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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.

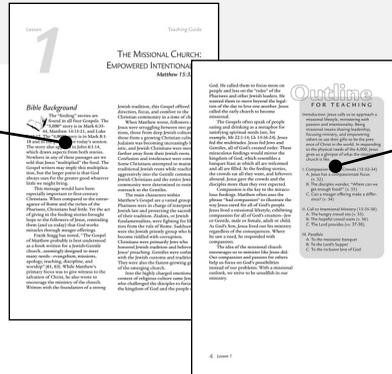
The Teaching Guide includes two major components: Teacher Helps and Teacher Options.

## Teacher Helps

### Bible Background

The Study Guide is your main source of Bible study material.

This section helps you more fully understand and interpret the Scripture text.



### Teaching Outline

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

## Teacher Options

The next three sections provide a beginning, middle, and end for the session, with focus paragraphs in between.

### Focus Paragraphs

are printed in italics at the top of the page because they are the most important part of the Teaching Guide. These paragraphs will help you move your class from “what the text meant” to “what the text means.”

## 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.

## SUBMISSION

*Hebrews 5:5-10**Bible Background*

Living the Christian life would be impossible without this important truth: God lives with us and through us. This truth is vital because, since the beginning of church, Christians have grown weary in living out their faith. Why are we so prone to spiritual exhaustion? Maybe it is because we forget that God offers to be the subject of our lives and invites us into a relationship through which we may know abundant, life-giving joy. If we forget this from time to time, we are in good company.

The writer of Hebrews was addressing Christians who were low on energy, drained by the challenges of the Christian life. “The threat here,” writes Thomas Long, “is that, worn down and worn out, they will drop their end of the rope and drift away. Tired of walking the walk, many of them are considering taking a walk, leaving the community and falling away from the faith” (3).

Hebrews teaches us where to look when our faith needs renewal. The writer points readers to Christ as the source of spiritual strength. Hebrews reminds us that weary Christians do not restore themselves. God does. Aware of the obvious needs in the faith community, the author preaches to the weary congregation about the nature and meaning of Jesus Christ, rather than introducing

time-management systems or tips for conflict negotiations. Hebrews devotes itself to developing a rich picture of Christ, the source of our strength and salvation. “What is most striking about Hebrews,” says Long, “is that the Preacher, faced with the pastoral problem of spiritual weariness, is bold enough, maybe even brash enough, to think that Christology and preaching are the answers.... This Preacher doesn’t float around on the surface where the desires of people cluster eagerly around this or that fad; he dives to the depths, to the hidden places where profound symbols work on the religious imagination to generate surprise, wonder, gratitude and finally obedience” (Ibid.).

Because the Hebrews audience struggled with the challenges of the Christian life, it is especially significant that the author makes the cross central to the book’s message. “There can be no theology of the incarnation which does not become a theology of the cross,” writes Jürgen Moltmann in *The Crucified God*. “God did not become man according to the measure of our conceptions of being a man. He became the kind of man we do not want to be: an outcast, accursed, crucified.... God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity. The nucleus

of everything that Christian theology says about ‘God’ is to be found in this Christ event” (205). Struggle and suffering are part of the human condition. God works *through* rather than *around* it.

When Jesus submitted his life to God, God made him a priest above all others. Through the law, persons could never reach perfection. Through Christ, followers are made whole. Christ’s sacrifice of himself was “once and for all.” Because of this, Christ is the source of eternal salvation.

Jesus is fully human, not through sin, but through suffering: “Suffering is not sin; suffering is built into the human condition. Limitation and weakness are not sin; they too are part of what it means to be human. Jesus, as a human being, suffered and was limited and was weak, but his pain taught him obedience, not faithless despair (5:8); his frailty deepened his reverence for God rather than stiffening his rebellion (5:7). Pressed into the muck and mire of human anguish, Jesus never forgot that he was the Son. Therefore, not only is he compassionate toward those who have lost sight of the truth that they are God’s very own children, Jesus can also take them by the hand and lead them home” (Long, 68).

Jesus Christ’s submission to God in this passage highlights the strong relationship and trust Jesus shared with God. Because he understood that God was at work in his life, Christ could give himself fully. Likewise, because Christ gave himself fully, God’s activity through Christ was clear. Hebrews reminds weary Christians that this relationship of submission to God leads to life. When followers give themselves to God, they learn to trust and experience the presence of God’s activity in their lives.

# Outline

## FOR TEACHING

Introduction: Refer to the Jimmy Carter story in the Learner’s Study Guide. When we recognize our need for deeper faith in God, this passage leads us to submission as a path to such spiritual growth.

- I. Writing to Tired Christians
  - A. Describe this sermon’s first audience.
  - B. Explain that the writer responded to spiritual weariness by preaching Christ.
  - C. Hebrews offers a defense of Christianity, showing how Jesus is the climax of Old Testament history.
- II. Jesus’ Life Shows God at Work (5:5-6)
  - A. Note God’s activity in these verses.
  - B. Jesus gave his life to God, and God declares Christ “Son,” an affirmation that God makes throughout Scripture.
  - C. The writer’s reference to Melchizedek affirms the different type of high priest that Jesus would be.
- III. Jesus Gives Himself Fully (5:7)
  - A. Through the incarnation, Jesus experiences the suffering that is part of human experience.
    1. Through Jesus, God touches the broken human condition.
    2. The cross is the experience through which he does this.
  - B. Jesus’ prayer demonstrates the confidence of the righteous.
- IV. The Source of Eternal Salvation (5:8-10)
  - A. Jesus’ frailty deepened his reverence for God.
  - B. Jesus’ passion was the path to his perfection.

**A** “Submission” covers a wide range of challenges. Because we live in a culture steeped in individualism, in which the underlying assumption is that “it is all about me,” the gospel of denying self may be our biggest challenge. **Hebrews 5:5-10 reminds us that we experience abundant life by giving our lives to God.** This text declares that we do not take such a leap of faith alone—Christ goes before us and beside us. Christ’s way of submission is our path to discovering a deeper relationship with God.

### ○ Customizing the Story

Briefly retell the story of Jimmy Carter’s spiritual quest from the Learner’s Study Guide. Ask the group to imagine themselves in a similar situation, either as the person seeking spiritual counsel or as the person someone has come to in order to seek advice about the Christian life. Set up this imaginary scene by having the seeking person say something like, “I’ve gone to church all of my life, but when I look at Christians whose faith seems to make a difference, mine seems superficial.” How would the conversation go from here? Suggest that the conversation might address the following questions: (1) What would a deeper commitment to Christ mean in our lives? (2) What will our struggles be in living for Christ more intentionally? (3) What particular joys would we discover from living in such a committed way?

Depending on the size of your group, you might have volunteers improvise this conversation in front of the large group and then discuss the exercise. Or you might ask the entire group to create this conversation. Another possibility would be to form smaller groups to talk about this situation and answer the questions.

### ○ Language Lessons

Mention that minister and writer Fleming Rutledge believes that churches often speak of God as though God is not active in our lives. She points to conversations and sermons in which we make ourselves the subject and give God the role of the object in the sentence. Draw on material from the Understanding section of the

Learner’s Study Guide to develop this idea.

Have learners share examples of speech they have heard that put us, rather than God, in the position of subject. For instance, share the example of the “got Jesus?” bumper sticker. Have the group reverse that thought, putting Jesus into the subject position: “Jesus has me.” What’s the difference between these two sentences? Is it too subtle a difference to matter—or is it crucial?

When our faith is stale, or superficial, God has the power to breathe new life into familiar words. Often, this new life involves new ways of thinking and speaking. After learners list examples of speech in which we make God the object, take several of these and make God the subject of the sentence. For example: “I think God is pleased when I share what I have” becomes “God shows me that sharing with the poor is a way to worship.” Ask: Does our speech affect our spiritual growth? How might making God the subject in our speech affect our spiritual formation? Why? What would happen if we consciously spoke and thought about an active God? What would it take to make God the subject of our lives? What would be most challenging about it?

### Questions

- Because making God the subject in our lives is difficult, where do we find the strength and encouragement to do so?
- What do you consider the greatest challenge of the Christian life, and how does it relate to the challenge of submitting ourselves to God?

# B A Way to Explore Scripture

Christians have always struggled with the challenge of following Christ. The author of Hebrews wrote to encourage believers who were weary of the challenges they constantly faced to stay faithful to their commitment. If we had been given the task of encouraging weary Christians to persevere, what would we have said? Some might focus solely on particular ways to improve problems or challenges. “Try this at the next business meeting,” we might advise. Hebrews holds up the story of Christ’s sacrifice, the truth about submitting our lives to God, and the reality that we will know God’s presence through submission and suffering.

**Telling the truth is still the way to build the church.** Jesus’ amazing relationship with God was one in which he submitted his life. His example is our path to God as well.

## ○ God Can Handle Your Anger

During a Bible study on being honest with God, a teacher told a story from Madeleine L’Engle’s novel *A Ring of Endless Light*. In the book, despite her constant prayers for his life, Vicky’s grandfather dies. In turn, Vicky stops praying because she is angry with God and wants to protect God from her feelings. Trying to edit her prayers creates a barrier between herself and God. Finally, a friend tells her that God can handle her anger. God is larger than whatever she needs to tell God. This wisdom restores Vicky’s spiritual life. Her relationship with God became stronger.

After telling this story, the teacher noticed a student crying. “I’ve never heard we could share anger with God before,” the woman blurted out. She was facing serious health issues with her son, but she didn’t think she could tell God how upset she was.

Read Hebrews 5:5-10, emphasizing verses 7-9. Explain that the prayers Jesus offered, are characteristic of a righteous man. Despite the suffering Jesus endured, he remained submissive to God. In his dying, Christ continued offering himself to God. In doing so, he was “being made perfect,” becoming the source of eternal salvation. By following Jesus’ example of opening his life to God, we discover access to the presence of God (Isaacs, 1274).

## Questions

- What good news do you hear in this passage?

- How do our ideas about God affect our relationship to God, both positively and negatively?
- What happens when we pray honestly?

## ○ A Tale of Two Writers

Tell this story to your group: An expert writing teacher noticed two people, each of whom was trying to write the Great American Novel. The teacher brought the two friends together and made an offer. “Your dedication impresses me,” the teacher said. “If you will regularly submit your work to me, I will help this dream of your writing a novel happen.” After a minute, the first writer said, “Thanks, but no thanks. I do want to write a book that people will love, but I couldn’t bear your changing my words or my vision. I’ll do this on my own.” The second writer, while nervous about the process, graciously accepted. The teacher read his work, and they became friends. The writer realized that when he submitted his work, the teacher made it better. Submitting made his work more, rather than less.

Why do people fear the idea of submitting themselves to anything or anyone? What helps a person choose to submit? Read Hebrews 5:5-10. Using commentary from the Learner’s Study Guide, study this passage by considering how his relationship with God sustained Jesus as he continued submitting his life to God.

# C A Way to End

**When life tests our faith and we find our faith lacking, these become opportunities for spiritual growth.** *In those moments, God invites us to move into the deeper waters of our baptism. Those moments are times in which we choose again who will be the subject of our lives. Will we serve ourselves, or will we be more open to God's activity and direction in our lives? Will we spend our days in life-giving submission to God, being more than we were before? God is always inviting us to enter into a deeper relationship, to choose God as the subject of our lives.*

## ○ Praying Honestly

Give each person a copy of the “Praying Honestly” resource page and a pencil. Ask learners to respond to the “prayer starters” on the page. Learners may want to write or begin a prayer. They may want to pray through each suggestion on the page. After a few minutes, offer the group the opportunity to pray aloud, using the sheet as a prompt. Close by asking for God's help in giving ourselves more fully.

## ○ Laying Down and Taking Up

Place a cross at the front of your meeting area, or draw one on the board. Give each person two index cards and a pencil. Ask learners to name things that Christians need to let go of, or lay down, in order to follow Christ more closely. When people have named a variety of things, ask them to write one item on their card. Invite learners to place these cards at the cross. Then, ask the group to name things that Christians need to take up in order to submit their lives to Christ. After they have named several of these, ask the group to write on their second card what they need to take up in order to give their lives again to God. Close by asking Christ to help us all as we lay down what keeps us from being close followers and as we take up the challenge of giving ourselves to God.

## ○ Writing Our Lives with God

This unit gives learners the opportunity to journal briefly each week. You may want to provide a small notebook for learners, invite them to bring their own, or have paper available. Each session offers six statements/questions for reflection. Learners will have time to work on one each week in class. If they want to continue working throughout the week, suggest that they write on one a day.

## Questions

- (1) Write God a letter about how you have struggled with submitting your life to God.
- (2) What do you consider your biggest challenges in living a Christian life?
- (3) What helps you pray honestly? What do you hope to learn about praying honestly?
- (4) In what ways is God active in your life?
- (5) If you could let go of something (an attitude, object, idea, etc.) that keeps you from following Christ more closely, what would you lay down? What would you take up that might strengthen your willingness to submit yourself to God?
- (6) Finish this prayer: O God, I want to give you...

If time allows, provide opportunity for volunteers to share their writing. Close in prayer.

# 2

## PURPOSE

### *Ephesians 2:1-10*

### *Bible Background*



When did you discover how challenging it is to serve Christ? Maybe you attended a church business meeting that left you uncomfortable and disillusioned. Or maybe you spent hours preparing to teach and no one showed up. Perhaps you've had a nagging thought about whether or not a particular ministry that you've been devoted to for so long is still worth your time. Your commitment to Christ brought you such vitality and vision when you first made it because you were focused on a relationship. Now you sometimes feel that the focus of your commitment is on being responsible. Your commitment brings you a sense of obligation—and often weariness.

The Christian life is a challenge, and the longer we follow, the more questions and opportunities we find along the way. Those of us who are involved in the life of the church but find ourselves asking “What’s the point?” need to look at Ephesians 2:1-10 again. This passage is a holy reminder of God’s purpose and direction for us as part of a faith community.

Ephesians confidently declares that God is at work in us, actively redeeming creation. God’s great love for creation means God continues creating, redeeming what God began. We need this continuing redemption. Verse 1 makes it clear that all

who are redeemed participated in a depraved human nature that left us ethically and spiritually dead. “God must begin his glorious work of redemption always with this sort of dead material,” said W. O. Carver. “Paul has here in mind comparison of man in moral deadness with the physically dead Christ whom God raised. By the same power and with the same ultimate purpose, he raised dead souls.” Paul regularly uses the term “flesh” to mean sinful human nature (88).

When God brings life from death, it is clear what God is capable of doing, what God desires, and what the nature of God is. The grace of God becomes visible as God takes what we can no longer restore and redeems it, making it something glorious. God began this great work of grace through Jesus Christ, and it continues today, bringing the spiritually dead to life.

Verse 2 suggests that there is a power in the world that stands in sharp contrast to God. We need to understand that God’s work of bringing us to life is well underway, but not yet finished. Christians live between the “already” and the “not yet.” The verb phrase “have been saved” is important to our understanding of the state of our spiritual lives. The writer uses the perfect verb tense, meaning salvation is both past act and process, and it is in this realm that we live, move, and have our being.

“Although Christians do experience the stabilizing reality of their new identity in Christ (2:4-8) that releases them from the tyranny of the ‘powers’ and an uncertain future, nevertheless their personal experience of resurrection and ascension has not yet occurred,” writes Molly Marshall. “‘In Christ’ they are assured of these future realities; and yet it is “only through identification with the death and resurrection of Christ that the believer experiences the benefits of these events” (195).

Because Ephesians does not address the concerns of a particular congregation, scholars believe it was a circular letter shared with several churches in Asia Minor. Its general message applies to all who need reminding of our purpose in Christ. The longer we follow Christ, the more we learn of our need for Christ. We are not all that we need to be as Christians. Ephesians understands this and points us to the grace of God given to us in Christ and the assurance that God is not finished with us yet.

Twenty-first-century Christians have grown up in an individualistic culture. Our questions about God’s purpose for our lives tend to center on our individual lives. Ephesians teaches that God’s purpose for us is not isolated from the church. Wherever our gifts lead us, both inside and outside church walls, God has created us to be part of the church, to work for a holy purpose.

# Outline

## FOR TEACHING

Introduction: Ephesians describes the glorious way that God redeems creation. God’s church is central to this plan of salvation, as God brings life to Christians who have become lifeless by following the course of the world.

- I. You Are a New Creation (2:1-10)
- II. We Were Dead When God Saved Us (2:1-3)
  - A. These verses illustrate the dead material that God uses to create something new.
  - B. This description of the course of the world, a path of trespasses and sins in which we once walked, provides a contrast to the different path that we should walk, which is described in the final verse of this passage.
- III. We Are Made Alive through the Grace of God’s Love (2:4-5)
- IV. As God Raised Christ from Death, so God Raises Us from Our Lifelessness (2:6-7)
- V. We Are Not Saved by Our Works (2:8-9)
- VI. We Are God’s Workmanship, Designed to Be Instruments of Grace through Christ Jesus (2:10)

**A** *The music ends, and you stand to leave. In this hour of worship, God reminded you of what is most important. As you begin the new week, you are hopeful that you will focus time and energy on the things God wants. The next morning, the schedule of responsibilities and obligations fills your mind, and you try to remember what you felt and thought on Sunday.*

**The challenge of being in the world but not of the world faces every Christian.** *Ephesians tells us that we have been saved by grace. We don't need to constantly ask God, "How am I doing?" But we also know that finding our purpose and living in a way that makes sense of who we are and Whose we are brings us joy and makes us whole. Ephesians 2:1-10 reminds: God is still at work in us, making us new. Learning the truth of these verses brings us new life.*

### ○ Why Walk When You Can Fly?

In "Why Walk When You Can Fly?" Mary Chapin Carpenter sings about two ways we can travel through life. Consider playing this song, from the album *Stones in the Road*, for the group. If not, read or describe the following lyrics:

*In this world there's a whole lot of trouble  
In this world there's a whole lot of pain  
In this world there's a whole lot of trouble but  
A whole lot of ground to gain  
Why take when you could be giving  
Why watch as the world goes by  
It's a hard enough life to be living  
Why walk when you can fly*

*In this world there's a whole lot of sorrow  
In this world there's a whole lot of shame  
In this world there's a whole lot of sorrow  
And a whole lot of ground to gain  
When you spend your whole life wishing  
Wanting and wondering why  
It's a long enough life to be living  
Why walk when you can fly*

After hearing the lyrics, ask: What's the difference between walking and flying in this song? Have a learner read Ephesians 2:1-10 aloud. Discuss what similarities and differences the group finds between the message in the song and the message in Scripture.

### Questions

- Why do we often choose a lesser way of traveling through life?
- What causes, motivates, or encourages us to choose the better way?
- What does the better way look like in the Christian life?

### ○ Moments We Were Made For

Refer to Marge Piercy's poem "To be of use," in the Learner's Study Guide. If possible, locate a copy of the poem to read in its entirety. If not, read the final five lines: "Greek amphoras for wine or oil, / Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums / but you know they were made to be used. / The pitcher cries for water to carry / and a person for work that is real" (5).

We have a great need to feel useful. The widespread interest in living a purpose-filled life reflects both this strong desire and the fact that many people feel purposeless. Many find themselves without a sense of direction for their lives. While most of us have experienced the frustration of not knowing what we should do, most of us have also known those moments when we discovered the work it seems we were created to do. Ask the group to name moments when they discovered a purpose or activity that they knew was something they were meant to do. Have participants describe how their work in those moments relate to their spiritual life. How did their action affect their faith or their understanding of God?

# B A Way to Explore Scripture

*Ephesians sings of the glory of God’s work in our lives. Imagine how congregations must have passed this letter around. Perhaps one group was struggling with a particular challenge in their congregation when another church sent them the Apostle’s letter, with the note, “We found this especially helpful.” The words of confidence penned here were just the inspiration the young Christians needed. Encouraged, they passed the letter along to another struggling church.*

*We need the word that this book offers—that God is active in the world, making the church alive, uniting diverse people through Christ. **We need to read these words anew, as God’s reminder and encouragement to us.***

## ○ A New Way of Walking

Read Ephesians 2:1-10 and notice that the first and last verses suggest verbal “book ends.” Both verses describe contrasting paths in which we walk. Before our new life in Christ, we walked in a way that led to death. Make a list of the characteristics of this path. Using information from the Bible Background section and the Learner’s Study Guide, offer information about Paul’s description of this kind of life. If you were going to describe this path today, what words, phrases, or pictures might you use? What warning signs could you make to indicate the danger of this path?

Now look at the final verse. Talk about Paul’s reference to uniting Jews and Gentiles. What good works did God create us to be part of and do? How do we walk in the path of grace? What does this path look like? What are the things we do as new creations in Christ? What reminders and encouragement help us walk this path?

Compare and contrast the two paths Ephesians describes. What influences which path we take? If your group enjoys art projects, consider having two groups illustrate what these paths might look like on paper.

## ○ What’s to Love?

Using the Outline for Teaching from this session, work through Ephesians 2:1-10. Ask why God loved us when we

seemed determined not to love God back. What does God’s work of loving the unlovable mean for us? Discuss why love is the way we continue God’s creative work in the world.

Share the following story with the group: Several women worked in a clothing ministry for the homeless. One day, an abrasive man came into the center, and the volunteers had trouble dealing with him. When he left, the women’s initial reaction was relief. This man seemed beyond their ability to relate to him. But the question of our Christian calling to love the unlovable continued to work on the women. The man they couldn’t communicate with remained the focus of prayer and discussion.

When God is at work in us, we are often surprised by the activities we become involved in, which we would not have chosen had we been in charge. God’s list of those to love will not be the same as our list. God will stretch us, challenge us, and make us new in the process. Give examples of experiences in which this has been true in the lives of your group.

## Questions

- Who is it most difficult to love (remind members not to mention specific names)?
- What kind of caring and reconciliation seems impossible to us—and beyond our ability?
- What are our arguments for why we don’t love certain people?
- What perspective does the Ephesians passage offer these arguments?

# C A Way to End

*How long has it been since you put a huge jigsaw puzzle together? Do you enjoy the tedious task of trying to get a small section of the picture together? Have you given up on a puzzle before it was finished because the process was taking too long? The key to the art is constantly referring to the big picture on the box, using it as a guide. Studying what the completed puzzle is supposed to look like can keep you from getting totally lost among the tiny, confusing pieces on the table. The big picture gives purpose to tedious work.*

*Ephesians offers those caught up in the tedious work of being the church a view of the big picture. There is a point to what we do. **God has a purpose for creation, and God is working that purpose out through us.** We are not alone, lost among the small, confusing tasks before us. We have a Guide who brings meaning to what we do.*

## ○ Celebrating New Life

Give each class member a pen. Make enough copies of the birth announcement page from the Resource Kit so that each adult has at least one announcement. Encourage adults to think of the many ways they see God bringing new life into their lives, into their church, and into our world. This new life may take the form of a new ministry, a decision, or a change of plans. These may be personal or corporate examples. Give learners a few minutes to describe this new life on their announcement. Then, invite volunteers to read or summarize their announcement for the larger group. If your group wanted to have a party to celebrate these new births, what would you do? Take a few minutes to plan such a celebration.

## Questions

- What difference would it make in our spiritual life if we celebrated the new life God re-creates in the world as well as we celebrate the gift of new life when a baby is born?
- Why do we often miss the examples of God's re-creation that are all around us?
- What could we do on a regular basis to celebrate the way God works in us?

## ○ Writing Our Lives with God

Remind learners that writing about our faith is a way to record signs of new life we discover daily. If you are using this option as a way to end each session, ask adults to open their journals, or provide paper and a copy of the Resource Kit page for this activity. Give learners some time to respond to at least one of the statements/questions on the sheet. Remind them that they may want to take these statements/questions and use them daily throughout the week. After a few minutes, offer volunteers the opportunity to share briefly from what they've written. Be sure to note that while they are welcome to share their writing, it is not necessary. Close with a prayer of gratitude for the way that God's grace is at work in us, making us new.

## Questions

- (1) When do you feel most in need of new life in Christ?
- (2) What habits, routines, thoughts, actions, keep you from abundant life?
- (3) Describe a time when you felt fully alive.
- (4) How do you best express your gratitude for God's grace?
- (5) What is most challenging to you about living in God's grace?
- (6) What truth in Ephesians 2:1-10 do you hope to remember?

## WISDOM

*1 Corinthians 1:18-25**Bible Background*

When Paul describes the root of the church conflict in Corinth, we have no trouble picturing the scenario: Rivalries between preachers and their followers are taking a toll on the church. Some claim that one kind of sermon is most effective. Others feel they haven't worshiped unless they've heard their favorite preacher. Boasting about which speaker is deeper, or more eloquent, says Paul, demonstrates that these churchgoers have missed the message of the gospel altogether. "[The Corinthians] are caught up in rivalries because they glory in the superficially impressive human wisdom of this age," writes Richard Hays. "They are boasting about their own possession of wisdom and rhetorical eloquence—or at least they are infatuated with leaders who manifest these skills. God, however, has revealed in Christ another kind of wisdom that radically subverts the wisdom of this world. God has chosen to save the world through the cross, through the shameful and powerless death of the crucified Messiah. If that shocking event is the revelation of the deepest truth about the character of God, then our whole way of seeing the world is turned upside down" (26-27).

Paul understood the gospel as the good news of God's saving work through the cross, not a slick message or wisdom

teaching that elevates only those who know about it (Soards, 1157). The cross, says Paul, divides us into two groups: those who see it as foolishness and perish versus those who find it to be the power of God and, because of their faith, are saved. Such a revelation baffles those who live outside of our faith. Hays notes, "The gospel is not a slickly packaged philosophy, not a scheme for living a better life; instead, it is an announcement [through which Christians] find themselves on a trajectory toward salvation, but they cannot unqualifiedly claim salvation as a present possession" (27-28).

Paul insists that we remember the not-yet-completed character of our salvation in Christ. We have not already arrived. We see through a glass darkly: "For Paul, however, the power of God is presently afoot in the world, through the gospel, bringing both destruction and deliverance. The books are not closed yet; the verdict has not yet been rendered" (Ibid., 28). Verses 18 and 19 emphasize the continuing destruction that parallels our continuing deliverance. The phrase "I will destroy," from the Isaiah reference in verse 19, echoes the phrase "those who are perishing" in verse 18. The literal interpretation of the phrase in verse 18 is "those who are being destroyed."

The wisdom of the wise, which the Corinthians valued most, is what God will destroy. The quotation from Isaiah is part of a judgment against Judah. Judah's

leaders were making a military alliance with Egypt to protect their kingdom, rather than heeding the message of the prophet and putting their trust in God (Isa 29:13-14). In doing so, they rejected God's wisdom.

Those who heard the gospel for the first time found it scandalous. To Jews looking for signs of God's power that would end the political oppression they faced, the cross was nonsense. For Greeks wanting an attainable and perfect wisdom, the cross was illogical. The cross is a picture of human nature at its worst and the human spirit at its best. Crucifixion was one of the methods that the Roman Empire used to eliminate troublemakers. Sometimes death took hours, and sometimes it took a week. That God would use this means to reveal the truth and power of God was a stumbling block for those who heard this message. Strength in weakness, gaining by losing, and hope through dying are difficult concepts for people to grasp.

In addition to his reference to Isaiah, Paul used a second Old Testament reference in this first chapter, Jeremiah 9:23-24, to offer help for the state of division in the Corinthian church. Verses 30-31 conclude this chapter, reminding readers that Christ Jesus "became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"

The challenge of the Christian life is the challenge to accept God's wisdom. Such wisdom involves a kind of listening and trusting that seems foolish outside our faith. Yet those who are open to this message experience God's power, sensing God's wisdom through it.

# Outline

## FOR TEACHING

Introduction: Paul writes this letter in response to the problem of divisiveness that has troubled the church at Corinth. His attention to the power and wisdom of the cross gives Christians a lens by which to view their conflict.

- I. Paul describes two kinds of people (1:18).
  - A. People who view the cross as foolishness and are lost
  - B. People who view the cross as the power of God and are saved
- II. Paul quotes Isaiah 29:14, reminding the Corinthians that God will destroy worldly wisdom and make it foolish (1:19-20).
- III. Some seek a power and others a wisdom that they define by worldly standards, so the crucifixion is an obstacle for them (1:21-23).
- IV. For those whom God has called (both Jews and Greeks), Christ is the power and wisdom of God. This truth, which is foolish to the world, is stronger than human power and wiser than human wisdom (1:24-25).



**A** How do we know what to think? If we're talking politics, the particular party we favor will be happy to shape our opinion. If the topic is theology, then denominations, local churches, or our own religious experiences affect the conversation. If we need to make decisions in matters like caring for the elderly, parenting, or educational pursuits, expert consultants wait to persuade us. In this age of excess information, deciding how we think—and how we make decisions—is crucial. If we don't think about such things, we lack a larger purpose or wisdom.

Our faith has something to say about how we think. We must love God with our mind, as well as our heart and soul. But what wisdom does our faith offer us in knowing what to think when it comes to our daily parade of decisions? **How does God affect the way we think?**

### ○ Faithless/Faithful Jeopardy

On large pieces of construction paper write the following three answers and attach them to a focal wall or board: The Perfect Day; Best Gifts to Give Children; Most Important Accomplishment.

Explain that in today's session the class will look at two kinds of wisdom—the wisdom that the world values and the wisdom that comes from the Christian faith. In this session's Scripture passage, Paul says that God's wisdom turns the world's wisdom upside down.

Point to the first answer on the wall, "The Perfect Day." Have the group state a question for which the phrase "the perfect day" could be the answer. Ask the group to first state a question that people outside the Christian faith might state. Encourage them to be as specific and detailed in their responses as possible (for example: What is twenty-four hours of leisure, an invitation to someone's beach house, and no rain?). Then have them respond with a question from the perspective of someone who follows Christ. Respond to the other two answers on the wall in a similar way. When your group finishes working through the three categories, discuss whether there were obvious differences between the two sets of responses to each answer. If not, why? Which set of questions was harder for them to create?

### Questions

- What might Paul think of our different answers?
- How does the wisdom of our culture influence our own wisdom?
- How do we open ourselves to what God wants us to consider when it comes to how we spend our time, energy, and resources?

### ○ Words of Wisdom Tournament

Form small groups and explain that you are about to determine the best advice you have ever received. Give both silly and serious examples. For instance: (1) Never go through a car wash without checking that your windows are up. (2) Never make a life-changing decision without giving yourself enough time to consider it fully.

Give groups no more than five minutes to share the best advice they were ever given and to choose which piece of advice will advance to the finals. After five minutes, have each team share their best piece of advice with the entire group. You could determine the best advice of the tournament by a show of hands, applause, consensus, or a designated judge.

### Questions

- What makes advice "wise"?
- What determines whether we follow certain wisdom?
- What role does our faith play in how we choose which wisdom we follow?

# B A Way to Explore Scripture

*It's an old joke that sitcoms like to revisit: A couple with a new baby prepares for a trip. They rush around, grabbing all the equipment they think necessary for the child, arguing over what to take, and expending much time and energy in this exhausting endeavor. Finally, they rush out the door. The camera zooms in on the baby in a car seat, calmly waiting in the corner of the house for her parents to realize they left behind the most important cargo.*

*While their situation was not humorous, the church at Corinth was making a similar mistake. They were busily trying to make the church as effective as it could be, arguing over the best form of worship, declaring the best way to preach, dividing over ethical points and theology. The problem was that their efforts took their focus off the one thing that made them a church: the cross. **Paul's passage helps us all recognize what is most important, what is wise, and what needs to guide the way we think and live.***

## ○ Changing Minds

Describe the following story: A church group was discussing grief. One student made the comment that dwelling on one's grief never helps. "You should just get over it and get on with life," she declared. Another member of the class spoke up: "There's something about experiencing sorrow and suffering that gives us the capacity to know real joy, too." Both members who spoke had gone through recent, potentially life-changing crises.

Consider asking: Why is it that suffering leaves some people changed and some untouched? Why do experiences that have the potential to change our lives often make only a temporary difference? What does it take to change us in a lasting way?

Read aloud 1 Corinthians 1:18-25.

Drawing on material from the Learner's Study Guide and Bible Background, ask the group to discuss how the cross affects the way we think.

Ask group members to think about times in which a growing or a newfound faith changed a person's thinking. You might mention stories of people who overcame prejudice or greed because of a faith experience. The cross is the power by which God changes hearts and minds. In what ways does the cross change the way we think? In what ways do we still need to be changed by the wisdom of the cross?

## ○ Defining Foolish and Wise

Have your group create definitions of foolishness and wisdom. On the board, make a list of actions or activities that illustrate each term. Read aloud 1 Corinthians 1:18-25. Discuss what it means to say that the cross destroys the world's wisdom. Does Paul's understanding of wisdom and foolishness differ from the definitions your group gave? Look at the list you first made. Is there anything the group would want to rewrite or add after discussing the biblical text?

Look at the Understanding section of the Learner's Study Guide and discuss the various examples of those described as taking up a cross: the person who continues to visit the Alzheimer's victim; the retired woman who continues to tutor in the after-school program though she's not sure she's getting through to the student; the nurse who gives of himself to his patients; the single woman who shares money she could use herself; the father who keeps loving a prodigal.

## Questions

- Why would some consider these actions foolish? What in these actions makes them redemptive?
- How could what most consider foolish actually be wise after all? What power can be found in these acts?

# C A Way to End

When people try to change someone's mind, they often present new facts, polish up their debating skills, and try to be eloquent. Paul says that when God wants to change people's minds, the usual methods of persuasion become meaningless. What makes us think differently, says Paul, is having our hearts captured by the story of the cross.

This passage offers a word we desperately need in an age of divisiveness within the church: We must love God with our minds. If we do this, God will point us to a kind of wisdom that the world has trouble accepting. This wisdom helps us understand everything else. To love God with our minds means to love one whose foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and whose weakness is stronger than human strength. **To love God's wisdom is to understand that the cross is the picture of God's love, forgiveness, and power in the world.**

## ○ "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross"

To close this session, sing the hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." You may want to arrange for a soloist to sing for your group or have someone read the hymn.

### Questions

- ▶ When we contrast our lives with what the cross symbolizes, what do we think about and/or feel?
- ▶ When we consider the cross, does it move us to sacrifice "all the vain things that charm me most"? If it does not move us to let go of lesser things, why doesn't it? If it does, what are those things it moves us to willingly let go of?
- ▶ Consider the last line of the hymn: "Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small; love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all" (Watts, 213). What do we give in response to this amazing love seen in the cross? What could we give in response?

Sing the final line of the hymn once again as a closing prayer.

## ○ Writing Our Lives with God

If you have been using this option throughout the unit, have adults take out their journals or use the Resource Kit pages. Give the group time to journal in response to one of the following questions. Invite volunteers to share their responses. Encourage them to take the pages home and use the questions as a daily activity.

### Questions

- (1) How does the cross affect your thinking on a daily basis?
- (2) In what areas of your life is the struggle between choosing the world's wisdom and God's wisdom the greatest?
- (3) What is hardest for you about taking up a cross for your faith?
- (4) Paul describes salvation as a process. In what ways do you know that you are being saved—both in terms of how you have changed from the beginning of this process and in terms of how far you know you need to grow spiritually?
- (5) How are we like the Corinthians, who forgot the source of their community and pursued paths that led to division?
- (6) What strength and help do you find in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25?

Close in praying, thanking God for the wisdom of the cross, which helps us understand our lives. Ask for God's help in learning how to seek and follow this wisdom.

## 4

## HUMILITY

*Romans 7:14-25**Bible Background*

The Bible tells us that an authentic experience with God fosters humility in the believer.

In the Old Testament, Isaiah saw God in the temple and cried out, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isa 6:5). The New Testament includes Simon Peter’s reaction to Jesus’ gift of an overwhelming catch of fish in Luke 5:8: “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.” When we experience God’s holy presence, we see ourselves in a different light. Because of this, whenever Christians demonstrate an attitude of arrogance, we are also demonstrating our need for renewal, through a genuine encounter with God.

Paul had a genuine encounter with God; thereafter, he saw his life differently. In Romans, Paul shows how his conversion changed the way he understood everything, including his past. Admitting our mistakes and shortcomings can be a humiliating experience, but Paul found his faith deepened and enriched by this humbling event. The words “humility” and “humiliating” share the same root. One definition of humiliation is “religious mortification.” Donne wrote that “humiliation is the beginning of sanctification,” the act of being made holy or given to sacred use (Morris, 641). The

word humble comes from “humus,” meaning ground or soil. When Jesus told the parable of the soils, he was describing the conditions of the human heart. Humility is a fruit that grows in the good soil of the spiritual life.

Through his humbling experience on the road to Damascus, Paul began to understand that the law he once believed could save him actually led him away from the truth. The law itself is good, but sin turns the law into an instrument that creates the false belief that we can achieve salvation through our actions. One commentator notes, “The law promises life, and under the conditions of fallen existence (in the flesh) people assume that life is attained by doing the law. They attempt a righteousness of the law that is a righteousness of their own, a human righteousness that puts God in their debt. This also is a refusal to submit to God. The law incites sin in the sense of offering a means to establish one’s own righteousness, which is a rejection of God’s righteousness” (Via, 1149).

Paul Achtemeier believes that we must not use this passage to discuss the moral dilemma of the Christian. We can work out moral dilemmas through human effort. Paul is talking about being captive to sin. Human effort is unable to effect a change in this kind of captivity: “Only a power stronger than the sin which rules through the law, good though it be, can rescue the ‘I’ from such enslavement. The

passage therefore speaks of an absolute imprisonment, precisely the imprisonment from which the Christian has been freed by baptism into Christ's death" (Achte-meier, 122). In other words, Christ has broken the power of sin, and Christ can deliver us to a new life in the Spirit (Ibid., 124).

In other parts of his writing, Paul assures his readers that he understands how people of faith struggle with sin and temptation (see Rom 6). However, Romans 7:14-15 reminds those who sometimes feel that the challenge of the Christian life is too difficult that, in fact, the life of faith is an amazing, life-giving grace. If we ever start to believe that the alternative to the Christian life is more appealing, we need to remember that life without Christ is limited and hopeless.

This chapter of Romans reminds us that our saving grace is Christ alone. We cannot achieve salvation through good works. We must recognize, as Christ did, that equality with God is not a thing for humans to grasp. Remembering this often comes through humbling experiences, but they are most often the events that lead us to new life.

# Outline

## FOR TEACHING

Introduction: In Romans, Paul addresses the implications of the Christian life. As Christians, we must remember our limitations and that Christ is our salvation.

- I. Three interpretations of Romans 7:14-25 exist:
  - A. Paul's life as a Pharisee
  - B. Paul's life as a Christian
  - C. The life of everyone who tries to "do good" outside of Christ
- II. The bondage of sin: Paul describes the state in which humans exist. A force beyond their control keeps people from doing good (7:14-15).
- III. The reality of sin: Paul states absolutely that nothing good dwells within the flesh (7:16-20).
- IV. The helplessness of life without Christ: Paul declares that humans are incapable of breaking their bondage without God (7:21-23).
- V. Declaration of human wretchedness and a cry for help: Conversion recognizes our need for salvation. Paul states both the need and the desire to be rescued from the human condition (7:24).
- VI. Proclamation of God's deliverance: Paul declares that God saves humanity from the bondage of sin through Jesus Christ (7:25).

# A

*Humility is an attribute that more people claim than demonstrate. Conversely, and unfortunately, arrogance is an attribute that more people demonstrate than claim.*

*In Scripture, humility is a frequent response to an authentic religious experience.*

*When biblical characters encounter God, many humble themselves. When we recognize God's holy presence, we also see our shortcomings more clearly. **Spiritual maturity brings an awareness of our inability to live without God's grace.***

## ○ Humility Makeovers

On separate slips of paper, write each of the following: (1) an awards ceremony—like the Emmys or the Oscars; (2) a political convention; (3) a high school reunion. Form three groups, and have each group draw one slip of paper. Explain that each group has chosen an event at which arrogance often abounds. Have groups give their event a “humility makeover.” They should design their event to encourage a spirit of humility. Have each group give a presentation to the larger group that includes samples of speeches, agendas, and ways to arrange and decorate the meeting space to set a humble tone.

## Questions

- How likely is it that events that typically lend themselves to arrogant attitudes could be transformed into events that demonstrate humility? What would it take to have this happen?
- Do you think these makeover events would have as much appeal to people as the original events would have? Explain.
- How and why do we encourage arrogance? How and why should we nurture humility?
- If these events you planned actually happened, what might result from such an experience?

## ○ What Would You Say?

Suggest the following scenario: A young person you know has always struggled with self-esteem. One day, you read this quotation in a devotional guide and think about your friend:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate, our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.... There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. (Williamson, 56)

You send a copy of the quotation to your friend, along with a note telling them what a gifted person you think they are. Over time, you become a mentor to this youth. With joy, you watch the young person's confidence grow.

Then, one day you observe your friend among a group of peers. You're stunned by this person's arrogance. The youth demonstrates self-importance and puts down the others. As a mentor, you want to address this situation without causing your friend to lose the confidence that was so hard to establish. What would you say? Discuss the learners' responses as a large group, or have small groups write a response to the youth and then share their letters.

## Questions

- What is true confidence?
- How does a person learn to accept both their gifts and limitations?
- How can friends and community help people see themselves as God sees them?

# B A Way to Explore Scripture

*Have you ever had a faith experience that changed the way you had previously thought about God—or yourself? Suddenly, you have new questions and new convictions. Everything changes. You let go of some things and take on some things—like new perspectives, new ways of living out your faith.*

*This experience was Paul's. In fact, Romans is Paul's account of how an experience with Christ changes everything. Paul's encounter with Christ was humbling. It caused his worldview, his theology, and his understanding of himself to change. **Encounters with Christ are powerful enough to change our vision of who we are and Whose we are.***

## ○ Loving Those Limitations

As a group, make two lists on a board or newsprint. For the first, ask learners to list evidence that people believe they have no limitations and can create whatever life for themselves they want. Possibilities might include popular sayings, commercial slogans, current event examples, or instances from personal experience. On the second list, ask learners to give evidence that limitations are part of our identity as humans.

Compare and contrast the two lists. For instance, if the first list contains more commercial slogans than the second one, what might that say about our culture? Did either list contain references to Scripture or a faith tradition, and what might that mean? If the second list does not contain any evidence about our limitations from a faith perspective, introduce that idea by saying that today's session looks at human limitations and God's grace.

Read aloud Romans 7:14-25. Use material from the Learner's Study Guide and the Bible Background section to discuss the relationship between the law and sin, and the law's inability to lead people to the kind of life God offers.

Recap the story of Twyla Tharp from the Understanding section of the Learner's Study Guide. Then ask the group to consider examples from their own experiences in which discovering the reality of their limitations became a gift. In what ways did they grow spiritually from such experiences?

## Questions

- How would Paul describe the limitations all humans face?
- Why is humility a gift we need?

## ○ Arrogance Antidotes

As a large group, name situations in which Christians struggle with arrogance. Form small groups of three or four, and have each group choose one of these situations to address. Within the small groups, have learners read Romans 7:14-25. Based on this passage, ask them to consider what Paul might say to address their situation. Address the following questions: (1) Why is arrogance sometimes a problem? Who is hurt by an arrogant attitude? (2) Why do Christians struggle with arrogance at all? (3) Is there an effective remedy for this problem; if so, what is it?

Groups may want to write Paul's response in the form of a letter. If time permits, have groups read the responses.

## Questions

- What kind of message do arrogant Christians communicate?
- How can we cultivate the spirit of humility in our lives?

## C A Way to End

*Because God's work in us is unfinished, both humility and arrogance can be a part of our daily lives. Experiencing God's presence will help us remember who we are and enable us to respond with humility for such a gift of grace. Each of us needs reminding that it is God's spirit that gives us abundant life. You may want to introduce this last section of your session by retelling the story from the Reflecting section of the Learner's Study Guide about the preschooler who tried to blow the tree branches. **When we pay attention, we can realize that the wind of the Spirit is what makes things move in our world.** The best thing we can do is to add our breath—and our lives—to the work that God is already accomplishing. Such an experience is both humbling and deeply joyful.*

### ○ The Tangled Web We Weave

Have available a ball of string. Ask group members to form a circle. Explain that you will hold one end of the string and throw the ball to another person across the circle. As you throw the ball, name something that keeps people from being free in Christ. Encourage the next person to do the same, holding on to a piece of string and naming something as they throw the ball to someone else. Continue throwing the ball of string until every person is holding on and the group has made a web. Compare the web your group has created with the situation Paul describes in the passage. If your group has gotten into this activity enough that they are actually "bound" by the string, have scissors ready to free them from the mess.

### Questions

- In what ways, like the web we've created, does sin affect us all?
- What does it take to be free from the things that bind us?

Put the string down on the floor, and join hands. As a group, offer prayers of thanksgiving for the ways that God frees us and is present with us.

### ○ Writing Our Lives with God

If you have been using this option throughout the unit, have adults take out their journals or use the Resource Kit pages you have prepared for them. Give the group at least five minutes to journal in response to one of the following statements/questions. If time allows, invite volunteers to share their responses. Encourage them to take the sheets home and use the questions as a daily activity and time of prayer.

### Questions

- (1) What is your biggest challenge in striving to live with humility?
- (2) In what ways are you most arrogant? How does this arrogance affect you spiritually?
- (3) What helps you to remember who you are and Whose you are?
- (4) How does God help you overcome sin?
- (5) Why do you think spiritual maturity means seeing more of our own sinfulness?
- (6) What faith experience has most significantly changed the way you look at yourself and God?
- (7) Write a prayer of gratitude to God, expressing thanks for the grace that gives you life.

Conclude this session in prayer, asking God to help us remember how much we need God's grace each day. Or lead the group in a song that celebrates God's grace, such as "Amazing Grace" or "Grace Greater Than Our Sin."

## 5

## PRAYER

*Matthew 6:5-13**Bible Background*

Jesus knew that the disciples would face enormous challenges and that they needed something more to lead them to a deeper life of faith, so he gave them a way to pray. Since that time, Jesus' followers have learned that this prayer has the power to shape their lives. Clarence Jordan wrote, "If we lack a reverent, vital, living expression of this prayer, our lives will suffer. In it is the secret to great power. But it is not released by vain repetition. Pagans, even though they call themselves by Christ's name, never taste its essence. For this is the prayer of the totally committed, the wholly surrendered, the completely dedicated citizens of the Kingdom of God" (89).

One of the dangers of sticking a Christian label onto everything from political agendas to our automobiles is that Christ's name can lose its power. When people wear the label, but are not completely dedicated to God's kingdom, the word "Christian" loses meaning. Jesus confronted religious people who wore the label of the faith without living the substance of it. Artificial religion has been around for a long time. When we accept this substitute for genuine faith, we reject the substantial gift God offers us.

Matthew 6:5-13 is a portion of Jesus' teaching about the difference between

counterfeit and real faith. The theological principle Jesus teaches is "that which can be understood as rewardable by public acclaim should be avoided.... Jesus' injunctions prohibit the assignment of status to members of the community by virtue of their financial donations, laudatory prayers, or works of pious observance" (Humphries-Brooks, 951).

Matthew sees the Lord's Prayer as a model for our private prayer. Interestingly, there are distinctive Christian elements missing from Matthew's version, including the phrase "In Jesus' name we pray." Douglas Hare writes, "The most noticeable characteristic is its Jewishness. Almost every phrase has its parallel in Jewish literature." Matthew's audience was Jewish, but Hare continues, "This is not at all to suggest, however, that the Lord's Prayer is simply a collage of borrowed liturgical phrases. It has its own integrity, reflective of the teaching of Jesus. In this sense it is genuinely Christian" (66).

Jesus taught that prayer has the potential to be as self-centered as anything else. We need to pay attention to the first word of the Lord's Prayer: "Our." We address God as members of a community. When we're tempted to set our sights on health, wealth, and comfort, this prayer causes us to remember that we pray alongside others whose basic needs cry out for our prayers. This prayer centers on God, who cares for us all and

calls us to care for each other. It is hard for people with deep freezers to pray for their daily bread in the same way that those who are uncertain where their next meal will come from will pray. Clearly, this portion of the prayer reminds us of Jesus' intention that we pray to "our Father." We pray for and with those whose basic need is for daily food. Our world is filled with these sisters and brothers for and with whom Jesus wants us to pray.

Followers who give themselves to God through this prayer will find it hard to pray "Thy kingdom come" while thinking only of themselves. Much of the time, we want our own will to be done. We need to ask what these words mean for our lives and actions. A Chinese prayer starts, "God, revive your church, beginning with me." Our prayer could become, "Thy kingdom come, beginning with me."

While sin distorts and breaks our relationships, prayer restores them. Forgiveness is essential to restoring this brokenness. As we receive forgiveness from God, we are motivated to forgive others. Vernon Davis notes, "An unforgiving spirit is evidence that one has not fully experienced the forgiveness of God. Christians are to pray both for forgiveness and the grace to forgive" (101). Hare comments, "Our determination not to forgive another is a form of impenitence that blocks the flow of divine forgiveness. The Lord's Prayer and the attached commentary (vv. 14-15) do not suggest that God's pardon is doled out in proportion to the number of times we have forgiven; it is, rather, that we must genuinely repent our hardness of heart before expecting to receive God's mercy" (69).

The petition "And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one" reminds us that we always face the possibility of turning our backs on God's hopes for us. We deal daily with the tension between living as God's child and choosing a different way. Jordan explains, "We know certainly that God does not

tempt [us] in an evil sense.... On the other hand, God does allow [us] to be tested.... Is it not therefore logical that this prayer should contain a petition which recognizes [our] struggle with sin, and the absolute necessity of having God's power if [we are] to overcome the evil one?" (89).

## Outline

### FOR TEACHING

Introduction: In Matthew 5:20, Jesus tells the disciples that they demonstrate a better righteousness than the scribes and Pharisees. He then describes this better righteousness with examples of giving, praying, and fasting. Our session looks at authentic prayer.

- I. Making a Show of Prayer (6:5-6)
  - A. Jesus describes hypocritical prayer as that which is done for the praise of others (v. 5).
  - B. Jesus contrasts prayer that is meant to be admired by others with genuine prayer, which is meant for God (v. 6).
- II. How Not to Pray (6:7-8)
  - A. Do not try to manipulate God with your words (v. 7).
  - B. Remember you can't tell God something that God doesn't already know (v. 8).
- III. The Lord's Prayer: How We Should Pray (6:9-13)
  - A. Our Father (v. 9): We pray as part of a community.
  - B. Your kingdom and your will (v. 10): Prayer becomes God-centered rather than self-centered.
  - C. Prayer for daily bread (v. 11): For those of us with more food than we need, we're reminded to pray for sisters and brothers who go hungry.
  - D. Forgive us as we forgive (v. 12): God's grace helps us offer forgiveness.
  - E. Rescue us from the evil one (v. 13): God helps us with the challenge of temptation.

# A Way to Begin

*When something is new, whether it is a computer or a baby, we love to celebrate its potential. As time goes on, however, we often trade the adventure of exploring new possibilities for learning just enough to “get by.” Maybe the computer could organize our family reunions and pay our taxes, but as long as we know how to type and print a letter, we’re happy. Maybe our children could fill art galleries with their work, discover needed cures for cancer, and make the world a better place, but if they learn to clear the table, do their laundry, and graduate on time, it seems enough. In many areas, we have more potential than we realize.*

*Jesus reminded the disciples that there was more potential in their religious lives than most people would ever realize. **Too many trade the possibilities of an authentic relationship with Christ for learning how to look religious.** God gives us the potential for more.*

## ○ What’s Wrong with Rewards?

Present the following story to your group: Three ministers attending a conference were having coffee together. The conversation turned to mistakes they had made in ministry. Youth ministers described how they wanted their teenagers to experience missions within their own community. “But spending the summer at home didn’t sound appealing enough to those who wanted to travel to some exciting, out-of-town destination,” Sam explained. “So we set up this plan. If the youth participated in three of four mission projects, they earned a trip to the beach.” “The problem came when some youth, who decided earlier in the summer not to be involved, had a change of heart by project number three, and wanted to do it all—the missions and the beach,” Sue said. “Not only did we struggle with what was fair, but we began to doubt the whole structure. Providing a ‘reward’ for missions was a mistake. What we really wanted to teach was that experiencing missions offers its own reward, in spiritual terms.”

Their friend Sarah sympathized: “We give prizes to children who learn Scripture and check a sheet that they are praying every day. Will children learn the gift of Scripture and prayer if we teach them that the real gift is a ‘prize’? Of course, the argument is that by giving incentives they will actually study Scripture and start a discipline of prayer.”

“But if you pray to earn some incentive, is that really prayer?” asked Sam.

## Questions

- What is the danger of giving rewards for something like giving of our resources, doing missions, and praying? Why do we encourage these kinds of rewards? How do we encourage these disciplines?
- What are the real gifts that come from the practice of missions, giving, study, and prayer?

## ○ Heartfelt Conversations 101

Ask the group to imagine they have been asked to write an article titled, “How to Have a Heartfelt Conversation.” Have learners begin the article with a paragraph subtitled, “Heartfelt Conversation...Not!” For this section, ask them to list things that get in the way of genuine communication. For instance, they might write, “Try to talk in a crowded setting where one of you will be frequently interrupted. Better yet, keep your cell phone on.”

After a few minutes, have the group share their best suggestions for this section. Then ask them to write their suggestions on ways to have meaningful conversations. For instance: “Listen wholeheartedly, rather than thinking about what you’ll say next while the other is talking.” Have the group share responses. Then ask, “How do our suggestions about what nurtures good conversation and what keeps us from it apply to the discipline of prayer?”

# B A Way to Explore Scripture

**By offering us the gift of prayer, God invites us into a relationship that has more potential than we will ever realize.** *Maybe this overwhelming truth keeps us from taking prayer too seriously. Do we fear how God might shape our lives through prayer?*

*In Matthew 6:5-13, Jesus speaks about the kind of prayer for which most people settle. When we are satisfied with “appearing to pray,” our reward is “looking religious.” Jesus must have known that living out a faith that is more than the mere appearance of faith is a constant challenge for religious people. God gives us the potential for something more. To help us choose this better path, Jesus instructed us on how to pray.*

## ○ Making the Words Our Own

Using the Learner’s Study Guide and the Bible Background material, introduce Matthew 6:5-13. Explain the setting of this passage and its place among three examples of disciplines that often miss the purpose God has for them. Read the Lord’s Prayer, offering commentary on each verse. Ask learners when they first remember saying the Lord’s Prayer. What were some of the most meaningful times in which they said this prayer? Does a particular phrase have special meaning for them? Does a particular phrase or petition raise questions for them? Why is this prayer powerful?

Form small groups, give each group paper and a pen, and assign them one of the following: children and youth; college students; young parents; middle-aged adults; and senior adults. Have each group consider the particular age group and how the Lord’s Prayer applies to them. Ask them to consider the life stage of their age group, along with questions and challenges this stage raises in terms of faith. Then, have learners write a paraphrase of the prayer directed to their assigned group. (You might read a paraphrase of the Lord’s Prayer for children, as an example of what they will be doing.) When the groups have completed their work, have them share their paraphrases with the rest of the group.

## Questions

- How might we pray this prayer differently at different stages of our lives?
- How might we pray this prayer differently at different stages of faith?
- How does praying this prayer over a lifetime actually change our lives?

## ○ Authentic Prayer

Every Thursday night at our church we have an Agape Meal. Two hundred guests from our neighborhood, the majority homeless, join our volunteers for a hot meal. Before each meal we pray the Lord’s Prayer together. When we share prayer concerns after dinner, we pray for the sick, the bereaved, those with addictions, those who need inner strength, children having trouble fitting in at school, the need to find a job, the depressed, people without housing. Our dinner guests are teaching us about prayer. Those who stay to pray are not trying to keep up appearances. Most pray because God is their only hope. Consider asking: Do you think there is a connection between praying the Lord’s Prayer at the beginning of these Thursday evenings and the honest prayers offered later in the service? Explain. In what ways do we strive to “keep up appearances” even when it comes to prayer?

Read Matthew 6:5-13. Using the study material and the story above, discuss what is most difficult about praying in the way Jesus teaches us to pray. What helps us learn to pray as Jesus instructs us?

## C A Way to End

Clarence Jordan has paraphrased Matthew 6:6: “But you, when you pray, go to your bedroom, shut the door and pray to your Father in private. And your seeing Father will privately participate with you” (81). **Jesus assured his disciples that**

**authentic prayer would lead them to a relationship with God.** *When our prayers feel empty, or meaningless, we need to prepare for prayer by asking if God is the subject of our prayers. We need to question whether we seek God’s purpose in prayer, or our own. Have we remembered the way Jesus taught his disciples to pray and followed his wisdom? Are we aware of the One to whom we pray, and do we relate to God in an attitude of humility? God gave us prayer to help us live through the challenges of the Christian life.*

### ○ Praying the Lord’s Prayer

If possible, enlist a person to either sing the Lord’s Prayer or play an instrumental arrangement of it. Challenge your group to choose a particular time each day for the next week to say the Lord’s Prayer. You may want to ask them about the experience next week: Did praying the Lord’s Prayer affect other prayers you may have offered during the day? Was it hard to remember to say this prayer every day? Did praying this same prayer make it seem more routine, or more meaningful? Did you say it differently each day, or did different portions of the prayer speak to you each time you prayed? You might ask these questions ahead of time and have the group respond to them both before they have tried praying this each day and then afterward.

Ask the group how prayer guides us through the challenge of living the Christian life. Close by saying the Lord’s Prayer together.

### ○ Writing Our Lives with God

If you have used this option throughout the unit, have learners take out their journals, or give each person in the group a copy of the Resource Kit page. Explain that writing is a form of prayer for many

people. Ask learners to reflect on the experience of writing during this unit. Did anything surprise them about the experience? Was it helpful or difficult? Did they learn anything in particular in the writing? Is it something they plan to continue? Why or why not?

Ask learners to write on one of the following during the next five minutes. Remind them that they may want to use the other six questions as a writing guide for the week to come.

### Questions

- (1) In what ways is writing like praying for you? How is it different?
- (2) What makes it difficult for you to be honest with God?
- (3) Choose a verse of the Lord’s Prayer and copy it onto your sheet or journal page. Then write about a phrase or word in that verse that grabs you. What do you think God might be saying to you through these words?
- (4) In what ways is prayer most challenging to you?
- (5) How has God shaped your life through prayer?
- (6) When are you most tempted to use prayer for purposes other than God’s?
- (7) Record a meaningful prayer experience and what it showed you about God.

When everyone has had an opportunity to write for at least five minutes, offer time for volunteers to share something they’ve written. Close the session by leading the group in the Lord’s Prayer.

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# PRAYING HONESTLY

God, help me...

O God, I fear...

Dear God, I'm sorry that...

Show me how to follow,  
God, because...





# CELEBRATING NEW LIFE



**Joyfully announcing the birth of**

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(Fill in some form of new life that you have seen God create in your church, family, or community.)

**Born:** \_\_\_\_\_  
(When did it begin?)

**Distinguishing Characteristics:**  
(Describe the ministry, decision, or friendship and what is most helpful or appealing about it.)

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**Joyfully announcing the birth of**

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(Fill in some form of new life that you have seen God create in your church, family, or community.)

**Born:** \_\_\_\_\_  
(When did it begin?)

**Distinguishing Characteristics:**  
(Describe the ministry, decision, or friendship and what is most helpful or appealing about it.)

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# WRITING OUR LIVES WITH GOD



## Journal Entries: Session 1

- (1) Write God a letter about how you have struggled with submitting your life to God.
  
- (2) What do you consider your biggest challenges in living a Christian life?
  
- (3) What helps you pray honestly? What do you hope to learn about praying honestly?
- (4) In what ways is God active in your life?
  
- (5) If you could let go of something (attitude, object, idea, etc.) that keeps you from following Christ more closely, what would you lay down? What would you pick up that might strengthen your willingness to submit yourself to God?
- (6) Finish this prayer: O God, I want to give you...



# WRITING OUR LIVES WITH GOD



## Journal Entries: Session 2

- (1) When do you feel most in need of new life in Christ?
- (2) What habits, routines, thoughts, actions, keep you from abundant life?
- (3) Describe a time when you felt fully alive.
- (4) How do you best express your gratitude for God's grace?
- (5) What is most challenging to you about living in God's grace?
- (6) What truth in Ephesians 2:1-10 do you hope to remember?

## Journal Entries: Session 3

- (1) How does the cross affect your thinking on a daily basis?
- (2) In what areas of your life is the struggle between choosing the world's wisdom and God's wisdom the greatest?
- (3) What is hardest for you about taking up a cross for your faith?
- (4) Paul describes salvation as a process. In what ways do you know that you are being saved—both in terms of how you have changed from the beginning of this process and in terms of how far you know you need to grow spiritually?
- (5) How are we like the Corinthians, who forgot the source of their community and pursued paths that led to division?
- (6) What strength and help do you find in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25?

# WRITING OUR LIVES WITH GOD



## Journal Entries: Session 4

- (1) What is your biggest challenge in striving to live with humility?
- (2) In what ways are you most arrogant? How does this arrogance affect you spiritually?
- (3) What helps you to remember who you are and whose you are?
- (4) How does God help you overcome sin in your life?
- (5) Why do you think spiritual maturity means seeing more of our own sinfulness?
- (6) What faith experience has most significantly changed the way you look at yourself and your God?
- (7) Write a prayer of gratitude to God, expressing thanks for the grace that gives you life.

## Journal Entries: Session 5

- (1) In what ways is writing like praying for you? How is it different?
- (2) What makes it difficult for you to be honest with God?
- (3) Choose a verse of the Lord's Prayer and copy it onto your sheet or journal page. Then write about a phrase or word in that verse that grabs you. What do you think God might be saying to you through these words?
- (4) In what ways is prayer most challenging to you?
- (5) How has God shaped your life through prayer?
- (6) When are you most tempted to use prayer for purposes other than God's?
- (7) Record a meaningful prayer experience and what it showed you about God.