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# WHAT'S IN YOUR TEACHING GUIDE

This Teaching Guide has three purposes:

- to give the teacher tools for focusing on the content of the session in the Study Guide.
- to give the teacher additional Bible background information.
- to give the teacher variety and choice in preparation.

The Teaching Guide includes two major components: Teacher Helps and Teacher Options.

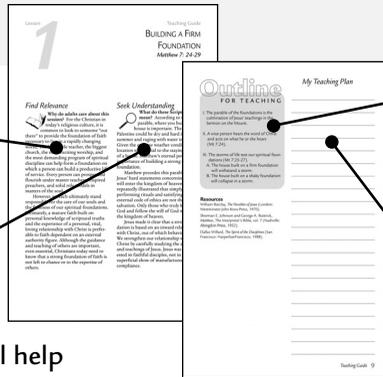
## Teacher Helps

### Find Relevance

helps you zero in on why each session is important for the adults you teach.

### Seek Understanding

presents helpful Bible Background informations and insights that will help you better understand the Scripture.



### Teaching Outline

provides you with an outline of the main themes in the Study Guide.

**My Teaching Plan** is a convenient place for you to make notes for teaching the session.

## Teacher Options

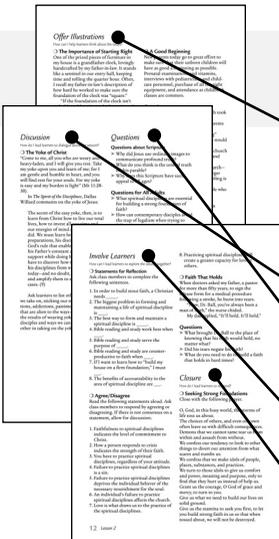
**Offer Illustrations** presents material that will help you paint a picture of the session. This section often presents items from church history, current events, or interesting anecdotes that help introduce the session.

**Discussion** provides teaching activities that will help learners discuss the Scripture text.

**Questions** presents multiple collections of questions for various kinds of adults.

**Involve Learners** helps learners become actively involved with the Scripture text for a particular session.

**Closure** gives you a means for wrapping up the session.



### You Can Choose!

There is more material in each session than you can use, so choose the options from each section to tailor the session to the needs of your group.

### Prepare Before the Session

Read the session for today in the Study Guide. Then read the options in this Teaching Guide, placing checkmarks beside the activities you plan to include. After you have decided which options to use, gather the appropriate materials.

# JACOB: LOOKING OUT FOR NUMBER ONE

*Genesis 28:10-22*

## Find Relevance



**Why do adults care about this session?** While most Christians are certainly familiar with the concept of prayer, just as many seem to have difficulty practicing it. Granted, some believers are devoted to a vital, personal prayer life, but still others limit their prayer time to bowing their heads briefly in worship while someone else vocalizes a prayer.

Even those who pray frequently may mistake the intent of prayer. Instead of focusing on the glory of God or the submission of personal confession, prayer becomes an exercise in selfishness, an effort to persuade God to make all our dreams come true. We have many needs and desires, but we often have trouble distinguishing between the two. Some of our needs and desires can be met through our own efforts, while others seem way beyond our power. For example, we cannot change the heart of an angry spouse any more than we can ensure that other drivers will conduct themselves safely when we are on the road with them. Neither can we reverse the course of sickness, withdraw hurtful words, or increase our income at will. What is the “right” way to approach prayer? Can we influence God’s inclination to provide the things we want? Is God willing to “cut deals” with us?

## Seek Understanding



**What do these Scriptures mean?** Fleeing Beersheba, Jacob encounters God in an isolated setting about midway between southern Judah and northeastern Mesopotamia. Many scholars believe the narrative describing Jacob’s encounter at Bethel is a skillful compilation of two ancient stories. The verses portraying the event as one in which God appears in physical form are characteristic of the early “Yahwistic” source, the obvious reference being to “Yahweh” as God’s name. The verses suggesting that God appeared at a distance, however, are characteristic of other passages in which God is called Elohim, derived from the “Elohistic” source. You will notice that both forms lead to the same confrontation: one minute Jacob is asleep, and the next minute he finds himself unexpectedly in the presence of God.

Jacob sought to gain the advantage with God by making a vow. Biblical vows, always contain two parts, the *protasis* (the request) and the *apodosis* (the promise). The person making the vow asks for some special favor in exchange for offering a specific act of devotion or worship.



## Offer Illustrations

How can I help learners think about the issues?

### ○ The Art of the Deal

Some years ago, Donald Trump released what would come to be his best-selling book, *The Art of the Deal*. People know Donald Trump as a fast-talking, fast-living, not-necessarily-ethical-but-always-effective entrepreneur. After all, he has mastered the art of maintaining a high media profile, and knows all too well how to make money hand over fist, so naturally people flock to buy his book in hopes of picking up a few pointers.

With all of that said, understand that Jacob is the “Donald Trump” of the Old Testament: nice enough to be intriguing, but just shady enough that you wouldn’t want to leave him alone with your stuff. To be sure, Jacob is a deal-maker from the get-go. In fact, the narrative describing his birth explains that when he and his twin brother were born, Jacob came out holding onto Esau’s heel, as if he were trying to pull his brother back into the womb so that he could be born first instead. In light of this, is there any wonder why Jacob’s name means literally “heel-grabber” or “supplanter”?

### ○ An Adult Christmas List

Retailers are putting a new twist on the “wish lists” that have been a Christmas tradition for children throughout the years. Now, believe it or not, some toy stores allow children to use portable scanners to create their own personal gift registries! And even more amazing, one enterprising Internet site provides a similar service, which allows children and youth to scan bar codes at the stores of their choice and post their wish lists on a special web site.

While we tend to look distastefully at the typical selfishness of children who produce 11-page Christmas lists, we must not neglect to acknowledge that many

adults approach God in much the same way that children approach Santa Claus. More specifically, we ask for blessing upon blessing, as if God’s primary concern is to make our lives easier.

### Questions

- If you could create your own “blessing registry,” what “items” would you choose?
- How much is *too* much to ask for?
- Should we be concerned about the “appropriateness” of our prayers? Explain.

### ○ Climbing Jacob’s Ladder

Maybe you remember learning to make a “Jacob’s Ladder” using string when you were a child. If so, you probably remember that the resulting structure is long and thin. When we read of Jacob’s vision at Bethel, we typically think of a huge, almost never-ending ladder, perhaps like those on specialized fire engines, cranked high into the air until it looks as though the upper end is propped upon the clouds. Then again, other aspects of the story suggest that God appeared to Jacob in physical form, not at the top of a heavenly ladder, but actually standing directly beside him.

### Questions

- Which of the images mentioned best characterize your own prayer life?
- Do you think of God as a force that is high and distant from you, or do you imagine that the Lord is really very close at hand, perhaps even in the same room? Is one image necessarily more appealing than the other? Explain.
- What are the positive aspects in each of the relationship models described above?

## Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

### ○ How Should We Pray?

Alicia Simms is worried about her two children, both of whom are in high school. She cringes every time she hears mention of yet another high school shooting or related act of violence. Fearing that her children will become just two more innocent victims of another student's adolescent rage, she prays, "Dear God, please guard over my children and keep them safe. If you will protect them through high school and college, I will give you two years of my life as a volunteer missionary."

### Questions

- How do you feel about the "appropriateness" underlying this prayer?
- Should we be concerned about whether our prayers are appropriate?
- What's the difference between a vow and a covenant?

## Questions

### Questions about Scripture

- Why was Jacob making a solitary journey through Bethel?
- How is God's promise to Jacob similar to earlier promises made to Abraham and Isaac?
- How does Jacob's request differ from God's promise?

### Questions for All Adults

- Does Jacob seem like the kind of person God would choose as the founder of Israel and the patriarch of the twelve tribes?
- Why do you think God chose Jacob?
- What kind of person would *you* have chosen?

### Questions for Mature Adults

- When has your prayer life disappointed you?
- If God does not "come through" on our specific requests, can we still worship God? Explain.
- In what ways do we remain faithful even when God remains silent?

### Questions for Younger Adults

- Jacob was not yet married when God promised to make him the "father of many nations." How might *you* have reacted to such a promise, especially at such a young age?
- What are some promises that God has already made to you?
- What other divine promises do you wish God would make on your behalf? Which of these do you think God would be more likely to agree to?

### Questions for Adults with Children

- Is it selfish to pray for our children?
- Do we teach our children the quick and easy formula that prayer equals asking for lots of "stuff"?
- How do we model an effective prayer life for our children?

## Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

### ○ Screen Test for a Spiritual

Before the session, recruit three volunteers in advance to read the Scripture text as if it were a movie script and they were auditioning for the most coveted roles. You will need to be sure to provide copies of the “script” from the Resource Kit page for this session, as this sheet clarifies the various parts in the “film.”

Ask the class to imagine that a movie studio is screen-testing actors for the part of Jacob in an upcoming movie. The parts of the narrator and the voice of God will be read by house actors, but the part of Jacob is to be read by an actor testing for the part. Encourage readers to be expressive. In particular, during the conversation with God, ask “Jacob” to play up the manipulative aspects of the character. Keep in mind that you may want to have several “Jacobs” audition for the starring role.

### Questions

- How did this approach to the Scripture passage help you gain additional insight into Jacob’s character, namely his attempt to gain the upper hand over God?
- Have you ever lifted up a similar prayer?

### □ Step into the Story

Help your participants put themselves “in Jacob’s sandals” by either reading or adapting the following statement to suit your group:

Imagine that you are camping alone in a desolate area. In the middle of the night, you are suddenly awakened by a tingling sensation. You look up to discover that Heaven’s gate has

opened before you. Why, you even see *angels* going back and forth, attending to their heavenly business! You are overcome with the majesty and wonder of it all, when suddenly you realize that God’s own presence is standing beside you. God speaks to you, making marvelous promises—and *all for you!*

### Questions

- How do you think you would have responded to the scenario described? Do you think you would have had the nerve to try making a deal with God?
- Would our daily prayer lives be any different if we took a moment to think about God standing over us, watching carefully?

## Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

### ○ Closing Meditation

Close the session by leading everyone in the following meditation. Pause after each sentence to give group members time for internal response:

Close your eyes. Can you see the Lord beside you?

Quiet your mind. Can you hear God’s call?

Open your heart. Can you feel the Spirit’s touch?

Now, what are you going to do about it?

You don’t have to make a deal, because the deal is done. The price is paid. Abundant and eternal life are yours to have, to enjoy, and to share. Jacob’s Ladder stands before you, and there is room on it for another person. Will you climb, or will you pass it by? It’s **your** move.

## 2

JEPHTHAH: VICTORY  
AT WHAT PRICE?*Judges 11:29-40**Find Relevance*

**Why do adults care about this session?** Their faces appear frequently in newspapers—often on the front page of either the “Business” or “Lifestyles” section—the rights to publish their exploits coveted. And why? Because others want to know how these people made it to the top, how hard they worked, and the price they paid for success. Often, however, there is a darker side to the lives of our cultural heroes. After all, more times than not the family members of these icons are the ones who suffer the most during their loved ones’ rise to glory. For instance, ask the long-suffering spouse or even the children of one of these success stories to rewrite the best-selling novel that it inspired, and you might just get a different version entirely.

The passage chosen for this session describes the painful experience of Jephthah, an ancient military leader, who achieved a great victory at an even greater cost. Like too many others, Jephthah did not realize the price of his ambition until it was too late. Challenge your learners to redefine what it means to “be a success,” including how far they’d go to get there.

*Seek Understanding*

**What do these Scriptures mean?** The underlying theme of today’s story is not unique to the Bible. In fact, the perils of ambition are a common motif in many literary traditions, even ancient Greek mythology. Perhaps the particular account that is most reminiscent of Jephthah’s experience is the one involving a man named Meander who was at war in Phrygia with the people of Perssinus. During the battle, he vowed to the “Mother of the gods” that if she would just grant him victory, he would sacrifice the first person to greet him upon his return home. He won the victory, but to his horror, was greeted simultaneously by his son, mother, *and* sister. And even though he fulfilled his promise, he was so fraught with grief that he drowned himself in a winding river, which incidentally came to bear his name (Gaster, 430).

This Greek etymology, a story that explains the origin of a name, endowed the English language with the verb “meander,” meaning “to wander.” But even more importantly, the biblical story of Jephthah provides an unforgettable lesson for those whose personal ambition tends to lead them astray from those responsibilities that are *truly* important.



## Offer Illustrations

How can I help learners think about the issues?

### ○ Stan

Stan Manley committed himself to making a million dollars before his 30th birthday. Pressing through maximum course loads every semester in college, Stan earned an MBA by age 22. Pausing just long enough to get married before joining a prestigious manufacturing firm, Stan quickly became a manager and worked his way up the corporate ladder. Even though he put pictures of his children on his desk, he sometimes forgot their birthdays. By the time Stan was named vice-president at the age of 29, he had already earned more than a million dollars in stock options in addition to his salary, at which point he set a new goal of earning \$10 million before he turned 40.

Shortly after moving his family into a palatial new home, Stan returned from a lengthy business trip to find the house empty, except for a short note from his wife. A simple “Goodbye, Stan,” was all it said. For the life of him, Stan couldn’t begin to fathom what had happened.

### ○ Katie

Katie Morgan was named “Volunteer of the Year” in Fordyce County after serving concurrently as President of the PTA, Den Mother for Cub Scout Pack 23, Chair of the local March of Dimes, and mentor for three sixth-grade girls in a special after-school program. Meanwhile, Katie also sings in the choir, teaches a college Bible study class, and directs the children’s missions program at her church. She’s even thinking about signing up for Meals on Wheels and wants to help organize a new soccer league for her community. Katie doesn’t understand why her husband and children don’t seem to be very excited about her many community and church efforts.

### ○ Liza

Even from birth, Liza Borne was blessed with intelligence and wit, curiosity and charm. In fact, these qualities were only enhanced as she matured, until eventually classic beauty was added to the list of reasons that others admired—even envied—her so intently. Not only did Liza’s family dote on her constantly, but teachers praised her as she swept top honors in high school and college. In the meantime, a position with the family business awaited her, with nothing but bright success in her future.

Somehow, though, this just was not enough for Liza. Perhaps things had become too easy for her, or maybe she simply wanted more than material reward and public acclaim. Whatever the reason, the whole town was shocked when Liza was found dead in her apartment after not reporting to work for two days. In search of a transcendental experience, Liza had accidentally overdosed on cocaine. No one could grasp why a person so gifted would trade her future for the ephemeral promise of a drug-induced high.

## Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

### ○ Applying the Illustrations

When Jephthah made his ill-fated vow, the Spirit of God, which came upon him in a mighty way (11:29), had already blessed him. Who could ask for more? After all, previous judges had gone on to lead Israel to victory under the powerful influence of the very same Spirit. Yet, in hopes of even greater assurance, Jephthah took an unnecessary and dangerous chance. Like so many even in today's world, he had difficulty recognizing the boundary between what is appropriate and what is excessive. Like too many after him, ultimately he seems to have fallen victim to personal insecurities and a deep-seated desire to prove himself to others.

Lead your participants to discuss what they feel are appropriate boundaries for maintaining a healthy balance in the ongoing search for success. How do *you* know “when to say when”?

## Questions

### Questions about Scripture

- What is the central theme surrounding the Scriptures from Joshua through 2 Kings?
- How does Israel's experience in the Jephthah story illustrate this theme?
- Why was Jephthah empowered with the “Spirit of Yahweh”?

### Questions for All Adults

- In what ways are children sacrificed today?
- Why do you think Jephthah fulfilled his vow?
- How might Jephthah have recanted his promise?

### Questions for Mature Adults

- How have work habits changed from generation to generation?
- What lengths have you gone to in order to achieve success?

### Questions for Younger Adults

- Have you ever felt left out, as Jephthah did?
- Had you been Jephthah's daughter, how might you have reacted to the situation at hand?
- How do *you* define success?

### Questions for Adults with Children

- When have you placed your career before your family?
- What motivations allow people to value their work more than their families?
- How can we make a positive “sacrifice” of our children to God?

## Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

### ○ Sacrificing Children

While it is easy for modern readers to condemn Jephthah, one might suggest that all parents sacrifice their children in some way or another. Have your class form several smaller groups of two or three to discuss the various “gods” to which children are sacrificed in today’s world. Some potential responses might include:

- Personal ambition
- Contemporary culture
- Materialism
- Pleasure

After allowing for several minutes of discussion, suggest that children must be given up to something. We can’t keep them for ourselves. Ask, “How can we give our children to the true God?” Before moving to the next exercise, allow ample time for each of the small groups to explore some possible avenues by which children can be sacrificed to God in a positive way.

### ○ A Place for Sacrifice

The Study Guide suggests that there is an appropriate place for sacrifice in all our lives. After all, Jesus Christ sacrificed himself for our sins. From a Trinitarian standpoint, God sacrificed God’s own Son—also a part of God’s creation—to redeem humankind. It is difficult to untangle the thorny mixture of motives that direct our behavior concerning sacrifice. Keep in mind, God sacrificed self for the benefit of others, while our tendency is to sacrifice others for the benefit of self.

Lead your learners to develop their own scenarios, patterned after the ones found in the “Offer Illustrations” section. Once they have done this, invite them to discuss whether the main characters in their scenarios would be more inclined to

exhibit a willingness to sacrifice self for others or to sacrifice others for self.

### ○ Word Games

Lead your class to define the following terms in their own words:

- Workaholic
- Type-A personality
- Perfectionist
- Compulsive

### Questions

- How are these terms similar?
- In what ways are they different?
- To what extent do basic personality traits drive career or lifestyle choices? Explain.

## Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

### ○ Setting Priorities, Making Sacrifices

For a concluding meditation, ask your class to close their eyes while you ask the following questions and read the final statement. Be sure to allow a few moments after each question for a bit of personal reflection.

- Who has made sacrifices for you? God? Parents? Spouse? Others?
- For whom have *you* made sacrifices?
- When have you mistakenly thought you were sacrificing self for others, only to realize later that the others were actually paying the greater price?
- Ask for God’s help in setting priorities for life, family, and work.

## 3

HANNAH: TODAY FOR ME,  
TOMORROW FOR YOU*1 Samuel 1:1-20**Find Relevance*

**Why do adults care about this session?** For believers as for others, life comes with no guarantee of safety, let alone days of ease. The bottom line is this: Life is just plain hard. Diseases refuse to disappear. People sicken, suffer, and die. Marriage partners squabble, struggle, and sometimes part. Work brings stress. And even if we manage to handle all that, sometimes our fondest dreams and best-laid plans still manage to go awry.

So, how do we react to the obstacles life brings? How do we find peace when circumstances seemingly conspire to inundate us with misery? How is it that some people have mastered the art of remaining both hopeful *and* helpful even in the midst of adversity? Though usually poor by worldly standards, these individuals remain generous in spirit—not to mention, resources—open-hearted to *all* children of God. The world is made all the better simply because they have learned to be effective stewards of their pain as well as their blessings. Meanwhile, their inner strength provides light and hope to others who are wrestling through times of difficulty. As a matter of fact, Hannah, the subject of today’s session, happens to be a perfect example of just such a person.

*Seeking Understanding*

**What do these Scriptures mean?** Hannah’s sorrowful situation arose in part not only because ancient people never so much as entertained the notion that men might be infertile, but also because they had no idea that gender is determined by the father’s genetic contribution of an either X or a Y chromosome. Therefore, the lack of children—and namely, of sons—was inevitably attributed to the woman.

As she bargained with God to send her a child, Hannah promised not only that her son would spend his life serving God, but that he would indeed live as a Nazirite (v. 22). Nazirites were not allowed to cut their hair, to drink strong drink, or to touch the dead (see Num 6). Early devotees seem to have been Nazirites for life, while later it became common for persons to become Nazirites for only short-term periods (“Nazirite Vows,” 409).

Hannah named her son Samuel, which means “because I asked the Lord for him.” Many scholars assume that the name is derived from the word for “ask” (*sha’al*), which is the root of the name Saul. There is other evidence, however, suggesting that Samuel is built on the root word translated as “to hear,” meaning “heard of God” (*Vows in the Hebrew Bible*, 188-9).



## Offer Illustration

How can I help learners think about the issues?

### ○ Hope through Prayer

Hannah found peace when she surrendered her dilemma to God, when she finally just entrusted God with everything, especially her need and her pain. Hannah's attitude calls to mind the oft-quoted "Serenity Prayer":

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

God chose to bless Hannah with a child, but prayers—no matter how heartfelt—are not always answered according to what *we* want to happen, but rather, according to what *God* wants to happen. In other words, sometimes we just don't get what we want, and come to think of it, sometimes we even end up losing what we treasure most. When Hannah left the Temple that day, she did not know that God would answer her prayer with a child. Yet, she left with a renewed joy, which arose from her surrender to God's will, not her own. Perhaps it is no coincidence that this is the very same way Jesus taught us to pray: *Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven* (Mt 6:10, KJV).

### Questions

- What unsettling or dissatisfying circumstances have you had to accept?
- For you, when has accepting God's will brought with it a change in attitude?
- How do we know when to accept and when to persist?

### ○ True Wealth

An Oriental wisdom story tells of a poor farmer who dreamed that he met a traveling wise man claiming to possess a stone of great value. That evening, as the farmer went to the stream to draw water, he met an old monk camped nearby.

Emboldened by his dream, the farmer cried, "The stone! Give me the precious stone!"

The monk reached into his pack and withdrew a diamond as large as a man's head. "Perhaps you mean this," he said. "I picked it up on a forest path some days ago. You may certainly have it."

The poor farmer returned home with great rejoicing, but oddly enough, was unable to sleep that night. Before dawn the next morning, the farmer went to search for the wise man, hoping to find him before he broke camp and continued his travels. Once he found the monk, the farmer knelt before him, placing the valuable stone back into his hand. "Oh, sir!" he cried. "Please give me the wealth that enables you to give away this diamond so easily" (de Mello, 140-1).

### Questions

- How are we bound by what we own?
- What will it take for us to be "unbound" from these things?

## Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

### ○ Put Yourself in Their Shoes

Encourage your learners to discuss the following questions, as you open the floor to all ranges of comments:

- Why might Elkanah have felt it necessary to take a second wife? (Consider possibilities such as these: Elkanah was getting old, and sensed his own biological clock ticking; Elkanah was young, but his parents or friends were pressuring him to ensure his legacy through children; Hannah, like Sarah before her, suggested that her husband should enlist another woman.)
- Why would Peninnah have agreed to become a second wife when Elkanah so clearly loved Hannah? (Responses might include: Peninnah was lonely; Elkanah had money; Peninnah thought Elkanah would come to love *her* more once she had borne him a son; Peninnah's parents arranged the marriage.)
- Why would Hannah feel the need to make such an extreme vow? (Consider: Peninnah's constant criticism got to her so badly; Hannah felt her childless situation far surpassed even the extremity of her vow; at the time she didn't realize the implications of her vow.)

## Questions

### Questions about Scripture

- What was missing in Hannah and Elkanah's relationship, and why was it important enough to warrant Elkanah's taking another wife?
- How is Hannah's vow similar to those of Jacob and Jephthah?
- How is it different?

### Questions for All Adults

- What have been some of God's greatest blessings upon *you*?
- What causes the greatest void in your life?
- Can you trust God entirely, with your blessings as well as your pain?

### Questions for Mature Adults

- What have you prayed for but never received?
- What promises have you made to God that you didn't keep?
- How have you learned to find inner peace?

### Questions for Younger Adults

- What is your greatest hope for the future?
- Do you make your hopes known to God?
- How can we remain faithful, even when God does not answer our prayers as we might like?

### Questions for Adults with Children

- How do you feel about temporarily entrusting your children to other people?
- How easily could you give up your child, even to God?
- How would you react if your child were called to missions in a land where missionaries are unwelcome and Christians are persecuted?

## Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

### ○ An Exercise in Gloating

Invite two volunteers to illustrate Peninnah's gloating by engaging in playful banter—"playful" being the operative word—focused on something one of them has that the other doesn't.

(Important note: for sensitivity purposes, steer the subject away from childlessness and other touchy subjects.) Set the stage by explaining that even though the specified volunteer has many material things, they still try to bolster their ego by belittling others.

### Questions

- When have you realized that you were the object of someone else's need to boost their own self-esteem?
- We are *all* guilty of making unnecessary comparisons. When are you most susceptible to such behavior?

### ○ A Dramatic Reading

Recruit an especially expressive class member to try to convey the depth of Hannah's agony by reading the following rendering of Hannah's prayer. Be sure to remind your volunteer that it is likely Hannah repeated her prayer not just once, but many times. The complete text is also provided on the Resource Kit page for this session.

*O God, I want a son.*

*Please give me a son!*

*That's all I want from you, all I will ever ask from you.*

*I have served you all my life, but I think you have forgotten me.*

*O God, remember me!*

*O God, have mercy on my misery!*

*O God, don't forget me!*

*O God, please just grant me a son!*

*One son—that's all I ask.*

*God, give me a son—even just for a while—and I will give him back to you.*

*I will dedicate him to your service.*

*O God, don't forget me!*

*O God, have mercy!*

## Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

### ○ God Who Gives, Teach Us...

Consider asking your participants to pray silently as you read the following prayer aloud:

O God, who gives us life and who teaches us to love—

God, who gives us children and teaches us to sacrifice—

O God, who gives, teach us to give.

Teach us to give of our time, knowing that in the midst of our busyness, you are our most important business.

Teach us to give of our treasure, knowing that in the midst of our debts,

we owe our all to you.

Teach us to give of our hearts, knowing that in the midst of our many infatuations,

you are the author of love.

Hear the prayer of your servants, O God—

remember us, and grant that we will remember you.

Give, and remind us to give in return. Love, and receive our love, as we offer our prayer to you this day.

In the name of your beloved child, given for us, we pray.

Amen.

## ABSALOM: USING THE SYSTEM

*2 Samuel 15:1-12*

### Find Relevance



**Why do adults care about this session?** Self-interest is one of the primary motivating forces in all people's lives. In fact, self-interest often determines where we work, where we live, who our friends are, and even how we practice our religion.

On more than one occasion, Christians have been accused of seeking salvation as a type of "fire insurance" against hell, or in other words, as a way to achieve "pie in the sky by and by." Not only is it no secret that some Christians tithe with the expectation of material rewards, but also we know that plenty of others serve in hopes of future blessing or present forgiveness. Still others may take advantage of church programs for their own benefit, without giving anything in return. And meanwhile, many couples use church facilities for weddings or receptions even though they may have no intention of supporting the church afterwards.

The Scripture passage chosen for today recounts a time when the royal prince Absalom sought a way to distance himself from his father in order to organize a military coup. To belie King David's suspicions, Absalom hid behind the religious practice of vow-making, using the religious system to accomplish his own personal agenda.

### Seek Understanding



**What do these Scriptures mean?** Absalom's vow brings to mind the manipulative promise of Jacob, another strong-willed son who sought supremacy (compare Gen 28:20-22). Not only did the two both pray for a safe return home, but true to their nature, each of them also tended to seek the upper hand at any cost, willing to abuse even the sacred institution of vow-making to further their own interests.

Absalom's name is built from a stem that could mean "the (heavenly) father is peace," or perhaps, "my father is peace." But neither Absalom nor his father were men of peace. On the contrary, their lives were characterized by violence and bloodshed.

In Absalom's purported vow, he prayed for a safe return to Jerusalem, a city whose name might have meant "city of peace." And all the while, peace was the only thing David wanted, as he sent Absalom away with the last words he would ever speak to him: "Go in peace." But little did David know that Absalom was going to war, and Absalom's father would be his foe.



## Offer Illustration

How can I help learners think about the issues?

### ○ Heather

Heather wanted to go out with Hank, but because her parents did not approve, the two were not allowed to date. Shortly thereafter, Heather expressed an interest in attending the Wednesday night youth programs at Hebron Church, and although her parents did not attend, they allowed Heather to pursue her new interest, hoping church would have a good influence on her. What her parents did not realize was that Heather's practice was to walk into the front door of the church, then meet Hank's car at the back door. As a general rule, Hank would return Heather to church just in time to mingle with the other teens as the youth program ended.

### ○ Dabney

Dabney is planning to run for public office, but his public image needs some "sprucing up." So, he begins attending Hebron Church, volunteers to teach Sunday school, and even participates in a week-long mission trip, which he makes sure is fully covered by the local newspaper. Dabney never misses an opportunity to speak in front of a voting audience about his family values, his faith, and his involvement in church.

### ○ Jasmine and Clete

Jasmine and her husband, Clete, have just learned that Jasmine is pregnant. Jasmine eats well, exercises, and follows her pediatrician's instructions, but yet, she is still uneasy about the baby, and wants to do everything in her power to ensure its health. She begins to pray daily and even goes back to the church she has not attended since high school. Clete goes along, too, in hopes of persuading God to bless their baby with a healthy birth.

### ○ Yancey

Yancey has had a violent temper since childhood. But who can be surprised, especially since he spent more time in detention than in class before finally dropping out of school in the ninth grade? A string of short-term jobs left Yancey frustrated and unable to support his alcohol and cocaine addiction. Robbing a convenience store seemed an easy and logical solution to his problem, but he hadn't counted on the clerk's putting up so much resistance. Yancey didn't intend to kill anybody, but the clerk was lying in a pool of blood when Yancey ran out of the store, only to be met by the police.

His case was easily prosecuted, and not very surprisingly, Yancey was sentenced to die, at which point he began reading his Bible, claimed conversion, and even started describing himself as a minister to the other inmates.

## Questions

- Are these individuals sincere in their church commitments, or are they just using the church? Explain.
- How can the church minister to these individuals in a way that will encourage deeper involvement?

## Discussion

How do I lead learners to dialogue about the session?

### ○ Religious Motivations

What motivates *your* religious faith and practice? Many of us believe in Christ, follow his teachings, and support the church solely because we were raised to do so. Being Christian is a part of our basic identity, a part of our culture. Those who make a commitment to Christ later in life, however, may be more aware of their motivation for choosing a Christian lifestyle. Lead your learners to discuss possible motivations for following Christ, using the following questions to guide your thoughts.

### Questions

- If our faith carried no promise of present help and future salvation, would we continue to follow Christ?
- Would we support the church if we found no encouragement or support from our family of faith, no spiritual lift from weekly worship?
- How can we distinguish between a balanced, mutually beneficial relationship with God and one that is inappropriately focused on giving too little and taking too much?

## Questions

### Questions about Scripture

- Why did Absalom flee David's kingdom?
- How did Absalom use Joab to facilitate his return?
- What did Absalom have planned in Hebron?

### Questions for All Adults

- What is your primary motivation for participating in church?
- When has a crisis affected your church attendance?
- How can a "religion of convenience" develop into a more genuine relationship with God?

### Questions for Younger Adults

- On what levels do you identify with Absalom?
- What has caused either you or someone you know well to drop out of church for an extended period of time?
- What brought you/that individual back around?

### Questions for Mature Adults

- Can you identify with David's love for the rebellious Absalom? Explain.
- How would you describe the ups and downs of your spiritual life?
- How has your spiritual life prepared you to deal with crisis?

### Questions for Adults with Children

- How do you answer your child's question: "Why do we go to church?"
- Did having children affect your choice to practice your faith? Explain.
- When your children want to sleep in on Sundays, how do you motivate church attendance?

## Involve Learners

How can I lead learners to explore the session together?

### ○ Digging for Motives

Experienced pastors see many families move into and out of active church life. Usually, if a family has been inactive for some time, then suddenly returns to church—or begins attending a new church, for that matter—nine times out of ten you can rest assured that some sort of crisis underlies the sudden change in behavior.

“Crisis,” in this sense, suggests a time of change that can be either positive or negative. For instance, families undergo predictable crises such as marriage, the birth of children, the growing maturity and questions of those children, and of course, moving into a new home. As a matter of fact, these are often good “starting points” for engagement or *re-engagement* with religious faith, demonstrated by public involvement as well as private devotion. In the meantime, other crises that lead to spiritual re-evaluation include personal illness or sickness within the family, unexpected job changes, or episodes involving children getting into trouble at school or with the law.

Divide your participants into four or five smaller groups, giving each team the same assignment: to discuss creative ways the church can reach out to people in crisis. Encourage the groups to explore unique possibilities for helping people connect or reconnect to the church during or after times of crisis. Be sure to allow each team to share their ideas within the larger group before moving on to the next part of the session.

### ○ What Brought You Here

Assign two of your class members to portray a church “visitation team” that follows up on guests who have recently attended a group meeting. You may even

select several other volunteers to role play the guests. As the visiting pair extends the church’s welcome, encourage them to probe gently for clues that may open the door to more specific ministry by the church family or programs. For example, the visiting team might ask the guest about their particular interests, concerns, or needs.

After the role-play, ask the class to brainstorm a list of questions that could be used for just such a situation to help determine specific needs that must be met.

## Closure

How do I lead learners to respond?

### □ Why Are You Here?

Encourage your learners to close their eyes and pause for a time of reflection. Lead them to imagine an unexpected confrontation as follows:

Bible study is over, and you are sitting in worship.

You have sung hymns, read Scripture, and placed an offering in the plate.

Just as the choir begins the anthem, time stops and the scene is frozen. Only you remain alert.

A man, who is Jesus—without question—strolls into the sanctuary and purposefully takes a seat beside you.

As you stare into his penetrating eyes, he gestures at the surrounding scene, asking but a single question: “Why are you here?”

Allow a few moments for your participants to contemplate their responses before adjourning with a prayer, asking God to help your group members lead balanced spiritual lives.