24; 2 Timothy 4:16-22.]

CHARACTERS

1. Priscilla
2. Aquila
3. Paul
4. Apollos
5. Some people for congregations or audiences
6. Narrator

PROPS

1. Some leather or cloth for Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila to pretend to work on.
2. A podium, lectern, desk or table for a speaker. Or it could be just a central chair. A Bible marked at 1 Cor. 16 and another opened to 2 Timothy 4.
3. A pitcher of water and a glass.

ACT 1

Scene: Some people are in a group in the middle of the front of the room, "being a city." You can get as creative with this as you like and have time for: they could be merely walking around, gesturing, silently pretending to talk, or you could even make a sort of little market street, with people pretending to buy and sell things. Priscilla and Aquila are there, working on their tents or selling them. They have the pitcher of water and glass with them. There must be some chairs there. Paul is over at one side of the room.

Paul: (Walking from side of room toward center front, sighing, maybe rubbing his back) I'm so tired! The people in Thessalonica caused an uproar, then came to Berea where people were actually accepting Christ and caused more trouble there. Then in Athens they were argumentative, and most of them just sneered at me when I told them Jesus rose from the dead. Well, at least a few believed. Praise God for that! I know Corinth won't be any better. Probably worse! It's a really wicked city. (He sighs.)

Priscilla: (Noticing Paul) look, Aquila, here comes a tired traveler. Let's greet him in Jesus' name.

(All others continue to silently masquerade their work or shopping while the following conversation takes place.)

Aquila: (Stands, if he isn't already standing)
Hello, brother, welcome! You look as if
you've been walking a while. Here, have a
seat.

Paul: (Sits gratefully. Priscilla hands him a
glass of water.) Thank you. You are very
kind.

Priscilla: We know how tiring traveling can be. We
came all the way from Rome recently.

Paul: Rome! I've always wanted to go there. Why
did you leave?

Aquila: Emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews. We
had to leave.

Priscilla: We hope to go back someday. Why have you
come to Corinth?

Paul: (Looks around at the others and sighs) It
is a wicked city. It is very much in need
of the story of Jesus the Messiah.

Priscilla: The Messiah! You know, we've heard some
rumors about that. It isn't true, is it?

Paul: (Earnestly) Oh, it's true! It's the word
of God for all, beginning with us Jews!

Aquila: We want to hear all about it. Why don't
you stay with us?

Paul: I would be very grateful! I can earn my
keep, too—I see you are tentmakers, and so
am I!

(They get up and go away together. Others move chairs
into rows at one side of front and sit down as if in
synagogue.)

Narrator: So Paul stayed in Corinth with Priscilla and her husband Aquila. They were faithful Jews, and not only did they accept the story of Jesus with joy, but their passion for the people grew as great as Paul's. They, too, began to preach and tell the story, and in fact, they went to Syria by sea with Paul when he went. For reasons we don't know, they stayed in Ephesus when he went on to Caesarea and Antioch. They even started a church in their home, and since Priscilla is almost always named first when they are mentioned, it seems that she was the stronger character and leader, though of course we can't know that for sure. While they were in Ephesus and Paul was away, a great speaker named Apollos came to town.

Act II

Scene: Apollos stands before the people sitting in the chairs and raises his hands to speak. Priscilla and Aquila join the group.

Apollos: And so, my friend, John the Baptist was the one who pointed out Jesus of Nazareth as being the one God had promised to our fathers centuries before. John even baptized Jesus.. Some of his disciples became Jesus' disciples. I, too, have been baptized into repentance, as John said. I invite you to be baptized as well.

Priscilla: (In a low voice, as if she is whispering to Aquila, but be sure she can be heard) Aquila, he doesn't seem to know the whole truth. He's only talking about John's baptism.

Aquila: (Also "whispering.") Yes, and he hasn't mentioned the Holy Spirit once.

Priscilla: We don't want to embarrass him in front of people, though. Let's invite him to dinner.

(People get up and move away as if the meeting is over.)

Aquila: Brother Apollos, may we speak to you?

Apollos: (Smiling) Certainly!

Priscilla: We'd like you to come to our house. (The three walk away together slowly while having the following conversation.) Brother, we noticed you were speaking of John's baptism, but not of baptism into Christ.

Apollos: I don't know about that. Is there more?

Aquila: Oh, yes, much more! Do you know about the Holy Spirit?

Priscilla: Well, you see, after Jesus died, He sent the Holy Spirit to be with us always...(Her voice fades away and they walk to the side. While Narrator reads next section, Priscilla, Aquila, and a few others quietly move the chairs into a circle as if it's a living room, and gather in them. Priscilla has the Bible marked at 2 Tim. 4, and Aquila has the one marked at 1 Cor. 16.)

Narrator: We don't know exactly what Apollos preached about, but Acts in 18:24 and 25 we learn that he was "mighty in the Scriptures, fervent in spirit, and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus," but that he only knew about John's baptism. However, he listened with great interest to Priscilla and Aquila as they taught him the rest of the truth they knew, and accepted what they taught him. We know that he became a leader who also had a passion for the church because later Paul said in 1 Cor. 1:12 that some people were claiming to be "of Paul" and some were claiming to be "of Apollos." Paul reminded them that we're all only "of Christ," not of any one man. Reminds us of Luther, doesn't it?

Narrator sits down.

Act III

(Priscilla, Aquila, and the others look very sad, wiping away tears as if they have been crying.)

Priscilla: I just can't believe he's dead! (Others murmur and shake their heads sadly.)

Aquila: (Speaking with horror) The emperor had him beheaded! Oh, Lord, keep us strong!

Priscilla: At least we have his letters. Let's encourage ourselves by reading some of them.

Aquila: Look, remember this one that he wrote to Corinth while we were together? (Reads 1 Cor. 16:19-24, sadly.) Those were such good days!

Priscilla: We'll never forget them. Here's the last letter he wrote. Remember, he sent it to Timothy, and Timothy shared it with all of us. We've made copies, too, and sent them on to the churches. I remember thinking he sounded discouraged. Listen to this part. (Reads 2 Tim. 4:16.)

Aquila: Yes, I think we all knew then that his days were numbered. But he was still so compassionate, even to those who got afraid and deserted him. I was so touched that he made a point of greeting us by name at the end of that one. Paul was such a good friend. (Stops for a moment, putting his hand over his eyes. Then lifts his head.) But read on, Priscilla. The next bit is my favorite part.

Priscilla: (Reads verses 17-18. Remains silent for a minute, then raises her head, squares her shoulders, and says firmly) And so He will. God will rescue him, even from this evil deed of execution, and bring our brother Paul safely to His kingdom! Listen to how he ended the letter: (Reads verse 22.)

Aquila: (Also raises his head and squares his shoulders. Others in group do the same.) We must be strong. We must stand for God and His church just as Paul did. The Holy Spirit will be with us. Let us pray.

(This can be the closing prayer for the meeting if you wish.)

16

“I WILL GO”

Esther's is a story with both tragedy and victory in it. Talk about a life that is re-formed more than once, without any choice on her own part! This young woman, a faithful Jewish girl in exile in the land of Babylon, loses all chance to marry a man of her people for love when she is chosen along with many other young women (none of whom have any say in the matter) to go and become a part of King Ahasuerus' harem. She loses the only family she has left, her older cousin Mordecai, who adopted and raised her after her parents died. She even loses her own name, Hadassah, which means “myrtle tree,” for the Babylonian Esther, meaning “star.”

For a year she lives with only the other virgins and is trained and kept under a beautifying regimen. She may see Mordecai occasionally, or she may not see him directly. We are told he hangs around the court to learn news of her, but she may only have been able to send and receive messages through servants, as seen in chapter 4, verses 4 and 5.

At the end of the year, all the virgins in turn go to the king. Read or have read Esther 2:12-14. What house did each girl go to after her night with the king? What was she now? What does verse 14 imply about her future fate? How would you feel if this were you? Would you be tempted to think God couldn't work in an ungodly system like this?

Read verses 16-18. In many ways, this is a blessing, since Esther now has privileges she didn't have before and wouldn't have had in the house of the concubines. But remember she still has had no choice in all of this. Perhaps she grows to love the king. Perhaps not.

Esther can't even share her faith, since Mordecai told her not to let anyone know she is a Jew. This seems to go against what we are learning about having a passion for God, His truth, and His people, but in the end, Esther is in just the right place to stand up for her people, even at the risk of her own life.

We all know about Haman's plot to kill all the Jews. As a reminder, read 3:1-6. What one small thing happened that angered Haman? What does the fact that he then wants to kill an entire race tell you about his character? In verse 8-11, does it look as though the king knows or even cares which people Haman

is out to get? In 4:1-5 it becomes clear that even the queen has no idea of the edict and what it means. Mordecai has to send her a copy of the edict and ask Hathach to explain it to her (v. 8).

What did Esther first reply? What did she do in the end, and what was the result? We will go into these matters in more detail in the skit. The lesson for us is, how willing are we to openly stand up, even against earthly authorities, for what is right? Will we, like Esther, say, "I will go"?

DEVOTION

Read or have read Ephesians 6:12. What does it saying we are fighting against? Since the passage clearly states “not against flesh and blood,” we must keep in mind that these are demonic powers of darkness that God’s armor fortifies us for.

Yet, given the way power and authority work on this earth, standing for right against power usually means dealing with one or more humans, just as Esther and Mordecai had to deal with Ahasuerus and Haman and the Me-do-Persian system. What safeguards do you think will help us deal wisely with humans in authority, still loving them, yet being serious in our stand against wrong?

The life of Paul gives some examples. Keeping your finger in Ephesians 6, let’s take a quick look at Acts 17:16. How does Paul feel about the many idols he sees in Athens? Now read verses 22-24. How does he actually address the people? Notice how respectful he is, and that he begins with something positive.

Now look at chapter 24:10. When Paul was taken before Governor Felix, how did he address him?

The thing to keep always in mind is that Jesus loves each and every person you will ever meet, no matter what they have done. He is the only one who can cause reformation in their lives, and all too often, Christians get in the way of that and cause more harm than good. These people were all innocent babies once upon a time, and though they are now responsible for their own choices, only God can know what influences have helped to form them the way they are. It is the evil designs of Satan we are fighting, not flesh and blood. And for that, we need armor that only God can give. Go back to Ephesians 6 now.

Paul uses the imagery of military armor in this passage, but he is talking about real, powerful protections only God can provide. Let’s name them. (You may wish to have a scribe record these.)

1. The first two are in verse 14. What are they? (Truth and righteousness.)
2. What is in verse 15? (Gospel of peace.)
3. Verse 16? (Faith.)

There are two again in verse 17; what are they? (Salvation and the Word of God.)

And finally, in verse 18, what is our constant defense? (Prayer and the Holy Spirit.)

Take a few minutes to discuss: Where is the one and only place we can get this armor? What happens when we try to go up against the devil without any one piece of it? What do you think fortified Esther for her battle? In conclusion, read Esther 4:16.

How might the story be different if Esther and Mordecai had not fasted and prayed before confronting the king?

ACTIVITY SUGGESTION

1. Look at the headlines in a local newspaper and determine a local issue that would be helped by having dedicated Christians speak the truth to power.
2. Role play ways to do this, with some people playing the part of local leaders.
3. If possible come up with a real action that your group can do to make your community better.

SEVEN DAYS OF SOUL FOOD

SEVEN DAYS' WORTH OF DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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 emotions, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY ONE: Esther, a young girl from a time and place where women were kept silent and in the background, was somehow courageous and strong enough to confront a king who had the power of life and death not only her but over her remaining family and her whole nation. We all want to be like that. Make a sketch of the various pieces of armor listed in Ephesians 6:14-18. This week we will ponder how these work to transform our hearts, minds, bodies, and souls. Each day, have the passage open before you. You will be surprised about new thoughts that will arise as you ponder each individual piece of God's armor. You may think of other Bible verses you want to look up, too.

DAY TWO: *Heart:* Choose which piece or pieces of the armor you think are most connected with your feelings and emotions. Write as clearly as you can why you think this. Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in your heart this week.

DAY THREE: *Mind:* Choose which piece or pieces of the armor you think are most connected with your mind and intellect. Again, write about it. How does God want to work in your mind this week?

DAY FOUR: *Strength/body:* Choose which piece or pieces of the armor you think are most connected with your strength. Does it really matter how strong and healthy you are to be able to use this armor? Why or why not? What are the ways God wants to strengthen your body this week?

DAY FIVE: *Soul/spirit:* As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you so far this week, look again at your diagram. Which parts of your whole self do you feel are strongest, and how can you use them? Which parts are weak and what can you do to strengthen them?

DAY SIX: Are there ways you can think of that you can help your family, community, and church to depend on the armor that God offers? One interesting group action would be to compare notes with the rest of your youth group. Did everyone choose the same armor pieces to go with heart, mind, body, and spirit?

DAY SEVEN: 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 Twitter post(s).
- Make food and give it to someone in need.

Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something.

Share the love!

a short skit

"I WILL GO"

written by
Debbonnaire Kovacs

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A LONGER SKIT (ABOUT 20 MINUTES)

Cut scenes as you wish—could even reduce as far as just doing Acts 1 and 5

Even after Esther made the decision to go to the king, she didn't act as directly as she might have. In this skit, we will explore her choices and their results. We will have five acts this time, but they are fairly short. (There is more to this story. If you wanted to, you could create and rehearse an entire play of the book of Esther and present it to your church for a special event.)

CHARACTERS

1. Esther
2. Some girls as her maids
3. Mordecai
4. King Ahasuerus
5. Haman
6. Zeresh
7. Hathach
8. Harbona
9. A few other servants and guards
10. A few friends for Haman (these last can be the same people if you are short of players)

PROPS

1. Something to represent the scepter
2. Two crowns for Esther and Ahasuerus—could be as simple as chains or even bands of paper
3. A rolled scroll to represent the message passed between Esther and Mordecai

4. Choose a place that represents inside the palace and a place that represents outside. In the inside, on one side you need a fancy chair (drape a regular chair with red cloth, or something) for a throne, and a table and chairs for the banquet. Food can be real or pretend. The other side of the inside is Esther's room.

It would be nice to have something that represents the wall between the palace and the outside; use your imagination.

ACT 1

Scene: **Mordecai** is sitting on the ground outside the palace, his head bowed, looking very distressed. He could be rocking back and forth, rubbing his hands on his head, or even moaning. At least a couple of other people are out there, too, just standing around, maybe pretending to talk.

Esther and her **maids** are inside the palace, also looking worried. **Hathach** is with them, a message in his hand.

Esther: Well, did you ask him?

Hathach: My lady, he wouldn't take the clothes. He's still in sackcloth. He gave me this. (Hands her the message, which she unrolls and reads.)

Esther: Kill all the Jews? What?? What is the meaning of this?

Hathach: Mordecai told me to explain; it's a decree from the king—well, everybody knows it's really from Haman—that all the Jews are to be killed.

Hathach: We know how tiring traveling can be. We came all the way from Rome recently.

Esther: (Horrificed.) All of them?!

Hathach: Yes, my lady. Haman has offered to pay a very large sum of money into the king's treasury in return for this. Also...(he hesitates)...well, my lady, Mordecai wants you to go to the king and intercede with him.

Esther: (Even more shocked—backs away fearfully) Me? But I can't—the king wouldn't—(she stops) I'll write a reply. (While "writing" on the scroll she says) He doesn't understand. Tell him no one can just go before the king. We can only go if we're summoned, and he hasn't summoned me in a month! I'll be killed on the spot!

Hathach: (Goes out to Mordecai) The queen sent this, sir. (Hands him scroll.)

Mordecai: (Stands and takes it, unrolls, reads, shakes his head. Then "writes" while saying...) Tell her "Don't think you'll be safe just because you're in the palace. If you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Hands Hathach the scroll and sits back down. Hathach goes back to queen, gives her scroll and waits while she reads.)

Esther: (Turns away from Hathach and stands silently for a moment. Squares her shoulders, turns back.) Tell him to gather all the Jews he can find in Susa and fast and pray for three days. My maids and I will do the same. Then...I will go, even though it's against the law. And if I perish, I perish.

Act II

Scene: **King** is on his throne, a couple of servants beside him. One or two guards stand where the door is represented. Esther's maids are putting finishing touches on her. She is wearing her crown if you have one.

A maid: You look beautiful, my lady. God go with you!.

Esther: (To maids.) Pray for me. (Maids are in attitudes of prayer during rest of scene. Esther takes a deep breath and goes to the "door" of the throne room. The guards look shocked, but let her in.)

King: (Looks up, angry at first. Guard acts as if he will grab her. Then king's face relaxes and he smiles and holds out his scepter. Esther moves forward and touches tip of scepter.) Esther! My queen, it's been a long time! What is it you want? Ask me anything, even half of my kingdom!

Esther: (Bows.) If it please you, your majesty, will you and Haman come to a banquet I've prepared for you?

King: Certainly! (To servant.) Go get Haman right away!

(Haman comes, and they sit at table. Servants, including Harbona, serve them and they pretend to eat and talk. Haman acts very proud.)

King: Now, Esther, what is it? What do you really want? I'll give you up to half my kingdom!.

Esther: If I have pleased you, lord, please
come to another banquet tomorrow.

King: Of course, my queen!

*(As they leave, Haman goes out of gate and the
others there bow to him, but Mordecai doesn't even
stand up. Haman looks angrily at him then strides
away. Everyone leaves the stage area.)*

Act III

Scene: Now the table becomes Haman's house. Haman and his friends are eating, and his wife Zeresh is serving them.

Haman: (Boastfully) I am so great in this kingdom! I have ten sons, and a high office, and I'm getting richer and richer. The king has promoted me several times, even giving me my way on the matter of destroying those disrespectful Jews. Why only today, even Queen Esther honored me! She gave a special banquet just for me and the king, and tomorrow I'm to go again! (Others exclaim admiringly. Haman frowns) But it's no good to me as long as that Mordecai sits there at the gate and won't even bow!

Zeresh: Well, why don't you get rid of him before the rest of the Jews? Just have a gallows built, and get the king to let you hang him. You can do it today and then tomorrow you'll be able to go to the queen's banquet with a light heart.

Haman: (Brightening) That's what I'll do! I'll have the gallows built immediately!

(All leave.)

Act IV

Scene: **King** on his throne, servants beside him, Haman outside his "door."

King: (To his servants) Last night I couldn't sleep, and I had the records read to me. I was reminded that a while back, Mordecai the Jew saved me from an assassination plot and I've never rewarded him. (Guard comes forward, and king turns to him.) What is it?

King: Oh, good. Let him in.

Haman: (Comes in and bows.) My lord, there was something—

King: (Interrupts him) Haman! Just the person I was hoping to see! What do you think I should do for someone I want to honor?

Haman: (Turns aside and says quietly, as if to himself) That has to be me! This is even better than I hoped! (Turns back to King.) Well, my lord, let me see, I think you should have one of the princes put some of your own royal robes on him and put him on one of your own horses, and parade him through town, shouting, "Here is a man the king delights to honor!"

King: Perfect! And who is a more noble prince than you, Haman? You can be the one to do these things to Mordecai the Jew!

Haman: (Horrified) I—but—yes, my lord! (Bows and leaves.)

(Take only a minute for this part: as Haman turns away from king, his face shows his fury. Outside gate, he gets Mordecai, pretends to array him and put him on horse, then walks before him shouting,) "Here is a man the king delights to honor!" (Whole room should cheer, except for Zeresh and Haman's friends, who gather at one side, all upset. When he has led Mordecai back to the gate, Haman goes to them and Zeresh says,) "Your rise is over, Haman. You won't prevail against that man or the Jews."

Act 5

(Scene: Esther, King, Haman, and Servants including Harbona gather at table again. Haman is trying to put on a calm face, but he is very upset. They pretend to eat and drink and have conversation.)

King: Now, listen, Esther, you wouldn't keep inviting me to banquets unless something was on your mind. What is it? Tell me.

Esther: I only want my life, my lord.

King: What?! (During Esther's answer, he gets more and more angry.)

Esther: My people and I are sold, my king. We are to be destroyed. Annihilated. If we were only going to be sold as slaves, I wouldn't complain, but to be killed! All of us! This will only be a loss to you and your kingdom, my lord.

King: (Shouting) Who dares to do such a thing?

Esther: A foe and an enemy! This wicked Haman! (Points to Haman, who recoils in terror)

King: (Jumps up and turns away from table, pacing back and forth. To himself--) Haman! How could he? I must get hold of myself!

(Meanwhile, Haman cowers before the queen. He rises from his place and goes to hers, falling to his knees and clutching at her.) Mercy! Oh, my queen, I beg you, I didn't know!

(Esther tries to pull away; servants run forward.)

King: (Turns back to scene as servants reach to grab Haman) What?! Will you even assault the queen in my very presence?

Harbona: (Clears his throat) Uh...my king?

King: Yes? What is it?

Harbona: My lord, Haman built a gallows yesterday on which he planned to kill Mordecai.

King: (Glares at Haman) Mordecai! Well, hang him on it!

Servants drag Haman away. Hanan is protesting and begging for mercy.

King: (Goes to **Esther's** side) My queen, I have been foolish, trusting that man. I can't change the law now, but I can make a new one telling the Jews to arm and defend themselves. When everyone hears that, and hears about the downfall of Haman, there will probably be far fewer who rise up to kill the Jews anyway. It's the best I can do. I'm sorry.

Esther: (Bows) Thank you, my lord. Our God has saved us.

JOSEPH AND HIS FAMILY

One of the very best Bible stories for studying lots of different ways life can form and re-form is the life of Joseph. It's one of the most detailed stories in the Bible, spanning nearly half the book of Genesis. In this study we will look at the long list of ways in which Joseph's life changed around him, sometimes by his own choice, but often not. How did Joseph develop his sense and then maintain it through all his adversity?

FIRST: PRAYER

Always begin with prayer. Ask God to bless your study and discussion, and to help each of you to learn important ways you, too, can develop and maintain your sense of identity as a child of God, no matter what happens in or around you.

PREPARATION

If you have access either to the book *Patriarchs and Prophets*, or to the online version you can find at whiteestate.org, read about Joseph and his family on pages 208-217. Here are some important statements from those pages if you can't read the whole section:

[On his way to Egypt, Joseph] "Bitterly he wept at thought of that loving father in his loneliness and affliction. Again the scene at Dothan came up before him. He saw his angry brothers and felt their fierce glances bent upon him. The stinging, insulting words that had met his agonized entreaties were ringing in his ears. With a trembling heart he looked forward to the future. What a change in situation--from the tenderly cherished son to the despised and helpless slave! Alone and friendless, what would be his lot in the strange land to which he was going? For a time Joseph gave himself up to uncontrolled grief and terror.

But, in the providence of God, even this experience was to be a blessing to him. He had learned in a few hours that which years might not otherwise have taught him. His father, strong and tender as his love had been, had done him wrong by his partiality and indulgence.

This unwise preference had angered his brothers and provoked them to the cruel deed that had separated him from his home. Its effects were manifest also in his own character. Faults had been encouraged that were now to be corrected. He was becoming self-sufficient and exacting. Accustomed to the tenderness of his father's care, he felt that he was unprepared to cope with the difficulties before him, in the bitter, uncared-for life of a stranger and a slave.

Then his thoughts turned to his father's God. In his childhood he had been taught to love and fear Him. Often in his father's tent he had listened to the story of the vision that Jacob saw as he fled from his home an exile and a fugitive. He had been told of the Lord's promises to Jacob, and how they had been fulfilled--how, in the hour of need, the angels of God had come to instruct, comfort, and protect him. And he had learned of the love of God in providing for men a Redeemer. Now all these precious lessons came vividly before him. Joseph believed that the God of his fathers would be his God. He then and there gave himself fully to the Lord, and he prayed that the Keeper of Israel would be with him in the land of his exile."

READING ONE: JOSEPH'S BOYHOOD

Genesis 29:15-30

This is the background against which Joseph's life began.

Spend a few moments discussing the way you think the women felt in this situation.

1. Is plural marriage God's plan as shown in the Garden of Eden?
2. Did they have any choice over their destiny?
3. How do you think Jacob felt?
4. Was there anything he could have done to change things?
5. Do you think this is partly a consequence of the fact that Jacob himself had been deceitful in his youth?

The next chapter, Genesis 30, gives the main circumstances into which Joseph was born.

1. Read verses 1 and 2, scan the next section, and then read verses 22-24.
2. How many more women does Jacob take as wives?
3. What kinds of issues can you see developing in this complicated family?

Today we sometimes use the term “blended families” to speak of families which have been shaped by remarriage after a spouse is lost to death or divorce. Perhaps you or someone you know has a blended or complicated family. Perhaps you move from one parent to another, or you live with one and never see the other. You may have half- or step-siblings.

What are some of the difficulties you have to face? (People may share if they wish, but don’t have to, especially not things that are too personal. You can discuss general issues without getting into family matters.)

Gen. 35:16-18

1. What happens here? Once again, through no choice or action of his own, Joseph’s life took a different shape. Did you ever wonder who took care of the two brothers? One particular wife? All of them? We don’t know. Certainly one of them must have fed the baby.
2. The details of Joseph’s life fill chapters 37 all the way to 50, the end of Genesis. His life is formed and re-formed over and over again, but now he is old enough to make choices that will help or hinder him.

Gen. 37:2-4

1. What are the issues that are building up in Joseph’s family?
2. What advice would you give if you could travel back in time and talk to this family?

READING TWO

Gen. 37:5-11

1. Do you think Joseph is at all to blame in this situation? Why or why not?
2. What would you do differently?
3. Do you know any stories of families today that have had issues similar to this?
4. Read the rest of the chapter.
5. Do you live where people travel around pasturing animals? Today it might be easier to find them—or it might not. How would you go about finding some of your relatives if they were out in the country and you didn’t know exactly where?

6. What has been clearly happening in the hearts of Joseph's brothers?
7. Make a list of the different brothers' suggestions. Were some more compassionate than others? Keep this list to refer to during the conclusion of this study.
8. How would you feel if you were Joseph, lying in the pit? If it were your own family who put you there? What would you do?
9. How do you think Joseph felt as he was on his way to slavery?

At this point, Joseph has a very serious choice to make. Will he continue to be the "tenderly cherished son" who has been rather spoiled? Will he fight his fate and make more trouble for himself? He could have, you know.

List some unwise choices Joseph could have made at this point, ones that perhaps you would be tempted to make in the same situation.

Or will he make his father's God his God and choose to grow up and be faithful, no matter what? We can know what choice Joseph made by what happens to him later.

Scan Genesis 39. This shows Joseph's life going up and down like a hilly road.

1. Make a list of the bad, then good, then bad things that happen.
2. What is the one constant in this story? See verses 2-5 and 23 for a hint.
3. How does this tell us what choice Joseph made while he was led away to slavery?

READING THREE

Scan Genesis 40.

1. What happens to Joseph in this chapter?
2. Which verse shows something that gives him hope of getting out of prison?
3. Which verse shows that he won't get out after all?
4. How long does it take? (41:1)
5. Do you think it's possible that in heaven we will learn that many more lives were blessed by Joseph's faithful presence in that prison than we hear about in the Bible story?

Genesis 41:1-16

Does this story sound familiar? What other Bible character have we studied that interpreted a king's dream? The dreams are very different, but each character says basically the same thing to the king.

1. ***Read verse 16.*** What does Joseph tell Pharaoh?
2. ***Scan verses 25-36.*** What advice does Joseph give?
3. ***Read verses 37-45.*** At last, the biggest transformation came into Joseph's life. He became prime minister of Egypt and during the famine that followed, the lives of millions, in several countries, were in his hand. What are the factors that had been active in Joseph's life all along, through everything, that made God able to trust him with such responsibility?

What are the choices you can make, no matter how complicated your family or your circumstances, that will put you in the path of the blessings God has planned for you?

CONCLUSION

The last nine chapters of Genesis tell the story of the famine, of Joseph and his brothers and of their eventual reunion. We can't look at the whole story today, but we can review the highlights. If there is someone in your group who can briefly tell the story, let him or her do so. If not, you can look at the outline here.

1. Gen. 42: Who came to Egypt and why? Who did not come along with the others and why? How did Joseph treat them?
2. Gen. 43: What is different about this trip? How does Joseph treat them? Why do you think he cries in verse 30?
3. Gen. 44: Why is it Benjamin Joseph chooses to accuse? What do you think he is trying to learn about his older brothers? Which brother pleads the hardest for Benjamin and why do you think he did this?
4. Gen. 45: How does Joseph react this time? Why?
5. Read verses 4-15. Now go to chapter 50 and read verses 15-21. What do you learn about Joseph's character and about how his brothers have developed in all these years?
6. What can you do to be such a compassionate and forgiving person?
7. Do you think Joseph would have been like this if he had stayed at home? Why or why not?

ACTIVITY SUGGESTION

A tableau is a group of people frozen into position like a living picture. Sometimes it is made by looking at a picture of a group of people, choosing people to play each person in the picture, then getting into position. Today, someone who is not in the scene can take a picture once the tableau is complete.

Another way to make a tableau is just to invent the scene and create it. Choose one to three scenes from Joseph's life, choose people to play each part, and create a tableau. (Example: a scene of one or more brothers receiving money from one or more Midianite traders, while one ties Joseph's hands. The facial expressions are important. The brothers should look angry, the traders should look cruel, and Joseph should look frightened and despairing.) Once you have the scene the way you want it, freeze and have some pictures taken. You could do several and hang them in your church or school in chronological order as a way of telling the story of Joseph.

CLOSING PRAYER

Praise God for taking such faithful care of Joseph. Be specific in asking Him to bless each person and help them to develop a clear idea of who they are in Christ and maintain that connection throughout all the complicated circumstances of life.

SEVEN DAYS OF SOUL FOOD

SEVEN DAYS' WORTH OF DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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 emotions, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY ONE: Think about the story of Joseph. What elements of his life can you connect with, that may help you in your own life? Even if you don't have step-siblings or half-siblings, there may be complicated relationships you can prayerfully write about in your prayer journal and ask God for advice on how to build closeness and compassion into them.

DAY TWO: *Heart:* Jacob was a loving man. He rather comes across, though, as a weak man who gave in to pressure from others. What are some things he did right, things you would like to emulate? Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in your heart this week..

DAY THREE: *Mind:* Joseph had to have a strong mind in order to take control of the harvests for those seven good years and save enough for the lean years. What are some ways you can use your intelligence to help others this week?

DAY FOUR: *Strength/body:* Clearly, Joseph was a physically healthy and strong person. Make a list of the ways we can tell this from the Bible story (walking miles seeking his brothers, working as a slave, etc.) What are some things you do that keep you strong and fit?

DAY FIVE: *Soul/spirit:* Mrs. White says that Joseph “gave himself fully to the Lord.” You can see that his body, mind, and heart worked together. He even loved his brothers so much he wept over them when he met them, even though they had sold him! How can you be like that? Can you find a promise or promises that will help you?

DAY SIX: As you think about your family, community, and church, are there complicated elements? Do you need God’s help dealing with a complex family structure? Or do you know someone who is in that situation and could use a friend? Ask God how you may be of service.

DAY SEVEN: 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 Twitter post(s).
- Make food and give it to someone in need.

Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something.

Share the love!

18

CHURCHES SPROUTING LIKE FLOWERS

Throughout human history, whenever people get excited about something, they tend to gather in groups and talk about it. God made us this way. The interests can range from football to needlework to the latest book, but are often about something more important, like the birth of a new baby or a new spiritual understanding. Outside the closed gate of Eden, Adam and Eve's descendants began to gather to sacrifice and pray. The patriarchs gathered their families around them to tell the stories of how God had led them. In time, people built temples and synagogues where they collected and read the writings of prophets and sages.

While Jesus was here, people gathered around Him by the thousands, and after He returned to His throne, that story spread like wildfire. As it had been when Jesus was alive, people gathered by the thousands to hear Peter or Paul or James. But in order to discuss and thoroughly understand what they heard, they had to also gather in smaller groups. Read or have someone read Acts 2:46. You'll notice the people went to the temple to praise God in large groups, but also met day by day in each other's homes, sharing both physical food and the spiritual food of God's word together. In this way the church grew with astonishing swiftness.

In the back of a Bible, or online, you can find maps of the journeys the early disciples made through their world. Paul's missionary journeys are the best known, both because of clues in his letters and because Luke kept a journal that we now call the book of Acts. This one man, and his changing companions, crisscrossed all along the Mediterranean, from Palestine on its eastern end, through all the countries along its northern shore, and all the way up to Rome, halfway up the "boot" of Italy. Today, driving a car on our better roads, it would be over 2500 miles to drive from Jerusalem to Rome. Paul and the other missionaries walked, or rode horses or carts, or traveled in boats. Those were the only options. And yet they crisscrossed back and forth several times. Some even believe he got as far as what is now Great Britain. All along this route, churches sprouted up like wildflowers, mostly in people's homes.

We know far less about the travels of the other apostles, but old stories say they went all over the world they knew then. Tradition has Thomas founding the first Christian church in India in AD 52; Mark is credited with founding the Coptic faith in Egypt; Andrew is thought to have gone to what is now Russia; Philip may have traveled to North Africa, and some believe Mary Magdalene went to France. We won't know the complete truth of any of this until we meet them in heaven, but what we do know is that the people who heard told others, and those told others, until within one lifetime, the gospel traveled throughout the known world.

During what we call the Dark Ages, as false teachings got a strangle hold on Europe, the gospel seemed to languish, but there never was a time when God didn't have believers, hidden though they might be, and from the 1300s on the light of truth began to flash out again.

In the time of the reformers, churches began to sprout up again. People who heard the reformers speak or read their writings began to try to get Bibles in their own languages, to learn for themselves. It wasn't easy to get a Bible, so when one person had one, others gathered around that one and little home churches began and grew until they needed buildings of their own. For example, no one knows how many churches Martin Luther himself started, let alone how many were started by people who heard and believed what he had to say about God's love and grace. Soon, despite his opposition, they even began naming themselves after him and the Lutheran denomination was born.

That evangelizing spirit is one of the signs of true reformation whenever and wherever it happens. It tends to come in waves. One of those waves happened in several countries on several continents during the 1830s and 1840s. The resulting "advent movement" planted the roots of our own Seventh-day Adventist denomination, and several others. We believe that there will be another great wave of light before Jesus comes again. Read His promise in Matthew 24:14 and lift up your heads—He's near!

DEVOTION

Let's review the steps that set the early church on fire when Jesus went back to heaven. You may like to have a scribe record your findings.

1. First, review Acts 1:4. What did Jesus tell them to wait for?
2. Now look again at verses 14 and 15. Who is there? Is it only the eleven remaining faithful apostles? Is it only men? How many are gathered? What are they doing and what is the effect on them?
3. Look at chapter 2:2-4. What happens? What happens in the following verses?
4. Now read verses 42-47. Find and list all the characteristics of this early church. Discuss how the things you have read before this contributed to this result.

How similar or different is your local congregation?

What can a young person do to help?

Well, first of all, remember what "church" is. It's just faithful Christians gathering.

Starting a church is not confined to organizing an official congregation. It could be a study group at your school or in your home. It could be a bicycle evangelist pedaling from village to village, or an online series of Bible studies.

It doesn't even have to be confined to a religious gathering. What does James say true religion is, in James 1:27?

1. What if your home could be a church without actually being a Church?
2. Could it be a safe place where people could come if they were hurting or in need?
3. Could someone come to your room if he or she needed to talk?
4. Could a family who were hungry find food and help in your kitchen?
5. Or could you be the one to go, as Jesus did. Could you visit someone who was lonely or sick?
6. Could you help a mother with her children or an old man with his garden?

In Daniel 12:4, describing the time of the end, Daniel records the angel as telling him that many would run to and fro and knowledge would increase.

Do you think that describes our times accurately?

In Habakkuk 2:14 God makes a beautiful promise.

What is it? This can only be completely fulfilled after the earth is made new again. But do you think it can also begin before that?

Ask God if there's anything He wants you to do to sprout new growth in His kingdom. And beware—besides all of the above, He may want you and your friends to start an actual new church congregation! It could be true. Just wait to see where He leads.

ACTIVITY SUGGESTION

“Play church.” You may have played church when you were a little child. Here is a more purposeful way of trying it again. What if your group were the only church in your town? How would you organize? Pay attention to the different gifts among you. Who would be the speaker or speakers? Who would be the helpers? The musicians? Would you do your services the same or differently from the ones you are familiar with? Organize and create a mini church service. Or create a program and actually offer it to your church or community.

SEVEN DAYS OF SOUL FOOD

SEVEN DAYS' WORTH OF DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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 emotions, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY ONE: Reread Acts 2:42-47. This week you will use this passage in two ways. One is to find heart, mind, body, and soul for yourself in it. The other is a little different. It's possible to think of a particular congregation as one body. You may have noticed that groups have a kind of "soul" or "personality" of their own, beyond the individuals that make up the group. See if you can define the heart, mind, strength, and spirit of the early church described here.

DAY TWO: *Heart:* Which of the characteristics and actions of this group as a whole showed their heart and emotion? Which call to your own heart and emotion? Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in your heart this week.

DAY THREE: *Mind:* Where do you see mind and thought and intellect at work in the group depicted? Is this a strong or weak area for you? Are there ways God calls you through this passage to strengthen or balance your mind? Sometimes, especially when still in school, we tend to let our minds overbalance us. This is not healthy. How many verses in this passage speak to thinking? How does God want to work in your mind this week?

DAY FOUR: *Strength/body*: What are the specific ways the early church worked for the physical health and strength of themselves and the community? How can you imitate them? What are the ways God wants to strengthen your body this week?

DAY FIVE: *Soul/spirit*: As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you so far this week, consider the “soul” of the early church. Was it well-rounded? What made it so? Are you well-rounded? Where do you need to exercise or relax different sides of your being?

DAY SIX: Your family, community, and church have their own personalities, too. Where do you see the characteristics you’ve studied at work? Where do you fit in?

DAY SEVEN: 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 Twitter post(s).
- Make food and give it to someone in need.

Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something.

Share the love!

a short skit

JOSEPH AND HIS FAMILY

written by
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A SHORT SKIT (ABOUT 10-15 MINUTES)

We have had some longer skits, so here is a shorter, easier one based on Lydia's story in Acts 16.

CHARACTERS

1. Lydia
2. Several other women
3. Paul
4. Silas
5. Timothy
6. Luke

PROPS

None necessary. Define a space that is "by the riverside" and perhaps mark where the city gate is.

ACT 1

Scene: Lydia and the women are gathered by the river, talking and praying. **Paul, Silas, Luke,** and **Timothy** could be outside the door and come in to represent traveling. They walk slowly toward where the women are.

Paul: Even though we've been in Philippi for a few days now, I'm still tired from all the traveling and preaching. I'm so glad it's Sabbath! (Others agree: "that's for sure, amen to that," and so on.)

Luke: Where shall we meet?

Timothy: We could go to the synagogue.

Paul: I think there will be a prayer group outside the gates. There sometimes is. There's a nice place by the river.

Silas: (Points to women) There's a group. It's only women, though.

Paul: That doesn't matter. In God's new kingdom there is neither male nor female. (He leads the way to the women, who look up and see them.)

Lydia: (All the women stand to greet the men) Welcome. Are you visitors to Philippi? (They nod.) Are you worshipers of God? Would you like to pray with us? (All the men thank her, nod, or whatever, and they all sit down together.)

Timothy: It's so peaceful here by the water.

Silas: It's a beautiful place. Do you ladies know about Jesus and His resurrection? (The women shake their heads, but look interested.)

Lydia: Resurrection? You mean from the dead?

Paul: (Smiling) I know it sounds impossible. Let me tell you a story. You see, centuries ago, God promised to bless the whole earth through the Jews. All through the centuries, our prophets have promised the Messiah. (The women nod.)

Lydia: Yes, we do know about that. We've accepted the Jewish faith.

Timothy: (Excitedly) Yes, but He's come! The Messiah has actually come! (realizes he's interrupted his elders and looks embarrassed) Sorry, Brother Paul. I didn't mean to interrupt.

Paul: (Smiles) That's all right, Brother Timothy. God has called you also. You shouldn't let people look down on you just because you're young. Why don't you take it from here?

Timothy: (Excited again) Okay. Well, sisters, this is going to seem unbelievable, so hear me out. God sent a Man, born of a virgin through the power of the Holy Spirit. His name was Jesus of Nazareth. He preached and healed...we could take hours and hours telling you all His miracles. But His teachings were the most important. He says God loves everybody, every single person. Loves us so much that He sent His only begotten Son to live and die for us!

Lydia: Wait—die for us?!

Paul: (Shakes his head sadly) Yes. He was loved by thousands, but you can imagine what the church leaders thought. They were jealous. They killed him. (Women look shocked.)

Silas: On a cross.

Women: react with horror. On a cross? They crucified Him? That's horrible! (And so on.)

Paul: I never got to meet Him in person. (He straightens from his sorrow, with a face of amazement.) But He called me anyway! To preach, especially to Gentiles.

Women: Like us!

Paul: Yes—I met Him in a vision, and I so did not deserve His mercy! But that's the thing about Jesus. He came to show us the unbelievable mercy of God. Jesus died in our place and saved us from all our sins. Now all we have to do is accept and trust Him and be baptized.

Lydia: That's all?

All the men: That's all.

Lydia: That's amazing! (She looks around.) We've been talking so long I lost track of time! I believe! Here's the river, can't I be baptized?

Paul: (Showing his delight) Yes, absolutely!

Lydia: And then won't you come and stay at my home? I have plenty of room, and I want you to tell the rest of my household about all this!

A NETWORK OF ALTARS

In a very real sense, Abraham planted “churches” wherever he went. Of course, the concept of church that we have today didn’t exist yet. Even synagogues didn’t exist. The schools of the prophets were still in the future. In Abraham’s day “church” was simply patriarchs and matriarchs gathering their families around them to worship, pray, and sacrifice.

So before we consider what “church” was in those days, we need to consider what “family” was. In Abraham’s culture, and all cultures in his time, family included all who were related: parents, grandparents, children, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins and so on. All societies still have this concept, but in many contemporary cultures, if you say “family” the first thought is only of parents and children. We’ve coined the term “extended family” to include our other relatives, but we rarely live together, and certainly don’t think of the head of the family as having responsibility for the whole clan. There are still many societies, though, who think of family in much the same way Abraham did. Which kind of culture do you live in?

Importantly for our story, ancient Bible cultures also considered as family or household all those who worked with and for the family. Read or have read *Genesis 14:14*. How big was Abraham’s family? Maybe as many as a thousand with women and children? More?

As recently as the 19th century, lords of grand houses in Europe would still gather all their servants every day for worship together. The house might even have a chapel for the purpose.

It is interesting to consider the patriarchs doing what we would call evangelism. Perhaps we can learn from their methods. Abraham, in particular, shows a clear progression just like an apostle or missionary of New Testament times or even later history.

First, like any missionary, Abram is called out by God and sent on a mission. Read or have read *Genesis 12:1-3*. Where is Abram called from and to, and what is his mission? Or rather, what is God’s mission through Abram? Perhaps it would help us to think of all human mission in these terms.

Next, Abram obeyed. He began a journey that he probably didn’t expect to last for years and years. He probably thought God was asking him to move from one place to another place, but instead, he spent the rest of his long life

moving from place to place. During these years, Abram, later Abraham, doesn't seem to have particularly preached or proselytized. He just lives his life. He makes some mistakes, too, some big ones! But what do you think the people he passed through or spent time with or near remembered about him? Read and discuss the following texts to find answers to this question. What does each passage tell you about Abraham and his character?

1. Genesis 12:6-9
2. Genesis 13:8-9
3. Genesis 13:18

Genesis 14:14-24 We've seen part of this story above. Scan it and pay particular attention to verse 16, and verses 20-24. What do you learn of Abram here?

1. Genesis 15:6
2. Genesis 18:2-5

Time fails to go through Abraham's whole life, but it is clear that he was a man of faith, principle, and kindness. In the last half of this same chapter, 18, he does his famous bargaining with God for Sodom and Gomorrah. If only God had found even ten righteous in those cities, they would not have been destroyed.

As Abraham built altars to the Lord wherever he went, we can be sure those altars called to the people who lived in the area. Perhaps many turned to God because of Abraham's faithfulness. The fact that he made big mistakes didn't detract from that because he didn't stay in rebellion. He always repented and asked forgiveness. This, too, is a lesson to those around us.

Most important of all, what was the blessing that God kept promising, which would bless the whole earth? Are you blessed by the fulfillment of that promise today?

DEVOTION

As we discuss reformation this year, in our churches, in our societies, in our homes and families, and where it all must begin—in our hearts—it is worth pondering how we live in the eyes of those who see us every day. You may have heard the question, “If being a Christian were illegal, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

1. Take a moment as a group and think about this.
2. What is the visible evidence that a person is a Christian?
3. What actions would convict someone?
4. What attitudes?
5. Is one more important than the other?
6. Can you have one without the other?
7. Which comes first?

Now, here’s an important question: if it were illegal to be a Christian (as it has been, in different times and societies and still is in some places) what is it the authorities are trying to stamp out? Do they want to imprison and kill people because they are kind and compassionate? What is it they object to?

What if our lives, like Abraham’s, were known for the altars they built? These could be visible things, like works of art, or books, or even something written in sidewalk chalk, but most likely they are invisible. If you were to die suddenly, would people in your home, school, and workplace remember your acts of kindness? Would they remember how patient and forgiving you were?

If you want the Bible’s definition of perfection, compare *Matthew 5:48* and *Luke 6:36*.

If you read the context around these verses you will see they are both records of the Sermon on the Mount. These are two ways that two writers, Matthew and Luke, recorded the same thing Jesus said. So what does perfection equal? And would those around you see that in you?

We can live in such a loving way that our lives will leave altars of love and holiness behind wherever we go. We can repent and ask forgiveness when we sin, showing others that God is a God of mercy, love, and forgiveness. He’s a God of second chances. And third, and fiftieth! If we try to look faultless to those around us, they will only see us as fakers. If we show that God shines even through our brokenness, they will be drawn to take their brokenness to Him, too.

ACTIVITY SUGGESTION

1. **Build an altar.**
 - First, using whatever you like, make an altar in the place where you are having these meetings.
 - Talk together and gather the ideas of all as to what it should look like and how you will make it,
 - Then create it together.
2. **Then, gather ideas together** as to how you might go about creating visible and invisible altars of love this week.
3. **Let each person take at least one idea**, and the next week you can discuss how it went.

SEVEN DAYS OF SOUL FOOD

SEVEN DAYS' WORTH OF DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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 emotions, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY ONE: Read *Leviticus 19:1-18*. Verse 2 gives another form of the two statements we considered in our group devotion: Be perfect as God is perfect, and be merciful as God is merciful. In this chapter, God goes on to define what He means by holy (which literally means set apart for God. This week we will take a deeper look at the commandments given here. Many are the same or similar to the Ten Commandments.

DAY TWO: *Heart:* Look through the passage and find the things that you think particularly speak to how we should build altars for God in our hearts, and use our emotions for others. Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in your heart this week.

DAY THREE: *Mind:* Look through the passage and find the things that make you think deeply. How can you build altars to God in and with your mind this week?

DAY FOUR: *Strength/body:* Which parts of the passage speak to physical health and strength? For example, why is gleaning a good idea? How does it help the poor and also help the community? Is it practiced where you live? Can you help build an altar to God in this way?

DAY FIVE: *Soul/spirit:* As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you in this passage, how can you see that you will be more whole as you practice the altar-building He has called you to do?

DAY SIX: When you build altars, whether visible or invisible, your family, community, and church will grow. Don't confuse this with having them notice or congratulate you. People can be deeply blessed and never recognize why, and that includes you. Your blessings come from God alone. But when we pay attention, we notice more.

DAY SEVEN: 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 Twitter post(s).
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Share the love!

a short skit

A NETWORK OF ALTARS

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A SHORT SKIT (ABOUT 10-15 MINUTES)

Let's imagine we're neighbors of Abraham and his family. What might we learn from watching them worship? This is another short, easy skit.

CHARACTERS

1. Abraham
2. Sarah
3. A group to represent their sons and at least one daughter. If your group is large enough, you can have all 12 sons, but if not, a few can represent them.
4. A group to represent servants.
5. The rest of the class can be the neighbors. Designate three to have the speaking parts. They will be neighbor 1, neighbor 2, and neighbor 3.

PROPS

Designate one side of the room as Abraham's camp. You need some kind of desk, table, or box to represent an altar.

ACT 1

Scene: (Scene: Abraham, Sarah, and their household including servants are gathered at one side, around the altar. The neighbors are scattered around the room, apparently busy with different kinds of work. Abraham silently acts out making a sacrifice. When he raises his hands in the air, some nearby neighbors look up.)

Abraham: O Most High God, we call on You today.
We thank You that You have blessed us...

Neighbor 1: Look, there's old Abraham making a sacrifice again.

Neighbor 2: He does that every morning and every evening.

Neighbor 3: Let's go closer and watch. I've always wondered what he does at those altars he builds.

Neighbor 2: Well, he sacrifices sheep, of course. We do the same thing.

Neighbor 3: It's not the same at all.

Neighbor 1: I agree. For one thing, we don't all have our own altars, and for another we don't do it every day!

Neighbor 2: Let alone twice! You're right, I'm curious, too. (They walk closer to the family. Other neighbors look up from their work.)

Abraham: I thank You for my fine, strong sons, and for all of our family. I thank You for the love that exists among us.

(Other neighbors begin to move closer.)

Abraham: Receive this unblemished lamb, Creator of the universe, in the way you taught our ancestors to sacrifice it.

Neighbor 1: (Surprised) Their God taught them how to sacrifice?

Neighbor 2: Our gods never got that close to us.

Neighbor 3: I wouldn't want them to! Our gods are angry, and you never know what they'll do next. That's why I'm so curious about Abraham's God.

Abraham: You promised our parents in Eden that You would send a Redeemer. They taught their children, down to us, that this sacrifice, as perfect as we can make it, represents that Redeemer.

(Most of the neighbors are now gathered near the family. You could have a few shake their heads and turn back to their work. But they can still hear.)

Neighbor 3: See what I mean? Which of our gods ever cared about us?

Neighbor 1: None! And as for coming to redeem us...!
(Shakes head)

Abraham: We trust in Your promise, O Lord. We choose to live by Your ways of love and forgiveness. Please forgive us for the times today that we have not acted in love. Make us strong, faithful, and pure in heart. Amen.

Neighbor 2: And that's it? They're forgiven?

Neighbor 3: And forgiving, too. Last week I got into an argument with some of Abraham's sons over a pasture. We all got angry and shouted, but I hit one of them, I'm ashamed to say.

Neighbor 1: (Shocked) You hit one of Abraham's sons? I heard he can raise hundreds of armed men!

Neighbor 3: I know. I was scared. I went to the sons and apologized, and do you know what happened? Not only did they forgive, they asked *me* to forgive *them*!

Neighbor 1: I want to know more about this God. Let's go ask!

20

CENTERED IN THE WORD

The few Bibles had been in the hands only of church leaders. Now, while most people still couldn't read, more and more educated people were able to read it for themselves, and Luther urged them to do so. Here are some things he is quoted as saying about the Word of God:

"Let the man who would hear God speak, read Holy Scriptures."

"The Holy Spirit himself and God, the Creator of all things, is the Author of this book."

"I am afraid that the schools will prove the very gates of hell, unless they diligently labor in explaining the Holy Scriptures, and engraving them on the hearts of youth. I would advise no one to send his child where the Holy Scriptures are not supreme. Every institution in which men and women are not unceasingly occupied with the Word of God must be corrupt." (Retrieved March 31, 2017, from <https://givemethatbook.com/2010/01/19/martin-luther-his-quotes-on-scripture/>.)

Today, most of us have very little idea of what a marvelous thing it was to those people to have a Bible in their own town, written in their own language. Even if they couldn't read it for themselves, they could hear one of the educated people in their town read it. There are still places like this on earth, but in most places, we can easily obtain Bibles of our own, not only in our own language, but in several different versions—in simpler everyday language for people whose reading is not as advanced, for example.

In many homes today, there are a dozen Bibles, but they gather dust on a shelf, while in other places, people may still risk their lives to obtain even a piece of the Bible to read for themselves. Not that long ago, Bibles were illegal in many Communist countries, and people would smuggle small sections inside their clothing, or pass them from hand to hand under cover of darkness. People have been put to death just for reading and sharing the Word of God.

Do you have a Bible? Where is it? How much does it mean to you? How often do you spend time with it?

Are you centered in the Word of God?

DEVOTION

The Bible is an amazing piece of literature. Here is this little collection of 66 books written by about 40 people over the course of ten or more centuries, and yet it has been kept together in mostly the same format all these centuries. It is treasured by billions of people, and has had more influence over human civilization than any other book in history. It speaks to people of every color, age, and station, people who live in jungles, or deserts, or great cities, people who wear every possible kind of clothing and live every lifestyle known to humanity. How is this possible?

We believe it would not be humanly possible. We believe that God has had His hand over His word throughout all its vicissitudes and translations and paraphrases. There is enough in any Bible to enable any person to come to a saving knowledge of the great Creator who loves them and gave everything to save them.

Yet the Bible can be confusing, too. It has been misused to hurt all too many people, in the name of God. People have been tortured and killed because their reading of the Bible disagreed with the interpretation of someone in power. That's exactly what happened to the reformers. Many were killed, and Luther almost was.

Why? With what attitude must we read Scriptures in order to allow the Holy Spirit to have His way with the forming and reforming of our souls, rather than trying to use and mold the Scriptures to fit our notions and desire for power?

The Bible was written by human beings, led by God. Each person had a unique personality and experience, and they brought different styles and different interests to what they wrote. Some people worry about this, because it seems to them that different parts of the Bible “disagree” with each other. In fact, this is exactly what makes this small collection the Living Word of God: it speaks eternal, unchanging truths in changing languages and differing imagery, so that everyone on earth can hear God speaking for herself or himself. Praise the Lord for the wisdom that used all that variety to speak to all hearts!

Take a moment to do a small survey. Ask each person in the meeting what his or her favorite part of the Bible is, and why. You may like to have a scribe record the differences. You may discover that the very thing that

makes one person treasure one part of Scripture makes another confused or disturbed, and the part that person likes, someone else doesn't.

Read or have read 2 Timothy 3:14-17. Write down the statements that are made about the Word of God and why it can be trusted. Then make a separate list of what the Scriptures, if studied, will accomplish in an individual life.

Together, create a prayer that asks for humility and for God's wisdom in each heart as each one studies God's Word and seeks to have his/her life molded by it.

ACTIVITY SUGGESTION

1. Take several Bibles in different versions, and choose a passage or chapter, such as 1 Corinthians 13 or Isaiah 53, or any favorite passage, and read it together in different versions. It is even better if you have people who can read in different languages.
2. Compare and contrast and find out how many extra blessings and insights you can find by putting together all you find and talking the ideas out with all the different minds in the room.

SEVEN DAYS OF SOUL FOOD

SEVEN DAYS' WORTH OF DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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 emotions, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY ONE: This week we will do something different. For several months now, we have been learning more and more about the power of God's Word to work reformation and transformation in our lives. You have been encouraged more and more to create your own private devotional time and grow in grace. So this week, instead of giving you Scriptures to look at, this lesson will help you to look more deeply into your own favorites. To begin, which Scripture did you say was your favorite during the meeting this week? Reread that one, in context, asking God to show you deeper themes than you have seen before. Then, you could branch out into other passages as well. Try it with passages you are not comfortable with, or are confused about. You might be surprised how God will lead you.

DAY TWO: *Heart:* Beginning with your favorite passage, (going on to others if you wish) search out the parts that touch your emotions. Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in your heart this week.

DAY THREE: *Mind:* In what ways does this passage stretch or grow your mind? How does God want to work in your mind this week?

DAY FOUR: *Strength/body:* Are there ways in which this favorite passage speaks to your physical health and strength? If not, can you find a passage that does? What are the ways God wants to strengthen your body this week?

DAY FIVE: *Soul/spirit:* As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you so far this week, the Holy Spirit wants to lead you both more deeply into familiar parts of the Bible, and also more broadly, into parts you may not be as familiar with. Write in your prayer journal about what you are learning and how it affects your daily life.

DAY SIX: How can you show love to your family, community, and church through what you have learned this week?

DAY SEVEN: 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 Twitter post(s).
- Make food and give it to someone in need.

Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something.

Share the love!

a short skit

THE STORIES AS TOLD TO LUKE

written by
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Skit

10-15 minutes or as long as you like to take

We will do something different again this week. You will be the co-creators of an easy skit.

One of the people who gathered stories to write a gospel was Luke, the doctor who traveled with Paul. If you compare Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-2, you will see that he considered Acts a kind of Part Two to his gospel, which is the longest one and contains lots of stories that are not in the others. For one thing, there are more stories about women than there are in the others. Scholars think this could be because, as a doctor, Luke had more contact with women than most men had, though of course he treated men as well, and many of his stories came from men.

1. You only need one chosen character for this skit: Luke.
2. As many others as would like to participate should find a story they like in the gospel of Luke and pretend it happened to them or someone they know.
3. One at a time, each person tells a brief version of their story to Luke, who asks questions and pretends to be writing down what they say.

Here are some examples of stories that are only found in Luke's gospel (though you can use any story you like from it.)

1. Details of John the Baptist's and Jesus' birth. Mary the mother of Jesus probably told these to Luke. (Luke 1 and 2)

2. Anna and Simeon bless baby Jesus.
(Luke 2:25-38)
3. The Good Samaritan. (Luke 10)
4. Mary and Martha at home. (Luke 10)
5. Woman healed of being bent over 18 years.
(Luke 13)
6. The three parables in Luke 15: lost coin,
lost sheep, and prodigal son.

You can find many more. As you play the part of the Bible character, **use your imagination in telling "Luke" how these events affected you.** Also, **the person who plays Luke should use his imagination in asking questions Luke might have asked.**

TIMING:

1. If you want many people to play a part, appoint a timekeeper and only take a minute or two on each story.
2. Alternatively, if you want to go deeply into fewer stories, either set aside more time, or choose only 2-3 stories.

21

TAKING QUESTIONS TO THE WORD

To understand the way God's Word was viewed during the time of Christ, it is necessary to go back 600 years to the Babylonian conquest and captivity. For centuries before that, God's prophets had warned His people that if they did not start taking Him and His law seriously, the consequences would be catastrophic. Though God has always had some people who trust and obey Him, in general the people refused and rebelled. They were taken captive by idolatrous nations time and again, and rescued time and again. The northern kingdom of Israel had finally "filled the cup of iniquity" and fallen to the Assyrians a hundred years earlier.

The culmination of all this was that Judah, the somewhat more faithful southern kingdom, was taken captive by Babylon, and this time God said, "Don't even ask. You're not going to be free for seventy years." Read or have read *Jeremiah 25:8-11*.

During this long captivity, people had time to think. Was it worth it to disobey God? When they were finally set free again, Ezra and Nehemiah led the charge to reinstate God's law and this time, to keep it faithfully. Read *Nehemiah 8:1-3*.

As a result, over the following centuries, Judah finally became, in part, the nation God had called them to be, known for their faithfulness to their great God. But only in part.

You see, the problem is, they now went too far in the other direction. They began to see the law itself, rather than the God who made it, as being holy and bringing salvation. If disobedience to the law had brought captivity, then they were going to keep that law in every tiny detail. In order to be absolutely certain not to break a commandment, they surrounded each one with more laws, like a hedge of protection. For example, if the Sabbath is important, then let's make up a whole bunch of tiny laws that dictate how

to keep it. They decided you couldn't carry any burden at all, not even your handkerchief. If you wanted a handkerchief on Sabbath, you had to pin it to your tunic within reach of your nose on Friday, but you couldn't carry it on Sabbath. You could write or erase two letters of the alphabet, but more than that was work. There were dozens more like this.

By Jesus' time, religious leaders known Pharisees and Sadducees, as well as scribes and lawyers (experts in the Old Testament law) were making life an intolerable burden for people, who rarely could read for themselves, and couldn't possibly keep all the laws laid on them. Read what Jesus had to say about this in *Matthew 23:1-4*.

For centuries, Abraham's descendants refused to obey God's law; now they were all about perfect obedience. The plain truth is, neither way followed the God of the law. God's whole focus from Genesis on has been on love. "I love you, I want to bless you, please love Me!" God pled throughout the Old Testament.

And they knew this. The greatest prayer in Israel from Moses to this day is called the Sh'ma, and is the text from *Deuteronomy 6:4-5*. (Read together.) The law of God is, was, and always will be all about love.

Compare *Acts 15:10-11* to see how the early church, knowing Jesus and knowing about love and grace, looked at the Old Testament law.

But what if you have questions? What if you don't understand all about God's law? Should we just accept blindly whatever we are taught? Should the Pharisees have simply jumped to Jesus' side without being clear in their own hearts and minds?

No. God gave us minds and wills and He wants us to use them, and to come and bring our questions to him. This week we will learn more about some people who had questions and doubts, and who did the very best thing a questioner can do—they brought them to Jesus.

DEVOTION

Those who fear questioning God or think it is wrong to do so have not read their Bibles very clearly. Abraham asked God questions, and even argued with Him. The prophets asked questions and had doubts. Some of David's psalms are about questions. Jesus' disciples constantly asked Him to explain this or that, or what something meant. And by the way, He never gave up on them, but just kept patiently answering and explaining. Even Judas, right up to the Last Supper or perhaps beyond that, could have repented and been restored.

Let's take a look at three stories of questioners, and the results of their questions.

Can a Pharisee be saved? Of course you know the answer is yes; anyone who will can be saved. But there is also another evidence for Pharisees in particular that you may not have thought of. Jesus spent a lot of time and energy on them! Why would He be constantly calling out to Pharisees, even the "woes" *in Matthew 23*, unless He saw hope for them?

1. One Pharisee in particular heard Jesus and his heart was stirred. Nicodemus, not wanting to let his interest in Jesus be known, came to visit Him at night when he would not be seen. We will examine their conversation in greater detail in the skit, but for now, read *John 3:1-3*. As you can see, Nicodemus might have wanted to ease into the conversation, but Jesus had no such hesitation. He went straight to the heart of the matter He knew was troubling Nicodemus. What do you think Nicodemus meant by "we know You have come from God as a teacher"? Did he believe at this point? In our skit we will see some of the later results of this conversation.
2. Now read *Luke 18:18-27*. Whom is this story about? What is his question? Have you ever had similar questions? What new questions are raised by Jesus' answer? In this case, sadly, there was no acceptance of Jesus, at least not at that time. We can hope

the rich young ruler eventually believed, but we won't know for sure until heaven.

3. For our third story, read *Luke 10:25-29*. Who is doing the questioning here? Is he honestly questioning Jesus, or does he have a hidden motive? See the clue in verse 25. Notice that Jesus quotes the great Jewish prayer, the Sh'ma. Every member of His audience would have known this prayer by heart. The lawyer no doubt recited it every day. Whether he lived by it is another matter. He tries to turn the question by asking who his neighbor is, although, as an expert in the law, he knows perfectly well that God says absolutely any stranger or alien in need is not only our neighbor but our brother or sister. In answer, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. Then, in verse 36, Jesus turns the tables. What question does He now ask the lawyer, and what does the lawyer answer? In this story, we are not told the ending. Does the lawyer listen and give his heart to Jesus? We will never know until we go to heaven.

In these three stories, we have seen three different attitudes. Some people come to God as earnest seekers but are shy about it. Some publicly come to God as earnest seekers, but hope to get easy answers. Some only ask their questions to demonstrate that they don't believe and try to make the gospel look silly. In every case, with what attitude does Jesus respond? Did He love all three of these questioners? How do you know?

Do you have questions? We can no longer go and see Jesus in person, much though we might wish to. How do you take your questions to God, and how do you find answers? What do you do when there are no easy answers? Do you trust anyway?

ACTIVITY SUGGESTION

1. Divide the group into pairs or small groups of no more than four. Make sure each group has a Bible, some slips of paper, and pens or pencils. If possible, have one or more concordances available to share. Some Bibles have simple ones in the back. If you have internet access, you can also look online.
2. Have each person write down a question he or she wishes to have answered. In the groups, use the Bible to try to find answers. These could be actual answers to the questions, or they could be encouraging passages that help us to trust God even when we can't know the answers.
3. If time, have the groups come back together and share some insights they gained from the search, even if they didn't find the specific answer they wanted.

SEVEN DAYS OF SOUL FOOD

SEVEN DAYS' WORTH OF DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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 emotions, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY ONE: During this week, you can take time to go more deeply into some of the questions you wish you could ask God. First of all, do ask Him! Don't just dig into the Bible to try to find answers without asking for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If you don't have questions right now, you might want to look up deeper details about the things you do believe, so that you can explain them clearly to others. Write in your prayer journal, either about questions you have, or about ones you've had in the past and how or if they have been answered.

DAY TWO: *Heart:* Read Psalm 13. How do you think David's heart felt at the beginning? How do you think he felt by the end? What made the difference? Have you ever had these questions? Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in your heart this week.

DAY THREE: *Mind:* The apostle Paul was one of the most intellectual people in the Bible. He generally used logic to answer questions. For one example, read **1 Thessalonians 4:13-18**. Paul wants us all to understand about resurrection. He gives more of his logic in **1 Corinthians 15**. You could read the whole chapter, but at least read the first 19 verses.

What logic does Paul use?

Does this help your mind to understand?

DAY FOUR: *Strength/body:* If there's one eternal human question, it might be why does God allow suffering?

Choose any story of one of the people Jesus healed, especially ones that had been sick or crippled for years.

What questions might they have had during those years?

Their feelings were immeasurably helped by being healed, but does that really answer the question? Why or why not?

What is your explanation of the problem of human suffering?

How could you share it?

DAY FIVE: *Soul/spirit:* As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you so far this week, write about why you think passion for others reforms us and makes us more whole.

DAY SIX: Everyone—including your family, community, and church, struggles with questions. Are there ways you can share what you have learned?

DAY SEVEN: 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 Twitter post(s).
- Make food and give it to someone in need.

Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something.

Share the love!

a short skit

TAKING QUESTIONS TO THE WORD

written by
Debbonnaire Kovacs

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A SHORT SKIT

(ABOUT 10-15 MINUTES, could be longer depending on how deeply you go into Act 3)

An easy way to do this skit is simply to have the actors playing the parts of Jesus and Nicodemus with Bibles open to John 3 so that each person can read his part. This version is taken from The Message translation. If you have a Bible in your language with easy, everyday language, you can use that one. Or, of course, any version you like. The short second and third acts are a little more developed, from John 7:45-53 and 19:38-42.

CHARACTERS

1. Jesus
2. Nicodemus
3. Two or more temple police. They can share the speaking parts in Act 2.
4. Two or more Pharisees. Choose one to be the leader who speaks in Act 2.
5. Joseph of Arimathea
6. Pilate
7. Other disciples, including women. These are not speaking parts.

(continue on next page)

PROPS

1. Could have some kind of shawls for the Pharisees.
2. A long sheet or tablecloth as a burial cloth.
3. Herbs and spices can be imaginary.
4. If you put a row of chairs on one side and a long table on the other side, up front, you can use two of the chairs for the rooftop where Jesus and Nicodemus talk, then use the chairs for the Sanhedrin in Act 2, and use the long table for Jesus' body in Act 3.

Note concerning Act 3.

It is fine if you want to simply have Joseph and Nicodemus discussing their plans. But if the person who plays Jesus in Act 1 is willing, it can be a powerfully spiritual experience to have him pretend to be dead, and the others actually wrap up his body, trying to imagine the pain and sorrow of the real disciples as they buried their Master. If you choose to go this route, do take time to discuss the feelings it brings up, after the skit is over. Emphasize the pain and despair the disciples were feeling, as compared with the joy we have, knowing that Jesus is alive forever.

ACT 1

Scene: **Jesus** is sitting in a chair alone.

Nicodemus comes from one side, looking around as if he's nervous to be seen.

Jesus: Welcome, friend. How may I help you?

Nicodemus: (Nervously) I, uh...I need to talk with you. If that's all right...

Jesus: (Waves him to a seat) Of course. What do you need?

Nicodemus: (Sits down, hesitates, looking down at his lap; takes deep breath and looks at Jesus. He says his first line in a flattering way, as if he's trying to get Jesus to approve of him) Rabbi, we all know you're a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren't in on it.

Jesus: You're absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it's not possible to see what I'm pointing to—to God's kingdom.

Nicodemus: (Looking confused) How can anyone be born who has already been born and grown up? You can't re-enter your mother's womb and be born again. What are you saying with this 'born-from-above' talk?

Jesus: You're not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the 'wind-hovering-over-the-water' creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. When you look at a baby, it's just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can't see and touch—the Spirit—and becomes a living spirit. So don't be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be 'born from above'—out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it's headed next. That's the way it is with everyone 'born from above' by the wind of God, the Spirit of God.

Nicodemus: (Leans forward) What do you mean by this? How does this happen? (Nicodemus shows his varied reactions as Jesus makes the following speech.)

Jesus: (Be sure to be expressive throughout, knowing how Jesus loves Nicodemus.) You're a respected teacher of Israel and you don't know these basics? Listen carefully. I'm speaking sober truth to you. I speak only of what I know by experience; I give witness only to what I have seen with my own eyes. There is nothing secondhand here, no hearsay. Yet instead of facing the evidence and accepting it, you procrastinate with questions. If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don't believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can't see, the things of God? No one has ever gone up into the presence of God except the One who came down from that Presence, the Son of Man.

Jesus: In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life. This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him. This is the crisis we're in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won't come near it, fearing a painful exposure. But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is.

(Nicodemus looks very thoughtful. They freeze in place for a minute, then leave to signify the end of the Act.)

Act 2

(Scene: The Pharisees, including Nicodemus and Joseph, are seated in the chairs. The Temple Police come in and bow.)

Temple We went and heard him, as you ordered,
Police: but...(hesitates)

Lead (Angrily) Well, where is he? Why didn't
Pharisee: you bring him with you?

Temple Have you heard the way he talks? We've
Police: never heard anyone speak like this man!

Pharisee: Are you carried away like the rest of the
rabble? You don't see any of the leaders
believing in him, do you? Or any from the
Pharisees? It's only this crowd, ignorant
of God's Law, that is taken in by him—and
damned. [Note: this is the word used in
the Bible. You can say "condemned" if you
prefer.]

Nicodemus: Does our Law decide about a man's guilt
without first listening to him and finding
out what he is doing?

Pharisee: (Even more angrily) Are you also campaign-
ing for the Galilean? Examine the evi-
dence. See if any prophet ever comes from
Galilee.

(Scene freezes for a moment, then they leave, sig-
nifying end of Act 2.)

Act 3

(Scene: Pilate is seated at one end of room. It can be in one of the same chairs, but as far as possible from the table.

At the other side of the room, **Jesus** is lying on the floor, with **Nicodemus** and the other disciples around Him, grieving. **Joseph of Arimathea** comes to **Pilate** and bows.)

Pilate: Well? What do you want?

Joseph: Please, my lord, I request permission to take possession of the body of Jesus of Nazareth.

Pilate: (Looks away, clearly disturbed, guilty, and upset) Okay, okay, I don't care. Take Him!

(Pilate leaves). Nicodemus and Joseph, with other help if necessary, lay out the cloth on the table and lift Jesus onto it.

They take the imaginary herbs and spices and sprinkle Jesus and wrap him up.

Try to really express what you would be feeling if you were there that terrible day.

End the skit by having everyone kneel on the floor around the table and cover their faces with their hands.

Allow the silence to stretch for a few moments.

Then have all the actors return to the group, and take some time to talk about feelings and reactions, not just to the last scene, but to the whole play.

How was Nicodemus' life changed? How is your life changed?

22

TREASURING THE WORD

Psalms 119 is the longest book in the Bible, far too long for us to study the whole thing in one session. You will find great blessing if you take time to read and study it prayerfully. **For this Bible study, we will concentrate on three stanzas which talk about loving God's Word.**

NOTE: Torah is the Hebrew word for Law, but it encompasses the whole first five books of the Bible, also known as "the law of Moses." It is not, of course, Moses' law; he was only the recorder of what God gave him. We tend to think of the Ten Commandments as the Law, but in this context, "Law" and "Word" are interchangeable. All God's Words are powerful and creative, and can make us like Him when we immerse ourselves day by day in His Word.

FIRST: PRAYER

Always begin with prayer. Ask God to bless your study and discussion, and to help you to learn to love and treasure the Word of God.

PREPARATION

There are about a dozen psalms which are acrostics, each verse beginning with one letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Psalm 119 is one of these, except in this case its 176 verses are divided into 22 stanzas and each stanza begins with the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

This psalm contains other special literary factors in its composition. Possibly this is why, though no author is given, most scholars think it must have been David, the poet and singer. Almost every single verse contains some synonym for God's Law, the Torah, such as "word, promise," or "rulings." God's name is mentioned 24 times, and the psalm incorporates dozens of prayers. Often within each stanza, the first and fifth verses will state the same theme, followed by a statement that seems to conflict or oppose. Then the final verse, the eighth, is usually a transition introducing the next stanza.

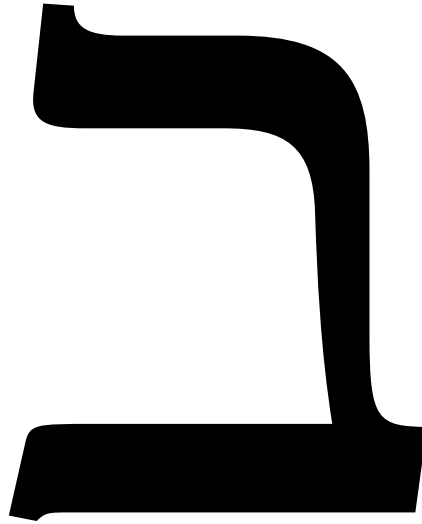
An important thing to understand about Hebrew is that, unlike alphabets such as English which are only symbols for sounds, each Hebrew letter has a meaning of its own. For our study, we will look at three stanzas which particularly emphasize love for God's Word. These three begin with the second letter, beth, the sixth letter, vav, and the thirteenth letter, mem. According to Rabbi Marcia Prager, in the book *The Path of Blessing*, from Jewish Lights Publishing, here are the meanings of these three letters:

1. **Beth or beyt—house;** “The letter beyt offers us the opportunity to experience all of Creation—from the cosmic to the subatomic—as a house of God, a dwelling place of divinity” (ibid., p. 34).
2. **Vav (in ancient Hebrew, waw)—**a hook or connection; in speaking of its use in the name of God (YHWH or Yahweh), Rabbi Prager says it connects “is, was, and will be” into one Eternal Being. (Drawn from pp. 84-91.)
3. **Mem—water;** “The letter mem evokes all that is fluid, creative, and fertile” (ibid. p. 122).

Bear these meanings in mind and see whether they add to the depth of the insights you will gain as you study these stanzas.

As you study, hold one overarching question in mind: is this psalm about loving God's Word, or is it about loving God? Or both?

Be prepared to discuss at the end.



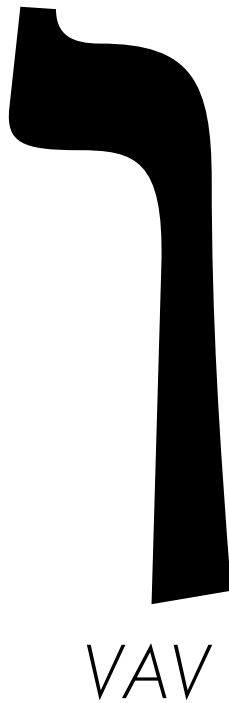
BEIT
(B/V)

READING ONE: **BEIT (B/V), PSALM 119:9-16**

Have different people read each verse in the stanza.

Discussion Questions:

1. In the first verse, remember that of course “young man” also means “young woman.”
2. Find the synonyms for God’s Law in this stanza and begin a list.
3. What is David’s first question in this stanza? What kinds of questions does this bring up in the group?
4. What does verse 10 teach us about personal choice and God’s work, working together?
5. What does it mean to “treasure” God’s Word? What do you do with things you treasure?
6. What would make a person rejoice in ordinances (rules) or testimonies?
7. List as many different kinds of actions (such as “meditate” or “tell”) as you can find in this stanza. What are some ways you can and do practice these actions?

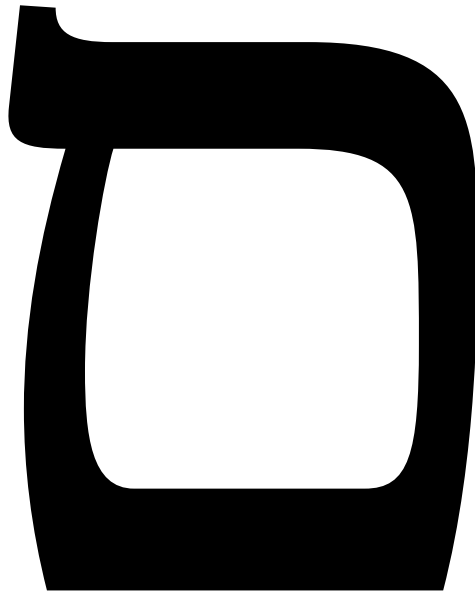


READING TWO: VAV, PSALM 119:41-48

Have different people read each verse in the stanza.

Discussion Questions:

1. Find the synonyms for God's Law and continue your list.
2. What is David praying for, and what reason does he give for asking this favor?
3. Are there troubles implied in this psalm? If so, what are they? Do you face troubles like these?
4. How can a person keep the Law and also "walk at liberty"?
5. What are some ways you "delight in" God's commandments?
6. In the Native American communities of the Pacific Northwest of the United States and Pacific Southwest of Canada, to say "thank you" one raises one's hands. What do you think the psalmist meant when he said he raises his hands to God's commandments? Does raising hands have a meaning in your culture?



MEM

READING THREE: MEM, PSALM 119:97-104

Have different people read each verse in the stanza.

Discussion Questions

1. Find the synonyms for God's Law. How long is your list now?
2. What does it mean to "meditate all day," since obviously everyone has many other things to do over the course of the day? How can you help each other in this practice? What difference do you think it would make in your life?
3. How can God's Law make a person wiser than teachers or elders?
4. What image does David use for the sweetness of God's Law? Why is it so sweet to him?
5. What things does this stanza speak against?

CONCLUSION

Remember our overarching question about loving God or loving His Law?

1. What do you think now? To whom is every single stanza addressed?
2. Can you imagine reading this as if it is only about a set of laws, with no reference to a loving Lawgiver?
3. What would happen—what does happen when people try this?

As you can see, there is a great depth and breadth to the passages in this Psalm. It will help bless you if you study the whole thing. Perhaps prayer partners or small groups could take on the challenge.

1. Make a list of principles you have found in this study that will help you to love and treasure God and His law.
2. Make a pact with one other person to practice this love and all-day meditation in your daily lives.
3. Keep in contact and encourage each other.

ACTIVITY SUGGESTION

Here are two things to try.

1. Individually or as a group, try rewording the themes of your favorite stanza, beginning with the equivalent letter of your own alphabet. For a bigger challenge, try to begin each verse of the stanza with that letter!
2. Go back over all the imagery the psalmist used for the Law of God. Choose your favorite(s) and create something that represents that to you. Take your creation home and keep it where it will remind you to treasure God's Word.

CLOSING PRAYER

Praise God for creating us and all that is with His Word. Praise Him for sending us, through many prophets, over many centuries, the Laws we can live by to be fully loving children of God. Praise Him even more for sending His Son Jesus to live out that Law of Love and show us once and for all that it is not an arbitrary set of rules and limitations! Be specific in asking Him to bless each person as they learn to treasure His words.

SEVEN DAYS OF SOUL FOOD

SEVEN DAYS' WORTH OF DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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 emotions, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY ONE: Read fairly quickly over the whole psalm, in order to choose three stanzas that particularly speak to you. Choose one that especially reaches your heart, one that stretches your mind and makes you think, and one that you believe will make you stronger if you apply it. Use these three stanzas for your personal study this week.

DAY TWO: *Heart:* Read prayerfully, verse by verse, through the stanza you chose for your heart and emotions. Why does it speak to you in this way? Write in your prayer journal about the feelings it evokes. Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in your heart this week.

DAY THREE: *Mind:* Read prayerfully, verse by verse, through the stanza you chose because it appeals to your mind, the logical, thinking part of you. Write about how it challenges and stretches your thinking. Do you perhaps have questions about the historic context or the original language of some of the words? You can look these up in concordances, commentaries, or online. How does God want to work in your mind this week?

DAY FOUR: *Strength/body:* Did you find a stanza that you believe can strengthen you? This wouldn't have to be physical strength, but if you use your imagination it could be. What if you chose a particularly rhythmic stanza to exercise or walk to? For one thing, you would soon learn it by heart. How does God want to strengthen you this week?

DAY FIVE: *Soul/spirit:* Soul or spirit, of course, is not a part of you. It's your whole self. But it's your whole self with a spiritual twist. It's your whole self choosing to be godly. Read through your three stanzas again, finding the verses that appeal to your spirit, that encourage your faith and trust and make you want to treasure God and His Word as David did. Can you find a promise or promises that will help you do this?

DAY SIX: As you think about your family, community, and church, can you tell which people treasure God and His Word? What visible difference does it make in their lives? Bear in mind that only God can see hearts, but you can usually tell when someone is trying to follow Him. How can you be a light in your community this week?

DAY SEVEN: 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 Twitter post(s).
- Make food and give it to someone in need.

Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something.

Share the love!

*The root of reformation is the Latin word reformare,
which means to form again or to change.*

Read EGW's book, *The Great Controversy*, Chapter 7

Seriously what's changed?



The graphic features the text "eWeek of Prayer 2017" in a white, cursive font against a dark, smoky background. A portion of a Bible is visible on the right side, with the words "HOLY BIBLE" and "ILLUSTRATED" partially legible on its cover.

Online
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Relationship
Authenticity
Transparency

While some may be content with rituals and doing things the same way as usual, many youth and young adults now crave a church experience that is different, more authentic. They want relationships with depth, where they can be themselves. This year we will launch our first annual **e-Youth Week of Prayer** meeting. A virtual/online experience that will allow young people an opportunity to discuss with each other what is relevant to them.