

Leader Guide

Encounter

BIBLE STUDY FOR ADULTS

September • October • November 2009

Encounter Leader's Guide

Using This Guide

The leader helps for each lesson correspond to the lessons in *Encounter* (student book). You will be able to identify the corresponding lessons by date and title. The sub-heads on each guide sheet are the same as those used in the lessons and reference the corresponding page number in the student book. The guide will provide activity suggestions and discussion tips. Use the questions and suggestions to further class discussion and to encourage the group toward action.

Evaluating

Tell us what you think of this issue by completing and returning the evaluation form at the back of this resource.

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Joshua, a Leader for the People

Lesson Aim: (1) To discover God’s directions and promises to Joshua; (2) to identify characteristics that made Joshua an effective leader; and (3) to support current church leaders and cultivate personal leadership traits.

Background Scripture: Joshua 1; **Scripture Selection:** Joshua 1:1-11, 16-17

Suggestions for Worship: *Opening Sentences:* Psalm 143:5-9. *Hymns:* “Jesus Shall Reign,” “Spirit of God, Descend upon My Heart,” “This Is My Father’s World.” *Devotional Reading:* 1 Timothy 2:1-6.

Advance Preparation

Familiarize yourself with the first four lessons in the student book to get a feel for the unit, which includes the stories of Joshua, Gideon, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Locate information about these leaders in a commentary or other reliable source. Your pastor may have reference books that would be helpful for this study.

Read the background scripture for this lesson. Using a translation different from the one you normally use can often provide new insight into passages.

Visit the area where the class meets. How can you give it a fresh look? What items need to be removed? Even small changes will make a difference.

Locate pictures of people who have been great leaders throughout history, as well as current leaders. If pictures are not available, write the person’s name on a large index card or sheet of paper. Post the pictures/names throughout the class meeting area.

This Sunday is the beginning of a new Sunday school year. It is also a holiday weekend, which may mean visitors and/or the absence of those who regularly attend the class. Plan accordingly.

Welcome/Introduction (p. 3)

Greet each person, making sure to introduce any visitors. Take care of any class business such as announcements, attendance, and offering. Then invite people to mention prayer requests and praises. Ask a volunteer to open the class with prayer, being sure to include those concerns just listed.

Briefly review the first unit of this quarter (the first four lessons). Share some basic information about Joshua: Joshua was one of the men Moses sent to spy out the land of Canaan, and one of only two who believed that the Israelites should move into Canaan immediately. He continued to exhibit strong leadership abilities and seems to have been a natural choice to succeed Moses.

God chose Joshua to lead the Israelites into Canaan, where they would finally establish a homeland for God’s people. What kind of leader would Joshua have to be in order to accomplish this phase of God’s plan for Israel? Encourage class members to list some of the qualities Joshua would need.

Ask class members to complete the sentence, “A great leader is . . .” Call attention to the pictures and names displayed throughout the meeting area. What qualities do these people share? What made/makes them great leaders? What criteria do we use to identify leaders today—national, local, and within your congregation? How do you support those who are chosen to serve as leaders, even if you disagree with the choice?

Willing to Wait (pp. 3-4)

Joshua served many years as an apprentice to Moses, patiently learning to be a good follower before becoming a leader. In what ways do patience and being a good follower enable a person to be a better leader? How does your congregation call upon those people who have been good followers?

Joshua was no longer a young man when God called him to lead the people into the Promised Land. It seems that we often look to younger people to be our leaders, disregarding the skills and patience that have

been honed throughout years of experience. In what ways does your congregation embrace the leadership gifts of its older members? How do you establish a healthy balance between younger and older members who are serving as leaders?

A Leader's Spirituality (p. 4)

God's people need spiritual leadership—a leader who nurtures their spiritual growth. Who provides such leadership for your congregation? Why is such leadership so crucial?

How does your congregation's observance of the Lord's Supper or baptism contribute to its spirituality? How does your church provide communion for its members who are not able to leave their homes or who are in long term care facilities?

God Is Our True Leader (pp. 4-5)

Invite class members to tell of a time when they found it more difficult to share God's plan with others than to proceed with the plan. Explain that Joshua found himself in such a situation. God's people were going into an inhabited land of walled cities. They would have to trust God.

God's Plan (pp. 5-6)

Suggest that class members put themselves in the position of the Israelites. Here was a nomadic nation about to enter a much more powerful nation, intending to occupy it. Most of us would want to know the strategy our leaders intended to employ. Imagine the reactions when they heard God's directive. When do you find it difficult to trust God's plans? Why? How do you know they are God's plans?

Joshua was a person of courage and faith. Invite students to define courage and faith. Who in your church has such courage and faith? It is amazing how a congregation is able to move ahead when the church leaders are able to convince the church that they are following God's lead. What plans does God have for your church? How will you work to enact those plans?

How Walls May Fall (p. 6)

Invite class members to tell of long-standing walls they have seen fall, both real and imaginary, physical and mental. Despite the destruction of some walls, new ones continue to be built. What walls exist in your community? How do those walls impact your congregation's ability to carry out its mission and ministry? How can your class be instrumental in destroying such walls?

A Man of His Word (p. 7)

Among today's leaders, it is increasingly rare to find a person who stands by his or her promises. However, Joshua went out of his way to be faithful to the promise he had made to a prostitute!

How might your feelings about the leaders of our nation (and even the church) change if you could depend on them to keep their word? Are there ever times when breaking one's word is justified? Why? How does a potential leader's "track record" influence your decision about voting for him or her?

Closing

Close with a prayer of thanksgiving for those whom God called to lead us in the past and ask God to bless and direct our current leaders.

The next lesson moves to the time of the judges and examines the leadership of Gideon, a man who seemed ill-qualified for what God called him to do.

Gideon: A Deliverer for the People

Lesson Aim: (1) To explore the account of Gideon, a judge and military leader whom God raised up to defeat the Midianite oppressors of the Israelites; (2) to identify ways God can work through seemingly unlikely persons to accomplish great things; and (3) to develop plans to answer God's call.

Background Scripture: Judges 6–8; **Scripture Selection:** Judges 6:1-3, 7-14

Suggestions for Worship: *Opening Sentences:* Psalm 84:1-4. *Hymns:* “Take Time to Be Holy,” “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” “My Faith Looks Up to Thee.” *Devotional Reading:* 1 Corinthians 1:26-31.

Advance Preparation

Familiarize yourself with the role of the judges in Israel's history after the days of Joshua. Read the final chapter of Joshua and continue reading through the first eight chapters of Judges. A commentary might also be helpful in this process.

Read the lesson in the student book. Highlight areas to which you want to refer during class time.

Provide a *Confession of Faith* to use during class.

The saga of Gideon is no simple story. Challenging cultural differences separate us from Gideon's time. But the similarities are striking. Get to know Gideon and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, let his story help your class.

There may be those in your class who are unable to reconcile their understanding of God with the wars and violence God seems to advocate in the stories of Joshua and Gideon. Acknowledge their concerns but seek to hold in-depth discussion of that question for another time. Focus instead on the development of courageous, forward-looking, hopeful leaders in your church.

Welcome/Introduction (p. 9)

Nothing more important can happen in the class than encouraging each person to become involved in this study. Welcome any visitors and learn their names. Share prayer concerns and invite a class member to lead in prayer, remembering each of those requests.

Share some of the information you discovered about the role of judges in Israel's history. Review the political climate of the time, especially how it differs from the time of Joshua's leadership. Encourage comments as to any similarities between the situation in Gideon's time and today.

Meet Gideon, Afraid and Hiding (p. 9)

Describe the man Gideon when we first encounter him in scripture. No hero, he appears to be somewhat cowardly. His tribe, Manasseh, had been defeated by Midian, and Gideon was threshing his grain while hiding. His fear was understandable but not admirable. God needed a man of faith and courage, and at first glance Gideon was certainly not that man. But God does not see us as we see ourselves or as others see us. God looked deep into Gideon's heart and liked what he saw.

Talk a bit about fear. What is your church facing that most concerns you? What most concerns you about the future of our nation? of the world? Fear may be a burden on you or your family, on your church or community. How have fears paralyzed you and stymied your faith? What would allay your fears and give you the courage to seek change? What role do leaders have in this process?

The Call of Gideon (p. 10)

God's call to leadership came to Gideon in spite of his fears. God had chosen Gideon to free Israel from the oppressive hand of Midian. Invite a class member to tell the Bible story or read it aloud from Judges 6:11-16.

Invite class members to tell of a time when they have felt God calling them to a task that seemed hopeless. Then ask: What excuses did you offer? How did you deal with your feelings of inadequacy? How did God use you, despite your weaknesses?

Putting God to the Test (pp. 10-11)

The next part of the story is one of the most interesting episodes in scripture. Gideon said that he would tackle the task if he could be sure that God was with him. He devised several ways to test God's intentions, the last one being "putting out the fleece." As a result, Gideon was convinced that God would be with him and help him take the land of Midian.

We are human, just like Gideon, asking for assurance of God's call. What fleece have you put before God? Why did you feel the need for a sign? What does asking God for a sign say about our faith?

Jesus in the Wilderness (pp. 11-12)

Allow time to discuss the issue of testing God. Is it wrong to test God? When Jesus was being tempted in the wilderness, he told the tempter, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test" (Luke 4:12). Why hasn't that statement settled the matter for Christians? In what sense do we still "put out the fleece" before responding to God's call? How have you challenged God when you knew what God expected of you?

Despite God's assurances, Gideon still had to deal with his fear. He did so by acting under cover of darkness. When is it prudent for us to listen to our fears and use darkness as a shield? Encourage class members to list such instances.

When There Are Too Many (pp. 12-13)

Gideon's courage in destroying his family idols brought thousands of volunteers to help him in the fight. God told Gideon there were too many to be of any real use. The process of whittling down the size of his force began and did not stop until only three hundred warriors remained. How God used those three hundred men to defeat the Midianites is a miraculous story.

No church is too small to accomplish God's mission. The key is being committed to following the guidance of God's Spirit. What is God calling your class/congregation/community to do? Step out in faith to answer God's call, remembering the story of Gideon.

Gideon's Place in Our Faith (p. 13)

Remind class members that at the beginning of this lesson Gideon was hiding out of fear. Now he is a leader of God's people, having led them to victory over a formidable foe. Ask class members to identify some of the formidable foes in our world today. What is the church's role in confronting these foes? What is your role?

Share the section on "Civil Government" in the *Confession of Faith*. Note especially paragraphs 6.30 and 6.32. Develop a plan of action to address one or more of the issues identified above.

Closing

As you close this lesson, remind participants of any projects or special events that are planned. Encourage them to be bold, courageous leaders for the church.

Close with a prayer for all leaders.

Ezra: A Priest for the People

Lesson Aim: (1) To explore the story of Ezra, who opened his heart and mind to God's teachings and diligently taught the laws of God; (2) to recognize the spiritual depth and maturity necessary to be a prayerful leader; and (3) to repent and offer prayers of confession for unfaithfulness to God.

Background Scripture: Ezra 9; **Scripture Selection:** Ezra 9:5-11, 15

Suggestions for Worship: *Opening Sentences:* Psalm 63:1-4. *Hymns:* "O Jesus, I Have Promised," "Morning Has Broken," "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less." *Devotional Reading:* Psalm 32:1-5.

Advance Preparation

Read the first eight chapters of Ezra to get the context for today's Scripture Selection.

Pray for the members of the class individually. Contact any regular attendees who have been absent to let them know you and the class has been missing them.

Welcome/Introduction (p. 15)

Welcome class members and visitors. Make announcements and allow time for the offering and taking attendance. Lead the group in a time of prayer, encouraging them to contribute to the prayer those needs and praises of which they are aware.

Use the following information along with the introductory comments in the student book to put this lesson in its historical perspective. The Old Testament books of Joshua through 2 Chronicles provide the story of Israel from the entrance into Canaan through the exile in Babylon. The Book of Ezra picks up Israel's story immediately thereafter.

The Jewish people had spent seventy years in captivity in Babylon and Persia (today's Iraq and Iran). The people had permission to return to their homeland, but they needed leaders who were strong enough to rebuild the temple and walls of Jerusalem and who could re-energize the spiritual life of the returned exiles. Enter Ezra and Nehemiah. Today's lesson focuses on Ezra and next one will deal with Nehemiah.

Encourage class members to list characteristics they think are needed in leaders today. Be sure to include secular as well as church leaders. How are we to recognize such leaders when God calls them?

The First Six Chapters (p. 15)

God used Persian kings Cyrus, Artaxerxes, and Darius to bring about the return of a portion of the Jewish community to Jerusalem. The exiles returned with the intention of rebuilding the temple. However, they became frustrated and lost their zeal and focus.

Suggest that persons reflect silently on these questions: What kinds of things cause you to lose your focus? In what areas of your life (personal and congregational) have you lost your focus or zeal for God's work?

Enter Ezra, Priest and Scribe (pp. 15-16)

When the temple restoration was finished, the people worshiped God. However, they gradually drifted away from God. When word reached Israel's religious leaders in Persia, they recognized the need to send a strong leader, one who would call the people to remember the law and the covenant.

Ezra was a strong and dedicated leader. He went to Jerusalem knowing that the task ahead of him would likely not be easy. How do the leaders of your church echo the faith and commitment of Ezra?

Engage class members in a discussion of this section using the questions in the student book.

Persuading a Pagan Ruler (pp. 16-17)

Have class members close their eyes as you describe the following situation: Your family moved to a dif-

ferent country before you were born. You have a family, a home, and a good job in this new country. The circumstances that caused your family to relocate have changed. You have the opportunity to return to your family's home country. It will take a lot of work to rebuild the country and to make it safe. Would you go? Why or why not?

Such was the situation with the Jewish people. Only a very small percentage of the exiled people chose to return to their homeland. Realizing that he would need religious leaders to help re-establish the worship of God, Ezra recruited priests as well as lay people to go to Jerusalem with him.

Encourage class members to think about the role lay leaders play in your congregation. In some congregations, lay leaders are more critical than pastors. The lay leaders will remain consistent while clergy will come and go. Identify the leaders in your congregation. Remember to pray for them and to offer a word of encouragement.

Arrival in Jerusalem (p. 17)

Turning down an armed escort undoubtedly took a great deal of faith. Yet, doing so helped to solidify the people's trust in God.

Ask for a volunteer to read the sections reprinted from the *Confession of Faith* in this section of the student book. Invite responses to these statements of belief.

Restoring a People Spiritually (pp. 17-18)

Sin, wherever it is found, seems so prevalent that we often do not know how to deal with it. People generally don't like for someone to point out their wrongdoings. In fact, a minister may find it necessary to move to a different congregation after attempting to help the people see the sin in their lives.

Ezra avoided this pitfall by freely acknowledging the sin in his own life. How do you respond when confronted with the sin in your life? How do you deal with the sin?

Explain that Ezra seemed especially concerned with false gods. What false gods have you allowed into your life? Resolve now to take whatever steps are necessary to remove those gods so that they do not interfere with your worship of the one true God.

Establishing Godly Homes (p. 18)

Our homes reflect what we truly believe and are the foundation of our society. If we allow foul language, excessive behaviors, abuse, and other worldly influences into our homes, our society and institutions will become corrupt.

How does your congregation strengthen the homes of its members? In what ways can you reach out to others in your community to help them develop godly homes?

Closing

The process of renewal began with Ezra's confession of his own sinfulness (9:6). Give each person a slip of paper. Suggest they write on the paper a sin with which they struggle. Pass a small trash bag around the group, inviting them to symbolically rid themselves of the sin by placing the paper in the bag. Assure them that no one will read the papers. Note: Dispose of the papers immediately following class.

Invite class members to join in a time of silent prayer, seeking forgiveness for their sins. Close by offering an assurance of pardon: Hear the good news: In Jesus Christ your sins are forgiven.

Nehemiah: A Motivator for the People

Lesson Aim: (1) To explore Nehemiah's plan to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem; (2) to examine the way Nehemiah approached a problem and rallied people to solve it; and (3) to motivate members of the congregation to undertake a project for God.

Background Scripture: Nehemiah 2; **Scripture Selection:** Nehemiah 2:5, 11-20

Suggestions for Worship: *Opening Sentences:* Psalm 119:73-78. *Hymns:* "O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee," "All the Way My Savior Leads Me," "Come, Ye Thankful People, Come." *Devotional Reading:* Isaiah 62:1-7.

Advance Preparation

Study the story of Nehemiah to get a clear picture of who he was and how he fits into the history of the Jewish captivity in Babylon and Persia. Read the brief overview of Nehemiah's relationship with King Artaxerxes in the student book. Use a commentary to supplement this information.

Welcome/Introduction (p. 20)

A good leader knows how to motivate and instill the desire to build a team among his or her followers. A key to building a strong team is relationships. Therefore, allow time for class members to catch up with one another before plunging into the lesson. Include any visitors by inviting them to share something about themselves and one interesting thing that happened to them during the past week.

Although the temple in Jerusalem had been rebuilt and people had returned to live in their homeland, the city remained in ruins. The wall that had previously surrounded the city, offering protection for its inhabitants, had not been rebuilt. The current inhabitants were largely defenseless.

When Nehemiah learned of the state of affairs in Jerusalem, it moved him out of his "comfort zone." What situations concern you enough for you to move out of your comfort zone?

Something Had to Be Done (pp. 20-21)

It is interesting that Nehemiah, a Jewish exile, held the position of the king's cupbearer. Nehemiah and Artaxerxes seem to have had a strong relationship, one that went beyond the service that Nehemiah provided for the king. Otherwise, the king would likely not have noticed or cared about Nehemiah's sadness, much less been willing to offer a solution!

The king listened to Nehemiah's concerns. Invite class members to tell how having someone truly listen to their concerns has made a difference in a situation. As a leader in the church (teacher, elder, deacon, pastor, committee chair, etc.), how is listening an important part of your role?

Another Critical Moment (p. 21)

When Nehemiah approached the king, he offered specific suggestions for ways the king could help rectify the situation in Jerusalem. Many times people are willing to help if they know what is needed, yet often we only offer complaints thus becoming part of the problem rather than the solution.

Encourage class members to identify situations that need attention. List specific, constructive ways your class can help solve those situations. Speak with members of the session about your concerns and any suggestions you have.

Arrival in Jerusalem (pp. 21-22)

Nehemiah lacked the skills to rebuild the wall, yet he was able to secure the supplies and organize the workers available to him. He became a leader without really intending to do so!

Many times we hear of someone who becomes the leader of a group simply because they feel passionately about the cause and become involved. Suggest that class members think of something about which they feel passionately. It might be providing clean drinking water for a village in Africa, making caps for the patients at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, or building houses with Habitat for Humanity. Then ask them to reflect how God might be calling them to be a leader for the cause, even if it is only within your class or congregation.

When Opposition Surfaces (pp. 22-23)

Ask class members to recall a time when they were very excited about a project only to have someone "throw cold water" on the idea. This situation is basically what faced Nehemiah shortly after he announced his plans to rebuild the wall.

It can sometimes be difficult to discern the difference between those who have legitimate concerns about an idea and those who are objecting for self-serving reasons. Suggest that class members reflect silently about the last time they opposed an idea brought before the church. Encourage them to be completely honest as they evaluate the position they took.

Agreement on all matters in church life is not required. However, we must learn to disagree with love and respect for one another. Consider: Why must the church be careful in dismissing potential opposition? How can we best combat opposition to what we believe to be God's will?

Completing the Wall (pp. 23-24)

The task before Nehemiah and the citizens of Jerusalem must have seemed overwhelming, especially in the face of verbal and armed attacks from their opposition. However, Nehemiah continued to seek God's will in the situation and the restoration was finished in only fifty-two days.

When a new person comes to a position of leadership he or she often encounters opposition: "We've never done it this way before." "We don't have enough funds or people to support this ministry." We've all heard such comments, and may have even been the ones making them! God expects us to use our resources wisely, but when we refuse to consider new ideas, we are limiting what we will allow God to do through us and the church. It is truly amazing what God's people can do when they work together for a common purpose. The work will progress faster if everyone cooperates, but if it is God's plan the work will continue regardless!

Why are we inclined to be so protective of our ideas that we fail to listen to what our opponents are saying? How can we manifest a spirit of genuine love for those who oppose us? What may God be calling your congregation to do?

Concluding Thoughts (p. 24)

Nehemiah ultimately ended up in Jerusalem as a leader of the people. As long as he and Ezra were alive, the Jewish people followed God. However, without a strong leader they returned to their idolatrous ways. This situation recurs throughout history. Do you think it is continuing to recur? Why or why not?

God sent courageous, faithful leaders to the people. God continues to provide leaders for the work of God's kingdom. How will you support those who come to positions of leadership?

Closing

Invite persons to name prayer requests at this time. Be sure to include the leaders of your congregation, presbytery, and denomination as well as local, national, and world leaders. Challenge class members to pray daily for the leaders of the church and the world/nation.

Looking for Jesus

Lesson Aim: (1) To unpack a narrative about Jesus and the disciples as they ministered to those who sought help; (2) to turn to Christ in our need; and (3) to seek ways to help someone who is searching for a relationship with God.

Background Scripture: Mark 1:35-45; **Scripture Selection:** Mark 1:35-45

Suggestions for Worship: *Opening Sentences:* Isaiah 40:1-5. *Hymns:* “Lord, I Want to Be a Christian,” “Jesus, Lover of My Soul,” “Jesus Loves Me!” *Devotional Reading:* Ezekiel 34:11-16.

Advance Preparation

Read the entire first chapter of Mark, paying special attention to the Scripture Selection for this lesson at the beginning of the week. Read it again later in the week using a different translation.

Write the name Jesus on several index cards and “hide” them throughout the meeting area.

Since this lesson begins a new unit, consider making some changes in the class meeting area. Check with the children’s Sunday school teachers to see if they have any pictures of Jesus that you might post in the meeting area.

Welcome/Introduction (p. 26)

As class attendees arrive, invite them to “look for Jesus” by finding one or more of the index cards. Once they have found some of the cards, begin class with whatever items are routine for the group. Explain that this lesson begins a new unit, which will focus on stories about Jesus from the Gospel of Mark.

The Baptism of Jesus (p. 26)

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark doesn’t provide any information about Jesus’ birth or family. He jumps straight into a report of Jesus’ ministry, beginning with the preaching of John the Baptist.

Invite learners to imagine themselves as part of the group that had gathered on the banks of the Jordan River to hear John’s message. John suddenly stops in the midst of baptizing people. What is happening? Who is this person to whom John says, “I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of [your] sandal”? He certainly didn’t say that to you!

How does the thought of Jesus seeking forgiveness and baptism make you feel?

Why Did Jesus Seek Baptism (pp. 26-27)

By joining those who had come to repent and be baptized, Jesus acknowledged his need for God. Those around him might have had difficulty accepting his teachings if he had adopted an attitude of being above the need for repentance and baptism.

Ask class members to recall church leaders whose attitude of spiritual self-assurance put them above others. One such leader who comes to mind is Jim Bakker. What happened when these people experienced a weakness? How did it affect those in their congregations? We are all human. How do you react to weaknesses in your congregational leaders?

A Second Reason (pp. 27-28)

Jesus must have been an incredibly patient man. He was thirty years old before God opened the way for him to begin his ministry. Many of us struggle to wait for God’s time rather than our own. Why do you think this is the case? How do you react when you think you are following God’s will only to have your path blocked at every turn? What enables you to discern God’s leading rather than your own desires?

The Temptation of Jesus (p. 28)

Temptation has been a part of life since Adam and Eve. What temptations do you face? How do you deal with them? To whom do you turn for support and encouragement when temptation assails you? How do you respond when others need your support and/or understanding? when that person is your pastor or other congregational leader?

Looking for Jesus (pp. 28-29)

This unit continues the theme of leadership. When Jesus emerged from the wilderness, he called four fishermen to be his disciples. What qualities do you think Jesus saw in these unlikely future leaders?

It became clear from the very beginning that Jesus' ministry would be one of care and compassion for God's people. What value do you place on these characteristics in leaders today?

An Effective Leader Handles Rage (p. 27)

The Gospels speak often of Jesus' attendance at synagogue services on the sabbath. While in the synagogue, a man began to scream at Jesus, challenging his authority. With understanding born of compassion, Jesus commanded the spirit to leave the man.

We need leaders in the church who are stable enough to handle criticism, even rejection. Angry lay leaders and pastors are of little use until they open their hearts to the reconciling work of the Holy Spirit. How can you be an instrument of God's healing and reconciliation?

A Good Leader Knows Who Is Hurting (pp. 29-30)

With today's medical advances, many ailments are easily treated and cured. What role does the church have in such situations? Why shouldn't we simply leave these matters to the medical community? How can we best express concern for people who have these types of medical issues? How can we know when a fellow church member needs us? How can we minister to them in such circumstances?

As a young adult, I was living far from family when I became ill. Having heard the women of the church we were attending talk about taking meals to persons who were ill, I called and asked if someone could come to visit me. A woman who became a good friend came to visit me that afternoon, bringing homemade cookies. In what ways can the church bring a healing experience?

A Good Leader Reaches the Outcast (p. 30)

We know that Jesus sought solitude for prayer. How does your congregation encourage the prayer life of its members? Why is prayer so important? How would you rate your own prayer life?

As Jesus and the disciples set out for the day, a leper approached them. In biblical times, lepers were outcasts, required to live outside the edge of the cities and villages and call out a warning to any who came near, "Unclean!" Yet this man approached Jesus with the knowledge that Jesus could restore his health. Jesus was not repulsed by him nor afraid of contracting leprosy. Jesus reached out and touched the man, healing him.

Who are the "lepers" in your midst? List groups of people in your church and community likely to feel rejected by both the church and the community. How will you offer them the restorative touch of Jesus?

Closing

As you prepare to close the lesson, invite prayer concerns. Remember to include those groups of people whom you identified as being outcasts. Challenge class members to pray for one or more of these groups of people daily. If they know individuals in these groups, encourage them to pray privately for the specific person.

In the next session, we will continue to examine Jesus ministry among the sick and sinful. Ask for a volunteer to research the meaning of demon-possession in New Testament times.

Recognizing Jesus

Lesson Aim: (1) To explore Jesus' encounter with a person enslaved by unclean spirits; (2) to recognize ways we may be in bondage so as to open ourselves to Jesus' liberating healing; (3) to identify persons who live in isolation at the edges of society and find ways to assist them.

Background Scripture: Mark 5:1-20; **Scripture Selection:** Mark 5:1-13, 18-20

Suggestions for Worship: *Opening Sentences:* Psalm 60:1-3. *Hymns:* "Lead on, O King Eternal," "Jesus Is All the World to Me," "Blessed Assurance." *Devotional Reading:* Luke 7:18-23.

Advance Preparation

Read Mark 4:35-41 in addition to the Background Scripture listed for this lesson. Consult a commentary for additional insight into these passages.

Read the lesson in the student book, noting any sections to which you want to refer as you teach.

Decorate your learning area with things related to boats such as a coil of rope, oars, life preserver, pictures of boats, etc.

Secure a CD of ocean sounds and a CD player.

Provide a map of the Sea of Galilee (and surrounding areas) in New Testament times.

Welcome/Introduction (p. 32)

Have the CD playing in the background as people arrive. As you greet each person by name, welcome them on board *The Galilee*. Ask people to stow their gear and take their seats as you will soon be underway. As you prepare to depart, take the roll and invite people to share prayer concerns. Open with prayer, being sure to include those concerns just mentioned.

Once you are underway, briefly review the previous lesson, reminding participants that Jesus cares for the least and lost among us. Then say, "I understand that Jesus is resting below. We always meet interesting people when we are with him. I wonder who we'll meet when we get to the other shore."

Jesus Stills the Storm (pp. 32-33)

Remind class members that they are on a boat journey as you ask them to close their eyes as you describe the following situation: The sky is getting darker and the wind is stronger. The waves are crashing over the side of the boat. The boat is taking on water faster than the crew can bail it out. It seems that all of you will die in the storm.

Share the story from Mark 4:35-41 with the class. Emphasize that, at the height of the storm, the disciples cried out, "Lord, do you not care that we are perishing?" The disciples believed that Jesus could save them from the storm, but afterward they cried out, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

Consider these questions with class members: How would you have felt had you been on that boat with Jesus? How would your faith have entered into the situation? What personal storms have you experienced? How did you deal with them? Where did you see Jesus in those storms?

What We Can Do (p. 33)

How do we balance proclaiming God's love and concern for the needy outside the church with a healthy concern for those in the church? Which group has top priority?

Identify storms that are affecting church members. Choose one or two of the ideas and talk about how your class can become involved in calming those storms.

Jesus Heals a Demoniac (pp. 33-34)

Call attention to the map of the Sea of Galilee. Point out the area called “the Decapolis,” with the territory of the Gerasenes near the shore. The boat on which Jesus and the disciples were traveling landed in this area.

Again imagine yourself as one of the travelers on that boat. A mad man rushes out of a cemetery, rattling chains. How do you react? Think of a comparable situation today. How do you treat people who seem not to be “all there” if they approach you? The student book talks about the “seven deadly sins.” How have those sins contributed to the problems of our society?

A Man Truly Lost (pp. 34-45)

Living alone in the cemetery had only made the man’s madness worse. This man clearly needed help. Why do you suppose he didn’t welcome the arrival of Jesus?

Invite members of the class to share their experiences in being liberated through the ministries of Christian believers or through the witness of the church. Then discuss: Who are the people in need within our community who would rather not be bothered by Christians? What do you think has caused them to develop this attitude?

We know that many people who are homeless suffer from one or more types of mental illness. They cannot function within the normal range of acceptable behavior and have chosen to live outside of the majority of society. What is the church’s responsibility to such people? How does your congregation minister to those who are the outcasts in your community? How do you need to adjust your attitude to allow them to see the love and acceptance of Jesus?

Demons Among Us (pp. 35-36)

Refer to the comments in the student book that relate to this section. Encourage class members to identify some of the demons in today’s world.

Many times people, even those who are involved in church, hesitate to divulge their problems to those within the congregation. A friend’s ex-husband had molested their daughter, yet she refused to talk about it with people at church. Or, the family who was struggling with a family member’s mental illness or imprisonment that pulls away from the church. Or the person who has become embittered over family issues but doesn’t see how it affects others. These types of situations are common, unfortunately. Why do you think people hesitate to bring such issues to the church? How can the church effectively reach out to such people?

Go and Tell (p. 36)

This point may be the most important one in the story. After Jesus healed the demoniac, the man wanted to go with Jesus. Instead, Jesus told the man to go home and tell his friends what had happened to him.

There will always be Christians who feel a call to minister away from home. For most of us, however, redemption results in simply telling our friends and family what Jesus has done for us.

Suggest that class members recall silently the last time they shared with someone what Jesus has done in their lives. As a class, consider ways of sharing the good news with others.

Closing

If any class members wrote a prayer (as suggested in the student book), invite them to share it now. Close the class time with a prayer for all those who are struggling with “demons.”

Contact class members who have been absent. Let them know they were missed!

Begging to Get In

Lesson Aim: (1) To explore the narrative of Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman; (2) to discern reasons for Jesus' uncharacteristic behavior with the mother; and (3) to share how God works in our lives during times when we need a strong faith.

Background Scripture: Mark 7:24-30; **Scripture Selection:** Mark 7:24-30

Suggestions for Worship: *Opening Sentences:* Psalm 119:73-77. *Hymns:* "Near to the Heart of God," "Jesus, Thou Joy of Loving Hearts," "How Great Thou Art." *Devotional Reading:* 2 Corinthians 8:1-7.

Advance Preparation

Remove the boat-related items used in the previous lesson.

Scan the chapters that separate this lesson from the previous one.

Read the Background Scripture in several translations.

Read this lesson in the student book. Be prepared to help the class with questions.

Look up *Gentile* and *Syrophenician* in a Bible dictionary. Be prepared to share the information.

Provide index cards, at least one per class member.

Welcome/Introduction (p. 38)

Greet participants as they arrive, being sure to introduce any visitors. Allow time for announcements and the sharing of prayer concerns. Make your class a time and place in which you can show genuine concern for those with whom you study and worship.

As you prepare to start the lesson, suggest that class members think of a time when they have had to be especially tenacious and to remember the feelings associated with the situation.

When Jesus Needed to Rest (p. 38)

Jesus was tired—physically and mentally. We all get to that point and need time apart to renew our spirits and recharge physically. However, Jesus was a very public figure and it was hard to get away. What opportunities does your congregation provide for its leaders to renew and recharge? Some churches insist that pastors take a sabbatical after so many years; others limit the number of years a person can teach, understanding that teachers need a break as well.

Enter a Mother in Need (pp. 38-39)

Say: You are so tired that you can barely put one foot in front of the other. Just as you are going to sit or lie down to rest, a neighbor comes by to borrow a tool or a friend calls and needs to talk or a stranger has a flat tire and needs help. Then ask: How did you feel when your much-needed rest was disturbed? Which of the three people described would you be the least likely to want to help in those circumstances?

Jesus found himself in a somewhat similar situation. He was exhausted from teaching and healing when a Gentile woman approached him. In Jewish society, Gentiles were considered to be a lower class of people, not fit to associate with the Jews. Yet, when this woman interrupted Jesus' rest, begging him to cast the demon out of her daughter, he allowed her to approach. It is doubtful that she knew much about the God of the Jews, but she had heard enough about Jesus to believe he could help her daughter.

To what lengths would you go to get help for someone you loved? Who would you hesitate to approach with a need that is close to your heart? Why?

On Giving Children's Food to Pets (pp. 39-40)

The student book offers several possible reasons for Jesus' rather puzzling response to the woman. Which of them seems most plausible? What other explanation would you offer?

Talk about what it means to believe in a "whosoever-will gospel." How does that belief affect the mission of your congregation? With whom are you failing to share the gospel message? Why?

Did Jesus Have His Priorities Wrong? (p. 40)

Have class members consider the criteria they use to establish priorities. Then ask: Which pleas for assistance get your attention first? Why do people tend to help friends, neighbors, and church members before reaching out to strangers? What are the congregation's priorities? What is the value in setting priorities when emergency situations are sure to arise?

But Even Dogs Eat the Crumbs (p. 40)

Often times I do not have a snappy reply to a comment, especially to an insult. Yet, despite her desperate need, the Syrophenician woman had an answer for Jesus. Even more amazing is that she apparently didn't hesitate to say exactly what she thought even though she needed Jesus' help.

In today's world people may hesitate to "tell it like it is" for fear of offending someone, especially if that person has control over any part of their lives. Ask class members to ponder silently situations in their lives about which they need to be more direct and/or tenacious.

"The Demon Has Left Your Daughter" (p. 40)

The student book suggests that Jesus was more receptive to the woman's needs when he heard why she was being so persistent. What does his response say about the love we have for others? About the value of intercessory prayer? Why should we be persistent in expressing our prayer concerns to God when we don't always get the hoped for answer?

A Moment of Saving Grace (p. 41)

The stories of Jesus' healings can be difficult for some people. We may ask why our loved one wasn't healed. Did we lack the faith? The persistence? These are tough questions to which this writer does not have the answer. If such questions arise, deal with them openly and honestly as a group, supporting one another.

"Grace Upon Grace" (p. 41)

Ask a volunteer to read the second paragraph of this section in the student book. Then invite comments about the definition of grace. How does your definition of grace vary from the one provided? How can you be more receptive to the gift of grace? How will you offer grace to others?

Closing

Give each person an index card. Suggest he or she write down a concern about which they have been praying. Encourage them to pray with the tenacity of the Syrophenician woman. In a couple of weeks, follow up by inviting class members to share the answer to their prayers. Remember that not all prayers are answered that quickly.

Close the class time with a prayer for all those who need rest and renewal.

Remind class members about any ongoing projects. Ask for a volunteer to contact recent visitors and those who have been absent.

Opting Out!

Lesson Aim: (1) To delve into Mark’s version of a rich person’s encounter with Jesus; (2) to recognize that we must wholeheartedly focus on God, not allowing anything else to take priority; and (3) to give our lives and possessions completely to God.

Background Scripture: Mark 10:17-31; **Scripture Selection:** Mark 10:17-31

Suggestions for Worship: *Opening Sentences:* Romans 5:1-5. *Hymns:* “Come, Thou Fount,” “This Is My Father’s World” “True-hearted, Whole-hearted.” *Devotional Reading:* Proverbs 11:1-7.

Advance Preparation

Study the Background Scripture and the comments in the student book early in the week; re-read them closer to the time you will teach.

Create additional interest in the learning area by displaying items commonly associated with wealth such as money (foil wrapped chocolate “coins”), purple cloth, jewels (costume jewelry), etc.

Welcome/Introduction (p. 43)

Welcome each person, calling him or her by name. Introduce any visitors and make every effort to integrate them into the class.

Provide an opportunity for any announcements or class business. Invite people to share prayer concerns and praises. Then ask a volunteer to open the class time with prayer.

Call attention to the items you displayed. Ask class members to consider how the church sometimes views people who are wealthy. Why? How do you view such people? Why?

The rich man who approached Jesus in today’s Scripture Selection seemed to have everything—position, money, authority, and a serious religious faith. Yet, he had a gnawing concern about his worthiness to receive eternal life.

How often do you think of the afterlife? What do you imagine your relationship with God will be like? When do you hear the question of heaven addressed? What do your favorite hymns about heaven teach? Keep in mind that this lesson is not about heaven but about eternal life. What do you think the difference may be?

God Alone Is Good (p. 43)

Jesus was quick to set the record straight when the man addressed him as “good.” As the student book states, “Of course Jesus was good, but claiming ‘goodness’ for himself is the first step down the wrong road.” God alone is good.

Many times we describe people as being good. In fact, we may confuse “being good” or living a “good” life with being a Christian. Suggest that class members think of instances when they have referred to someone as being good. Then ask: How might you rephrase your comments to reflect your intended meaning more accurately?

Keeping the Commandments (pp. 43-44)

In church we teach children the Ten Commandments at an early age. This man was very familiar with the Judaic law, indicating that he had kept it since he was very young. As a Jew, he probably also followed the strict pharisaic law, which was very detailed and complicated.

Consider with the students: Why is it important to keep the Law? What is the difference between keeping the Law and living the Law? Why was Jesus trying to help people see the difference?

More Was Needed (p. 44)

We know that eternal life is possible only by grace through faith. Yet, Jesus told the young man that despite his strict adherence to the Law and all he had achieved, he needed to do more to have eternal life. What do you think Jesus was trying to teach the young man and those who were listening? How do you reconcile Jesus' teaching with our understanding that salvation is a free gift from God?

The Young Man's Problem (pp. 44-45)

Jesus saw great potential in the young man. He already followed God's teachings and had sought out Jesus because he sensed that he was missing a key ingredient in his faith. However, he was not prepared for what Jesus told him to do. When Jesus told the rich young man to sell what he owned and give the money to the poor, the man was "shocked." Grieving, he left Jesus, for "he had many possessions." Had it not been for this condition, I think he would have gladly followed Jesus.

That command has been a deal-breaker for many people. How far would you be willing to go in divesting yourself of all worldly goods in order to follow Jesus? How do you need to re-focus your priorities so that your possessions do not control your actions?

Suspect Commitment (pp. 45-46)

Since Jesus did not require all of his followers to give up their possessions, it causes one to wonder if he was testing the rich young man's commitment to Jesus' mission. The man's reaction revealed his life's real goal, which wasn't the kingdom of heaven. Obviously the man felt a void in his life. Jesus told him what he needed to do to fill that void, but the man said, "Thanks, but no thanks."

Submitting our lives to God may sound simple, but reality is often much different! Suggest class members reflect on these questions. What areas of your life do you have trouble submitting to God? When we commit our lives to Christ, how much of our earthly possessions are we committing to God? Why does the thought of giving ten percent to the work of Christ in the world seem overwhelming to some people? If everyone followed this guideline, how would it change the ability of the church to serve in the world? If anyone wants to share, provide an opportunity for doing so.

Eye of the Needle (p. 46)

Many Christians have been blessed with great wealth and many possessions. What has enabled them to be followers of Jesus? This writer thinks that their attitude has made the difference. Giving generously without wanting recognition is one example of committing your wealth to God. Encourage class members to identify other ways people commit their wealth and possessions to God. How can your congregation help its members to experience the joy of giving? How can it also help those who may be trying to "buy their way into God's good graces"?

Continue by talking about the church's responsibility in using its resources. While we use our church buildings for many things, are we truly committing our resources to God if we must sacrifice ministries in order to support the building? Your congregation is probably working on the budget for 2010 now. How are such decisions made? What areas might need to be adjusted?

Closing

Close with a prayer of thanks for the resources God has made available to you and your congregation. Ask for God's guidance in using those resources as you endeavor to submit to God's will.

A Holy People

Lesson Aim: (1) To explore the teachings on holiness found in 1 Peter 1; (2) to identify examples of holy living within the congregation; (3) to find ways to be holy in personal conduct.

Background Scripture: 1 Peter 1; **Scripture Selection:** 1 Peter 1:13-25

Suggestions for Worship: *Opening Sentences:* James 2:14-18. *Hymns:* “Open My Eyes That I May See,” “Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee,” “Beneath the Cross of Jesus.” *Devotional Reading:* Deuteronomy 7:6-11.

Advance Preparation

We now move to five lessons from the two epistles of Peter. Read these two short letters as you begin your study. Scholars disagree as to the authorship of these epistles. However, for our purposes we will work on the assumption that Peter, the apostle, wrote both letters.

If you plan to use the art activity, provide items such as clay, aluminum foil, wire, etc. that can be shaped.

Welcome/Introduction (p. 48)

Greet people as they arrive. Be especially attentive to any members who have been absent recently and to any visitors. Take a few minutes to share prayer concerns and news of special events or activities coming up in the church. Begin with a few moments in silent prayer.

As a way of introducing this lesson, share a little information about Peter. He was one of the first disciples Jesus called. He was not educated and even denied knowing Jesus. But Jesus saw Peter’s potential and knew that he would be the rock on which the church was built.

A Call to Holy Living (pp. 48-49)

Through the centuries the church has made the subject of “holiness” unnecessarily complicated. With the passing of time, customs, habits, and moral standards have changed. But always the church has been inclined to think of holiness as pious conduct. This lesson is a serious effort to broaden that idea.

Peter appeals to the young churches to stand fast in the face of severe tests of their commitment to Christ, to rededicate themselves to holy living. What is holy living? How can we even come close to holy living?

Holiness as Sinlessness (p. 49)

Remind the students of last week’s lesson about the rich young man. He followed the laws, but that didn’t make him holy. When we get caught up in the expectations listed in the student book, it can become an issue of devoutness. While devoutness can be helpful, it can never make a person holy.

Class members will likely remember the “sinful conduct” items listed in the student book. How have things changed during your lifetime? How has the change impacted people’s attitudes about Christians? About the church?

Positive Behavior (p. 49)

Holiness is really not about us at all; it is about those we are trying to help. The holiness to which we should aspire has to do with living a Christ-like life. In the end, holiness has little to do with whether we drink, smoke, or gamble. It has everything to do with being willing to reach out, as Jesus did, to those who need our help. What is to be gained by avoiding the common vices of the world? How is our attempt to reach out affected by impious living? How do you react to the idea of living a holy life? Why? What did Peter hope would be the outcome of holy living among the believers?

Ask students to think of someone whom they feel exemplifies what it means to live a holy life. Then suggest

they identify the characteristics they associate with this person. How many of those characteristics are negative? How many focus on the person's positive actions? What do your findings say about living a holy life?

Moral Instruction (pp. 49-50)

People may associate moral living with holiness; while the two are intertwined, they are not interchangeable. Again the story of the rich young man applies. He was living a moral life, but not a holy one.

It seems that moral instruction is lacking in our society. Talk about the following with the students: Whose responsibility is it to teach morals? Why? What happens if such instruction does not take place? How can (or should) the church be involved in this process? What is your role as a Christian?

Redeemed by the Blood of Christ (p. 50)

For those people who have grown up in the church, living by a strong moral code, it can sometimes be difficult to see the need for the redemption of Christ. Yet without Christ, we will remain enslaved to sin, whether we realize it or not. What does it mean to be enslaved to sin? We must reach the point of understanding that our actions are not nor ever will be enough. How can you help others to see the truth of this message?

Resurrection Hope (p. 50)

When Jesus died, his followers were devastated and confused. Imagine their reactions when God raised Jesus from the dead. Even though Jesus' followers still recognized his physical body, he was a new creation. Through Christ the same promise is available to all who believe and accept God's grace.

Invite class members to think about what it means to be born anew, a new creation in Christ. Suggest they share with one or two other people how their lives changed and have continued to change as they experienced Christ. A creation continues to be shaped and molded for God's purposes.

Option: Provide materials that students can use to create something that will reflect what God, through Jesus Christ, has and is doing in their lives. Invite people to share their creations.

A Hymn of Praise (pp. 50-51)

Peter was a little slow to understand Jesus' mission and to accept his part in it, but once he put the pieces together, there was no stopping him! He had to accept that God could use him despite his failings. This knowledge empowered Peter and was a source of wonder, love, and praise.

Invite students to consider the kinds of things that may cause us to feel separated from God. How can we become more attuned to what God has done and is doing in and through us?

Holy Because We Have Been Redeemed (p. 51)

Ask a volunteer to read the last paragraph of page 51 in the student book. What does it mean to "prepare your minds for action"? Encourage class members to identify (silently) one or more areas of their life where they need to learn self-discipline. Remind them that God will help them to exercise that discipline, and that God can use them despite their failings.

Closing

Pray together, seeking God's will for the class and for the congregation. Give thanks for the gifts of grace and redemption that allow us to experience holy living.

A Chosen People

Lesson Aim: (1) To explore Peter’s teachings on the duties and obligations of Christians; (2) to examine what “being chosen” means; (3) to discover opportunities to live out our “chosenness” by proclaiming God’s amazing deeds to others.

Background Scripture: 1 Peter 2:1-17; **Scripture Selection:** 1 Peter 2:1-10

Suggestions for Worship: *Opening Sentences:* Psalm 108:1-4. *Hymns:* “I’ve Got Peace like a River,” “We Gather Together,” “Now Thank We All Our God.” *Devotional Reading:* Deuteronomy 10:10-15.

Advance Preparation

Read 1 Peter 1–2. Remember that, when written, this letter had no chapter divisions.

Study the comments in the student book, referring to a commentary and other resources as needed.

Set up two displays in the learning area. Include items related to a baby in one display and place a couple of large stones or pictures of corner stones in the other.

Secure small, smooth stones, one per class member (plus extras for visitors).

Welcome/Introduction (p. 53)

As class members assemble, call their attention to the display area. If they have not read the student lesson, they may wonder about the connection between these items!

Welcome everyone, specifically introducing visitors. If a class member is not already responsible for contacting visitors, talk with someone after class about doing so. Follow your normal opening routine, including a time of intercessory prayer.

Explain that this lesson continues the study of First Peter that was begun last week. Call attention to the word *therefore* in the first verse of the Scripture Selection. Peter is referring to what he has already written. In other words, Peter is saying, “Because of what I have just told you, you should take this action.” His point is simply this: Yes, we have been born anew and, therefore, have this genuine, mutual love for others. Or do we? If we do, our love will not be tainted by recognizable sin. What are the five elements that could affect the purity of our love? Talk about one or more of those elements. How do they hurt people who think we love them?

A Work in Progress (pp. 53-54)

The process of attaining spiritual maturity resembles what happens in the life of a newborn child. “Pure, spiritual milk,” which is generally interpreted as meaning the word of God, provides nourishment and strength for our growth as Christians. As a baby thirsts for milk, so should we thirst for the word of God. How do you satisfy that thirst? What would enable you to gain more nourishment from God’s word? How will you address this need?

Even the most spiritually mature among us is a work in progress. We all have much growing yet to do. From what sources do you receive spiritual nurture and the challenge of growth? How do you nurture others in the faith? What opportunities does your congregation offer for spiritual growth? What have you found helpful in your own spiritual growth?

A Church Composed of “Living Stones” (p. 54)

We are building blocks in the kingdom of God—“living stones.” The metaphor of the church as built of living stones is a reminder to us that the church is not a building—ever. It is people. We are among the “stones” that form the Christian community around the world today. Why do you think the author may have chosen that image? Who selects the stones with which your church is built? How can you strengthen any stones that

have begun to weaken? How can a faulty stone damage a congregation? Strengthen a congregation? In dealing with this type of situation, what must people keep in mind?

Spiritual Growth (pp. 54-55)

When people experience difficult times together, it often strengthens the bond between them. They learn to trust and rely on one another. As the early Christians endured rejection and persecution, they learned to rely on God. This time of extreme trial cemented their resolve and helped to form them into a lasting group—now known as Christians.

Encourage discussion by asking: How do difficult times affect you? In looking back, how did such situations strengthen you? What did you learn from the experience?

Two Questions (pp. 55-56)

During my high school days, I knew a boy who was very intelligent, yet he withstood the bullying of his peers in an effort to be accepted. None of the girls were particularly interested in dating him. However, girls from other schools thought he was very good looking. We rejected him because he didn't fit the popular mold.

How often do you dismiss someone because you do not see their gifts and abilities? Because they aren't like you? What does your church do to identify and use the gifts of its members?

As a class, take an honest look at your congregation. How do the ministries of the church fit with its mission? How do you involve people in the work of the church?

Priests One and All (p. 56)

Talk together about the duties and responsibilities of a priest. Invite learners to consider what it means to be Christ's priest. Use the questions at the end of this section in the student book for further discussion.

Identify ways we can bear one another's burdens. If your class or congregation is interested in taking the level of serving others to a deeper level, check out Stephen Ministries. If you are not familiar with the program, visit <http://www.stephenministries.org/> for additional information.

A Chosen Race, a Royal Priesthood, a Holy Nation (pp. 56-57)

Cite Peter's use of the word *chosen* in verse 9. Think together about those marvelous images. Across the Mediterranean in 80 B.C., there were a handful of tiny Christian communities meeting to celebrate their new life in Christ. At the moment they were not considered of any great political importance. God saw the believers otherwise, and so did Peter.

What does it mean to be chosen? How do you feel when you are chosen? Why do you think Peter used these images in communicating to the new groups of believers?

As God's people, for what have we been chosen? What difference does the knowledge that you are God's chosen people make in your life?

Closing

Pray, giving thanks for the faithful lives of Christians in every generation. Ask for courage to be solid "living stones" in your community and the world.

Give each person one of the small, smooth stones as a reminder that we are all "living stones."

A Suffering People

Lesson Aim: (1) To open up Peter's teachings about how Christians ought to respond when they suffer for the sake of the gospel; (2) to experience suffering as part of Christian living; (3) to stand in solidarity with and support those who are suffering for the sake of the gospel.

Background Scripture: 1 Peter 4; **Scripture Selection:** 1 Peter 4:12-19

Suggestions for Worship: *Opening Sentences:* Psalm 139:1-6. *Hymns:* "Lead on, O King Eternal," "O for a Closer Walk with God," "Take My Life." *Devotional Reading:* 1 Corinthians 12:20-26.

Advance Preparation

Read the first three chapters of 1 Peter. Then read chapter 4, consulting additional resources to broaden your understanding.

Welcome/Introduction (p. 59)

As class participants assemble, greet each person and introduce any visitors. Ask for prayer concerns for family, friends, and members of the church. Begin the class with prayer.

We all experience times of suffering. While it may seem that some have more than their share of difficult times, we all have them. Peter's original audience was early Christians who were enduring extreme persecution. In some areas of the world, Christians are still persecuted. In fact, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church has members who are ministering in areas that are so dangerous that their photos and full names are not distributed. However, most of us will probably not experience that degree of suffering as a result of our faith. Suggest class members identify times and places where they (or others) could encounter hatred, ridicule, etc. because they are Christian. What are some possible ways of dealing with those situations? Which ones are constructive?

The lesson will also focus on dealing with common problems from a faith perspective. Why is it that some people seem able to move beyond their suffering and others become mired in it? What enables some people to remain positive and joyful despite their problems? What do our reactions say to those who are not Christians?

A Call to Righteous Living (pp. 59-60)

The first eleven verses of chapter 4 are a call to righteous living. Many in the Greco-Roman culture accepted the things mentioned in verse 3 as a normal part of life. Peter admits that those to whom he is writing would encounter long-time friends who would be surprised that they would no longer join them in "excesses of dissipation" (4:4). What excesses are often a problem today?

Not many people lose friends because they join a church, but adjusting one's lifestyle to live as Christ would have us to might! Many adult Christians are unprepared to face suffering as a result of their commitment to a godly lifestyle. Peter asks us to believe that there is a Christian lifestyle in which there is no place for godlessness. Call attention to the quote from *The Interpreter's Bible* included in this section of the student book. Invite comments from class members.

Adults may experience unexpected challenges in their effort to behave as Christians. Some employers ask conduct of their employees that is neither ethical, moral, nor spiritual. Peter encourages us to hold fast to the conviction that suffering for godly principles is reason enough to praise God. That might be hard to do if a person has just been fired for caring more for the customer than for the company's bottom line. What about the fate of whistle blowers in government? What happens to those who raise questions about the conduct of leaders in the church? In other arenas of public life? How does a Christian deal with those who are abusive?

Those who remain mired in sin? It's easy to say that we love those people, but we need to be careful that we don't become self-righteous.

Your Friends Will Be Amazed (p. 60)

Living a Christian life is difficult enough, but to lose friends and possibly even family members, makes it doubly hard. Many people are ostracized by their families when they become Christian. A young man in the Chinese Cumberland Presbyterian Church in San Francisco related such an experience. Yet, he was joyful in his faith.

Ask class members, if they are comfortable doing so, to share any personal experiences of their faith causing them to be ostracized by friends or family.

Suffering as the Cost of Love (pp. 60-61)

Be prepared to share an example of someone who has suffered as the cost of love. German-born Dietrich Bonhoeffer is one possibility. When he announced his intention to study theology, Bonhoeffer's older brother told him not to waste his life in such a "poor, feeble, boring, petty, bourgeois institution as the Church." Bonhoeffer lived in Germany during the rise of the Nazi regime. Even though he was safely out of Germany, he returned to try to make a difference. He talked against what was being done to the Jews and worked with the resistance efforts. The "approved" church in Germany was controlled by the government, so Bonhoeffer trained ministers and encouraged congregations that were operating illegally. He was eventually imprisoned and hanged. Yet, even while in prison he ministered to other prisoners. A witness at Bonhoeffer's execution told of his fervent prayer as he was being taken for execution. Bonhoeffer gave his life because of his belief.

Suffering as a "Fiery Ordeal" (pp. 61-62)

In 4:12, Peter elevates the danger of suffering to "a fiery ordeal." What kind of action called for today in the church or politics might result in extreme suffering? For sure, such issues as same sex marriage, abortion, or female clergy may create serious divisions in a congregation, school, or workplace. How would you cope if your attitude on such issues entailed suffering?

Be Prepared (pp. 62-63)

Talk about why people seem to think that living a godly life will bring them health, wealth, and happiness. God did not promise such a life; Jesus' life certainly did not set this example. How can we respond to people who become discouraged when they encounter difficulties? When someone feels as if God has forgotten about him or her?

Sufferings of Age (p. 63)

Ask class members to share how they cope with the ordeals growing older brings, whether for themselves or for loved ones. Older Christians go through "fiery ordeals" in matters of health. Peter wants to be certain that we all understand that such things are not some form of punishment from God!

How does your congregation include older members in its ministry? How do you minister to those who are suffering? Consider starting some additional programs, such as a day care center for adults, if community resources are not available.

Closing

Ask God for courage to be faithful in confronting suffering for your faith. Give thanks for those who have suffered for their faith, enabling the spread of Christianity.

A Faithful People

Lesson Aim: (1) To unpack Peter’s teachings about the faith of a godly person; (2) to recognize the relationship between a deeply rooted faith and godly living; (3) to find and pursue ways to manifest goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection, and love in our lives.

Background Scripture: 2 Peter 1:3-15; **Scripture Selection:** 2 Peter 1:3-15

Suggestions for Worship: *Opening Sentences:* 1 Peter 5:6-11. *Hymns:* “O God, Our Help in Ages Past,” “Now Thank We All Our God,” “We Gather Together.” *Devotional Reading:* Luke 19:12-26.

Advance Preparation

Many years had passed after the writing of 1 Peter. Seeing a need to remind the churches again of the cost to being a faithful people, Peter wrote another letter. We know it as 2 Peter. Read that letter, and then read the comments in the student book.

Have available newsprint and marker or an erasable board and markers or chalk.

Today is the Sunday before Thanksgiving. What special community or congregational events will take place this week? What projects is your class supporting? Highlight the events and projects, encouraging class members to participate in both.

Welcome/Introduction (p. 65)

Greet class participants warmly as they arrive. Issue a special welcome to visitors and integrate them into the class. Take time for class business and announcements. Invite people to name prayer requests and praises. Ask for updates about people for whom the group has been praying.

Explain that this lesson will deal with Peter’s second letter. Peter was concerned that as new generations of followers came into the church they would be confused by false teachings. Peter knew that the best solution to this concern was to help the people strengthen their faith and encourage them to follow the core values around which the church was established.

Peter listed seven qualities that he felt were essential to a growing faith. List these qualities (goodness, knowledge, self-control, endurance, godliness, mutual affection, and love) on an erasable board or newsprint. Review the list throughout the lesson.

Support Your Faith with Goodness (pp. 65-66)

Deeply religious groups are at war today, and their brutality makes a mockery of their faith. There is nothing new about that. The Bible has much to say about a people who seemed to believe that a good religious reason justified killing people. Peter says that faith without goodness is not Christian faith. Christian faith has at its heart a love for God, self, family, neighbors, and enemies, which is the “goodness” of our faith. How do you explain the loss of some of that goodness along the way? What will enable goodness to be restored to our nation? The world?

Believers extend their beliefs through their actions. We support our faith with goodness—or it isn’t faith at all. Goodness is helpfulness. It is walking the same road and doing the same things that occupied the attention of Jesus. Goodness is not all that mysterious. You see a need and meet it to the best of your ability. Consider with class members: What needs in your church or community does goodness require you to address? How will you make a difference? How is your church setting an example of goodness?

Add Knowledge to Goodness (pp. 66-67)

We have faith and we are trying to practice goodness. What else is there? Well, Peter knew that it was im-

portant for people to understand God's nature. The surest way for that understanding to happen is through knowledge. *Knowledge* means wisdom as well as a mastery of facts.

Invite class members to recall a time when they acted on incomplete or incorrect information. What happened as a result of your actions? How did your lack of knowledge impact your ability to practice goodness?

Sometimes even when we have all the facts, we do not have the experience to interpret or utilize them in the best way. Ask class members to think of situations when this has happened. For instance, the welfare system in the United States was designed to help people, but those who implemented it did not consider the long-term effects on society. The original expression of goodness has resulted in some recipients' failure to see the need to help themselves. We must bring knowledge to our goodness if we are to be truly helpful. Why is applying wisdom to our desire to be helpful often difficult?

To Knowledge Add Self-Control (p. 67)

Self-control is the mastery of the natural appetites. Have class members suggest some of our natural appetites. As humans, we are prone to indulgences of all types. However, as we grow in our faith, we develop the self-discipline necessary to keep us from "falling back into the old sins of the past." Talk about how a person's ability to use self-control can be a witness to others.

Encourage discussion by asking: How does your church help foster self-control among its members? In what areas of your life do you most need to exercise self-control? How will you address those areas of need?

A String of Pearls (pp. 67-68)

Review the list of qualities made at the beginning of the lesson. You have dealt with three of those in some detail. Using this section in the student book, share information about the remaining four qualities.

Someone suggested that in building a fire you need kindling and logs. Kindling flames quickly and is very helpful in starting a fire. The logs flame more slowly but provide warmth. The kindling is soon gone, but logs burn for a long time. In the church we have kindling and logs people. Some members are very impressive at first and do much good for a short time. But Peter suggests that the church needs logs that endure. Who in your faith experience best represents endurance? How does endurance affect your ability to be godly? How does your congregation exemplify the seven characteristics Peter listed?

Peter's Conclusion (p. 68)

Through this letter, Peter continues to help us keep our lives aligned to God's teachings. He knew the blessings of a faithful life and wanted to ensure that others would experience them as well. Who are some faithful people who left a legacy to you? How did they pass it along to you? What was it? What have you done with it? What are you passing on to new generations of believers? What legacy will you leave?

Closing

There are only three chapters in Second Peter; encourage students to read those chapters before the next session. Suggest that they consider two questions in their reading: What do you find most interesting in this letter? What do find most helpful?

Close with a prayer of thanks for Peter and the legacy of faithfulness he left.

A Hopeful People

Lesson Aim: (1) To delve into Peter’s encouraging teachings concerning the promise of Christ’s return; (2) to discern areas in our lives where we need encouragement; and (3) to devise and carry out a plan to give encouragement to those who are facing difficulties.

Background Scripture: 2 Peter 3; **Scripture Selection:** 2 Peter 3:1-13

Suggestions for Worship: *Opening Sentences:* 1 John 4:13-16. *Hymns:* “I Love Thy Kingdom, Lord,” “My Faith Looks Up to Thee,” “Love Lifted Me.” *Devotional Reading:* Psalm 42.

Advance Preparation

Read the Scripture Selection. Quietly reflect on the passage. Consult a commentary and do some reading in other sources to get a broader understanding of the passage.

As you read the lesson in the student book, note sections that you want to incorporate into your teaching.

It would be easy to let this lesson become one on speculation about the end times. Keep it focused on the hope that we have through Christ.

Today is the Sunday after Thanksgiving, so some regular attendees may be absent, and you may have several visitors. Plan accordingly.

Welcome/Introduction (p. 70)

Be at the entrance to your meeting area to welcome students as they arrive. Introduce any visitors and strive to help them feel like part of the class. Allow time for normal class routines. Then lead in a time of prayer, inviting people to add prayer concerns.

Invite students to name things that cause them to have hope. Point out that not all people will find hope in the same things. Explain that this is the situation in which Peter found himself. He wrote to offer encouragement and to give the new believers hope that Jesus truly would come again.

In the Last Days—Scoffers (pp. 70-71)

Remind students that the early Christians thought Jesus’ return was imminent. More than fifty years had passed and there was no indication of his return. One can see how they could have become discouraged and begun to doubt. Yet Peter doesn’t seem to have a problem with those who doubted, but with those who mocked them. The mockers had given up their faith and were living lustful lives.

Invite comments from class members about the second coming of Jesus. What would you do if you knew that Jesus was returning tomorrow? How (if at all) does it affect your perception of the second coming when you consider that Jesus is with us through the presence of the Holy Spirit?

God Is Eternal and Omnipotent (pp. 71-72)

As the centuries passed without the return of Christ, the doctrine of the second coming remained strong in the church. In fact, it may be stronger now than in recent centuries. Why do you think this is the case? Why do you think Christ has not yet returned? Peter suggests two reasons: God does not relate to time as we do and God’s reasons are beyond human understanding.

God Is Merciful (p. 72)

Ask a volunteer to read aloud this section in the student book. Then ask: Why do you think God continues to give humans the opportunity to come to God? How does this idea echo the events in the first lessons of this quarter?

What to do While Waiting (p. 72)

Earlier in this lesson the question was posed as to what you would do if you expected Jesus' return the next day. We have a responsibility to share God's love and mercy with others. With whom are you sharing God's love and mercy? How are you helping to prepare people for Christ's eventual return? We are to live lives of godliness and holiness. What changes do you need to make in your life?

Signs of His Coming (pp. 72-73)

Undoubtedly class members will have heard numerous predictions as to the time and place of Christ's return. Some of the predictions may seem foolish or ridiculous to those not part of that group. Yet those people believe so strongly that they may go to extremes (such as quitting their jobs, selling their homes, giving away pets, etc.) to prepare.

A few years ago, a group of people proclaimed that they knew when Jesus was going to return. Certain that their life on the earth would end at that time, they decided to live beyond their means for the time they had left. They charged many expensive items, reasoning that they wouldn't be around to pay for them.

As the student book states, those people who are convinced that they know when Christ will return have had to deal with disappointment. What impact do such predictions have on unbelievers? Believers? How do you react when someone approaches you with an evangelical tract, proclaiming that the end is near? What is your opinion of materials that attempt to tell what will happen at the end (such as the *Left Behind* series)?

Horror Is Not Peter's Last Word (p. 73)

When I know that something special is approaching, planning is a significant part of my preparations. If I'm going on a trip, I determine where I'm going, when to depart/return, the route to take, what items to pack, etc. If I'm going to a potluck at church, I decide ahead of time what to take so that I know which items to purchase at the store and how far in advance I need to make the food. As Christians, we need to be prepared for Christ's return, no matter when it happens. How will you prepare?

Even though Peter gives us a glimpse of what awaits those who do not come to know Christ, he also gives us hope. There will be new heavens and a new earth. We don't know what those will be like, but we have God's promise that the heavens and earth will continue in some form. How does this promise give you hope?

The student book challenges us to help make the present earth more like heaven while we wait for the fulfillment of God's promise. Invite class members to generate a list of ideas as to how they can individually and corporately work toward this goal. Today is the first Sunday of Advent. What an appropriate time to renew your efforts to improve the world around us.

Closing

Close with a prayer of thanksgiving for the promise of Christ's second coming and for the daily blessing of the Holy Spirit in your lives.

If your class will be having a special fellowship time or supporting a project during Advent, remind class members of those plans.

Next week the class will begin a study of Christ as the fulfillment of God's promises. Be sure class members have copies of the student book for the new quarter as they leave.

Evaluation

Help to improve the usefulness of this leader's guide by answering the following questions and returning this form, along with your comments and suggestions, to the address listed on the reverse side of this page.

To what extent was this leader's guide helpful to you?

(Circle the appropriate number. "1" = Not at All and "7" = Extremely.)

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2

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6

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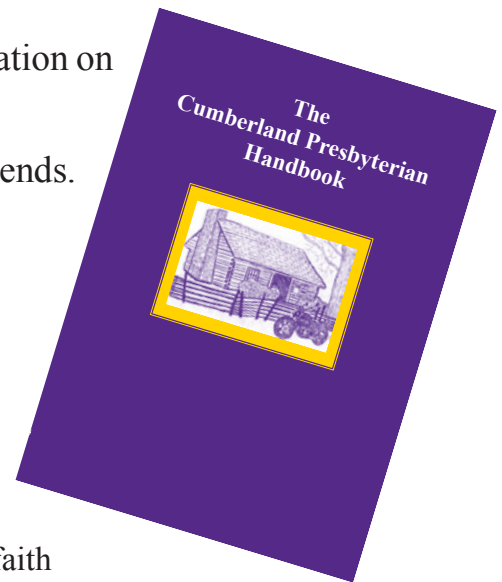
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