

Small Group Guide THE FABRIC OF FAITH

The Church at Brook Hills

Dr. Jim Shaddix

February 23, 2014

Luke 1:5-25,57-80

Use this resource as a tool to help Christ-followers move forward in their spiritual growth. To do this well requires that the Small Group Leader is building a relationship with the individuals in the small group and has identified where the people are in their relationship with God. Are they Christ-followers? Are they growing in Christ? If so, in what areas do they need to grow further? As disciple-makers, Small Group Leaders shepherd people to know the truth of Scripture, to understand why it matters, and to apply it to their lives. Small Group Leaders come alongside those whom they disciple to discover how loving God, loving each other, and loving those not yet in the Kingdom should shape how they live. The structure of this resource coincides with moving people from knowledge (Main Truth) to understanding (Why It Matters) to application (Now What Do We Do?). Utilize this Small Group Guide as a flexible teaching tool to inform your time together and not as a rigid task list.

GETTING STARTED

Before Small Group

Readings for February 24-March 2

Exodus 7-13

Luke 10-16

Where We Are In The Story ~ Old Testament (Exodus)

Background of Exodus: The title “exodus” comes from the Greek word meaning “going out” or “departure” and describes the major event that occurs in the book. Exodus opens where Genesis leaves off – the descendants of Abraham are living in Egypt instead of in the Promised Land. The events in Exodus occur approximately four hundred years after Jacob’s family moved to Egypt, and as prophesied in Genesis 15, Abraham’s descendants became slaves. While Genesis highlights God as Creator, Exodus focuses on God as the Deliverer of His people, for He keeps His promise to free His people and to bring them back to the land of promise.

Structure of Exodus:

- Exodus 1-18 focuses on the deliverance of the people Israel from Egypt and God’s provision for His people.
- Exodus 18-24 explains God’s covenant with Israel.
- Exodus 25-31 provides instructions for the construction of the Tabernacle and explanation for the priestly role.
- Exodus 32-34 describes God’s response to His people’s idolatry.
- Exodus 35-40

This Week in the Old Testament: Exodus 7-10 contains descriptions of the ten plagues that God sent to deliver Israel and to judge Egypt for oppressing God’s people. Numbers 33:1-4 also explains that God destroyed all of the gods of Egypt through the plagues. The gods of Egypt were all tied to their economy – the Nile River, the livestock, the sun, etc. The plagues were not chosen at random; they specifically targeted what the Egyptians worshipped and how they made money. Through the plagues, God showed Himself as more powerful than any man or god, which is why God reiterates with the plagues that through them “you shall know that I am the LORD.”

The final plague, the Passover, resulted in the release of God’s people. When God gave Moses the instructions for this event, He did so with a view towards a greater meaning of the Passover. While God used this plague to deliver the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, He also designed it to point to Jesus Christ, the ultimate Passover Lamb whose blood enables those who trust in Him and turn from their sin to escape God’s judgment and to find freedom from slavery to sin (1 Cor. 5:7-8). After the Exodus, God instructed the Israelites

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to celebrate the Passover each year in order to remember God's redemption of His people – redemption that occurred through the shedding of a lamb's blood.

In Exodus 13, God instructs the Israelites to celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread for seven days after the Passover. The Jews recognized that leaven symbolized sin, and before the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the people were to clean out all of the leaven from their homes (Ex. 12:19). This spring cleaning was meant to be symbolic of the purity that is to come after redemption. For Israel, this feast signified the results of their deliverance. They were to remove from their lives all of the corrupting influences of Egypt. After the Exodus, the Israelites continued with this feast as a reminder of the purity that should follow being delivered by God.

Where We Are In The Story ~ New Testament (Luke)

Background of Luke: In Luke 1: 1-4, Luke explains why he wrote this book – for his friend Theophilus (and for us) to have certainty regarding the identity of Jesus and the beliefs that Christ-followers commit themselves to. While Matthew focuses on Jesus as the Promised Messiah and Mark emphasizes that He is the Son of God, Luke depicts Jesus as Savior.

This Week in the New Testament: Jesus came “to seek and to save what was lost” (Lk. 19:10), and by featuring Jesus' interactions with three unlikely groups of people (the poor, the sinners, and the Gentiles), Luke shows that Jesus came to save all types of people – not just the Jews. These three groups were on the fringes of Jewish society, but Jesus chose to interact with them despite the comments of the Jewish religious leaders. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:25-37), Jesus portrays the righteous person as a *Samaritan*, and despite the racial prejudice between Jews and Samaritans, Jesus teaches that His followers should love and care for all people, including those who are different from themselves. Through the three parables of Luke 15, especially the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus expresses God's delight in saving sinners. If God finds such delight in recovering the lost, how can His followers refuse to welcome sinners who respond to God's invitation?

Luke also addresses the subject of wealth and how it can either be used to advance God's purposes or to distract disciples from obeying Christ. The parable of the rich fool and its subsequent teachings clearly warn believers of the folly of living for earthly things (Lk. 12:13-34). In the parable of the wedding feast (Lk. 14:1-24), the reasons people give for rejecting the banquet invitation include possessions and human relationships, and this points to the importance of Christ-followers orienting their life around following Christ and not the things of this world. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus reinforces the meaningless of wealth in comparison to eternity (Lk. 16:19-31). As followers of Christ, do we hold our money and possessions with a light grip, or are we foolishly living for money and possessions when they will not last? As Luke 16:13 states, “You cannot serve God and money.”

During Small Group

Welcome – *Incorporate time for greeting one another, enjoying any refreshments, and making announcements. If guests are visiting, make introductions and help them feel welcomed. Ask for their contact information, so you can follow up with them.*

Looking Back – *Provide an opportunity for small group members to share what God is teaching them, how they are applying what they are learning, and how He has given them opportunities to share the gospel with others. This can be done as a whole group or in smaller groups. Do the people know each other well enough to share more than surface level information? How can time together be used to foster deeper relationships among those in the small group? Also, what are the struggles and needs of the people in the small group? How can the people in the small group sacrificially serve each other?*

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Looking Up – Hold prayer as fundamental to small group time rather than supplemental to it. Give adoration and thanksgiving to God in prayer. Submit yourself to Him, confessing sin. Petition God for personal needs and other requests. Pray for the disciple-making efforts of those in the group and for the salvation of the lost in each other's families, spheres of influence, and in the world. The Weekly Prayer Focus below can also be incorporated in the group's prayer time.

Weekly Prayer Focus (from Our Worship Guide)

- *Pray for Our Lives: Praise God for His good gift of salvation by grace through faith. Ask Him to continuously strengthen our faith as we grow in our dependence upon Him. Pray we will all trust in the faithfulness of God regardless of what circumstances of life we might find ourselves in. Praise God for His mercy and ask Him to make us merciful toward others. Ask the Spirit to convict us of any sin and to lead us to obedience. Pray our faithful lives will serve as living testimonies to others of the faithfulness of God.*
- *Pray for Our City: This week we are praying for the health clinic hosted today from 1:00-5:00 p.m. by Brook Hills Hispanic Congregation in partnership with Cahaba Valley Health Care. We are also praying for Brook Hills Hispanic Congregation and Eduardo Torres, Pastor.*
- *Pray for Our World: This week we are praying for Brook Hills Long-Termer, Jenny W., serving in East Asia. Jenny was commissioned out from Brook Hills this past year. Jenny serves at a large hospital and works, lives, and makes disciples among unreached people groups in East Asia. Join us this week as we pray for Jenny. This week we are also praying for the Hakka peoples of China. For more information and ways to pray, visit brookhills.org/weeklyresources.*

MAIN TRUTH

Message Outline

The Fabric of Faith Luke 1:5-25; 57-80

The thread of salvation...

- Desperation for salvation (5)
- Prayer for salvation (9-10)
- Promise of salvation (14-17)
- Assurance of salvation (18-23)

The thread of suffering...

- Desperation for a son (7)
- Prayer for a son (13)
- Promise of a son (13-14)
- Assurance of a son (18-23)

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- Celebration of a son (57-58)
- Celebration of salvation (59-80)

Living in the fabric of faith...

1. Don't expect a pass on suffering for living right. (5-7)
2. Look for God's redemptive plan in your suffering. (8-17)
3. Don't expect God's ways to always make sense. (18-23)
4. Rejoice in God's mercy more than your blessing. (24-25,57-58)
5. Refuse to compromise obedience to God's words. (59-63)
6. Connect the dots for others by celebrating God's salvation. (64-80)

Message Summary

Within the narrative of Christ's advent lies the story of John the Baptist's birth. John, the man God had chosen to send to Israel to prepare the way for Jesus' coming, was also born from a place of divine miracles. John's birth happened in such a way that only God could be responsible for it. It was part of His greater picture to redeem humankind. It also came, however, from a place of suffering for John's parents Zechariah and Elizabeth. After walking through decades without children, the two found themselves advanced in age and staring at a future that could not possibly include children.

Despite the righteous way they lived, Zechariah and Elizabeth found themselves praying desperate prayers to God for a child. Their prayers were not answered in the way they had desired but, ultimately, were answered in a way that was an integral part of God's redemptive plan for Israel and the whole world. In their times of pain, they likely could not have imagined God's plan for their lives and how it was woven into His story of salvation for humankind.

Zechariah and Elizabeth's story does not appear solely to encourage those who are enduring suffering. Primarily, God ordained it to tell us a part of God's story of salvation. As we see how their story is part of God's overarching story, we can be encouraged and hopeful that God is also sovereignly weaving our stories as part of His plan of salvation. Following Christ indicates that our lives are part of His purpose; therefore, all aspects from celebration to suffering are part of God's Greater Story, even if it doesn't make sense to our finite minds.

WHY IT MATTERS

Digging Deeper

As the leader, there are at least three directions the small group can take in light of the current Bible reading plan. Knowing the people in the group, prayerfully consider what would be the best route to help those in your group grow. The group's meetings could also vary with each week, so if one week's sermon prompts a lot of thought and discussion, option one could be what the group does that week while the next week could be

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different. As the leader, feel the freedom to take all or just some of the content in this guide and do what is best for your group.

- Using the discussion questions below, the small group time can focus on discussing the sermon and how to apply it.
- The group can discuss the Bible readings from the past week. If choosing this route, ensure that the group does not simply discuss information but also focuses on how to apply what they have learned from the Bible readings. The information in the “Where We Are in the Story” section can assist the leader in knowing the background and context for the readings.
- Using the REAP (read, examine, apply, pray) outline for studying Scripture, the group can take one or both passages from that day’s readings and discuss them. So if the group meets on Monday, then you could pick one or both of the passages for Monday. This also helps those who are new to studying the Bible or who struggle with reading it learn how to do so. To assist the group with REAP questions, download the Guide to Personal Worship from brookhills.org.

Many religious teachers today present the idea that God simply desires happiness for all people and that a life lived for God results in success and prosperity. However, when we look at the lives of those who followed God in the Bible, they teem with suffering and hardship, often precisely because they were following God. Lead your group to think about the hardships that people like Hosea, Paul, John the Baptist, and Jesus faced, particularly in light of their obedience to God. In addition, droves of believers across the world today face intense persecution and death because they decided to follow Christ. Discuss how these truths impact our theology of suffering.

Many times, suffering leads us to a place of questioning God’s character. How could a God who loves us ordain suffering? There may be people in your group who are wrestling with this question and others like it. Are not our greatest problems with suffering often a result of our own expectations of God and our own demands of Him? Why is it important, then, that we develop a solid theology of God and suffering prior to experiencing it? How can you help those in your small group be transparent about their struggles while also helping them remain faithful to the truth of God?

Knowing that suffering is under the sovereign hand of God can be messy in terms of our human understanding. Knowing that God can cause mountains to move but finding ourselves suffocating under the unmoving weight of the mountain can bring us to a great crisis of faith. We come to a place of spiritual wilderness, where our perspective becomes limited to our own personal world and where God does not fit into our logical confines. It is easy in this time to separate our life’s story and the everyday “stuff” of our lives from the story of God’s redemption of the world. Why is it so difficult to see that our lives are part of a bigger picture and that our suffering may be a vital part of our story? Invite any members of your group (or yourself) to share how a time of suffering became a visible part of God’s story of redemption. Lead your group to realize that it is a game-changer when we see our lives as part of God’s bigger story. How would our lives change if we consistently believed every aspect of our lives were part of something bigger?

NOW WHAT DO WE DO?

Group Discussion & Application

Use the following questions to help review the application of God’s Word to our Head (What does God want me to know?), to our Heart (What does God want me to desire/value?), and to our Hands (What does God want me to do?).

- How did Luke describe Zechariah and Elizabeth’s life? Did Luke indicate that their suffering through barrenness was in any way connected to sinfulness or a lack of faith on their part?

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- On the contrary, how does Zechariah and Elizabeth's story indicate that their suffering through infertility was an ordained and sovereign plan of God for His glory?
- Why does the thought of God ordaining suffering in our lives often make us uncomfortable? What does it indicate about our view of the purpose of the Christian life and of God's role in our lives? What theological errors do we need to correct in light of these truths?
- "Our story is God's story." How does this truth impact the way that we deal with our personal struggles?
- Why is it difficult to focus on anything except ourselves when we are in the midst of deep, personal suffering? Why is such an internal focus dangerous to our relationship with the Lord, to our faith, and to our witness?
- What are some practical questions that we can ask ourselves to help us look for God's redemptive plan in the midst of our struggles? Why are trusted friends helpful to enlist as support when we are undergoing trials?
- Zechariah and Elizabeth's prayers were answered in a dramatic and miraculous way. But that is not how God always answers our prayers. At times, He answers by showing His incredible strength in our lives as we endure weakness. How does this affect the way we pray for others and ourselves? How should we pray in light of these varying possibilities?
- Zechariah and Elizabeth share similar (but not exact) circumstances with Abraham and Sarah barrenness and miraculous births. One couple demonstrated obedience in God's promise and another demonstrated disobedience, which led to more suffering. How are we prone to take matters into our own hands like Abraham and Sarah instead of remaining faithful to God's commands and promises?
- How do we often display that we believe our circumstances caught God off guard or are events that He did not plan for?
- How did Elizabeth and Zechariah praise God for giving their son more than they praised the gift of their son? How did this demonstrate a proper perspective of their gift and of the Giver?
- Why is it easy to let the object of a prayer become an idol in our spiritual lives? What steps can we put in place to keep our relationship with God the priority of our faith instead of our own desires and happiness?
- In light of today's discussion, why can we be thankful for suffering? How should our response to suffering change if we view it as part of God's greater story of redemption?
- How can we be sensitive to the pain and needs of others while also recognizing God's hand in redeeming pain?