

FROM THE EDITOR

“I Have Decided to Follow Jesus” is a hymn many congregations use as a closing response. If volumes had theme songs, “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus” would work for this group of sessions. This volume focuses not on making a decision, but on the results of faith decisions we have already made.

The first unit addresses the nature of our relationship with God. Following God often encompasses themes like unity, trust, love, and struggle. These four themes, and the texts from which they come, will help learners explore the stories of faithful ancestors. We have much to learn from their experiences, both the joy and difficulty in following God.

The second unit concerns the foundations of our faith. These texts point toward understanding essential theological themes such as truth, discipleship, and ministry. These themes are foundational in that much of our faith can be built upon them.

The final unit includes eight sessions. While unusual in length, this longer view will enable learners to see the larger picture of the Lenten and Easter seasons, and to study the disciples who first followed Jesus. The very question that Jesus’ first disciples struggled to answer is our question too: What does it mean to follow him? Each text explores different aspects of that question, helping learners answer the question in the context of their unique calling.

I trust that this volume will enable good conversation among your classes. I hope that these sessions will foster vital growth individually and corporately in your church. Read them, measure their insights with your own reading of the biblical texts, and above all pray for God’s spirit to guide your journey so “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus” can become your own song.

Beverly Crow-Tipton

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FOLLOWING GOD

Unit Preview

Our connection to God is unique. It's also difficult to describe. Our best efforts to describe our relationship with God are an assortment of metaphors. One of the most popular metaphors is a journey or pilgrimage. Still, it falls short of our experience with God.

Sometimes we want to describe God in more personal terms, so we talk about our relationship with God as if it were similar to relationships we have with other people. This model breaks down occasionally, but it is what we know. We can combine personal images with journey images, as in the experience from Genesis where God and Adam walk together in the "cool of the day." A walk with a close friend is a good way to think about our relationship with God.

In this unit, we look at aspects of our walk with God: our struggles of faith, the peace that comes in trusting, the ability to see beyond differences, and the strength of love. We begin with what can be described as a dark part of the journey. Most of us have known or will know moments when we feel isolated from our closest friends, even God. In our most significant struggles, the bonds of friendship are tempered and strengthened and so are the bonds that tie us to God.

Saying that a person is our close friend implies trust. We trust our friends with our secrets, dreams, fears, and hopes. In greater ways, we can trust God.

Friends don't always agree. Within Christian fellowship, we must learn to disagree agreeably. Our relationship with God allows us to share differing opinions while still maintaining our connection with each other and with God.

Love is the binding force that holds relationships together. We use the word love to describe our appreciation of everything from hotdogs to our children. Yet even a young child knows the difference in what we mean. Someone has said, ask a child if they love their blanket and they may answer "yes," but ask the same child if their blanket loves them and they'll give a definite "no." Love is a shared experience, and 1 John 4:19 tells us "We love because God loved us first."

Randy Gardner is pastor of a church in York, South Carolina. He has written for Reflections and is a contributor to the online Weekly Support for Formations. He and his wife Sara have two children in college, Clay and Clary. Randy and Sara share living space with two dogs and an ever-changing assortment of cats. Randy's hobbies include reading mystery and science-fiction novels.

January 4, 2004


FOLLOWING GOD...IN STRUGGLE

Psalm 13

Central Question

How do we trust God even in the midst of our deepest pain?

Scripture

Psalm 13 How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? 2 How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? 3 Consider and answer me, O LORD my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death, 4 and my enemy will say, "I have prevailed"; my foes will rejoice because I am shaken. 5 But I trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation. 6 I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.  **Access OT 689-90**

Reflecting

I knew for sure that dads will do almost anything for their daughters when I found myself suspended 150 feet from the ground with my daughter and one of her friends. At that particular moment, my attention focused on the ridiculously slim cable supporting us and on the ripcord in my daughter's hand. With a quick tug, the towline would release and we would fall and (hopefully) swing through the air. We reached the takeoff point, the ready-set-go lights flashed, and with a scream of joy (hers, not mine) my daughter pulled the cord. For the scarcest of moments, we were in freefall, and it didn't matter that we were secured by a cable capable of holding many times our combined weight. It didn't matter that while in line we had watched dozens of people swing safely through the air. For those seconds, all I

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felt was the helpless panic of a person falling, with no means of control for intervention. Those few seconds stretched into an eternity until I felt the comforting assurance of that supporting cable. Then the panic was replaced by something almost fun.

A few moments of freefall on a theme park attraction can be fun, but living in an out-of-control emotional freefall is another matter altogether. Life is like that sometimes. We all experience emotional struggles. We feel it when we lose a job through a reduction in workforce. Perhaps an economic shift causes a decrease in our planned retirement income, and we no longer feel we can make ends meet in the future. Sometimes we find ourselves in a troubling relational crisis within our family. Maybe we learn that a close family member has a dreaded chronic, or even terminal, illness. In moments like these, we feel the earth dropping out from under our feet and the helplessness of being cut off from help or even hope.

Sometimes we feel so alone that we wonder if God is there. That thought frightens us because we are taught that we should never doubt God. However, theologian Paul Tillich said, “Doubt isn’t the opposite of faith, it is an element of faith” (30). Even in the Bible, as our text for today shows, we find people who experienced a freefall of the heart. These people of faith expressed passionately their pain and sorrow, their grief and fear, and yes, even their doubt.



Paul Tillich said “If doubt appears, it should not be considered as the negation of faith, but as an element which was always and will always be present in the act of faith” (74).

Remembering

Perhaps nowhere else in Scripture do we see the depth of human-divine communication as we do in the book of Psalms. In the words of the psalms, we read expressions of stark honesty as the writers poured out their hearts to God. The psalmists’ writings cover the full range of human emotion and spiritual condition—the highs and lows, the peaks and valleys—in the same way we experience them today.

We can divide the psalms into categories or genres: (1) There are psalms of thanksgiving that proclaim gratitude for God’s greatness and loving care. (2) Worship hymns are psalms that we assume were part of celebrations at the tabernacle and temple used to proclaim trust in relationship with God. These hymns are exquisitely beautiful and can lift our spirits. (3) The final category, which comprises approximately one-third of the entire book, includes the “lament” or “complaint psalms,” which give the book of Psalms its unique quality (Bandstra, 408). In these psalms, the writers called God to account for what they viewed as unfair treatment, and they responded with feelings of victimization, depression, and abandonment. In laments, we find sorrow, frustration, and despair.

When a new student of the Scriptures approaches these psalms, he or she might be somewhat shocked to find harsh words, even anger, directed toward God. Yet these words are recorded for us in inspired Scripture. By implication, we can understand that these words did not offend or frighten God. In fact, they show us the strength of our bond with God.

Studying

Psalms 13 is clearly a psalm of complaint. Its first words—“How long, O LORD?”—are at once a lament, a complaint, and an indictment. Eugene Peterson’s translation of the Bible, *The Message*, reads, “Long enough, GOD—you’ve ignored me long enough.” The psalmist challenged God with the desolation of his predicament. While we can’t know the specifics of his complaint, the emotion is clear. He felt deserted and abandoned by God.

A crushing weight accompanies this kind of loneliness, which most of us have experienced at some time. It’s the feeling of being out of control, helpless, and utterly alone. The center of our attention narrows to a pinpoint. We can focus only on what we face at the moment. In an almost defiant tone, the psalmist said to God, “This situation has gone on long enough.”

In verse 3, the psalmist expresses his perception of his situation in definitive terms. Without God’s intervention, he felt as if he were as good as dead. “Take a good look at me,” he demanded and pleaded with God. In its own way, this demand and plea is also an affirmation of faith. Even when the psalmist felt abandoned, he still believed. He still called out to God. Faith can hold, refusing to let go regardless of evidence to the contrary.

Verses 5-6 hold possibly the most amazing aspect of this psalm: “But I trust.” Regardless of what has happened, the psalmist’s trust in God survived. The psalmist may have complained, felt abandoned, and even doubted God, but remember our earlier definition of doubt. Ultimately, doubt

is only possible for a person who has a basic belief. Either the doubt is proven, or the belief is affirmed. The psalmist boldly assumed that his faith and belief in the sovereignty and goodness of God would be validated in his life. He made a deliberate decision. No matter what he faced, he believed God would give him reason to sing again. In the end, his trust outweighed his doubt.

Understanding

The honesty we find in the psalms is sometimes disquieting, but in them we find the full range of human experience. Many biblical characters demonstrated their doubts, posing questions and challenges to God. While we might feel inspired by Isaiah's bold commitment to God, "Here am I; send me," we read on to discover Isaiah's question to God concerning "how long" (Isa 6:11) he would have to proclaim a warning that the people refused to hear. In Mark 9:24, we read the words of a man who came to Jesus for help with his son. In a moment of complete desperation, but also of great hope, he cried, "I believe; help my unbelief." And then there's "Doubting Thomas," the disciple who earned the reputation for doubting when all he wanted was what the other disciples had already received, an experience with the risen Lord. We remember, however, that in John 20:24-29, when Thomas encountered Jesus in the Upper Room, Jesus did not condemn or rebuke Thomas for lack of faith, but instead granted him what he needed in order to believe. In fact, Jesus did not condemn a seeker with honest doubts. Rather, those who tried to "fake" faith received stern rebukes.

Although the intensity of pain and loneliness we feel when faced with traumas cannot be minimized, even within tragedy there is the possibility for hope and faith. The Chinese pictograph for *crisis* is comprised of the symbols for *danger* and *opportunity*. Such a joining is appropriate. Even in the most threatening of crises, we have choices. How will we respond to the situation? What can come of the experience?

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Doubt implies belief, feeling abandoned assumes the possibility of companionship, and desperation can be an opening for hope. The pain or distress we feel when dealing with traumas is incredibly real. Crises can challenge every aspect of who we are. Career crises, health questions, relational distress, and personal conflicts can cause us to question our relationship with God (Why does God let this happen?) and even our individual sense of identity (Who am I without my work or my health?).

God does not cause our suffering in order to teach us, but we can learn through the experience of God's aid in times of stress and struggle. When we place our trust in God, even as a last resort, our faith in God's sustaining presence grows. Fortunately, we don't have to endure major upheavals to grow in faith. Like a child taking small steps before they learn to run, we learn to trust God by degrees. These life lessons accumulate over time and provide the foundation of faith that makes trust possible.

What About Me?

• *How long?* At some point in our lives most of us will be able to identify with the psalmist's question. Perhaps we have already known a moment that seemed to last an eternity. In those moments we've asked questions we never would have considered before: Where is God? How long am I going to have to endure this before God intervenes? Is God there, and if so, does God care? The questions aren't idle

philosophizing; they are questions that strike at the core of what it means to be a person of faith.

- *Look at me.* There is an odd symmetry to this joining of doubt and faith, despair and hope. Even being able to put the words of a prayer of complaint together implies that someone will hear and care what the prayer says. Even when we feel lost and alone, faith causes us to reach out to God.
- *Ultimate trust.* While the song “Count Your Blessings” encourages a person amid life’s troubles to consider the ways God has given blessings in the past, maybe a more effective practice would be to remember how God has been sufficient in the face of life’s tragedies. In times of great trial, and even during times of minor annoyance, God has been with us. Those experiences serve as good teachers. As God has been with us, so God will be with us now. That’s why the psalmist could begin to plan his celebration—because of his trust in God.

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