

2015 Junior Youth Week of Prayer

by Debbonnaire Kovacs



God Wants You Back



Try the 15-Minute Rule.

For every 15 minutes of preaching/teaching, include an energy-burning activity or game. Maybe the activity illustrates a point, or it could be completely random. A strategically placed activity might break your flow, but it greatly enhances a junior youth's ability to stay mentality engaged.

www.gcyyouthministries.org

for activity ideas

Home Again!

God Wants You Back

by Debbonnaire Kovacs

2015

JUNIOR YOUTH WEEK OF PRAYER SERMONS

YOUTH MINISTRIES DEPARTMENT
GENERAL CONFERENCE OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS®
AUGUST 2014

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Debbonnaire Kovacs



Debbonnaire Kovacs has been writing since she was a small child and sold her first story to *Guide* magazine (known in those days as *Junior Guide*) when she was eleven years old. When she was fourteen, she was “tricked” (when she missed Sabbath School because she was sick) into doing a mini sermon for a large youth convention, and thought she would die! But she didn’t, so she wrote a sermon herself for a youth Week of Prayer at Mount Vernon Academy when she was seventeen. She lived through that, too!

Today she is a full-time author and speaker who has published 19 books including the first, second, fifth, and sixth grade Bible textbooks used in Adventist schools in North America, and over 500 stories and articles, including lots of stories for *Primary Treasure*. She speaks at camp meetings, women’s retreats, and other events, and is hardly ever afraid anymore. Praise God! Mrs. Kovacs strongly encourages young people to follow their dreams, and not wait until they are grown up to do something God is calling them to do.

She lives on a mini farm in Berea, KY, with milk goats, chickens, gardens, and orchards, and is also a fiber artisan who does spinning, weaving, lacemaking, and many other textile arts. *Gaela’s Gardens*, which has a theme of forgiveness and reconciliation, is her first novel.

About the book:

Can two loners hiding from troubled pasts find peace in a garden named Eden’s Gate?

Gaela Clancy, head caretaker at a garden estate, is an intensely private person with secrets she would rather forget. So when a scruffy loner with haunted eyes shows up at Eden’s Gate, she runs from the memories he awakens. But, recognizing the need in his eyes, she begins to pray for him and a fragile friendship sprouts. The more she gets to know this bitter outcast, who calls himself Caine and turns out to have an incredible musical talent, the more she realizes he, too, hides a painful past.

Can Caine and Gaela learn to trust again? Is it possible that the Holy Spirit, hard work and the help of unlikely friends will overcome all obstacles? Maybe, just maybe, Eden’s Gate can become a sanctuary for those whom life has cast aside.

Available at CreateSpace.com, amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com. Also available for Kindle, Nook, or Kobo.

HOME AGAIN! GOD WANTS YOU BACK

READ THIS FIRST

Start Your Planning Now. We know that leadership sometimes changes at the end of the year, but please, if you will no longer be the AY leader next year, do not let that stop you from planning for this special week. Start your planning, develop your target, get your team together, and make sure your pastor is a part of that team.

Global Youth Day Information. Get information on the Global Youth Day project. This day will be the launch of the Youth Week of Prayer. Please visit our website, www.gcyyouthministries.org, or contact your local youth director to find out how you can participate.

Commit Your Prayer Warriors. Get a team of adults together who will commit to praying for you and your ministry on a regular basis. Make sure this is a group with whom you can confidentially share both your personal and ministry prayer needs.

Choose a Theme Song. Involve your youth choir. If your church does not have a youth choir, this is the perfect time to get one started. Pick out songs that you all like and which fit the topic of each evening, or choose a song for the entire week.

Start a Prayer Journal. Nothing is greater for your personal spiritual growth than time spent in prayer. Your youth group will grow as you grow. Prayer journaling will help you encounter God in new and exciting ways. You will be able to “track” your walk with God as you go back and review answered prayers and see how He has lead you step by step each day. New, fresh ideas will come to mind as you spend time in His presence journaling your prayers. You can find many ideas online on starting and keeping a prayer journal. Just go to *www.google.com* and type in the words “starting a prayer journal.”

Form a Week of Prayer Development/Review Team.

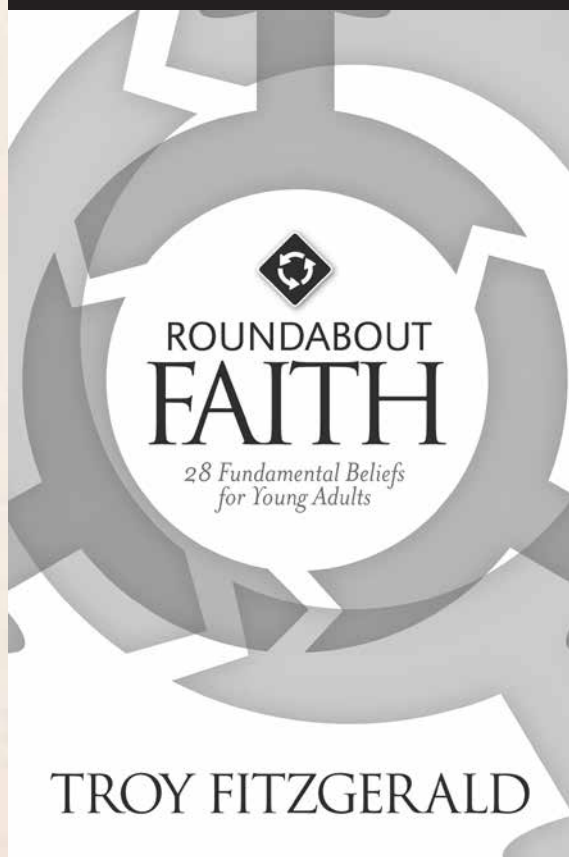
Depending on the size of your church, this group can be four to eight persons who will go through all eight readings with you. Include on your team only interested and committed young adults and youth ministry leaders (Pathfinder, Sabbath School, etc., your pastor/s); this is important because it gives ownership to the entire group, rather than just you and your assistant. Ask the group to commit to meeting for at least three weeks—at least one week for four lessons, and an extra week to wrap things up. Be sure to identify the goal and direction you want to go, preferably at the first meeting, and choose a young person to speak for each day.

Integrate Global Youth Day (GYD) into Your Week of Prayer Plans.

Ideally, GYD should be a time to teach youth how to sacrificially give of themselves by providing opportunities in the church and the community. If you are a small youth group and do not have the resources to arrange a community-based GYD event, you can use this opportunity to break down denominational barriers in the area by partnering with and pooling resources and ideas with other youth groups from other churches in your area.

AVAILABLE

@www.adventsource.org



ROUNDABOUT FAITH

is a journey through 28 fundamental beliefs for young adults. Each chapter is framed in a format that celebrates the young adult search for meaning while challenging them to connect what they believe to how they live. In the same way that a roundabout flows in one direction around a center point, each lesson urges participants to yield their mind to Christ and merge their life with the word of God. This study can be used for personal study as well as with small groups.

INTRODUCTION

by Jonatán Tejel

You have in your hands the lessons for the 2014 Junior Youth Week of Prayer. This year our focus is on how much God wants us back. In these pages you'll find some episodes from the Gospel you may already know, but this week we will discover something vital: God wants you back!

I'm sure that you know the story of the *Prodigal Son*. He leaves home with the money from his inheritance and spends all of it on wild living. When he realizes that he has made a big mistake, he decides to go back home to his father.

The father knows that his younger son will fail—but he hopes that one day his son will return. He has left his father's home, but not his father's heart.

This son is a failure, but the father longs for his son. He waits for him. Others might have told the father that he should not have done such a thing. Still, the father waits for him. The son will return one day, he hopes. Perhaps as a beggar. Maybe as a failure... still, the father waits. Every day he runs out of the house to see if he is coming back. And finally one day He sees him from a distance—and He recognizes him, with torn clothes, dirty face, and a stinky smell. What a terrible image of his son.

However, the father doesn't say, "I knew this would happen to you. Now go take a bath, get a shave and then we'll talk." He accepts him where he is and walks him back home. And if that is not crazy enough, He organizes a big celebration for the son that caused him trouble and despair... This is something that really amazes me. No matter how difficult your situation is in life, no matter how far you have gone from the father, He is waiting for you: He Wants You Back.

From the beginning of this terrible conflict we are living in, up to the end of it, there is one thing that has never changed: The Father is out there, outside of the house, on the road... waiting for you to come back.

HOME AGAIN! GOD WANTS YOU BACK

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

with a small or large group

Journal Space. This book is designed to be filled with your thoughts. Use the space provided to record your reactions to the something you may hear in the sermon and the questions at the end of each day. It can also be used to write a prayer request or praise to God. Encourage participants to use it anyway they want. It's their journal! Tell them there are no rules, just guidelines. The important thing is to listen to the Lord and open their heart in response to His leading.

Leaders, if you take the time to read the daily readings prayerfully and with the anticipation that God will reveal new things to you, you will be surprised at what will flow through your pen or pencil onto the pages of these journals.

Start a Prayer Journal. Nothing is greater for your personal spiritual growth than time spent in prayer. Your youth group will grow as you grow. Prayer journaling will help you encounter God in new and exciting ways. You will be able to "track" your walk with God as you go back and review answered prayers and see how He has lead you step by step each day. New, fresh ideas will come to mind as you spend time in His presence journaling your prayers. You can find many ideas online on starting and keeping a prayer journal. Just go to *www.google.com* and type in the words "starting a prayer journal."

Daily Questions. At the end of each sermon are questions designed to get you thinking. Form small groups and discuss these questions. Take a moment to really think about what they are asking. Listen to the Holy Spirit as He teaches you through Scripture. Encourage participants to record their thoughts in their journal.

EDITORIAL: ON REPEAT

by Vanessa Correa

Does it ever seem like adults really like to repeat themselves?

Over and over and over.

Your parents, your teachers, your youth leaders—some of them say the same thing so many times you could make a gif out of it.

“You have to clean your room before you can go out.”

“How many people studied the Sabbath School lesson this week?”

“You already have an A in this class; you just need to study hard to keep it.”

“So, have you thought about getting baptized yet?”

“If you don’t go to bed early, you’re going to be cranky all day tomorrow.”

“No phones at the table.”

“Breakfast is the most important meal of the day.”

Even though it can feel like they’re just nagging you, the truth is that they really love you.

They want you to grow healthy and happy.

The amount of times they repeat themselves shows that they never stop caring for you—every minute of the day they’re thinking of helping you, providing for you, and giving you what you need to have a real relationship with God, which is the number one important thing for any person to have.

God repeats Himself, too. Over and over, throughout the Bible, He tells us He loves us and makes promises to us. He tells us many times how we can have eternal life in the next world and how we can rise above all the problems in this world.

He tells us a thousand times that even though our world fell under the power of the devil, He has made a way for us to escape and He Himself is the way. He gave everything He had, did everything He could, to rescue us from the enemy.

And He will never stop telling us this as long as we live. Because His loving words are on repeat, they are always available to remind us, whenever we fall down or mess up, that we can continue to be His children because He will always be our Father, the one who always wants us to come home.

HOME AGAIN! GOD WANTS YOU BACK

KEEPING IT IT REAL

tips and ideas

In this book are eight outstanding messages on the parables of Jesus. These messages were written by Debbonnaire Kovacs. Throughout these readings you will find opportunities to share stories from your own life with others. Use them. They will give you a chance to show that what you are talking about is real and personal, not just something theoretical.

To encourage interaction, we have included discussion questions at the end of each day's reading. These discussion questions are very important in the process of adapting and applying the lesson to their daily lives. They can be done together as a large group, or you can break down into smaller groups; get together in these same groups each night. Please remember that no two small groups will be the same. Each will have its own dynamics, reflecting the varying characteristics of the members. The common thread running through the entire group will be Jesus Christ and it is in His name that the group will meet each night of this special week.

Avoid the "Christianese" and theological terms. Stick to language young people will understand. **Always remember:** this week and all the discussion will mean nothing to them if they don't understand what you are saying.

This week will prepare you for next week.

Global Youth Day is set to launch the official week of the Youth Week of Prayer meetings. **Ahead of time, please contact your pastor or conference youth leader to see what projects your church will be involved in on this day, March 21.**

If you are planning a full day event, the *Adventist Development and Relief Agency* (ADRA) has a wonderful activity that can be done during or as the AY program. This activity, *In Their Shoes™*, (*Eat. Sleep. Live. Be.*) is an interactive poverty experience for teens that takes them on a 24-hour journey into the lives of other teenagers around the world. Through the eyes of this new identity, they will begin to understand the challenges that millions of people in developing countries face every day. You'll discover what ADRA is doing to help and what the Bible has to say about living a life of Christian service.

This program was created for ages 14-19. If this sounds like a fun activity to integrate in your Global Youth Day/Youth Week of Prayer program, please contact Vila-Sheree Watson at vilasheree@ADRA.org before the day of the program. You can also take some time to discuss or talk about the global youth day projects that you just participated in.

Start your planning now!

When planning your Week of Prayer, here are some things to keep in mind:

- If your group is large and has lots of visitors, you may want to begin with a crowdbreaker or getting-to-know you activity.
- Review the daily questions on the last page of each lesson ahead of time. Be prepared to spend some time with this.
- Where possible think of concrete objects to illustrate messages... this will help the learning to continue long after the “lessons” end.
- Handouts are great. Create handouts of things that can be taped to the wall. (I remember both my sons doing this in middle school, and they shared the same room...yes! The poor wall!!) These can be used as wall decorations and will help continue the lesson learned beyond that one week.
- Give out nightly rewards. If you are running your meetings at a school, you can keep a prize box hidden away and add items as you come across them: gift cards, school supplies, etc.
- Repeat the Small Group Covenant (on last page) at each meeting.
- Encourage them to use their prayer journal everyday. Write down prayer requests and put the answers, and date them. You may be surprised how helpful it can be in our spiritual walk when we can look back on answered prayer.

The Small Group Covenant (SGC)?

A Small Group Covenant is a set of promises about behavior to help foster a safe environment for spiritual exploration and provide relational ground rules. It is a very good way to help your groups affirm and remember their common goal. Creating a covenant together as a group will require that the members consciously and intentionally commit to growing with each other as Christians and will help in keeping the group healthy and focused.

Note to leader: Make copies of the small group covenant on the next page for each person. Have extra copies at each meeting for newcomers or those who may need an extra copy. Encourage them to put this somewhere visible, so that they can see it and be reminded of it long after the meetings are ended.

Help them understand the Small Group Covenant

A great way to help your small group understand the small group covenant on page 14 is to discuss it. Below we have given you some discussion starters on each topic. A cool idea may be to make decorative prayer cards for each one; you can use what we have or come up with your own.

1. **Love each other**

So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. –John 13:34 (NLT)

2. **Be in harmony with one another**

Read Romans 12:16 and Mark 12:33

3. **Speak the truth in love**

Truth is overrated if we forget to tell it in love. Our duty to each other is to tell the truth wrapped up in love.
Read Ephesians 4:15, 16

4. **Welcome and accept each person**

Pray that we will always remember to treat people who are poor, of a different race or culture, or who are different from us with the same love and respect that God does. God is no respecter of persons. He shows no partiality. Read Romans 2:11 and John 3:16.

5. **Be kind to each other**

Therefore, accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory. –Romans 2:11 (NLT) Also read Ephesians 4:2, 3

6. **Do not judge each other**

Read James 4:11-12; Luke 6:37; Deuteronomy 13:14, Matthew 7:1, Matthew 7:12, and James 4:11

7. **Pray for one another**

Find a quiet place to pray each day, make it a part of your daily routine. Read James 15:16-18 and Ephesians 6:18-20

8. **Attend each small group meeting when we can**

Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.
–Matthew 18:19-20 (NIV)

9. **Lets's not hate one another**

Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. (1 John 2:9, ESV) Read James 4:11, 12; Matthew 5:22-26; Hebrews 12:15; 1 John 4:20

Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. –Romans 12:10 (ESV)

10. Be respectful of everyone's opinion (no dumb questions)

Respect everyone, and love the family of believers. Read 1 Peter 2:17 and 2:3, 4 ESV

As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. –Romans 14:1

11. Encourage and build each other up

We should think about each other to see how we can encourage each other to show love and do good works. ²⁵ We must not quit meeting together, as some are doing. No, we need to keep on encouraging each other. This becomes more and more important as you see the Day getting closer. –Hebrews 10:24-25, Easy-to-Read Version (ERV)

12. Keep advice to a minimum

Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Philippians 2:3, ESV

Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity. –Titus 2:7 (ESV)

13. Forgive one another

If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you refuse to forgive others, your Father will not forgive your sins. –Matthew 6:14, 15 (NLT)

Put up with each other, and forgive anyone who does you wrong, just as Christ has forgiven you. –Colossians 3:13 (CEV)

14. Do not grumble against each other

Grumbling is a sign of ungratefulness and can test God's patience. It can cause you to lose sight of all the good things in each other and make others lose faith. Read Psalm 106:24-26 and 1 Corinthians 10:10

15. Let's not give up meeting together

Meeting together is an important part of our faith journey; it is where we learn, gain strength, grow, and offer support to each other as a small group. It reminds us that we are not alone. Read Romans 12:4-6

Well, my brothers and sisters, let's summarize. When you meet together, one will sing, another will teach, another will tell some special revelation God has given, one will speak in tongues, and another will interpret what is said. But everything that is done must strengthen all of you. (1 Corinthians 14:26, NLT)

16. Do not speak about group members when they are not present

Pray to see your own shortcomings and weaknesses, not to exploit another person's weakness when they are not around to defend themselves. Read Leviticus 19:16, Proverbs 10:18-21, 1 Timothy 5:13, and Proverbs 26:20.

OUR SMALL GROUP COVENANT

I AGREE THAT THIS GROUP EXISTS AS A SAFE PLACE FOR ME TO BE MYSELF, ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT MY FAITH, LEARN TO LOVE OTHERS, AND RECEIVE SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGEMENT IN MY WALK WITH GOD.

We agree to:

1. Love each other.
2. Be in harmony with one another.
3. Speak the truth in love.
4. Welcome and accept each person.
5. Be kind to each other.
6. Not judge each other.
7. Pray for one another.
8. Attend each small group meetings when we can.
9. Not hate one another.
10. Be respectful of everyone's opinion (there are no dumb questions).
11. Encourage and build up each other.
12. Keep my advice to the minimum.
13. Forgive one another.
14. Not grumble against each other.
15. Not give up meeting together.
16. Not speak about group members when they are not present.

PRINT NAME

SIGNATURE

DATE

"By this all men will know that you are my (Christ's) disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:34, 35)



DAY 1 : Twisted!

Do you think God gets excited? Since we're created in the image of God, surely God feels our emotions, only bigger, better, and without getting mixed up with sin and selfishness. At any rate, on Day Six of Creation, we know God was looking forward with love and joy to what He was about to do next. God is Love and Love needs somebody to love. God had already created millions of angels and now He was about to make a new kind of being to love: humans. Instead of just saying, "Let there be humans!" as He had done for birds, fish, bugs, and all other mammals, God got His hands dirty. We can imagine God kneeling in the dirt—mixing in just enough water to make it all stick together—and forming it into a man.

Still, it wasn't a man yet. There are sculptors on earth who can form clay into the figure of a person. Some can do it really, really well, like Michelangelo, though not as perfectly as God. He wasn't finished yet. He did something next that no other being in the whole universe could do—he leaned over and breathed into the mouth of the clay man... and Adam "became a living person"! (Gen. 2:7)

Can you *imagine*?! The clay statue sat up; he had working eyes and ears, and inside of him were a heart pumping blood and a stomach that could eat, and billions of nerves and everything!

God was excited. He had a new friend. After He made Eve out of Adam's rib, God had two new friends!

Of course, everybody they met were new to Adam and Eve. In fact, there was nobody else to meet except God and the angels. And the animals, of course. They, too, were smarter and stronger than they are now, so if you can imagine what a good friend your dog or cat or horse is to you, they were even better friends to Adam and Eve—not to mention lions, zebras, and squirrels.

Then there were the snakes. Most people today don't really think of snakes as friends, though there are many who do love them. In those first beautiful days, the snakes were the loveliest of all the animals God had created. Ellen White says:

The serpent [another way of saying "snake"] was then one of the wisest and most beautiful creatures on the earth. It had wings, and while flying through the air presented an appearance of dazzling brightness, having the color and brilliancy of burnished gold. [Patriarchs and Prophets, p. 53]

Adam and Eve must have loved to watch the snakes and perhaps touch them or pet them. It's strange that Eve doesn't seem to have been surprised when one talked to her. Of course, everything she saw was new and wonderful, and she had never actually heard a lie or seen cruelty or selfishness... but she *had* been warned.

God told Adam and Eve all about a terrible rebellion in heaven. Lucifer, one of the chief angels, had decided he wanted to be God, not obey the true God. Nobody understands why Lucifer, with a perfect life in heaven with God and the angels, could possibly have wanted to do this. God had tried hard to work with him and make him understand, but he refused. Eventually, he and one-third of the angels who decided to follow him were thrown out of heaven. God warned Adam and Eve that this fallen angel, now called Satan, would be trying to get them on his side.

God, trying to make things as safe and easy for His new people as possible, told Satan he couldn't go anywhere in the garden except near one particular tree. Then he told Adam and Eve to stay together and not go near the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Satan would have no power to destroy their happiness if they would just stay away from him.

The angels warned them to be on their guard against the devices of Satan... While they were obedient to God the evil one could not harm them; for, if need be, every angel in heaven would be sent to their help. If they steadfastly repelled his first insinuations [or hints], they would be... secure... But should they once yield to temptation, their nature would become so depraved [twisted] that in themselves they would have no power and no disposition to resist Satan. [PP 53].

How did it happen? What made Eve wander so close to the tree? Did she just stray and not realize it at first? Was she curious?

Certainly she was curious once she got there. When the beautiful snake in the tree started talking to her, she was even more curious. Did she think to herself, even for a minute, "I really ought to leave now"? Did she glance around and wonder where Adam had gone? Did she realize she'd gotten too far from him? Mrs. White says that for a second she was afraid, but then she decided "she had sufficient wisdom and strength to discern evil and withstand it" [PP 54]. Silly Eve! She didn't even know what evil was! But she was about to find out.

Whatever the details, all we know now is that the saddest story in history was about to begin. Humankind, created for God to love, created to love God in return, were about to turn away from him. They were also about to learn the important concept we will be studying during this Week of Prayer: *God wants us back!*

God not only allows us to change our minds and come back to Him, He begs us to! Even more than that, *He* is the one who makes it possible. We'll go more into the happier parts of the story and how God changed the ending on other days this week, but first we need to take a good look at its sad beginning.

So there stood Eve, looking at the tree. Like all the trees God had made, it was beautiful. Its leaves glistened with health and the fruit looked and smelled delicious. Silently, Eve wondered why God didn't want them to eat it. Then she saw the glitter of a gorgeous, winged serpent coiled in the branches. No doubt her face showed what she was thinking and the snake said slyly, "Did God really say you can't eat any of the fruit from all these lovely trees?"

"Oh, no!" Eve explained. (She didn't know it, but that was her third mistake. First, wandering alone, then toying with temptation, now arguing with the tempter.) "We can eat from all the other trees, just not this one. God says if we even touch it we'll die!"

"You won't really die," the serpent said. Now, you'd think the devil would be a little sneakier than that, but he knew Eve was too innocent to catch him, so he just came right out and boldly called God a liar. Then he made up another lie to blame on God: "He knows that if you eat this fruit, you'll be just like Him. You'll be like a god, knowing good and evil for yourselves!"

If only Eve had thought for just one second, she might have remembered *she already was like God!* She'd been created in His image, created for love—created to know only good, not evil.

According to Mrs. White, Satan went on to claim that the reason he could talk (pretending he was just a serpent) was because he'd eaten of the fruit... and *he* wasn't dead yet.

So she did it. She took some fruit and took some more to Adam. What weeping there must have been in heaven!

If God were the angry, vengeful Being some people claim He is, always waiting to get even with anybody who makes a mistake, this would have been the end of the story. He would have destroyed the humans and maybe even the whole planet. Maybe He would have destroyed the sinful angels to begin with, but remember, God is love. He had been trying to create new friends and believe it or not, He still wanted them to be His friends. God had a plan.

That evening, as He usually did, God walked in the garden, looking for His friends. "Adam! Where are you?" (Of course, He knew where they were!)

Ashamed, Adam and Eve came out of their hiding place. They must have looked pretty silly, wearing aprons of leaves they'd made for themselves. "We heard you,"

said Adam, hanging his head. "But we were afraid, because we were naked. So we hid."

Afraid! Of God! The very One they'd *loved* to walk and talk with!

Can you imagine the sadness on God's face? "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat the fruit of the one tree I told you not to touch?" Of course, God knew this answer, too, but He wanted to give them a chance to be honest and repent. Instead, they immediately began blaming everyone but themselves.

"Eve made me do it!"

"The serpent made me do it!"

Though they probably didn't realize it yet, they were really blaming God. Satan was laughing in secret, because that had been his plan all along. "The woman *You gave me*" was Adam's way of placing blame. "The serpent deceived me!" Eve insisted. Well, who made the woman? Who made the serpent? Who made Adam and the garden and the tree? God had tried to make the test as simple as He could, but now they were seeing the whole situation as being His fault. Twisted.

Satan was hoping that this would end the new relationship of love God had been building. He must have been stunned to hear God's reaction. First, He made the serpent (actual snakes, that were innocent in the whole thing) to be reminders to all humans forever. He took away the serpents' beautiful wings and made them crawl on the ground, not because it was the animal's fault that Satan had possessed it, but so we would never forget. God's next words weren't for the snake; they were for the real serpent, the devil.

"I will make you and the woman hate each other; her offspring and yours will always be enemies. Her offspring will crush your head, and you will bite her offspring's heel" (Genesis 3:15, GNT).

This meant a lot more than it looked like at first. “Seed” meant offspring or child. At some time thousands of years later (in the garden only God knew the exact time), the devil would partially harm (“bruised on the heel” was a symbolic way of saying this) one of Adam and Eve’s descendants (Jesus), but that Descendant would fatally harm the devil (“bruise his head”). We’ll look at this some more as the week goes on.

This is the first promise in the plan God made to get His friends back. Before He ever set out to create this world, He knew that someone would sin as Lucifer had. So God made a plan. He would face death on our behalf. He would reclaim us—get us back. In the meantime, He would find ways of still being our Friend and of urging us to be friends with Him.

This began right here in the Garden of Eden. God didn’t cast off sinners. He even helped them make better clothes. He taught them to make altars and sacrifices, to remind them that someone innocent was going to die for them someday. He sent them out of the garden because the only thing worse than being sinners would be to be immortal sinners! Imagine if bad people could eat from the Tree of Life and never die! God gave Adam and Eve work to do, the same kind of work they’d had in the garden, though He warned them it would be harder now. The earth, with its plants and animals, would be affected by their sin and by the fact that they’d chosen Satan to be the ruler of the earth instead of God. Still, working for their food would be a blessing to them. He gave them each other to help and encourage, and He gave them the Sabbath, a weekly promise of getting back into paradise again someday.

We know that Adam and Eve sincerely repented and did all they could to have a right relationship with God, even though they could no longer see Him. They tried to teach their children to do the same, but some refused. They had a lot of sorrowful years ahead to live.

During this Week of Prayer we are going to examine this concept that God always wants us back, no matter what we’ve done.

We’ll look at some other Bible stories to see how people turned away from God, how God worked to get them back, and how they returned to Him. We’ll see that in the end, everyone who accepts God’s invitation to come home to Him will get to live with Him forever. We’ll see the Tree of Life and eat its fruit. We *won’t* see the devil or struggle with his temptations! As for right now, we still have to. Can you tell the difference between the struggles you have from day to day that are just problems from living on a sinful earth and the ones that are a direct result of your own choices to turn away from God? When you turn away from Him, do you turn back? Do you need to turn back right now? Most importantly of all, do you truly *know* that God *always wants you back*? By the end of this week, you will.

[Leader: When you pray with the group, pray for any who need to turn back, pray for repentance, and allow a minute of silence for people who need to repent to be able to do so in the privacy of their own hearts.]

Let's pray together. *Dear God, we don't know how to thank You enough that you didn't cast off our first parents and You don't cast us off, either. We are so sorry for the times that we disobey or turn away from You. Please forgive us and help us to recognize temptation when it comes. Help us to turn to you right away for help to resist. Now I'm going to allow a minute of silence for anyone who needs to repent of something in his or her heart. Jesus will hear you. [Allow silence. Don't cut it too short. Be sure people have time to pray silently.] Thank You for promising forgiveness and help. Thank You for loving us. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss how sometimes sticking with a friend helps you to resist temptation. Is there ever a time when the opposite is true?
2. What do you do about it? Tell about a time when you felt sorry for turning away from God and decided to go back to Him (you don't have to give all the details) and how you felt before and afterwards.
3. What does it mean to toy with temptation?

Have you ever done it?

How do you avoid it?



DAY 2 : Lost Things

Luke 15 could be called the chapter of lost things. The whole chapter is made of three parables about being lost and then found. Today and tomorrow we're going to learn about those three parables.

First, let's look at what was happening when Jesus told these parables. Verses 1 and 2 tell us, "Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes *began* to grumble, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'"

You see, the scribes and Pharisees didn't believe that God always wants us back and that God does the work to make it possible for us to come back to Him. They believed we humans have to work really, really hard, do all the right things in the right way every minute of every day, and then maybe, *if we're really lucky*, God might accept us. You'll notice they are complaining that Jesus eats with "sinners" as if the Pharisees *aren't* sinners! They believed they were righteous and therefore worthy of God's attention, and the tax collectors and others they looked down on were not.

Jesus was trying to get them to see that God doesn't look at it that way at all, so He told three stories. He told the story of the lost sheep first. (Read or have someone read Luke 15:1-7.)

So Jesus told them this story: *"If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won't he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.' In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away!"* (Luke 15:3-7, NLT)

Let's use our imaginations to understand this story. Have you ever seen sheep close up? Do you know much about them? They like to huddle close together with all the rest of their flock. The more anxious they are, the closer they huddle. Imagine you are a little sheep and you are trotting along with all the other sheep

as the shepherd takes the flock out of the fold and goes out to find pasture. In the country where Jesus lived, there wasn't a lot of green grass, so they had to go looking for more every day. There was a lead sheep that followed the shepherd and all the other sheep followed along behind the lead. The ones in the middle and the back followed behind each other until they found pasture where they could eat and rest. In your imagination, maybe you and your flock are going past stony, dry places, or maybe you're climbing over dusty hills. It might take a long time. You might be hungry and impatient to find grass. Maybe you get tired and want to lie down. Perhaps you think you see something green over in another spot, away from the trail and you go investigate to see whether you can eat it.

However it happens, you suddenly realize you are alone. The rest of the flock has gone on without you! Although it doesn't say so specifically in this story, many people believe the sheep must have actually gotten stuck somehow, its wool tangled in thorns or something. If it could have, any lost sheep would have run after the others right away (*baa-ing* loudly!) as soon as it realized they were going on without it.

Now, imagine that you are stuck and the more you try to get loose, the worse you get tangled. You are afraid! All you can do is cry out—and you do.

Imagine how you feel when you hear the shepherd calling. You *baa* louder and maybe try to struggle free again. Then you see him coming toward you. You are found! You can hardly hold still so he can untangle you. Jesus says that the shepherd picks up the poor, tired sheep and lays it across his shoulders to carry it home. How do you think you'd feel if you were that sheep?

The Pharisees and scribes didn't like this story. It seemed to them that Jesus was saying He loved the strays more than them, that He would "leave them in the pasture" to go and find the lost ones. They thought He was telling them heaven would rejoice more over some tax collector than over them. Of course, He wasn't saying that at all, because *He* didn't think they *were* "righteous and didn't stray away!" Jesus knew that all humans are sinners; all humans need to repent and He loves all humans. In fact, right at the moment that He told this parable, Jesus *was out seeking His lost lambs, the Pharisees and scribes!* The problem was they didn't think they were lost.

So He told another story. It's found in verses 8-10. Jesus is speaking:

"Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Won't she light a lamp and sweep the entire house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbors and say, 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents."

In Bible times (and at many other times in earth's history, too) families who could afford it would give young girls something called a "dowry", some amount of money that would go with her when she was married. That money was supposed to be her own, to do with as she decided. It was usually saved for future need—if her husband died, or left her, she could have money to live on. She might also use it for her children. Even though the dowry money was supposed to be for the wife to use, in that society as in many others, husbands had total control of wives. They could beat them or mistreat them and not get in trouble for it. They could divorce their wives simply by giving them a paper that said, "I'm divorcing you" and sending them away. They could do this for the smallest of reasons, just because the woman displeased them in some way, like burning their food. In fact, many men married women who had dowries, especially large ones, just so they could get that money.

However, many other men did love their wives and act compassionately toward them. Wives in those days could be beloved partners with their husbands and they could still keep control of their own dowries. This woman apparently had control of her own money.

The parable doesn't tell us whether the woman was still married and saving her money for later, was already widowed and it was all she had to live on, or even if she had children. However, it does say that she mentioned it to her neighbors and friends. Perhaps she was all alone, with no children or husband to care for her. If so, that was a really frightening way to live. There were almost no jobs for women, so they couldn't make their own money, especially if they were old. This woman's ten silver coins weren't worth much. They were drachmas, a Greek coin worth about a day's wages. That means she had about ten days' wages and it may have been all she had to live on, unless she could find some way to use some of the money to make more. Now you can imagine how worried she was when she lost one, as well as how excited and relieved she was when she found it.

Let's think about the coin for a minute.

If you were the coin, would you be all upset and frightened, like the sheep? No, because coins don't have any feelings. Could you struggle and call for help? No, coins can't do that. The coin didn't even know it was lost. It had no idea it was valued or that somebody wanted it and was searching for it. It didn't get lost by wandering away or losing track of the other nine.

In a way, the scribes and Pharisees were more like this coin. They hadn't wandered away from their faith. In fact, they were extremely faithful in performing all the duties and rituals *they* thought were important to being a good Jew and having God's favor. They would have been horrified if someone had said they were lost or

needed to be rescued. They certainly didn't think about whether they were valued in Jesus's eyes, or whether He or God might be searching for them. You can be lost in different ways. They were lost among a forest of rules they'd made up for themselves, trying to earn God's love.

God already loved them before they ever did a thing. He'd sent His Son after them and Jesus loved them so much that He was going to give up His life for them. All the stories He told, all the preaching He did, all the healing and other miracles He performed were for one purpose only—to call all people to come back home to God. He was really hoping that at least some of these men, and all the other listeners, would listen and realize that He was really talking about them, not about sheep or silver coins.

Maybe some did. We know that Acts 6:7 says “a great many of the priests” later believed in Jesus. Only God knows which of them were in this particular crowd, or exactly when they began feeling their hearts touched by the things Jesus said and did.

There is one thing exactly the same about these two parables. What's the same is the ending. The person who finds what was lost not only rejoices, but also calls his or her friends and neighbors to share the joy.

[Ask your listeners what they think is the same.]

It's not enough for the shepherd to find his lost sheep. It's not enough to bring it back and take care of any hurts it got while it was lost, as well as give it food and water and rest. The shepherd has to call everyone and say (in our words), “Yay! Hooray! I found it! Look, he's fine!” The shepherd expects his friends to be excited, too. Have you ever lost a dog or cat and told the whole neighborhood about it, asking people to help you look? What happened when you found your pet?

It's not enough for the woman to find her coin. She has to call in her friends. “Remember that coin I lost? I found it! Look, here it is, good as new!” Her friends will likely say something like, “This time, be sure you put all ten coins away safely!”

In this part of the parable, Jesus doesn't speak in symbols. No longer does He use “sheep” or “coin” to mean person, or compare Himself or God to a shepherd or a woman looking for her money. In this part of both parables, Jesus says directly, “There is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents.” He gives us a mental picture of angels clapping and singing and praising God, and of God smiling widely too, because one person decided to turn around, repent, go back, get reclaimed. That's the way God feels when we go back to Him. Of course, He's also delighted when we never turn away at all! Still, all of us sometimes need to repent (turn around) and be forgiven. Sometimes we need to forgive, too.

Is there something in your life that you need to repent from? Do you want Jesus to find you and rescue you from the wrong things you do? Let's pray about that now.

Next time, we'll talk about the third parable in this chapter of Luke.

Dear God, You are so patient with us when we get lost! We will take a moment now to repent from the choices we have made that have gotten us off Your path. [Allow enough time for people to pray silently. Don't cut it off too short.] We also ask that You help us to be on the lookout for others that might not even know how much You care about them and are looking for them. Help us to be kind and loving searchers, always rejoicing when someone comes home to You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Compare and contrast the two stories in this lesson. How are they similar? How are they different?
2. Have you lost something? What happened?
3. What do you think it means to be lost and not even know it? How much rejoicing in heaven is there over you? (Hint: a lot!)

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DAY 3: A LOST SON

In the “chapter of lost things”, Luke 15, Jesus told a third story, even more important and dramatic, to the Pharisees and scribes who were criticizing Him. He was trying hard to get them to see that God, our heavenly Father, wants *all* His children back from wherever they wander. Some of God’s children wander into obvious ways of sinful living, like the ones Jesus was talking with at the beginning of this chapter. Others, like the Pharisees, start acting self-righteous, pointing their fingers at the ones who have made bad choices and telling them how sinful they are. Jesus was trying to help the people understand that being self-righteous and pointing their fingers at others is just as sinful.

In the story of the lost coin, Jesus talked about something that was lost and didn’t even know it. In the parable of the lost sheep, He told about something that was lost and knew it, but didn’t know how to get back home again. Now we will look at a story about someone who was lost, knew it, and knew how to get back home, but was afraid (at first) to go back.

[Read or have someone read Luke 15:11-12.]

To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: “*A man had two sons. The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now before you die.’ So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.*” (NLT)

The man in this story seems wealthy. He has land, flocks, and (as we’ll see later) nice clothes and jewels. He only has two sons in a time when people usually had lots of children. Of course, children often died before they grew up, so perhaps these were simply the only two the man had left. One was a faithful, hard worker, and the other... well, the other came one day and said, “Hey, Dad, give me my share of the estate now, so I won’t have to wait until you’re dead!”

Now, really! Can you imagine how the father felt? It’s as if the son was saying he couldn’t wait until his dad died! The story doesn’t tell how long the father thought about it, but he did say yes. He divided up his estate (he might have had to sell some land to get the money to do this) and gave the younger son his share. In fact, the story says he “divided his wealth between them”. In a sense, the older son got his share, too, because now everything that was left would be his someday. I wonder how he felt.

Now the young man was rich! He thought he'd be happy. No more slaving in the fields, taking care of animals, plowing, planting, harvesting, threshing, and all that hard work! Best of all, no more putting up with a bossy older brother! He was going to live it up! Off he went to "a far country".

[Read or have someone read Luke 15:13.]

There's a lot in that one sentence, isn't there? Today, this young man might go to the big city. What are some of the things he might do to splash his money around? How do you think other people might react to that? [Let some people respond.]

You tend to have lots of friends while you have lots of money and this happened to the young man in Jesus' story. When the money was gone, the friends were gone, too. Life was not turning out to be as fun as this younger brother had imagined. Did he think about going home at this point? He might have been too ashamed to go back home. Imagine having to say, "Dad, I'm sorry, but I wasted all that money. Can I come home and let you take care of me again?"

Instead he got a job. Not just any job, he got the worst job a Jewish person could have—feeding pigs! That's a pretty bad job even today and it was worse back when people lived with the animals they cared for 24 hours a day. The man was hanging out with pigs and giving them things to eat like empty corn husks, but he didn't even have anything to eat himself. What he did have was lots of time to think. He finally came up with a plan. It would be terrible, not to mention unfair, to go back home and expect his father to support him again—but what if he worked for his dad? Any job at his dad's farm would be better than the one he had now and there would be people who cared for him. Maybe he'd better go home.

[Read or have someone read verses 17-19.]

While the young man is trudging all the way home from wherever he had run off to, let's go back to his old home and check in on the family he left. What do you think the older brother is doing? Working hard as always, right? Maybe he tries to forget he ever had a brother. Maybe he misses him a lot, but doesn't want to admit it.

What is the father doing? This is the most important part of the story. The father is watching and waiting, every single day, straining his eyes looking down the road, hoping against hope that his boy will come back. Did the father stop loving his son because he made some bad choices? Did the father stop loving him because he said and did some unloving things? Never! He watched and he waited...

...and one day it happened! He saw someone walking down the dusty road, but that was nothing. He saw people coming his way all the time. Still, there was

something about this one... The father stood and shaded his eyes from the sun. Was it—could it be—? *It was!!*

[Read or have someone read verses 20-24.]

When the father saw his boy, he pulled up the edges of his long robe and ran down the road. He didn't even hear what the boy was trying to say. He threw his arms around him and laughed, and cried, and kissed his son's cheeks.

The young man was stammering, trying to get his speech out. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight—"

"Hurry, bring the best robe and put it on him, and a ring for his finger, and sandals for his feet!" His father was shouting to the family servants who had come out to see what the commotion was.

"...and I am no longer worthy to be called your son," continued the boy. That was as far as he got.

His dad had turned and was pulling him along toward home, his arm around his son's shoulders, still shouting. "Kill the calf we've been fattening for a special occasion! Let's have a party! My son was dead and now he is alive!" (That's how it felt to the father.) "He was lost, but now he's found!"

Just like the people in the other stories, this man called all the neighbors to celebrate with him, but this was a much bigger occasion than finding a lost sheep or a lost coin! This was a young man who had chosen to leave, but now had chosen to come home. His dad was so happy he couldn't stop smiling and laughing. He probably cried a little, too, for joy.

[Read or have someone read verses 25-28.]

The father most likely sent servants to find the older brother, who was still out in the fields. Maybe he came in on his own. When he heard all the singing, laughter, and dancing, he asked one of the servants, "What's going on?"

"Oh, sir, haven't you heard?" exclaimed the servant. "Your brother is back! Your father is so overjoyed that he's killed the fattened calf and is throwing a party, because he has him back safe and sound!"

Now, let's stop right here for a second. What are some of the kinds of feelings the older brother might have at that moment?

[Allow people to answer.]

He could have been overjoyed, as well, at the safe return of his younger brother. He could have been curious, or disbelieving, or surprised. He could at least have gone inside and checked to be sure it was really his brother.

To the servant's surprise, the brother frowned and turned away. He wouldn't even go into the house! The servant went to report to the father and the dad came out to talk to his son. The Bible says he pleaded with him. "Please, son, just come in and rejoice! Aren't you glad we have your brother back?"

The older brother just hunched his shoulders and frowned harder than ever. To see what he said, read (or have someone read) verses 29 and 30.

Jealous, that's what he was! Perhaps he felt he had reason. Have you ever worked hard on a project and someone else didn't do any work, but it seemed that person got all the credit? That's how it felt to this young man. Maybe he thought his dad was always worrying about his younger brother and never thought about him.

You can tell from the story that this isn't the case. The father is clearly a loving dad and he had, after all, given the older boy his share of the inheritance, too. In the father's reply, we can catch how much he loved the older son, also. Let's look at what he said. *"And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we have to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"*

"You've always been with me," the dad said. That shows he was glad about that because he loved the older son, too. "All that I have is yours." Did you ever think of that? The younger son had already lost his share. Everything that was left belonged to the older son. He could have had a party any time if he wanted to. He could have thrown a party for his father, to help cheer him up. He, too, could have watched for his younger brother to come home and been glad to see him.

Like the father in this story, God always wants His children back, no matter where they wander. The question is do *we* want sinners to come back? Do we want people in our churches, our schools, our homes, who have done wrong, and they know it, and now they want to come back and be part of the family again?

If you have turned away from God and need to repent, this is another chance to do it. If you know someone who has hurt you and is sorry, have you forgiven that person? Are you willing to welcome him or her back home?

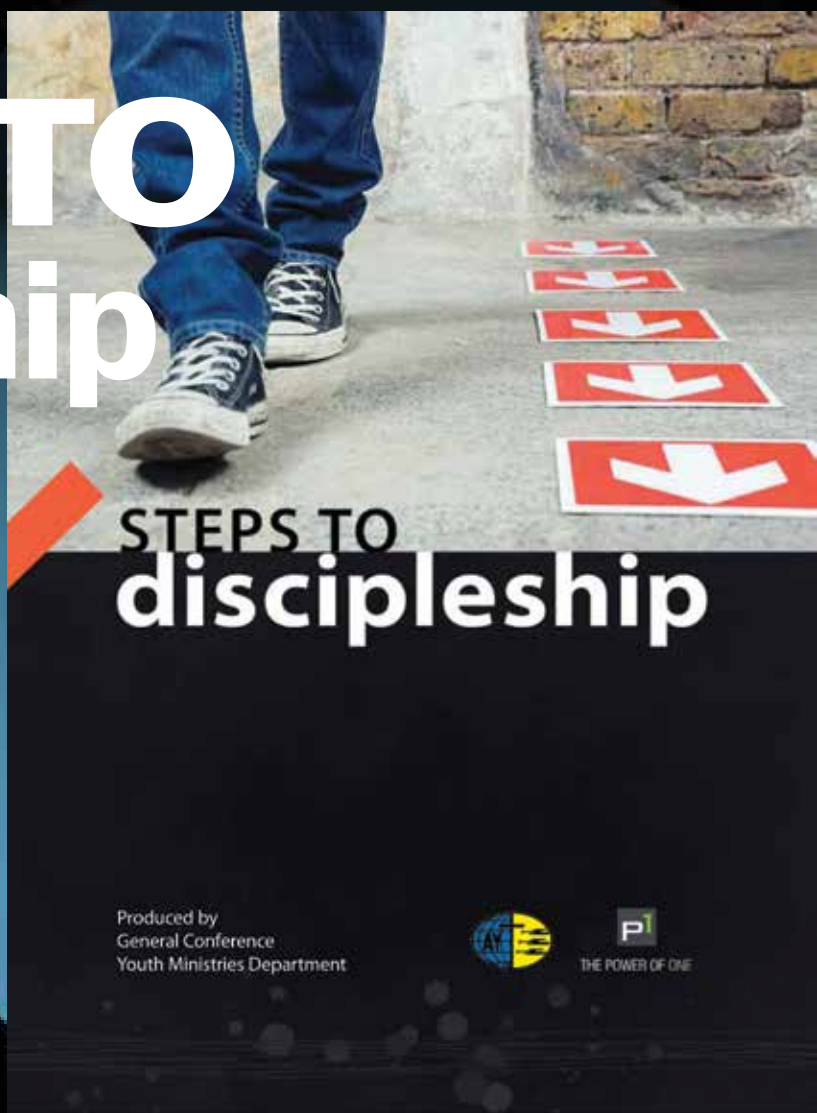
[Pray for repentance and forgiveness for all present.]

Let's pray. Dear Father in heaven, You really are a loving Father to us! You watch for us, work for us, and always welcome us back with open arms. Please forgive each person who is asking You now. [Allow enough silent time for people to pray.] Give us Your love, enough to fill our hearts and spill over onto everybody around us! Help us to welcome back with open arms every child of Yours and never to be grouchy like the older brother. If we are, forgive us for that, too, and help us to change. In Jesus' name, Amen.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do you feel more sympathy for the father, the older son, or the younger son? Explain. Can it vary, depending on what's happening in your life?
2. Have you ever done something really wrong that hurt people? How did you try to show your repentance and make up for it? What happened?
3. Is there someone you know you need to forgive? Are you ready to welcome that person back to your friendship?

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DAY 4: Reclaimed at the Last Second

During the first days of this Week of Prayer, we learned that God always wants His children back. He will go to great lengths to seek out and rescue one beloved person who has done wrong, even before that person is sorry. This story is one of the best examples of the extremes God will go to in order to save one of His children, one that others may think is completely bad, with no worth at all.

Mrs. White says some very surprising things about the thief on the cross. The Bible doesn't tell very much about him (except the most important part!). This lesson will tell his story, using information from *Desire of Ages*, pp. 749-750.

This boy might have been young when he first began to steal things. Perhaps at first it was just on a dare, with some of his friends. Maybe it would be market day, when all the farmers brought their milk and cheese, vegetables and fruits, and animals to town. All the artisans and crafters brought in baskets and pottery and wooden things, and everyone got together to trade and buy. It would be a busy, colorful, noisy scene and some kids could dash through, laughing and pretending to be only playing, but really picking up things without paying or trading for them. There were some older boys who were already known to be troublemakers, but they seemed exciting and the boy wanted to impress them, so he did things he knew were wrong. When he felt guilty, he tried to think about other things or get busy with something else so he wouldn't have to do anything embarrassing, like apologize or return something he'd stolen back to its owner.

This is a good way to quiet your conscience and through the years, as the boy became a man, he got really good at not listening to his conscience at all. Now he was a thief and a cheat all on his own. It was no longer somebody else daring him.

At some point, the man began to hear about a new preacher. Crowds were going to listen to this man, Jesus, so the thief went, too. As he listened, he might have heard things like, "If somebody wants your shirt, give him your coat, too, and give to those who ask and don't turn away from someone who wants to borrow from you" (based on Matthew 5:40-42).

The man who had become a thief felt his heart stir for the first time in a long time. He watched Jesus' face and how everyone crowded around Him, and the thief wanted to be like that. Everyone ran toward him when they saw him coming!

Certainly no children would want to sit on his lap the way they did with Jesus.

However, the thief also heard what the priests and leaders said. When Jesus did a miracle, they would exclaim, "This man has a demon!" When Jesus healed someone on the Sabbath they would mutter, "He can't be from God—he doesn't keep the commandments!"

Well, the thief wasn't a very law-abiding citizen, but he wanted to respect the leaders of his people. Maybe they were right. Anyway, living as Jesus described would be hard! Perhaps the man heard about Zacchaeus, who gave back *four times* as much as he stole! The man didn't want to do that! Maybe he was even there when the rich young ruler turned away, refusing to give up his riches as Jesus had asked.

Have you ever noticed that when you have a guilty conscience and you're trying hard to drown it out, you act worse and worse? Mrs. White says that this man tried so hard not to hear his guilty conscience that he "plunged deeper and deeper into sin".

Then... he got caught.

He was arrested, jailed, and then brought to court. Apparently, he was tried around the same time as Jesus. He (and the other thief, too) probably cursed and swore and shouted that they were innocent, even though they weren't. Then they saw Jesus acting in a way that was so different they could hardly believe it.

Jesus didn't curse or swear. Most of the time, He didn't even answer. When He did answer, He was respectful. When He was beaten, He took it bravely, and the most amazing thing (also the very hardest thing to watch) was that He seemed to look lovingly even at the soldiers who were beating Him!

The thief couldn't stop staring when Jesus stood silently before people who were obviously making up lies about him. He watched as Pilate declared, "I find no fault in this man," and washed his hands, showing that he was excusing himself from any responsibility for what would happen to Jesus.

Jesus seemed so strange—so different! He was almost godlike. Nothing the soldiers or others did to Him could make Him lose His temper or break down.

On the road to Calvary, the three were all carrying their crosses. No doubt they all had a hard time of it, dragging them along, perhaps falling. Two of them shouted and argued and swore. One didn't.

Our thief was feeling worse and worse inside, but he didn't know why. He didn't know the Holy Spirit was working just as hard as He could possibly work, trying to save him before it was too late. The Spirit worked on the other thief, too, but he

wouldn't listen. This one was softening around the edges, just a little. Only God could tell. You couldn't see it from the outside.

When they got to Calvary and all three were nailed to their crosses, the anger and pain and horror were so bad that the two thieves were screaming defiance, insults, and curses. It was all they knew how to do.

The thief saw people sticking out their tongues at Jesus and yelling insults. He yelled insults, too. At first. Then he began to fall silent. He watched the passersby mocking Jesus. "If you're the Son of God, save yourself!"

The other thief, shrieking in pain, shouted, "Yeah! Save yourself! And us, too!"

**Jesus just tried to keep breathing.
His eyes were on His mother and the
other women and John, who were
weeping at the foot of His cross.**

The thief realized that the priests and leaders he'd looked up to were among those sticking out their tongues and yelling insults. "He saved others, but he can't save himself! If God loves you so much, let *Him* save you!"

Maybe that was the moment that the thief saw reality. That was blasphemy. It was amazing disrespect for God. In the courtroom these same men had said Jesus was guilty of blasphemy; now they were using the name of God to make fun of a dying man?

He realized there were some people below the crosses who were not mocking and jeering. Some were defending Jesus. They were saying He was innocent and reminding each other of miracles He'd done or of some of the things He had said.

"He said to love your enemies and I didn't think it was possible, but look at how He looks at the soldiers!"

**"I know! Did you hear Him say,
'Father, forgive them, they don't
know what they're doing'?"**

The thief watched the onlookers weeping and tears came to his own eyes. What if this was really the Messiah?! In an instant, with a shock like an electric bolt, the

man realized this was it. He was dying. Humans could no longer do anything to him, but sometime he would still have to meet God. He was afraid of what God might think of him.

He looked over to the criminal on the other side of Jesus, who was still yelling and spitting. "Aren't you afraid?" he gasped. "You're the one who has been condemned. So have I."

His breath failed and the only answer he got from the other thief was a sneer and more cursing.

"We're both guilty! We deserve this!" the ex-thief insisted. "This man is innocent! You heard Pilate!"

He felt awful. All the confusion he'd been feeling inside, all the way back to the first time he'd heard Jesus speak, flooded his memory. He was full of despair when he thought about his life. When he thought about Jesus, about the things he'd heard Him say, the things he'd seen Him do... even the way Jesus had reacted to His own trial and crucifixion, the despair lifted just a little. Something strange and new, something the man couldn't remember feeling in a long, long time, began to stir in his heart.

It was hope. What if—could it be possible that Jesus would treat *him* with the tenderness He'd used toward the priests and the Romans? He turned his head painfully and read what it said above Jesus' head. "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." Silently, the Holy Spirit whispered Bible stories the man had heard years ago, as a child. About the Lamb of God, who takes away sin. About the Messiah. About the kingdom of God, where all is love and light.

The man looked at Jesus and Jesus was looking back! He had turned His bleeding head and was looking at the ex-thief with that same look of love and sympathy that he'd seen when Jesus looked at others. His heart broke. Tearfully, he begged, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom!"

Jesus smiled. The Holy Spirit had won after all! "I promise," He said gently, "I promise you right now, this very minute, when I go to Paradise you will be with me."

There was a lot of suffering yet to come—more for the two thieves, who didn't die as quickly as Jesus. One heart was still hard and angry, refusing God. One was flooded with light and peace, even during the unimaginable pain of crucifixion and death. He would be in Paradise. He hugged the promise to himself until his last breath.

God wants His children back. He wants all His children back! He wept over the other thief, who refused to hear His call. He sent His only Son to die so that neither

one of those thieves, nor any other sinner in history, would have to die forever. The ex-thief is waiting in his grave for Jesus to call him. Imagine what he will feel like when he awakes and sees the promise come true! He will know for sure that he never did anything at all to deserve God's love or grace. He stole, swore, cheated, and cursed until just hours before his death. He will think he never did one positive thing, except maybe in his childhood. He will be amazed to discover that he accomplished something no one else had been able to accomplish on that darkest day of Jesus' earthly life.

He gave Jesus hope. He comforted the One whose own disciples first fell asleep, then ran away. Two of them betrayed Him—one to death and one by swearing he never knew Jesus. Mrs. White says that "to Jesus in His agony on the cross there came one gleam of comfort. It was the prayer of the penitent thief." Imagine how he'll feel when Jesus hugs him in heaven and thanks him for that comfort in a very dark hour!

He accomplished something else, too. There were some at the cross who did believe in Jesus, who were crying their eyes out as He died. They were so discouraged. They had believed until the very last that Jesus wouldn't let Himself be killed. Even Judas believed that. He thought he was doing Jesus a favor, making Jesus declare Himself and show, once and for all, how powerful He was. How, wondered the people around the cross, how could He possibly be the real Messiah if He died?

To those people, the repentant thief gave a gleam of hope. Jesus was still saving people, right up to His last few breaths! They weren't sure what it meant yet, but when they saw Him after His resurrection, they remembered. They had seen Jesus reclaim one of His own from Satan's power, right when Satan was sure he was winning.

There is never a moment when it's too late to receive God's forgiveness, but there could come a moment when a person doesn't want it anymore. That's what happened to the other thief, the one who wouldn't listen, who kept on cursing and mocking until he died. Don't let it happen to

you! If you have something you need forgiveness for, ask now. God wants you back! If you are already living with God every day, don't leave! He wants to keep you.

[In your prayer, you might pray for people in the world who are in their last moments and still have a chance to turn to God. We never know—maybe somebody was praying for that dying thief!]

Let's pray. *Dear Savior, we are amazed at Your endless patience and mercy! You can save someone right up to the last second—maybe even after the people around them think it's too late. Perhaps someone, somewhere was praying for that thief. We pray right now for anyone in the world who is in their last moments, that they will turn to You and be saved. We also ask for Your forgiveness for anything we need to be forgiven for. [Allow silence.] Thank You for Your love! In Jesus' name, Amen.*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Can you see how a young person who does a few not-so-good things could end up becoming a criminal?
2. Are there unwise choices you or your friends are making or thinking of making? What can you do about it?
3. How do you think the thief felt when Jesus promised he'd be in Paradise with Him? How do you think Jesus felt?
4. How do you think His mother and the other women felt?



DAY 5: Living Water

Based on John 4:1-44

There are several places you can find fresh water on this planet. First are still places like ponds or puddles. This is fresh water, not salt water like the ocean, but it's not clean for drinking because it sits still. Larger places like lakes are a little cleaner because wind moves the water somewhat. Creeks are better, because they keep moving and the top part of the water is clearer than the water near a muddy bottom. Best of all are springs. Springs are places where fresh water bubbles out from deep inside the earth. They are where streams and creeks begin, which flow together until they become rivers. If you've ever seen a spring, you may have been amazed because it looks like the water is coming from nowhere, yet it keeps on flowing and flowing, unless a drought comes.

People need water almost more than anything else, so throughout history, they settled near springs, creeks, and rivers. If they had to live in a dry land, they dug wells. They knew that water was down under the ground in what we call aquifers. If they could dig down to it, that would be pretty clean even though it sat still, because animals couldn't get to it as they can to creeks and rivers. They also knew the well water would not be as good as spring water. Because the water in a spring kept flowing all the time, they called it "living water". Thousands of years ago, Jacob dug a well that reached underground streams of flowing, or "living" water. That was almost as good as drinking from a spring and the well is still in use to this day. You can look it up on the internet and see pictures of it.

In Jesus' time, the Samaritan town of Sychar was near Jacob's well and He once met a woman who had come there to get water. We don't know her name, so to keep from calling her "the woman" all the time, we'll call her Isha, which means "woman" in Hebrew. Isha needed more water. She swung a heavy ceramic jar over her shoulder and set off. It was noon and the day was hot. She wiped her forehead with the edge of her veil and hoped to get back home quickly.

Women still have to carry water in many places in the world today and most of the time they go in the morning or evening when it's cool. Isha might have gone during the middle of the day because people would gossip about her if she went with the women in the morning. She was pretty famous in her town, but not for

good reasons. Isha had been married five times! We don't know if any of them died, or if they left her, or if she left them, but now she was living with a man she was not married to. Lots of people in Sychar looked down on her, ignored her, or made fun of her and called her names.

Isha sighed as she saw the well in the distance. There was a man sitting there. Too bad. As she got closer, she could see that he was a Jew, too. Worse yet. Jews hated Samaritans. He might say something nasty to her, or even keep her from getting her water until he felt like leaving. However, the man didn't move or say anything as she came to the well. Maybe if she ignored him, he would ignore her. Isha set down her jar and reached for the rope that held the bucket. She would let the bucket down into the well (it was a very deep well), fill it with water, pull it up, and pour that into her jar. She would do that over and over until her jar was full. Then she would hoist it up to her shoulder again, now much heavier, and trudge back home.

At least, that's what Isha *thought* was going to happen!

As she reached for the rope, the man spoke to her. "Will you give me a drink?"

Isha nearly dropped her bucket. He was speaking to her? *Nicely*? She was so surprised she forgot her manners. "You, a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan and a woman, for water?" she said.

Jesus smiled. "If you knew the gift of God and who it is asking you for water, you would have asked me and I would give you living water."

Isha smiled too, but it was a sarcastic smile. "Really? Where's your bucket? This well is deep, you know. Do you think you are greater than our father Jacob, who gave us this well?" That ought to put this Jew in his place. Jews might hate Samaritans, but Isha wanted to remind him that both peoples came from the great patriarch, Jacob.

Jesus' eyes twinkled. Something about that smile made her feel funny. Maybe she shouldn't be sarcastic with this man. He said, "Everyone who drinks of this water gets thirsty again. Everyone who drinks of My water will never thirst. My living water will become a well inside you, springing up forever into eternal life."

Isha's eyes grew wide with surprise. If that were true, her life would be a lot easier! "Sir, give me this water, so I won't have to come and carry water anymore!"

"Go get your husband," said Jesus, "and bring him here."

Isha looked at the ground. Sooner or later, it always came up. She sighed. "I don't have a husband." Now he would make fun of her, or insult her, as she had expected from the beginning.

He didn't. He just said calmly, "Good. You've told the truth. You have had five husbands and the man you have now is not your husband at all."

Isha looked closely at the man. Sychar was not that big a place. She knew she would have remembered if this man had ever been there, so he couldn't have heard about her. There *was* something special about him. Could he be a prophet? If so, perhaps he would answer a question for her. "Sir, I can see you are a prophet. My ancestors have always worshiped here on this mountain." Isha pointed toward Mt. Gerazim, on the south side of the valley where they were. "But you Jews say Jerusalem is the only place where people should worship. Is that true?"

There really was something special about this Man. He smiled as if He knew her and loved her! "Woman," He said (and He used the form of endearment, just as He did to His own mother), "believe Me, the time is coming—in fact, the time has already come—when it won't matter where people worship. The Samaritans worship God, but still have many questions. We Jews know more about God, for salvation is from the Jews" [He meant Himself]. "But the fact is, what matters is not where you worship, but how you worship. What matters is whether you worship God from your heart, in spirit and in truth. God is Spirit and this is what He is seeking—people who will worship Him in spirit and truth."

Isha had forgotten all about her water—and about the man's thirst, for that matter. She was starting to get excited. "I know that Messiah is coming. When *He* comes, He'll explain everything," she said.

Here is where this story gets really amazing. Jesus said something to this woman that He almost *never* said to anyone else. He looked her in the eyes and declared, "I who speak to you am He." Jesus told the woman from Samaria that He was the Messiah!

Why did He do that? There are at least three reasons. One is that He wanted this child of God back and was trying to reclaim her. Another is that He knew He could trust her to be a missionary for Him and tell others, so He would reclaim even more children of God. A third reason is that He knew millions of people, through the centuries, would read this story—right down to us today—and we could know that it isn't just a rumor that Jesus is the Anointed One of God; *He said so Himself*.

Isha just stood there for a second, her mouth open and her heart beating fast. She probably didn't even notice a group of men coming toward the well. She forgot all

about her jar and her errand and how hot and tired she was. She even forgot to say good-bye! She turned and ran all the way back to Sychar. As she got to the gates, she was crying out, "Listen, listen, everybody! Listen to me!" She didn't care if they looked at her scornfully. She didn't even notice. She just said, through her panting from running, "Come see a man who told me everything about myself! Could it be the Messiah?"

There must have been differing reactions to this exclamation. Some people probably scoffed. Some laughed. Some turned away... but many came closer. "What did you say?" They listened and decided to go see for themselves.

Back at Jacob's Well, Jesus' disciples, who had gone to buy food while He rested there, sent curious looks after the woman who was running away. They wondered why on earth Jesus was talking to a woman, especially a Samaritan woman, but they didn't ask. They just offered Him food.

Jesus was looking after the disappearing woman with a bright light in His eyes. He said, "I have food to eat that you don't know anything about."

The disciples looked at each other. "Did somebody bring Him food?"

Jesus looked at them then. "My food is to do my Father's will." Doing what God wanted Him to do made Jesus feel fulfilled and happy, just like eating does. He had reclaimed one of His Father's children! And look—here came some more, running toward Him. He smiled and said to His disciples, "Don't you say, 'Four months 'til harvest'? Well, look around. The fields are ripe now, with people needing to be harvested. Already, the harvesters are gathering fruit for life eternal. The one who sowed the word and the one who reaps the harvest can rejoice together. I am sending you to reap what you haven't planted."

He may have meant that the disciples were now going to help Him "harvest" the town of Sychar, although He was the one who had done the work to prepare that field. In fact, the Holy Spirit had obviously already been at work, or Isha would not have had the questions she did. Already she was watching for the Messiah. Already she wanted to do the right thing—worship in the right place and in the right way.

Now she had just done her first "planting" for Jesus, because here she came, with dozens or maybe even hundreds of people who she might have considered her enemies just hours before.

The people listened eagerly to Jesus and then they asked Him to stay in their town. What a nice change it must have been for Him, so different from Jewish towns that refused Him or priests that said He cast out demons using the devil's power. He and His disciples stayed in Sychar for two days and when they left, they left a

lot of believers. The people of the town said something very important. “Now we don’t just believe because you said so. Now we have heard Him for ourselves and we believe this One is the Savior of the world.”

The Savior of the world! Like the thief on the cross, these people recognized the power they saw in Jesus as the power of God and they felt that power in their lives.

Three things had happened: the woman had told her story; the people had believed her at least enough to go and see for themselves; they had listened to Jesus directly and made a choice for faith. This can happen, or at least begin, when you tell your story, too.

Sychar must have felt like a different place to live after Jesus had spent time there. I wonder how Isha’s life changed. (I wonder if Jesus ever got His drink of water!)

[Pray not only for repentance, but for faith to tell our stories as the woman did, even to people who used to make fun of her.]

Let’s pray together. *Dear Jesus, You were never too tired to listen to someone who needed someone to listen to her. We know You are listening to us now, too, as we ask forgiveness of our sins. [Allow silence.] We ask for Your love and faith as we seek to find and listen to people who need love. We ask that we will be kind enough to listen to their stories, instead of having to interrupt with our story. We also ask for the courage this woman had, to tell the story of what Jesus has done for us, even to people we don’t know well, or who have been making fun of us. Amen.*

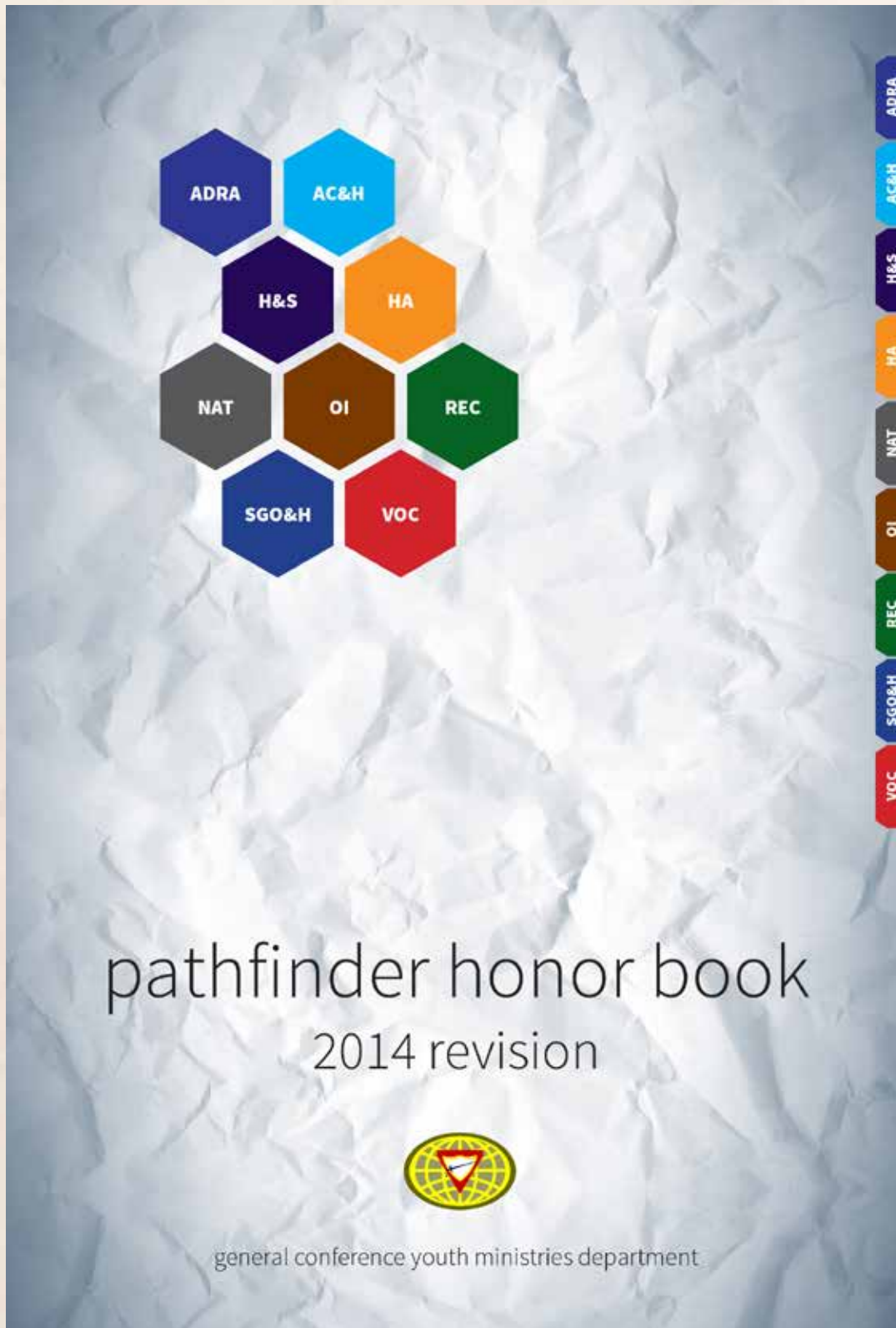
<http://oneyearinmission.org>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever made the same mistake over and over again? How did you feel? Might this be part of what the woman felt?
2. How can we be friends to people who look like they’re making the same mistakes over and over again?
3. What did Jesus do to reclaim this woman that we can do to reclaim others?

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DAY 6: The Demons Run

One of the most amazing stories that shows how much God wants all His children back—and will go to any lengths to reclaim them as His own—is the story of the one (or two) demon-possessed men on the other side of the Sea of Galilee.

In Matthew's gospel, which tells the story in chapter 8:28-34, there are two men. In the other two reports, in Mark 5:1-20 and Luke 8:26-39, there is only one man. You know how it is when you and some friends see something exciting—afterwards, when you tell your memories, everybody remembers a little differently. This is actually a good thing if someone (a judge, for instance) is trying to find out the actual truth. If two or more people claim to remember something *exactly* the same way, in our courts that is called a conspiracy and the officials know it can't be all completely true. It's a sign that people have gotten together to make sure their stories match because they are trying to hide something. One of the things that helps us to know the four gospel writers were really telling the truth as they remembered it is that there are some small differences.

So we don't actually know for sure if there were two men or one, but we are given far more details about the one and those are the details we will use in our story.

Imagine a dark, cloudy night, with no stars and a cold wind blowing. Outside of town, there is a cemetery with tombs where people are laid to rest to wait for Jesus to come again (although most people don't know that yet). From this cemetery, you can hear screams and howls. It's really scary!

Is the cemetery haunted? Of course not—people don't become ghosts after they die, running around haunting places! Well, then, is it evil spirits you hear? Yes, but in a certain way.

One or two men have been taken over by evil spirits and two different things cause the yelling and screaming. One is that the demons themselves sometimes use the voices of their victims. You'll see them do that in this story. However, what you are hearing is mostly the agony and torment of the men the demons have claimed. They would give anything to go back in time and make different choices from the ones they made, choices that gave the devil and his fallen angels access to them! They long to be free, but they don't know how.

Meanwhile, the townspeople wanted to be free of *them*! They were afraid of these men, so they made them live outside town and tied them up to make sure they stayed there. The men broke the ropes, so the people chained them with metal chains—and they broke those, too. At least one of the men even took stones and cut himself. Perhaps, in his insanity, he thought he could cut himself and get the spirits out. Perhaps he wanted to die. Whatever was left of this man (and you will see there is something left of the real person), on the inside, he believed there was no hope at all for him.

He didn't know that Jesus was on the way, taking a boat trip across the Sea of Galilee in a storm, only for one purpose—to reclaim these children of God.

Jesus and the disciples were tired. They had been preaching, teaching, and feeding huge crowds. Jesus had asked them to take Him across the lake, but in the boat, He fell asleep. Even a terrifying storm didn't wake Him. You remember the story—the disciples woke Him up, He told the storm to quit, and it did! So the disciples were already in a state of amazement when they arrived across the sea in this foreign place, called the land of the Gadarenes or Gerasenes. What was the first thing they saw? Crazy men, dressed in remnants of rags, with broken chains dangling, rushing toward them and screaming!

The Bible doesn't say, but the disciples probably started to turn around and jump back in their boat. Mrs. White says they “fled in terror” (*Desire of Ages*, p. 337). Not Jesus. This was why He'd come all that way in the long boat trip. He walked toward the men and at least one of them fell down on his knees screaming, “What business do we have with each other, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torment me!”

Now, who do you suppose was speaking? Was this the man, or the evil spirits? Was the man telling Jesus to go away and leave him alone? We would have no way of knowing, even if we had been there. We wouldn't have been able to hear his human voice underneath the voice of his tormentors, but Jesus reads hearts. He knew the man was still in there, somewhere, driven nearly out of his mind, but longing to be free. How can we know? Because Jesus set him free. He never forces Himself on anyone, so if the man had really meant for Him to go away, He would have done it.

Besides that, the screaming voice knew exactly who Jesus was, when He hadn't started proclaiming that yet.

“What is your name?” demanded Jesus sternly. His eyes, usually so kind, flashed with authority. He wasn't talking to the men.

The demons would rather not answer, but they couldn't disobey the Son of the Most High God, even in His human form. “My name is Legion,” the voice hissed,

“for we are many.” Imagine the state of that poor man! Bad enough to be possessed by one evil spirit, but a legion of them? “Legion” was a word Romans used to describe a large group of up to 5,400 soldiers.

Jesus, still looking stern, opened His mouth and the demons knew what was coming. “Don’t send us out of the country!” they begged. “Look! There is a herd of pigs! Let us go into the pigs!”

Jesus did. In seconds, the men were on the ground, blinking, hardly able to believe that they were free. The pigs were all going insane in their animal way, rushing down the hillside into the water, where they drowned.

Imagine the disciples’ feelings. They had seen Jesus cast out demons before, but not in such a dramatic way. Perhaps they had not yet experienced a case where many demons were in one or two people. Some of them must have gotten out some extra robes (or taken off their outer ones) because when the townspeople came to see what the herdsmen were yelling about, they saw these men sitting “clothed and in their right minds”. Jesus was sitting with the men and talking with them. What a change! The men were calm, intelligent, and most likely tearful with relief and gratitude.

Surely the people stumbled to a stop in confusion, hardly able to believe their eyes. It must have taken a minute, a few head-shakings and murmurs of disbelief, before they found their voices and told Jesus to leave. What a difference between these people and the ones in Sychar, the town of the woman at the well! There, they had invited Him to stay and after two days, they had believed in Him as Messiah. Here, they didn't even want to hear what Jesus had to say.

However, Jesus loved them, too and He had a plan. He had reclaimed two of His sinful children. Perhaps He could get more than that. As He and His followers turned to go, the men grabbed His sleeve. "Oh, sir! Please let us come with you!"

Maybe Jesus put His hands on their shoulders as He smiled lovingly into their new, calm, peaceful faces. "No," He said and before they could voice their disappointment, He explained that he had work for them to do. "Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19). Jesus knew that the demons had first gotten power over these men because of choices they had made. He knew they knew it, too. That is what He meant by "mercy".

The men took deep breaths. How they longed to travel with Jesus. Still, here was a chance to be missionaries for Him, to share their stories with anyone they could—to help others make better choices. "Your people" could have meant their own families. Only God knows how long it had been since they'd been able to talk with their families or show them any love. Only God knows whether they were loving people before they were possessed. Certainly they had become involved in sin in order for this demon possession to take place.

Mrs. White says:

The two restored demoniacs were the first missionaries whom Christ sent to preach the gospel in the region of Decapolis. For a few moments only these men had been privileged to hear the teachings of Christ. Not one sermon from His lips had ever fallen upon their ears. They could not instruct the people as the disciples who had been daily with Christ were able to do. But they bore in their own persons the evidence that Jesus was the Messiah. They could tell what they knew; what they themselves had seen, and heard, and felt of the power of Christ. This is what everyone can do whose heart has been touched by the grace of God. [Desire of Ages, p. 340]

Do you know something about Jesus—something you know yourself, not just what your parents or teachers or the pastor have said? Have you had some prayer answered, or received peace and courage when you needed it? It might seem like a small thing to you, but you never know when your story might be exactly what a friend needs to hear. You, too, can help reclaim God's children. He wants us *all* back!

Let's pray together. *Dear God, this sounds like a scary story. We would probably have been like the disciples, running in fear from people who need Your help. We are sorry! Help us to have loving hearts like you and in difficult or frightening cases, help us to be able to hear Your voice above the frightening voices we might hear. Help us to share our stories, just like the healed men did, so we, too, can be missionaries for you. We commit ourselves to that now. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever seen people so much in the power of Satan that they couldn't control themselves? It doesn't have to be actual demon possession. Drugs and alcohol, for example, can cause the same kind of thing and they are definitely used by Satan to keep people out of their right minds so God can't use them.
2. Do you know someone who was reclaimed by God? Can you share ways God has worked in your life and brought peace and joy where there was fear, anger, or confusion?
3. Have you ever felt that you had no control over yourself? How did God help you in that situation?

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DAY 7: A Friendship Reclaimed

Almost always when one of God's children wanders from the path, there are human consequences, too, and when God sets out to reclaim His child, human hearts will be blessed. There is a story in the Bible about three men who were friends with each other as well as friends of God, and who nearly lost that friendship over some serious disagreements they had. God always wants us back and the Holy Spirit worked in many ways over the course of two or more years, so the friendship was saved. Even more important, some essential work was done for God and all His children.

Do you remember the apostle Paul—how he started out as a serious persecutor of Christians and ended up being a serious worker for God? The main thing Paul did for the rest of his life after God reclaimed him was travel around his area of the world. He, usually with some other people, would go to different places and tell the story of Jesus life, death, and resurrection. When some people believed and were baptized, they would start a little church, usually in somebody's house. Paul would travel on to start new churches, but he always tried to get back around again to visit the churches he had started. In the meantime, he wrote them letters to let them know he was thinking of them and praying for them, as well as give advice and counsel about the troubles they might be having.

In Jerusalem, there was a woman whose home, Mrs. White says, was a safe place for disciples to gather, talk, pray, rest, and eat. Her son, John Mark, was there once when Paul and his partner, Barnabas, were there. John Mark, or Mark for short, listened to the missionaries talk and he got all excited. He wanted to be a missionary, too! What a wonderful life it must be, going all over the world and telling people about Jesus. He asked if he could go the next time they went out and they said yes. [*Acts of the Apostles*, p. 166-7]

Mark packed up, said good-bye to his family and friends, and they set out. Well, it was exciting, but not as wonderful as Mark expected! There was a sorcerer named Elymas who called himself the Son of Jesus (not necessarily meaning our Jesus, though). He gave them a lot of trouble and said they faked their miracles and things like that. By the grace of God, they got out of that one and left some believers in that city.

Then they kept traveling. Mrs. White describes their journey like this:

"Their way was toilsome; they encountered hardships and privations, and were beset with dangers on every side. In the towns and cities through which they passed, and along the lonely highways, they were surrounded by dangers seen and unseen. But Paul and Barnabas had learned to trust God's power to deliver..."
(Acts of the Apostles, p. 169.2)

Mark hadn't had all the experience that Paul and Barnabas did. It was bad enough what happened with Elymas, but their troubles grew and grew. Mark remembered thinking the missionary life would be wonderful. It didn't feel so wonderful. It was hard and frightening, and sometimes they didn't have enough food or people made fun of them or threw stones as they passed. Mark decided maybe he wasn't cut out for this after all.

He quit and went back home.

If somebody quits a job when it's half done, other people are inconvenienced and upset. Both Barnabas and Paul (and maybe Mark's mother, too, when he got home) were disappointed. They tried to convince the young man to keep on trying, but he refused and they had to let him go.

Paul was really angry. He was a very strong-willed, determined person. Before he'd understood about Jesus, he had never given up in his pursuit of the Christians that he thought deserved death. Now that he was a follower, nothing anybody said or did could stop him from doing what he believed God wanted him to do. People like that find the weaknesses of others hard to understand. To Paul, Mark was a quitter and didn't deserve to work for God.

However, Barnabas, whose name means "encourager", always tried to see the best in people and think the best of them that he could. Also, according to Colossians 4:10, Mark was his cousin and perhaps Barnabas

felt responsible for him. He said that Mark was just young and inexperienced, that he should get another chance. “He felt anxious that Mark should not abandon the ministry, for he saw in him qualifications that would fit him to be a useful worker for Christ” [Acts of the Apostles, p. 170.]

Well, a few years later, the chance arose. Lots had happened. The young church was growing beyond anybody's expectations (except God's!). There had been a big council in Jerusalem (kind of like a General Conference session) and the leaders had made some decisions about the rules that would be required of Gentiles as opposed to the rules for Jews. Paul had spent some time in Antioch and now he wanted to go back to check on his new churches. “Let's go back and visit each city where we previously preached the word of the Lord, to see how the new believers are doing,” he said to Barnabas (Acts 15:36).

Barnabas thought that was a great idea. He also thought it was a good time to give Mark a second chance. “Let's take him with us,” he urged Paul—but Paul was still angry. He was judging Mark “severely” Mrs. White says, [AA 170] and according to the Bible, “a sharp disagreement” arose between the two good friends. It was so sharp that they separated. Paul was so determined not to travel with Mark that he ended up not traveling with Barnabas, either!

Three good things came about in spite of this argument between friends. One was that Paul chose Silas to travel with, and the two of them had some major adventures together doing the work of God. It was Paul and Silas, you may remember, that sang all night in a prison, kept the prisoners from panicking or escaping during an earthquake, and led the jailer and his family to God.

The second good thing was that, as Mrs. White says, Barnabas “followed out his convictions” [AA 202] and took Mark with him. They went to Cyprus and this time Mark did, in fact, live up to Barnabas’ trust in him. He stayed faithful in his missionary work. The third good thing is that because of this, twice as much ground could be covered, twice as many people reached, in the same amount of time.

However, God was not satisfied. He wants His children to get along and He also wanted Paul to learn a gentler spirit. Even famous preachers or well-known Christians everybody may look up to can make mistakes. They can still learn new things. True Christians are humble enough to realize that, apologize, and make up. As time went on and Paul saw the good work that Mark did, he ended up reconciling with him (and Barnabas, too).

In fact, in his letter to the Colossians, Paul recommended Mark to them as a fellow worker for the kingdom of God and an encouragement to him (Col. 4:10,11). In his second letter to another young man, Timothy, he asked Timothy to pick up Mark and bring him when he came, because Mark was “useful to me for the ministry” (2 Tim. 4:11).

We are never told the story of how Paul and Mark (and we hope, Barnabas) got back together. Did they apologize and ask each other’s forgiveness? Did they pray together? How did it happen that Mark ended up not only ministering for God, but actually working with Paul? Was it a shock to those around them?

Here’s something to think about: we might not have Mark’s gospel of Jesus’ life if Paul had gotten his way and never allowed Mark to work for God again. It’s even possible that Mark might have decided not to be a Christian anymore. Now, it’s important to understand that each of us is responsible for *our own* choices before God, so if Mark had made an extreme decision like that, it would not have been Paul’s fault, but he might have contributed to it.

Of course, it’s also possible that Mark might still have written his gospel, even if he wasn’t allowed to be a missionary, or that Barnabas’ encouragement would have made all the difference even if Paul never came to recognize his mistake. That encouragement was more than just in attitudes or words. Mrs. White says that “under the blessing of God, and the wise training of Barnabas, [Mark] developed into a valuable worker” [AA 170].

The important thing to know is that our actions have an effect on others, sometimes much more than we think. It’s very discouraging to be judged harshly, especially by someone we look up to. We can be the judge, like Paul, or we can be the peacemaker, like Barnabas. Which would you rather be?

[Pray for the ability to be peacemakers and to help others, as well as ourselves, live up to their potential.]

Let's pray. Dear God, thank You for working to get that important early friendship back together, serving You. If we have friends or family members we need to make peace with, we pray about that now. [Allow silence—a little longer than usual, since this may require more inner “talking” with God.] We pray that we will not lose our tempers, or that if we do, we will repent. We pray that we may be peacemakers like Barnabas, even when something is not our fault. We thank You for Your endless patience and for the fact that You work through faulty human beings! In Jesus' name, Amen.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever felt like Mark?
2. Has something been harder than you thought and you've quit, or wanted to?
3. How did other people react? Which helped you more—someone who told you what you had done wrong (sometimes necessary), or someone who helped you to do better?
4. How can you be a peacemaker instead of a judge?

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DAY 8: A Reclaimed Heart

For our last story, we'll look at a special one, about one of Jesus' best friends who loved Him very much, but still made big mistakes. Because God reclaimed this man and welcomed him back with open arms, thousands of people heard the story of Jesus and will be in heaven to thank him.

It all started out so well! Andrew, son of John (most Bibles say Jonas or Jona), was present when John the Baptist pointed to a Man and called out, "Behold (or Look!), the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is the Son of God" (John 1:29, 34).

Andrew's heart raced. This was it! The Messiah had come! He and another fisherman friend, John son of Zebedee, followed the Man and learned that His name was Jesus. They stayed with him that day and probably asked Him all kinds of questions. They must have been convinced, because after that, Andrew rushed to find his brother, Simon. "Hurry, hurry, we've found the Messiah!"

Simon dropped what he was doing and ran to meet Jesus. Ellen White says:

"Simon waited for no second bidding. He also had heard the preaching of John the Baptist, and he hastened to the Saviour. The eye of Christ rested upon him, reading his character and his life history. His impulsive nature, his loving, sympathetic heart, his ambition and self-confidence, the history of his fall, his repentance, his labors, and his martyr death, the Saviour read it all..." (Desire of Ages, p. 139).

Peter must have been amazed when Jesus looked at him, smiled as if He knew all about him, and said, ""Your name is Simon, son of John—but you will be called Cephas" (which means "Peter")." (John 1:42).

Simon (or Peter), Andrew, John, Philip and Nathanael became Jesus' first followers. They would go to hear Jesus preach whenever they could. Between those times, they went back home and kept working, catching and selling fish to support their families, mending nets, repairing boats, doing all the things busy fishermen do. Little by little, Jesus' followers grew in number. People came by the hundreds and then by the thousands to hear Him. Peter probably liked being known as one of Jesus' admirers. He talked about His teachings among his friends

and family. Then one day something happened that changed everything. Luke 5 tells the story. [Read or have someone read Luke 5:1-11.]

From this point, Peter and Andrew, as well as James and John, Zebedee's sons, left their jobs and followed Jesus full time. Don't you think that would have been scary? How were they to pay their bills and feed their families? You can see why Jesus said, "Don't be afraid." He was saying that the men could trust God to take care of them and their families if they did what God called them to do.

One of the most famous stories about Peter shows both his great faith and how quickly it could fade. Jesus came to the disciples walking on the water and they were all terrified, thinking it was a ghost. Jesus called reassuringly, "Don't be afraid; it's just Me!"

Well, that was enough for Peter. He said, "Lord, let me walk on water, too!" When Jesus said, "Okay, come," Peter did! We are quick to criticize him for turning to see if his friends were watching and falling in, but he did walk on water! Have you done that? When he began to sink, he did the right thing, too. He cried out, "Lord, save me!" and Jesus pulled him out, saying gently, "You have so little faith, why did you doubt me?" (Matt. 14:25-33).

It wasn't long after this that Jesus asked, "Who are people saying that I am?" The disciples told Him that some thought He was John the Baptist, Jeremiah, Elijah, or some other prophet. "But who do *you* say I am?" Jesus asked.

Then Peter gave the best answer of his whole life. "*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*" Jesus replied, "You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being." (Matt. 16:16, 17).

Peter was one of the three disciples Jesus chose to be His inner circle, training them for leadership when He would leave them.

Peter saw Jesus raise Jairus' daughter up from death. He saw Jesus transfigured on the Mount of Olives, and Moses and Elijah talking with Him. You would think all this would make Peter realize how much he needed and depended on Jesus, and probably he did, at least some of the time. However, Peter was easily distracted.

The story begins to turn sad in Luke 22.

Just a couple of nights before Jesus died, Peter was one of those who went to prepare the upper room for Jesus and the followers to share the Passover meal. Maybe he was the one who forgot to hire someone to wash their feet from all the dust of the city streets and the miles they walked all the time. He *could* have been the one who put a towel around his own waist and offered to wash his friends' feet. Can you imagine how that might have changed the story? Still, he didn't. He was shocked when Jesus did just that.

And when Jesus came to wash his feet, Peter (intending to be respectful) said, "Oh, no, Lord! You can't wash my feet!"

Jesus replied, "If I don't wash your feet, you can't be My follower."

Good old Peter! He made one of his instant about-faces and exclaimed, "Then wash my head and hands, too!" He meant to say that he wanted to follow Jesus all the time, in all places, with all of himself. Jesus just smiled and said that wasn't necessary, only the feet. That same night, He warned Peter that, in fact, he wasn't as strong a follower as he thought he was:

"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift each of you like wheat. But I have pleaded in prayer for you, Simon, that your faith should not fail. So when you have repented and turned to me again, strengthen your brothers."

Peter said, "Lord, I am ready to go to prison with you, and even to die with you."

But Jesus said, "Peter, let me tell you something. Before the rooster crows tomorrow morning, you will deny three times that you even know me." (Luke 22:31-34).

The Bible doesn't show Peter really taking this warning seriously. He just said, "No, Lord, even if everybody else falls away, I won't! I'm ready to die with you!" These words were going to come back and hurt Peter.

When Jesus went on to give all the counsels and warnings and encouragements that are recorded in John 13 through 16, and when He prayed for all His followers (including us today!) in John 17, Peter must not have been paying too much attention. He was coming closer and closer to the low point in his life... and he didn't even know it.

At the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asked Peter, James, and John to go further than the others and pray with Him... but they slept. Jesus woke them up once. He even begged Peter, by name, to stay awake with him... but Peter went back to

sleep. When Jesus was arrested, Peter pulled out a sword and chopped off the high priest's servant's ear. He was trying to help! I wonder what he thought when Jesus rebuked him, healed the ear, and just gave Himself up to the men who arrested him. Perhaps Peter was too busy being angry at Judas' betrayal to think about whether he was about to do the same thing.

Now we come to the saddest story of all: in the courtyard, with Jesus on trial for His life, Peter said — three times, just as Jesus predicted — *"I don't know Him!"* He also swore to prove it.

The Bible says when Peter heard the rooster crow and realized what he had done, "he went out and wept bitterly". Mrs. White says that in Gethsemane, *"on the very spot where Jesus had poured out His soul in agony to His Father, Peter fell upon his face, and wished that he might die"* (*Desire of Ages*, p. 713).

Peter wouldn't have cared so much if he hadn't loved Jesus. He hadn't meant to hurt his beloved Teacher, but he also hadn't gotten prepared through prayer, as Jesus urged him to do. Nobody can stand against the temptations of Satan, especially when it seems that life itself might be at stake, if we aren't spending our time and energy in prayer for God's strength and courage.

Peter cried. He probably thought he could never be forgiven. He certainly didn't think he deserved to be forgiven, but forgiveness is not something you deserve. It's something God gives freely. Jesus even prayed for the priests who condemned him and the soldiers who tortured him to be forgiven.

At dawn when Jesus rose from the dead, one of His first thoughts was of Peter. When the women came and found the tomb empty, this is what the angel said: [Read or have someone read Mark 16:5-7.] When the women ran and told the men Jesus was alive, Peter and John ran all the way to the tomb. Peter was the first one to enter the empty tomb. Imagine how he felt when he saw the grave clothes neatly folded! Did you know that in 1 Corinthians 15:5, when Paul is describing the things that happened after Jesus rose, he says that Jesus first appeared to Peter? We don't have that story. We can only imagine what they might have said to each other.

However, we do have a really important story in John 21. When we are confused and don't know what else to do, we often turn to something familiar that we feel we know how to do well. For Peter, that was fishing. He and some of those first followers of Jesus were together, and Peter said, "I'm going fishing." The others said they would go, too. They usually did their best fishing at night, but that night they didn't catch a thing. At daybreak, somebody on shore called out, "Didn't you catch anything?"

“No,” they called back.

“Throw the net on the other side of the boat,” called the voice. Well, why not? They tried it, just in case. The net got so full of fish they couldn’t pull it into the boat. John looked at Peter and their eyes got wide. “It’s the Lord!” gasped John.

Peter was always a man of action. He jumped in and swam to shore. Jesus had a fire going. “Bring some of that fish over,” He said. Peter went back and helped pull the net to land, and Jesus cooked them fish and bread for breakfast.

Nobody was saying anything. Can you imagine how shy they felt? They’d watched Jesus die horribly! Even though He’d shown Himself to them twice before, they probably still couldn’t quite believe it! They ate and probably looked and looked at Jesus, who still had His scars, but seemed completely happy and at peace.

[Read or have someone read John 15:1-17.]

Three times Peter had sworn he didn’t even know Jesus. Three times Jesus asked if Peter loved Him, and so helped him to rebuild his love and confidence. He also gave Peter a job it wouldn’t have been safe to give the old Simon: feeding the lambs and sheep—that is, new believers. Peter would now understand and have compassion on people who stumbled and made mistakes, even big ones. He had learned to be not only a fisher of people, but a shepherd. Here is what he had to write to leaders in the early church, some years later:

“To the elders among you... Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be... And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away” (1 Peter 5:1-4, NASB).

Every single one of us on this earth has fallen away from God and His high ideal for us. Since Adam and Eve, we’ve walked the opposite direction from the way God wants us to go. Fortunately, God always allows U-turns and He longs to welcome every little lamb to come back home. He came to earth to get us back—to reclaim us. One of these days, He will come to take us all home for good! He is waiting and waiting so that as many people as possible will turn back to Him. Peter says:

The Lord isn’t really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent... You already know these things, dear friends. So be on guard; then you will not be carried away by the errors of these wicked people and lose

your own secure footing... Rather, you must grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. All glory to him, both now and forever! Amen. (2 Peter 3:9, 17)

I want to turn back when I fall away. I want to live with Jesus now, in my heart, and live with Him forever in heaven! Don't you?

[Leader: You may wish to ask for a show of hands, or for people to stand, or come to the front, if they want to commit themselves to living with Jesus, now and forever. There could be some extra people to pray with individuals, if they wish it. Then pray something like this:]

Dear God, You are such a wonderful God! You never give up on us even when we make the same mistakes over and over, or even when we give up on ourselves! We have been asking You all this week to forgive our sins, to help us turn back to You in any ways that we have wandered, and to help us to be a help to others in coming to You. Tonight, we thank You for all the blessings of this week, and we ask You to take our hearts and our renewed promises to live with You. We are glad we don't have to depend on our own human abilities! You will be with us every second, helping us to know what to do, including how to repent and ask forgiveness if we fail. We love You and we want to belong to You forever! Praise Your name! Amen.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever been embarrassed or afraid to admit you know Jesus? What happened? What did you do? How did you feel?
2. Tell about a time you changed your mind and turned back to Jesus. How did you feel then?

CREATING YOUR OWN Prayer Notebook

We highly recommend that you create a **Prayer Notebook** because in a few days, weeks, months, and even years, you can look back and reflect on the different ways that God has answered your prayer requests.

1. **GET A NOTEBOOK/3-RING BINDER.** Any notebook or binder will do, as long as it has paper and no writing in it. It could be an exercise book, loose-leaf writing paper, or a diary with a decent amount of pages in it, at least 75 so it will last for a year (around 4 days a page).
2. **FIND A HIDING SPOT.** God doesn't want you to show off your praying, so don't go bragging about it. You will be writing down your prayers in here, even the personal ones that you don't want anyone else knowing about. It's good if no one ever knows where your journal is. It is even better if they don't even know that it exists. You cannot find something you're not looking for. If any family members find out about it, (you don't want them to know all your secrets) tell them politely to not read it and not tell anyone else about your journal. Tell them that it is very special and that you would appreciate it if it all will be between God and you.
3. **WRITE AN ENTRY.** It doesn't matter how you write it. Just write it. Make sure to begin each entry with the date, then the request. Leave 2-3 lines after each entry to write when the prayer is answered—lightly cross it out, add the answer and the date it was answered.

When you're writing, don't leave out anything. Just say your prayer that is going through your mind. Later on you'll want to remember what was happening on the day you wrote. Write exactly what you would say if you were talking to Him face to face. Just talk to God. Yes, this is where you can share all your goals, dreams, and desires that God has placed in your heart and watch Him work in your life.

TIP: Your prayer notebook is like saying a prayer to God. Don't keep repeating the same words, to be "praying" for an extremely long time, pointlessly — *"God's ear is not deaf nor is His arm too short to help us"* (Isaiah 59:1)

"And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him." (Matthew 6:8)

So, have faith that God knows and hears, as Jesus commanded.

4. **ANSWERED PRAYERS.** Every now and again, maybe monthly or quarterly, go back and read your notebook. Make sure to write down any answers you've received. You will realize that prayer works. When God has answered your prayer, sometimes you will know, but other times you wouldn't know since it may be different from what you wanted or expect.

Those of you who are tech-savvy just google "creating a prayer journal or prayer notebook" and get ideas to create your own. You can even turn your calendar on your phone or computer into a prayer notebook.

Below are two helpful websites in creating your own prayer notebook.

How to Make a Faith Notebook:

<http://thesethreegirlies.blogspot.com/2012/01/pages-of-faith.html>

Greeting Card Prayer Box:

<http://www.inlieuofpreschool.com/greeting-card-prayer-box/>

Let's face It!

The idea of doing something without monetary compensation may be foreign to many youth, especially if they are not from a family or part of a church or group that makes giving back to the community a part of their lifestyle.

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