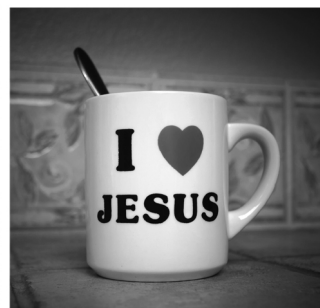




JUNIOR HIGH GROUP STUDY

THE NEW TESTAMENT

Additional Options



Published by Gospel Light
Ventura, California, U.S.A.
www.gospellight.com
Printed in the U.S.A.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Other version used is *NRSV*—Scripture quotations from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

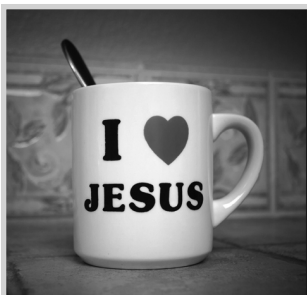
© 2000, 2001, 2010 Gospel Light.
All rights reserved.

Unit 1, “The Kingdom of God Is Near,” adapted from Pulse #5: *Followers of Jesus*.
Unit 2, “The Kingdom of God Is Growing,” adapted from Pulse #14: *Reaching Your World*.

Contributing writers: Kara Powell, PhD, Donna Fitzpatrick; Christi Goeser;
Jeff Mattesich; Laurie Polich; Siv Ricketts; John and Betsy Wilson.

Rights for publishing this book outside the U.S.A. or in non-English languages are administered by Gospel Light Worldwide, an international not-for-profit ministry. For additional information, please visit www.glww.org, email info@glww.org, or write to Gospel Light Worldwide, 1957 Eastman Avenue, Ventura, CA 93003, U.S.A.

To order copies of this book and other Gospel Light products in bulk quantities, please contact us at 1-800-446-7735.



SESSION I

MARY AND MARTHA: WHOLEHEARTED DEVOTION

STARTER

Chaos Relay. For this option, you need a five-minute timer, a dozen hard-boiled eggs, sturdy plastic spoons (one for each student), a box of saltine crackers, balls of yarn (one for each team), and candy or other goodies for prizes. (*Optional:* Squirt guns [or spray bottles] for the adult volunteers to use as distractions during the game.)

Greet students and divide them into teams of 6 to 10 students and have them stand in single-file lines. Distribute a spoon and two saltine crackers to each student, a ball of yarn to the last person in each team's line and an egg to the first person in each line.

Explain that when you give the signal, everybody is going to put the saltines in their mouths (let them know not to swallow the crackers), followed by the spoon *handles*. Use the spoons to pass the egg from the front person to the back, and at the same time, thread the ball of yarn under their shirts and out the neck from the last person to the front! (The person at the end of the line can tie the yarn to a belt loop or something equivalent as an anchor to start.) The teams are to continue passing the eggs and threading the yarn back and forth until you signal the end of the game.

Set the timer for five minutes and signal the start of the game. The team who passes the egg and the yarn the most times in the five-minute period wins

the prize. You will need adult volunteers to keep track of the number of times each team passes its egg and (if you choose the option) to squirt students with water as they try to pass the eggs.

When the game is done and the yarn is out of everyone's clothes, ask if anyone felt that there were too many things happening during the game. Was it a little too busy? Was it hard to keep track of everything?

Explain that life can be like this as well. School, TV, computers, sports, video games, music rehearsals, dance classes, movies, friends, homework, magazines, books, chores, sleeping—all these things take up time and energy. Sometimes, it can seem as if there is just too much going on to make time for God.

Transition to the next step by explaining that today you're going to look at how two not-so-famous followers of Christ learned the value of time and the best way to spend it.

MESSAGE

Making It All Fit. For this option, you need several Bibles, a large clear glass jar, sand or loose dirt, a few rocks to put in the jar and a large bowl.

Ahead of time, figure out how much sand and rocks you will need by placing the rocks in the jar (don't force too many in, but keep in mind that it should look pretty full). Next, scoop the sand into the jar over the rocks, shaking the jar gently as needed to fill the gaps between the rocks with the sand. Note that during the actual demonstration, it's best to shake the jar as little as possible. Fit as much sand in between the rocks as you can, and then empty the entire contents of the jar into the bowl. Remove the rocks and pour the sand back into the jar (it should fill the jar two thirds or so), and then try to add the rocks—they won't fit. If you want to be even trickier, experiment by adding water as well.

Ask for three volunteers who like to read out loud and give each volunteer a Bible (ideally the same version). Explain that four different followers of Jesus wrote accounts of His life, ministry, death and resurrection. We call these accounts "the Gospels," and they are the New Testament books of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. We often study one story at a time from these books, as we will do today, but it's important to remember that the stories we highlight from Jesus' life are small parts of His bigger story: the story of God's project to save the world.

Instruct the group to take turns reading from Luke 10:38-42, with each person reading only three words at a time until the passage is finished. Next, ex-

plain that Martha was having a problem because she was doing all the work and her sister Mary wasn't helping at all. There were many things that needed to be done, and no one was helping her. We can all probably relate to Martha—she was doing what she thought to be important work, and she most likely felt that if she didn't do it, it wouldn't get done. Mary, on the other hand, was not as concerned with the household chores. She was more concerned about their guest. Mary understood that Jesus was more important than preparing a big, fancy meal that took her away from Him. If Jesus is not our priority, we will put other things before Him, often not finding time for Him at all.

Illustrate the point by directing attention to the jar. Explain that the jar represents a person's life. Using the sand to illustrate, explain that this person fills his life (slowly pour sand into the jar) with all the stuff he needs to do: school, chores, homework, sports, choir practice, eating, sleeping. Yet he's not busy enough, so he throws in (continue pouring in more sand) youth group and other church activities and trips. His life is pretty full, isn't it? (Pause.) So, what about Jesus? Show students the rocks representing Jesus. This person can try to squeeze Jesus in (attempt to add all the rocks), looking for a spare minute here or there, but the reality is that he will never really be able to fit Jesus in if he does everything else first.

After this, pour out the contents of the jar into the bowl. Separate the rocks from the sand and explain that on the other hand, when we make Jesus our priority (place the rocks in the jar)—spending regular time with Him first, reading the Bible and learning about Him and what He wants for us, praying about our concerns and the concerns of others, confessing our sins to Him—we will see a *complete change* in our lives. As you add the sand, explain that the result may be surprising. As we put the other things in *after* Jesus—skateboarding, church activities, school, homework, choir, chores and everything else—it all fits.

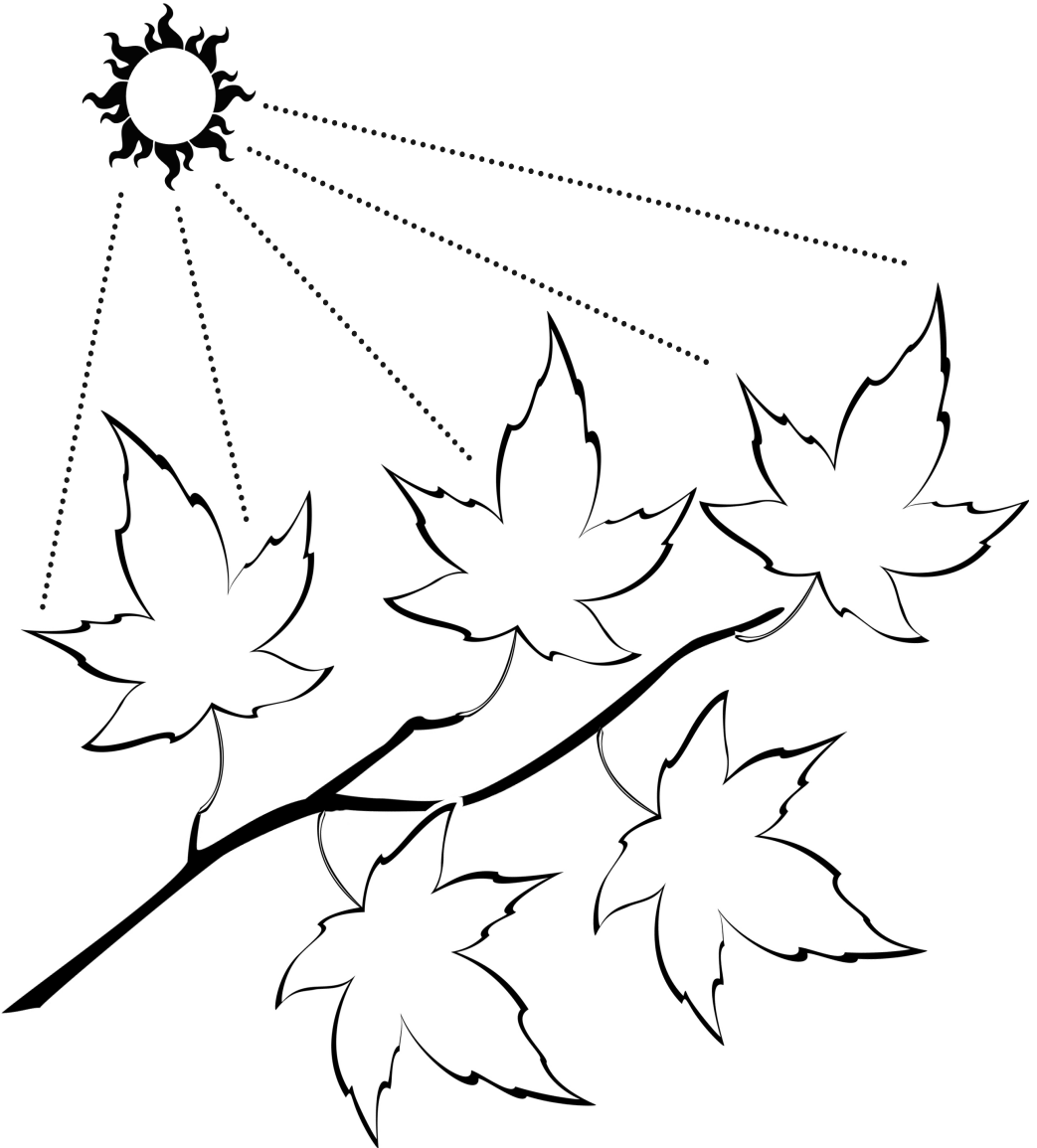
DIG

Jesus Synthesis. You will need several Bibles, a whiteboard and a dry-erase marker, a green plant, copies of “Jesus Synthesis” (found on the next page) and pens or pencils. Call attention to the plant, and then discuss the following:

- What is photosynthesis? (*It's the process by which a plant takes sunlight and converts it into energy.*)
- What happens when you keep a plant in the dark? (*It loses its green color, becomes weak and dies.*)

Jesus Synthesis

What are the effects in my life of the time I spend with Jesus?



- What else do plants need to grow? (*Soil, nutrients and water.*)
- Why do humans eat food? (*Like plants, humans need food to grow.*)
- Have any of you ever done something physically exhausting like a competition or race without eating anything on that day? What happened? (*You didn't perform your best because you were weaker and more tired. You may have even passed out.*)
- What happens when all you eat is junk food? (*You won't stay physically healthy.*)
- Why should we eat healthy food? (*We will stay healthier and have more energy to do our many activities. The reality is that our bodies reflect the food we eat. If we eat junk food, our health will be "junky."*)

Explain that the same is true for our spiritual bodies. We need healthy spiritual nourishment to thrive. We feed our spiritual selves by spending time with God in His Word and in His presence through prayer and worship. Just as when a plant or a person grows physically with the proper food, so too we will grow spiritually with the proper spiritual nourishment.

Distribute "Jesus Synthesis" and pens or pencils, and then divide students into groups of two or three to complete the handout. Have them write in the sunbeams several ways to spend time with Jesus; and in the leaves, the effects of time spent with Him. Allow five minutes for students to complete the handouts, and then regroup to discuss their answers. Briefly highlight students' ideas on the whiteboard as they share.

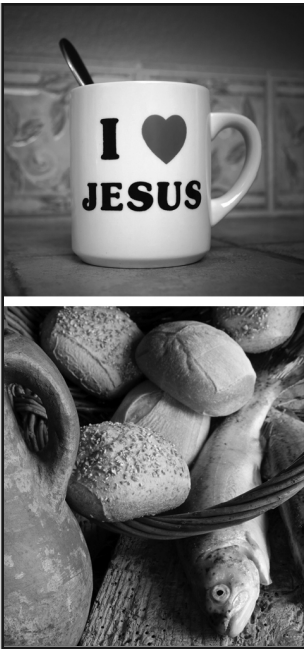
APPLY

Non-Commercial Breaks. For this option, you need several videos of current TV commercials (record these yourself or track a few down on YouTube) adding up to about seven minutes, a way to play them for the group (a computer or a TV), and a copy of the Reflect section for each student.

Ask for a show of hands to the following questions: "Who here watches TV? How many of you watch the commercials?" Show the commercial-break video, and then explain that three commercial breaks add up to about seven minutes of time. Explain that anyone can give God the equivalent of three commercial breaks every day. If we start each day with God, He will be more likely to affect our attitudes throughout the whole day.

Encourage students to select a time of day that they can devote to Him and to stay committed to that time. Distribute copies of the Reflect section and

conclude by stating that these devotions will take them through four days of this week with ideas for spending time with God. For the other three days, they can try reading a shorter book of the Bible or a few of the psalms, or even look up a specific topic in a Bible index. They'll be surprised how quickly their seven minutes will be up!



THE GENEROUS WIDOW: WHOLEHEARTED GIVING

STARTER

Man on the Street. For this option, you need a video recorder and screen to present the video to the group. Ahead of time, create a two- to three-minute video by interviewing Christian and non-Christian adults and students and filming their responses to the following questions: “What would you do if you were given a million dollars?” and “If you had to get rid of a million dollars, how would you do it?”

Greet students and play the video clip, and then discuss the following:

- What did you notice about the responses to the first question? How would *you* answer?
- What did you notice about the responses to the second question? How would *you* answer?
- Think about someone you know who is really good at giving away his or her money and sharing it with others. Why do you think that person is so good at it?
- Is it harder or easier to share something that isn’t yours—something that you’ve been given to use and care for that belongs to someone else? Why?

To illustrate this last point, share the following scenario about a train:

Your grandfather had an old train set that he gave to you when you were eight years old. When he came to visit, he liked to sit and watch you play with the train set, and you felt special because he had trusted you with it. As the years have passed, however, you've found yourself playing with the train set less and less. Sometimes you still take it off the shelf and play with it (it brings back memories of how much fun you had with your grandfather), but not all that often. You notice that your little brother is getting interested in trains and that he is now old enough to have a set of his own. He asks if you will allow him to come into your room to play with it.

Ask the group how they would feel about sharing the train with their little brother. Allow for responses, and then transition to the next step by stating that God has asked us to take care of His things for Him. He has given us His things to care for—not to keep for ourselves. In turn, we are asked to help others by sharing as He does. Today, we're going to check out someone who followed Jesus and understood the importance of giving back to God what He gives to us.

MESSAGE

Hand and Heart. For this option, you need a thin latex glove (these can be purchased at paint stores, hardware stores and some drug stores) and a heart-shaped, helium-filled balloon.

Read Mark 12:41. Blow up the latex glove like a balloon, tie off the end, and then explain that this hand represents the selfish way we sometimes hold on to the gifts God gives us. The wealthy people placing offerings in the Temple were giving what was probably a large amount in monetary terms, but what they gave were insignificant amounts compared to their wealth. They didn't fully trust God with their offerings and held on to their possessions by giving what was comfortable or what might impress others. Let go of the balloon and observe that it drops to the floor.

Now read Mark 12:42-44. Hold up the heart balloon and explain that, unlike the wealthy people, the widow gave everything she had—because she gave from the heart. She trusted God with her life and her meager worldly possessions. She knew that all she had belonged to God and trusted Him with it,

knowing He would always provide for her needs. Even though it was a much smaller amount, her attitude in giving it was pure and meant much more to Jesus. Let go of the balloon and observe that it lifts toward heaven.

Conclude by stating that God wants us to understand that we need to trust Him when it comes to giving. When we give to Him from our hearts and trust Him to provide for our every need, we will truly be giving our all to Him.

DIG

Giving Questions. For this option, you need just this book.

Discuss the following questions with the group:

- Why does God need our money? Doesn't He have enough? (*Giving is an act of obedience to God that helps us to grow in our faith. He doesn't need our money. He allows us to participate in His plan and partner with Him. Giving is one way we worship Him and honor Him with our lives and resources.*)
- Why do some people get so little and others so much? (*God gave humans the freedom to make choices and the choices we make affect other people; therefore, the world is not a perfect place. We need to have a godly perspective when it comes to our resources and know that no matter how much—or little—we have, God wants us to help others in need. We need to trust Him with our resources and that means not being selfish, regardless of how much we have.*)
- Why are churches always asking for money? (*A church's income comes directly from donations. When we give to our church, we are supporting its ministries by paying the pastors, supporting the missionaries, paying the utility bills, buying supplies, providing funds for helping families in crisis, and a myriad of other things that we tend to take for granted. We do this because we want our church to be a place where people can hear God's Word, meet Jesus and experience forgiveness and peace.*)
- Why doesn't God just take care of everybody? Why does He let kids starve every day in Africa and India? (*This question comes back to us. Is God letting kids die, or are we? He has given us the world to take care of and the resources to do it—but people are often too greedy and don't*

trust God enough to follow through. Right now, only about 20 percent of people who call themselves Christians give 10 percent of their income back to God. If every Christian gave a 10-percent tithe back to God, there would be enough resources available to feed every single hungry child in the world.)

Remind students that everything we have comes from God, and He wants us to trust Him and be obedient to Him in every area of our lives—including our finances!

APPLY

The Greatest Gift of All. For this option, you will need leather or thin ribbon appropriate for bracelets and plastic beads in blue, red, white, black and green colors.

Explain to the group that, so far, we've been talking about gifts we can give to God through our abilities, resources and talents. However, there is another gift that is even greater—in fact, it's the most important gift we can give. It's the gift of sharing with other people God's amazing gift of salvation.

Ask students to think of one of their friends or relatives (someone they already have a close relationship with) who does not know Christ as his or her Savior. Continue by stating that today, the group is going to make bracelets that tell the story of salvation. The students can give their bracelets to the person they thought of who doesn't know Jesus yet. They can also pray for this person as they are making the bracelet. As the students create the salvation bracelets, explain the meaning and symbolism of the colors:

- Blue represents creation. *God created the earth and all that is in it. He created us to have a relationship with Him.*
- Black represents sin. *Adam and Eve sinned, and as a result we are all born into sin, which separates us from God.*
- Red represents Jesus' blood. *Jesus died on the cross for our sins so that we would not be separated from God anymore—the cost of our sins was death, so only His death could save us from our sins.*
- White represents being cleansed or forgiven of our sin. *Because Jesus died for us, we are cleansed of our sins. When we ask Jesus into our hearts and confess our sins, He forgives us and cleanses our hearts.*

- Green represents peace. *We receive peace from God when we are in a relationship with Jesus. He heals our wounds and we can rest in His arms.*

Challenge students to share the story of salvation as they present the gift bracelets.

ZACK ATTACK: WHOLEHEARTED SURRENDER

STARTER

Lost Stories. For this option, you need zip, nada, nothing.

Greet students and divide them into groups of three or four. Ask students in each group to share about a time when they were lost, either alone or with others. Allow a few minutes, and then invite a few students to share their stories with the whole group. Take an informal vote on who got lost in the strangest place, who was lost for the longest amount of time, and who ended up farthest away from where they should have been.

Next, ask the students how it felt when they were lost, and how they eventually reunited with their parents or group. Conclude by stating that we all know it's no fun to be lost. Today, we will meet a lesser-known follower of Christ who was lost and how he learned how to become reunited with Jesus.

MESSAGE

Look, Listen, Leap. For this option, you need an adult volunteer, a video camera and some means of playing back your award-winning film.

Ahead of time, create a video from the perspective of a child lost in a department store, using the volunteer to act the role of the parent in the video. Be creative and humorous in the video, while getting the point across of a lost child seeking out his parents. Use the following scenario (written as if the parent is a mom—obviously, substitute if your volunteer is a male!) as a guideline. (Note that the points following the description of the scenario will work best if the video is recorded in three parts as outlined below, allowing for viewing the video one part at a time.)

1. *Look:* The child (camera) is shopping with his mom and spots the toy section. He wanders off when his mom isn't looking. Speak the thoughts of the child as he sees the toy aisle: *I should stay with Mom. . . ooh, look at all the toys! I'll just look a little bit. Mom will know where I am.* After a minute or two of checking out the toy aisles, the child realizes that his mom hasn't come looking for him. He looks around and realizes that his mom isn't where she was when he went to look at the toys.
2. *Listen:* Speak the thoughts of the child again, first puzzled and then increasingly worried and scared: *Hey, where did my mom go? She's gone! I'm scared. What if I don't find her? I might not ever see her again! I want my mommy!* Frantically searching for his mom, the child hears the mom's voice calling his name (at first from a distance and then getting closer each time).
3. *Leap:* The child yells out, "Mom!" and starts running in the direction of the voice. He is so excited to be reunited with his mom that he leaps into her arms.

Show part one of the video ("Look") and point out that the reason the child was lost was because *he* wandered off, not because the mom did. Once he realized he was lost, he started looking for his mom. Read Luke 19:1-4 and explain that Zacchaeus was like the child in the video, because he, like all of us, had wandered from God. Explain that sin pulled Zacchaeus away from God, and when he realized he was lost, he sought Jesus for help. Desperate to see Jesus, Zacchaeus realized he couldn't see Him from where he was, so he ran ahead and climbed a tree to see Jesus.

Next, show part two of the video ("Listen") and explain that when the child sought out his mom, he began to hear her calling his name, so he lis-

tened carefully, not wanting to lose her voice. Read Luke 19:5-6, and then ask the group how Zacchaeus reacted when Jesus called him down from the tree. (*Zacchaeus obeyed immediately and gladly welcomed Jesus.*) Although Jesus called to Zacchaeus audibly, He was also calling to Zacchaeus's heart, and Zacchaeus responded.

Transition to the final point by explaining that Jesus is calling *us* to Him as well. He says in Luke 19:10 that He came "to seek and to save" the lost. He wants us to be with Him and to have a relationship with Him. Have we responded to His call?

Finally, show part three ("Leap") and explain that when the child hears his mom's voice, he listens and responds quickly by running toward the direction of her voice. When he finds his mom, he leaps into her arms with relief and joy. This was the place of safety, but his mom's welcoming arms are also a sign that she has forgiven him for wandering off.

Zacchaeus also responded quickly and with joy to Jesus' voice. Read Luke 19:6 again and then Luke 19:8-9, and explain that Zacchaeus continued to respond to Jesus' voice. Jesus then told Zacchaeus that he had been saved that day. Read Luke 19:10 and conclude by stating that Jesus wants to forgive all of us for our sins. That is why He died on the cross and rose from the dead three days later. He conquered death for us and paid the price for our sins so we could be forgiven.

Ask the group if they are ready to leap into His arms. Are they ready to be forgiven and to turn from their sin and follow Him?

DIG

Salvation Questions. For this option, you need just these thought-provoking questions.

1. How do we know that other religions are wrong and that Jesus is the only way to God? (*Ultimately, it comes down to research and faith. What do we know about other religions? How do these things compare to Christianity? One thing that distinguishes Christianity from every other religion is grace. In Christianity, salvation is a gift, not a result of our good deeds, works or ability to earn it. All other religions, on the other hand, have some sort of works-oriented salvation, meaning people have to earn the right to be in heaven. The gospel says that God gave us a gift in Jesus' death on the cross and*

resurrection from the dead. We can't earn it; only embrace it—see Ephesians 2:8-9.)

2. What if someone has never heard about Jesus? Does that person go to hell? *(It is hard to say, because this is really God's job and not ours. However, Romans 1:18-20 addresses the fact that "since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse." This would suggest that a person would not necessarily need to hear about Jesus to recognize that there is a God and live to honor Him.)*
3. How can a loving God send people to hell? *(Is it really that God isn't loving? Think about all that God has done to make Himself accessible to us. Hell, which is eternal separation from God, is the result of a person's rejection of Jesus, not a hateful God.)*
4. What if Jesus has already called someone and that person didn't respond? Do we get another chance or is it a one-time opportunity? *(Jesus doesn't ever stop pursuing us. However, when a person doesn't respond to God over and over, that person's heart becomes hardened to hearing His call, potentially becoming less likely to hear His voice in the future.)*
5. If someone who has lived a pretty sinful life becomes a Christian on his or her deathbed, do they really get to go to heaven? *(Read Matthew 20:1-16. It is pretty clear that those who have followed Christ their whole lives receive the same wage as those who make the decision at the last minute!)*

APPLY

My Story. For this option, you need copies of "My Story" (found on the next page) and pens or pencils.

Inform students that from now on, they are not to think of themselves as teenagers, students or even just kids. Instead, they are to think of themselves as missionaries. Explain that they don't have to go to the other side of the world to be a missionary—a missionary is just someone who shares the Good News of Jesus Christ. They can do that right here, in their school or neighborhood, with their friends or teammates. *Everywhere* they go is their mission field.



My Story

Answer the following questions to develop your own story and discover that you do have a story to share with others who haven't found Jesus yet!

1

When and how did you meet Jesus? Who was there with you?

2

If you made your commitment to Jesus at a young age, have there been any times when your understanding of God grew or you rededicated your life to Him?

3

What are some things that God has saved you from?

4

How have you seen God work in your life?

5

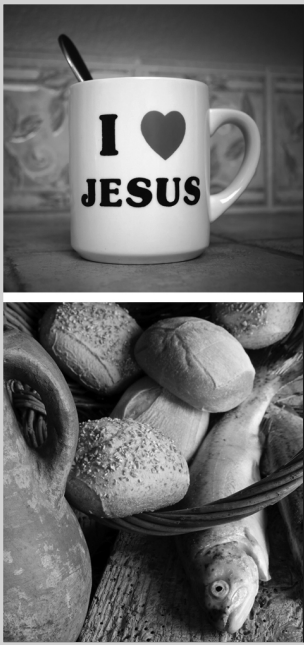
How do you depend on God right now?

At this point, most of them will probably be thinking, *I can't tell people about Jesus. I don't know enough about being a Christian yet or I won't be able to answer all the questions people will ask.* Explain that no one needs to know all the answers to tell people about Jesus, because what we all have to tell are simply our own stories. Our stories are about how Jesus saved us. They are our own experiences—where we started and where we are now.

Of course, at first it might not seem that we have a story to tell, especially if we've grown up in the church. We've never done anything *really* bad, so what would we have to tell? However, just because we might not have a "saved from drugs" story doesn't mean that we don't have our own story to tell. A drug addict who was saved by Jesus was the same as we were—lost without Jesus and needing Him to find us.

Jesus saved us from being apart from God forever and has forgiven us for all that we've done wrong. Ask the group to remember how they felt when they first realized this—the first time they accepted Jesus into their hearts not because they were taught to do so, but because they chose it on their own. Can they remember the joy, thankfulness, love and relief they felt? They can also share how Jesus helps them every day. *That's* their story! And they need to share it.

Distribute "My Story" and pens or pencils, and allow a few minutes for students to complete the handout. You can wander around and ask questions of students individually to stimulate their thoughts and help them to develop their stories. When everyone has completed their stories, invite a few to share his or her story. Close in prayer, thanking God for His mercy in finding us.



THE CENTURION: A TRUSTING FAITH

STARTER

Fall Away. For this option, you need one sturdy chair for every six to seven students and several adult volunteers.

Greet students and divide them into groups of six or seven and, if possible, assign at least one adult to each group. Instruct each group to choose a member to stand on the chair, facing the back of the chair, with his or her back to the rest of the group. Other group members should stand directly behind the person on their group's chair, forming two lines facing each other. The members will stretch their arms out toward the people facing them to form a landing area for the person on the chair.

Without looking back, the student standing on the chair should cross his or her arms across his or her chest and ask, "Are you ready?" The group will respond, "Ready." The student standing on the chair will then say, "Falling," and finally, the group will respond, "Fall away." At this point the person on the chair is to fall backward onto the landing area formed by the arms of the rest of his or her group. (*Caution:* Make sure the students on chairs understand that they must remain stiff, keeping their body straight, as they fall and are caught. If they bend in the middle as they fall, they will go right through the arms of the people trying to catch them. That is not a good thing!)

Have each person in the groups perform the fall, including adults. If you have larger adults, simply add some more people to the catching crew. Sixth-grade girls have been known to catch a 200-pound man falling off a one-foot to two-foot platform, but it takes a lot of them! The key is having an appropriate number of catchers!

After everyone has “taken the plunge,” ask the group how they felt as they were standing on the chair and preparing to fall. What about when they were standing and waiting to catch the person falling? What would have happened if they didn’t think their catching team would do their job? Who did they have to put their faith in? How would they have felt if they saw a group of catchers drop someone right before they stood up on the chair?

Explain that it’s not possible to have faith in someone unless you think he or she will do his or her job. Today, we’re going to study a lesser-known follower of Christ who had great faith—possibly the greatest faith Jesus had ever seen—because He knew Jesus’ power would work.

MESSAGE

Simon Says. For this option, you need your Bible and enough room to play a game of Simon Says.

Have the students stand for a quick game of Simon Says. As “Simon,” you call out several instructions for the students to obey, but only if you say the phrase “Simon says . . .” (for example, “Simon says touch your toes,” “Simon says pat your head and rub your stomach,” and so forth). Once they are in a rhythm, try to trip them up by calling out an instruction *not* using the phrase “Simon says . . .” (for instance, “Shout hallelujah!”). Anyone who obeys a command without “Simon says . . .” is out.

After the game, have students sit down. Explain that words are powerful not because of the actual letters and sounds themselves, but because of the one who speaks them. In the game, the group did what you said not because of the actual words you used but because, as the leader, you have authority.

Now ask students to think back to the account of creation from Genesis 1. How did God create everything? Solicit a few responses, and then read Genesis 1:3. Explain that when God created the world, He *spoke* and it happened. His words were powerful enough to create all things out of nothing! Why? Because He has all authority, so when He speaks, everything stands at attention!

Explain that there’s a passage in the Bible where someone who was in a position of great authority recognized that even his own great authority was not

enough. As background to the story, explain the following: Jesus was born a Jew in the ancient Middle Eastern region of Judea, which was ruled by foreign Roman soldiers and government officials. Many of Jesus' fellow Jews hated the Romans, and one group, known as the Zealots, even wanted to raise an army to kick them out of Judea. (One extreme group was also known as the *sicarii*, meaning "violent men" or "dagger men," because of their policy of killing Jews opposed to their call for war against Rome!) Our story today is about a centurion stationed in Judea, in the city of Capernaum. This man was a commanding officer in the Roman army and had 80 to 100 men under his command. Not only was he a despised foreigner, but also it is likely that he was not a believer in the One God of Israel, who sent His Son to be Israel's Messiah.

Read Luke 7:1-10 aloud, and then explain that a centurion would have commanded 80 to 100 soldiers on and off the battlefield. Whatever he said, the soldiers had to do or they would be punished—even by death. So when his servant got sick, you would think that all he would have to do is order a doctor to come and make his servant better. However, he sought out Jesus instead.

There are two reasons why this makes the centurion a great example of faith. First, *he expressed faith in Jesus' authority*. Even though the centurion had a great deal of authority himself, he knew it was nothing compared with Jesus' authority. By calling Jesus "Lord" (verse 6), he showed his faith in Jesus' authority over not only people but also sickness. In the same way, the first step to us having great faith is to recognize that we are unable to do everything. We need Jesus to help.

Second, the centurion *expressed faith in Jesus' power*. By saying that a simple command would be enough to make the servant well, the centurion showed his faith in Jesus' power. He believed that a word from Him was enough to bring about the miracle he needed.

Conclude by stating that while this doesn't mean Jesus will do anything we ask, it does mean that when we recognize His authority and power, we can trust that He will meet every need we have in accordance with His will for our lives.

DIG

Faith Questions. For this option, you need a willingness to wrestle with students about the truth about God. Discuss the following questions with the group:

1. Is faith something we have, or is it something that God gives us?
(*There are at least three different answers to that question. One is to*

say that faith, like grace and like salvation, comes from God as a gift that we receive. Another is that faith is a response that comes from our own choice. A third is that faith is a combination that is based on both God's gift and our choice.)

2. Does God get mad at us when we doubt Him? *(God understands doubt. Jesus was best friends with men who at times doubted Him. Peter denied Jesus three times—see John 18:15-18, 25-27. Was Jesus disappointed? Yes. Did He forgive Peter and encourage him? Yes. According to John 21:15-19, Jesus reinstated Peter after His crucifixion and asked him to take care of His other followers. God understands our struggle, but He keeps telling us to hold on. He's in control and is making us mature and complete—see James 1:2-4.)*
3. What about when we don't get what we want? *(Faith means that we trust that God is in control and knows what is best. It means trusting Him with our life and being able to rely on Him even when things aren't going the way we think they should. In fact, those are the times when we really need our faith to increase so that we don't move away from God.)*
4. What if we want to have faith that God will do something, but we just don't? *(In Mark 9:14-27, we get a great answer to that question. When the father of a sick boy realized that he has some faith but needs more, he exclaimed to Jesus, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" This is a great prayer model for us today. If we didn't have at least a little faith, we wouldn't care about having any faith at all; but if we feel we need more, we can admit to Jesus that although we have a little faith, we need Him to help us believe more.)*

APPLY

Growing in Trust. For this option, you need two student volunteers. The first volunteer should be one who has had a centurion-type experience where he or she had faith that Jesus could do something incredible. The second volunteer should be one who has had an experience where he or she had faith in Jesus and prayed for a specific need, but instead of answering the prayer in the way he or she initially wanted, He answered it in a way that was difficult to ac-

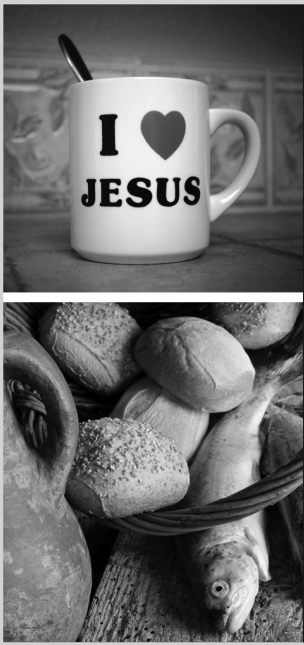
cept at first and then wound up being the best thing. You will also need several 3" x 5" index cards and pens or pencils. Ask the volunteers to be specific with their stories when they share them with the group and to talk about what they learned about faith through their experiences.

Introduce the volunteers and have them share their stories. After they have finished, explain that although sometimes God does do exactly what we pray for, other times He does something different, which is often hard for us to deal with at first.

Continue by stating that each of us has needs, just like the centurion did. It might be a physical, emotional or spiritual need. Share one of your own needs to trigger students' thinking and set an atmosphere of vulnerability. Ask students to identify one area where they need to have faith and want to experience God's peace and assurance.

Read Psalm 55:22 aloud, and then distribute the index cards and pens or pencils to the group. Instruct students to write their need on the card. Have them pray for Jesus to help them have faith that they can trust Him with that need and that He will do the best thing for everyone involved.

SESSION 5



THE FOUR FRIENDS: AN ACTIVE FAITH

STARTER

Piñata Time. For this option, you need an adult volunteer, a ladder (or other means for the adult volunteer to be up high to hold the rope), five brown paper grocery bags, a stick (or plastic bat), a 15-foot to 20-foot length of rope, two bags of assorted candy, and a blindfold.

Ahead of time, make a simple piñata by placing the grocery bags one inside the other to create a five-layered bag and fill it with the candy. Cut a piece of rope one foot in length and use it to tie the piñata closed. Hang the piñata by attaching the one-foot rope to the middle of the longer piece of rope. Attach one end of the rope to something solid and have the adult volunteer hold the other end of the rope while standing on the ladder. Ask the adult to raise or lower the piñata to make it tougher for students to hit with the stick.

Greet students and let them know today is a big candy day. Have them sit in a circle around the piñata, at least 10 feet away to avoid getting hit with the stick by an overzealous piñata attacker. Explain the rules: No one can come inside the circle to get candy until the person hitting the piñata has completed his or her turn (because collecting candy doesn't mix well with accidentally getting hit by the stick!). Each person will be given three swings to try to break the piñata.

Ask for a volunteer to go first. Blindfold the volunteer and spin him three times. Let him feel the bag with the stick and then tell him to begin swinging. After three tries, if any candy has fallen out of the piñata, allow students to come into the circle and collect it before selecting a new contestant. Ask the adult controlling the piñata to raise it while students are getting the candy so that no one hits it again until the new contestant's turn. Continue the process until the piñata has been destroyed and all the candy has fallen out. If no one is hitting the bag, your rope holder should move it less. (*Note: Don't control the collection of candy. This is an exercise in selfishness, so let students crawl over each other and act like fools to collect their candy.*)

When the mayhem is over, reassemble the group. Ask the group to discuss some of the ways they saw people being self-centered or selfish during this activity. (*The way people hogged all the candy—some people got a lot and others didn't get any.*) Next, ask who thinks they got the most candy. Figure out who the top three or four candy gatherers are. Ask those individuals if they shared any of their candy with others who didn't get any. (*Probably not.*) Ask why not, and allow for a few responses.

Continue by explaining that this exercise is not meant to pick on the students who got the most candy—after all, that's the point of a piñata. Rather, this exercise is meant to show how easy it is for us to be self-centered, thinking mostly about ourselves. Today we are going to check out four followers of Christ who figured out how to love others by looking out for others' needs first.

MESSAGE

Big Picture. For this option, you need several Bibles, three adult and/or student volunteers, a video recorder and a way to play your mini-film, and a wheelchair, a pair of crutches or a cane. Ahead of time, create a four-part video using the following outline:

Part One: A close-up of each person's face for 5 to 10 seconds each.

Part Two: A full-body shot of each person with Person Two using the wheelchair, crutches or the cane.

Part Three: An interview scene with each person describing his or her life, job and where he or she lives: Person One is unemployed and homeless; Person Two teaches high school and lives in a middle-class neighborhood; Person Three is a lawyer and lives in an upper-class neighborhood.

Part Four: A further interview with each person describing his or her family life: Person One is single and feels that is the right thing for now; Person Two is married and has three children, two dogs and a hamster; Person Three is divorced and in the middle of a custody battle with his/her ex-spouse, his/her two children are not doing well in school, and one of them was picked up last week for possession of marijuana.

Explain that you are going to show a brief video of three people and that the students need to identify the person in the video who has the need. Show Part One, and then stop the video and ask, "Which of these three people has a need?" (*They won't be able to tell from what they saw.*)

Play Part Two, and then ask, "Which one has the need?" (*Person Two.*) Why? (*He/she can't walk.*) Play Part Three, and ask the same question: "Who has the need?" (*Person One, because he/she doesn't have a job and has no place to live.*) Finally, play Part Four and again ask, "Now who do you think has the need?" (*Each of them has a need.*) Ask the students how they recognized that they all had a need. (*They had to see the big picture to get the whole story.*)

Distribute the Bibles. Offer this background information: When Jesus was on earth, He gained a reputation among the people for being an amazing healer. The Gospels record many miraculous healings, which Jesus said were a sign that the kingdom of God had arrived. The Gospels were eyewitness accounts of God's kingdom coming in, while the Epistles of the New Testament were letters to the earliest believers about how to live as citizens in that Kingdom. Taken together, the New Testament tells modern-day followers of Jesus what He did and how we should respond to Him.

Ask for 12 volunteers to read one verse at a time aloud from Mark 2:1-12. When they are finished, discuss the following:

- What was the paralytic man's need? (*He was paralyzed and needed to be healed.*)
- Why did Jesus tell the man that his sins were forgiven? (*Because that was his real need. He had physical needs, but the greater need was forgiveness through Jesus.*)
- If Jesus had only healed his physical problem and he left, would his needs have been met? (*Physically, yes, but his biggest need wouldn't have been met. Spiritually, he needed Jesus most of all.*)
- All of us have physical needs and spiritual needs. Both needs are important, but which is the greater need? (*Our spiritual need to know Jesus.*)

- What if Jesus hadn't healed the man's physical body but had forgiven him? Would his needs have been met? (*His true need would have been met, because he would spend eternity with Jesus. Jesus showed compassion for his physical need and healed him, but the physical healing wasn't necessary for him to follow Jesus.*)
- What role did his friends play in helping the paralyzed man? (*They recognized his need and helped him. They not only saw his need to be healed but also saw the big picture—his need for spiritual healing through Jesus.*)
- If you were the paralyzed man and could choose either physical or spiritual healing, which would you choose? (*The most important choice is for the long-term. Spiritual healing means eternal life with God.*)

DIG

Questions About Suffering. For this option, you need your Bible and some patience as students wrestle with these questions. Discuss the following questions with your group:

- If God is so good, why do people have so many needs and so much pain? (*Pain and hurt is a result of sin, which started when Adam and Eve first sinned in the Garden of Eden. Sin has caused our bodies to have disease and illness, through mankind's abuse of the world God gave us to care for. Selfishness and greed, among other things, have caused us to have problems in relationships. God showed how good He really is by sending Jesus, even though we had already turned our backs on Him.*)
- Why don't we see miracles anymore? (*Miracles still happen—we just don't always recognize them. Medicine is a miracle. Technology is a miracle. Miracles even without medicine and technology still happen, but they're not well publicized because humans have grown so skeptical that even when we do hear about miracles, we doubt they are real.*)
- Why does God allow some people to have handicaps? (*First of all, we live in an imperfect world in which, because of sin, people have diseases and handicaps through no fault of their own. Psalm 139:13 teaches that God knit us in our mother's womb. This means all of us are created purposefully. He has a greater perspective than any of us. We need to trust that He has a plan and is going to make the most of each of our lives, no matter what the situation, as long as we allow Him.*)

- Why does God let good people suffer and bad people get away with hurting others? *(Beginning with Adam and Eve, God has given us free will—the choice to follow Him or not. He could have forced us to follow Him like robots, but what joy is there in being loved by someone who has no other choice? The other side of this freedom to choose is that not everyone makes the choice to follow God. The result is that people seem to get away with hurting others. We need to keep an eternal perspective, however. One thing people who refuse to turn from their sin don't have is God's promise that they will spend eternity with Him. If we give our lives to Jesus, we will be in heaven with God for eternity, and those who don't, won't.)*

APPLY

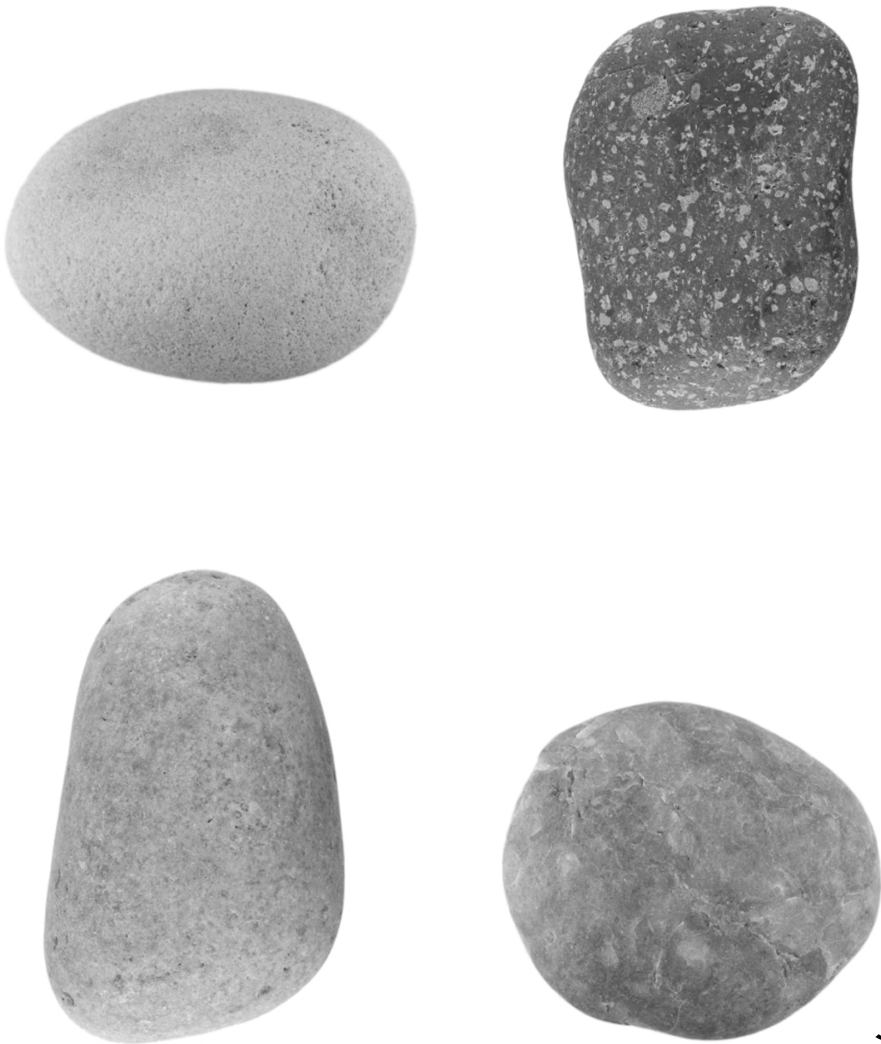
Rocks and Teardrops. For this option, you need your Bible, a backpack, 8 to 10 large rocks, a cross (preferably one with a base for standing it up), copies of “Rock Cutout” (found on page 32—this should ideally be copied on brown or gray paper), copies of “Teardrop Cutout” (found on page 33), some worship music (provided by either a recording or a worship team), and pens or pencils. Set up the cross in your meeting place where you'll be able to put rocks around the base, and cut out the paper rocks and paper teardrops.

Select a volunteer to come forward, and ask him or her to put on the empty backpack. Ask students to name some common needs, hurts and concerns that junior-highers have today. For each one named, put a real rock in the backpack. As the backpack begins to fill with rocks, explain that all of these things are a heavy burden for anyone to carry. Read Philippians 4:6-7 aloud, and state that when we give our needs to God, it's like taking a stone out of the backpack. Start taking stones out of the backpack and putting them at the base of the cross.

Distribute the paper rocks and a pen or pencil and invite students to give their burdens to God. Instruct them to write down their worries, concerns, hurts and pain on the paper rocks. Play the worship music. When they are done writing, invite them to prayerfully give these things to God as they lay their rocks at the cross.

Continue by explaining that not only is it important for us to bring our needs to God, but it is also important for us to show compassion for others who we know have needs or are hurting. Read Romans 12:9-10,13-15. Explain that when people have needs, we have the chance to reach out to them with compassion. The word “compassion” literally means “to feel with a person.”

ROCK CUTOUT



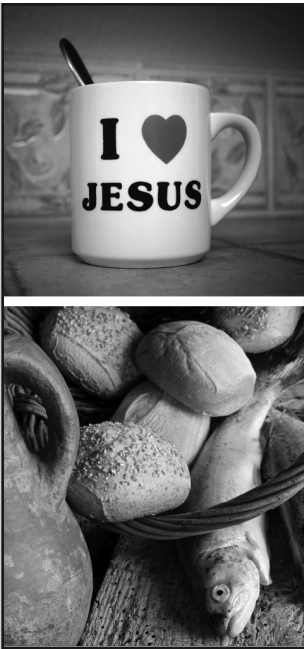
Teardrop Cutout



Continue by stating that in today's story, we saw how much compassion the four friends had for their paralytic friend. Likewise, if someone is sad and crying over something, our own compassion should move us to tears.

Distribute the teardrop cutouts and ask students to each pick someone that they know who they would like to show compassion for and write that person's name on their teardrop. Play worship music. Encourage them to put the teardrops in their Bibles and then close in prayer, asking God to give us all compassion for the people around us in need and for those whose names were written on the teardrops.

SESSION 6



THE LEPER: A DESPERATE FAITH

STARTER

You Should Have a Doctor Look at That. For this option, you need several volunteer actors to play the roles of family, friends and strangers on the street, a video recorder and a way to play your masterpiece for the group, and bandages and makeup for the “injured” actor (a bandage for his head with fake blood, fake gashes all over his body, exaggerated colorful bruises—anything that would be dramatic but exaggerated and fake). Before the session begins, create a video using the following scenario:

The video is a “man on the street” documentary style, focusing on a badly injured person who is oblivious to his injuries. Viewers will see him interacting with family, friends and strangers who all point out his injuries and stress the need for medical attention. No matter what anyone says, the injured person responds with complete denial and tells everyone how incredibly healthy he is!

The video ends with the injured person walking away from the last interaction muttering to himself about how healthy he is and how people are crazy to keep trying to get him to see a doctor. As he walks off, he falls and gets back up and then runs into a pole (or whatever’s

available). Obviously accident-prone, he continues talking to himself about how healthy he is.

Greet students and show the video, and then discuss the following:

- What was wrong with this person? (*He was severely injured, clueless, stubborn, and so on.*)
- What did he need? (*Medical attention.*)
- Will he end up going to a doctor? (*Probably not.*)
- Why not? (*Because he doesn't think he needs to do so.*)
- When there are things in our lives that don't work or are broken or hurt, what do we need to do before those things can be fixed or healed? (*Recognize them.*)

Transition by stating that our lives do need to be fixed—we need to be healed. Sometimes we need to be healed physically, but today we're going to look at how our hearts need to be healed and cleansed from something that hurts all of us—sin. We're going to check out a lesser-known follower of Christ who will help us understand that just because we're forgiven doesn't mean that our lives will be perfect or that we are free from sin.

MESSAGE

Sin Erasure. For this option, you need an Etch-a-Sketch.

Read Mark 1:40-45 and explain that the man's leprosy was a physical need that needed healing. We also need healing, but for most of us it's not physical—we need spiritual healing for our hearts. Just like Jesus was willing and able to heal this man physically, He is also willing and able to heal our hearts by forgiving us. Our illness is sin that separates us from God.

Discuss some of the sins that we need to be forgiven for, such as anger, self-centeredness, cheating, gossiping, and so forth. Point out that these sins are similar to leprosy, because just as that disease damages nerves and skin, eating away at anyone who has it, the sins in our hearts eat away at us, bringing hurt, bitterness, sadness, loneliness, emptiness and other illnesses. Yet there *is* healing for us; in fact, there are two kinds of healing.

Explain that the first type of healing is *big forgiving*. Just like the man in the Bible, we can come to Jesus and ask Him to heal us and bring us back into relationship with the Father. His response will be the same as it was to the leper:

"I am willing." When we ask Jesus to forgive us from our sin, He covers our sin with His blood and we become a new creation. When Jesus is in our hearts, His blood covers our sins; we are forgiven. Quickly draw a box on the Etch-a-Sketch and explain that it represents our sin. Shake the Etch-a-Sketch, and then explain that when we ask Jesus into our life and repent for our sins in earnest, He erases the sins that have kept us separated from Him.

The second type of healing involves *lots of little forgivings*. Just because we've received the big forgiving doesn't mean that our lives are now perfect and that we walk around skipping and singing worship songs. We still struggle with who we were before, which is called our "sin nature." Quickly draw a few lines on the Etch-a-Sketch and explain that every day we see signs of who we were before—in the way that we're self-centered and don't treat others as well as we'd like. (Share an example of a sin that you still struggle with as an illustration.) Anytime we realize that we're struggling with a sin, we should go back to Jesus and ask Him to help us. He will, and then we're clean again.

Now shake the Etch-a-Sketch to erase the image. Sum up by stating that because of our sin nature, we'll sin again and will need to go to Jesus for forgiveness again and again. This will continue throughout our lives, so we need to learn how to go to Jesus for forgiveness while we're teenagers so that it becomes a habit.

DIG

Sin-full Struggles. For this option, you need just these provocative questions. Oh yeah—and some students, too!

- If God is so good, why is there so much evil? (*God, in His goodness, doesn't want to force humans to follow Him, so He lets them make evil choices. In addition, it's not just our human choices, but as John 10:10 states, it is also Satan, whose strategy is to steal, kill and destroy God's followers. Of course, since God is God, He could eliminate free choice, but that goes against His goodness and His commitment to letting humans make their own choices. He didn't create us to be puppets. He wants us to come to Him because we want to, not because we have to.*)
- Why do we continue to sin if Jesus is in our heart? (*Even though Jesus is in our hearts and has taken control, we still struggle with something called our "sin nature." Our sin nature is our natural tendency to sin. It was*

started by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and we perpetuate it today in our selfish choices. You're not alone in this struggle though; every Christian struggles with sin. Even Paul, who wrote more books of the Bible than anyone, wrote the following in Romans 7:15 about sin: "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" [NRSV]).

- Will we ever stop sinning? If not, why should we even try to stop? (No, we will never stop sinning. Until the moment we take our last breath, we will be making selfish choices and struggling with our sin nature. Yet that doesn't mean we should give up trying and just decide to sin as much as we can. In Romans 7:24-25, Paul reminds us that we can ultimately be rescued from our sin through Jesus Christ. Anytime we sin—which is often—we can pray and ask Jesus to help us fight against it. He will never let us be tempted more than we can handle, but instead will always give us a way out from the temptation; see 1 Corinthians 10:13.)

APPLY

Option 2: Heal for Real. For this option, you need two student volunteers, two copies of "Heal for Real" (found on pages 40-41), 3" x 5" index cards, and pens or pencils. Give a copy of "Heal for Real" to each of the volunteers ahead of time so that they can become familiar with the flow of the dialogue (memorizing their lines isn't necessary).

Explain that one way we can share about Jesus is by being real with our friends, especially when we mess up. This is a perfect time to share about Jesus and how He is helping you. We've got a little skit to help us all understand how this might look. Have the volunteers present the skit, and then discuss the following:

- What happened in the first conversation? (*They were bad-mouthing another person.*)
- Why did the Christian go back and talk to his friend? (*When he was talking to God, he realized that he was not a good example of Christ during the earlier conversation. It was important for him to let his friend know that he messed up.*)
- Do you think this would be difficult to do? What might make it hard? (*The friend may not understand why you are apologizing for what you've*

done; he or she may start to think that you're weird; you might not know what to say.)

- What are some possible reactions that you might receive when you talk to your friend about Jesus? (*Interest, skepticism, disinterest, questions or debates, and sometimes straight-out rejection.*)
- Is it worth risking these reactions to share Jesus with the people you care about? Why?

Explain that it's important for students to be real with their friends—especially their non-Christian friends. Challenge them that the next time they sin in front of a friend, they should approach him or her and explain that they did not want to do what they did. Let students know that it's pretty likely that they will all get an opportunity to do this within the next week!

Conclude by asking the students to try to have a conversation like the one we demonstrated here. Most importantly, they need to be real and honest. Distribute the index cards and pens or pencils and invite students to write themselves a note to keep in their Bibles to remind themselves of their commitment. Encourage them to find someone to help them to be accountable—a small-group leader, volunteer adult staff member or another student—so that they know that someone will ask them if they have followed through with this commitment.

Cast

Christian

Non-Christian



The skit begins with Christian and Non-Christian standing around talking ad lib. Christian should talk about youth group, casually inviting the other one to come some time. This is just to establish that he or she is the Christian. The other student should respond with some interest, but feel weird about never having gone to church. Move the conversation along to other topics—sports, school, latest movie, girls/guys, and so on. Then the dialogue begins.

Non-Christian: Hey, have you seen that new student in math?

Christian: Yeah, why?

Non-Christian: He's kind of geeky.

Christian: Yeah, he does seem a little off.

Non-Christian: A little off?!? Dude, the guy is weird!

Christian: Yeah, he is weird. I saw him picking his nose at lunch—it was really gross!

Non-Christian: See what I mean? Definitely a loser.

Christian: Definitely.

Students walk off. Christian is alone, talking to God.

Christian: God, please forgive me for what I said earlier about the new guy at school. I guess I want (name of friend) to like me and think I am cool, so sometimes I say things about other people to agree with him and make him think I am a cool guy. I know that is not what You want from me. Please help me to stand firm in those situations. Thank You.

Students meet up again.

Non-Christian: Hey! What's up?

Christian: Hey! I have to tell you something.

Non-Christian: Sure, what is it?

Christian: You know earlier when we were talking about that new guy at school?

Non-Christian: (laughs) Yeah, what a dork.

Christian: Well, I just wanted to tell you that I messed up. I don't want to bad-mouth other people.

Non-Christian: You didn't do anything wrong.

Christian: Yes, I did. I don't want to say anything that is hurtful to other people, and what I said was hurtful and wrong.

Non-Christian: Why are you so concerned about it?

Christian: You know that I go to church. Well, it's more than church; it's really about my love for God.

Non-Christian: What do you mean?

Christian: Well, God wants us to love Him and to love others—even people who are hard to love. And I want to do what God wants me to do.

Non-Christian: Why?

Christian: Because He created us and He loves us and knows what's best for us.

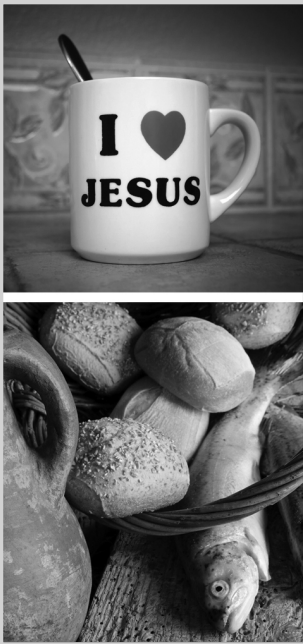
Non-Christian: I could never love everyone—that's way too hard!

Christian: Well, obviously I have a hard time doing it too, but God helps me. God knows that I can't do exactly what He wants. None of us can, so He sent Jesus, His Son, to be our Savior. We can be forgiven when we mess up and we can have help along the way. It's kind of like we're sick with sin and Jesus helps us. It seems like He is always healing me!

Non-Christian: That sounds a little weird. Maybe I could go to church with you sometime and learn more about what you are saying.

Christian: That'd be great.

The End



EMPOWERED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

STARTER

Balloon Racers. For this option, you need copies of “How to Build a Balloon Racer” (found on the next page), balloons, electrical tape, plastic straws, string, large bags, scissors and candy or other goodies for prizes. (*Note:* The amount of these supplies will depend on the size of your group. You will be dividing the students into groups of three or four.) You might want to recruit some extra adults to help with this activity—a great way to involve parents!

Place a copy of “How to Build a Balloon Racer” and the necessary supplies (listed on the handout) into each bag. Welcome students and divide them into groups of three or four. Give each group a bag of supplies and instruct students to follow the written instructions in the bag to build a balloon racer. You will likely need a few adult helpers available to guide this process. When every group has their racer built and running, have a contest to see which balloon racer is the fastest. If you have the time, hold elimination rounds to determine a final winner.

Award prizes to the winning team, and then ask what gave these racers the power to move across the string. (*The breath inside the balloon.*) Explain

HOW TO BUILD A BALLOON RACER

SUPPLIES NEEDED

- One balloon
- One plastic straw
- Electrical tape
- String
- Scissors

INSTRUCTIONS



1. Blow up the balloon, keeping a tight hold on the neck so that the air can't come out.



2. Tape the straw to the top of the balloon so that the length of the straw runs along the length of the balloon.

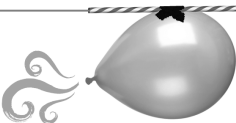


3. Cut a piece of string and thread it through the straw.



4. Pull the string taut and level.

5. Let go of the balloon!



that this is a lot like Christianity. The first people to believe in Jesus passed on their faith to others around them and to the next generation. Imagine what would have happened if they had kept the Good News to themselves! Thankfully, they didn't—and we can read about their excitement and love for Jesus in the New Testament. The history of the Early Church is recorded in the book of Acts, while the Epistles of the New Testament, such as the letters to the Romans, Galatians and Ephesians, were written to help those early believers live out their faith together. As we study Acts and the New Testament letters, we not only learn about the history of the Church, but we also learn how we can live out our faith today.

A Christian's job is to get the message of God's love and forgiveness down the line to the people around us and ultimately to the next generation. But many times when we hear the message of what Jesus did, we stop there. We don't realize that the message can't stop with us; it must be passed on to others. Jesus' death and resurrection was not the end of the story of Christianity; it was the *beginning*.

Transition to the next step by stating that on our own we can't do it effectively—we need power to get God's message across. Just like the air inside the balloon, the Holy Spirit is the breath inside of us that gives us the power to carry on His message. Ask a volunteer to read Acts 1:8, and then continue: During the next six weeks, we're going to take a look at the first Church and see how the power of the Holy Spirit made ordinary people powerful witnesses for Jesus Christ.

MESSAGE

Signs of the Kingdom. For this option, you need several electric fans (the bigger, the better), large candles in candleholders, matches and an audio recorder and player. Ahead of time, create an audio recording of various foreign languages (from TV, radio, video or even someone you know). (*Note:* This recording will be used to illustrate the supernatural gift of tongues that occurred on the Day of Pentecost, so choose appropriate content if there is any chance that someone in your group will understand the language.)

Explain that one of the most important events in history happened 50 days after Jesus' resurrection. It is called the Day of Pentecost, and it is considered the birthday of the Christian Church. But to understand the importance of this event, we need to back up and look at Jesus' ministry while He was on the earth.

Jesus came to bring the kingdom of God to earth. How did Jesus show that He had truly brought this heavenly kingdom? By the miracles He did for the sick and oppressed. He showed His authority as the King over sickness by healing people; as King over oppression by delivering people; as King over sin by declaring forgiveness; and as King over death by resurrecting. Jesus brought the kingdom of God to earth.

When Jesus went back to heaven after His death and resurrection, He turned over this job to His followers. Now *they* were commanded to bring the kingdom of God to the rest of the world—first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles—by showing that same power over sickness, oppression, sin and death.

On their own, they would never have been able to do this. The disciples needed God's power to bring God's kingdom, so Jesus made a promise to them: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you" (Acts 1:8). This promise was fulfilled on what is known as the Day of Pentecost. Pentecost was and is a Jewish holiday that celebrates God giving the Law, the Torah, to Moses on Mount Sinai. Fifty days after Jesus' resurrection, many Jews from all over the Roman Empire were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost, and these visiting Jews spoke many different languages. It was during that time that the Holy Spirit came and filled the waiting disciples with the power to be Jesus' witnesses; they were given God's power and life and the ability to extend His kingdom just as Jesus had.

Read Acts 2:1-17, and explain that three signs were given to show that the Holy Spirit had come: (1) an audible sign—they heard a rushing wind; (2) a visual sign—they saw fire; and (3) a verbal sign—they spoke in languages they had never learned. Now discuss what these signs had to do with having power to witness:

- **Wind:** Turn on the fans. Explain that wind is often used as a symbol for the Holy Spirit. In fact, the Hebrew and Greek words for "spirit" can mean "breath." Before His death, Jesus said that He wouldn't leave the disciples alone. He would send another comforter to them (see John 16:7). By this He meant the Holy Spirit.
- **Fire:** Light the candles. State that throughout the Old Testament, fire was a sign of God's holiness and power. Think of Moses and the burning bush (see Exodus 3:2), Isaiah and the fiery coal (see Isaiah 6:6-7), and Elijah and the contest with the prophets of Baal (see 1 Kings 18:38). The Holy Spirit's fire cleanses and purifies believers.

- **Speech:** Play the recording softly. Explain that speaking fluently in a language that you had never learned was a truly miraculous sign! It shows us that the ability to take the message of Jesus to others would never rest in our own ability, but always on God's. It is His message, and we can only effectively communicate it when we are telling it through the power of His Spirit—whether we say the words in English or Swahili.

Let the fan, the fire and the recording continue for a minute (you can turn up the volume if needed) and have students close their eyes and think about what it must have been like to experience this as the disciples had on the Day of Pentecost.

Turn off the fan and recording, but leave the candle lit. Ask the group, "What was the result of this miraculous event? Read Acts 2:32-41 for the answer, and then conclude by stating that because of the Holy Spirit, Peter and the other believers were able to be powerful witnesses for Jesus to all the Jews who were in Jerusalem for the feast. People came from all over the city to find out what had happened in that Upper Room, and more than 3,000 of them accepted Jesus and were added to the Church that day. Now that's effective witnessing!

DIG

Questions About the Spirit. For this option, you need nothing but the truth! Discuss the following questions with the group:

- That Pentecost stuff was just for the Bible guys, but it isn't really meant for us now, is it? (*The Bible makes it clear that the Holy Spirit was given not only to the first Church, but for all who would believe [see Acts 2:38-39]. And it's a good thing too! Because we need the help of the Holy Spirit just as much as Peter did. People don't come to Jesus because of a great sermon, but because the Holy Spirit draws them. He lives in us, to live through us. The Holy Spirit wants to use our lives to be a magnet that draws others to Christ. Jesus knew that we would not be able to communicate His Word without the help of His Spirit—see 1 Corinthians 2:4-5.*)
- Why do we need the Holy Spirit? Why can't we just say what we know? (*Without the Holy Spirit we would never know what to say! The Bible says that spiritual things can only be understood as the Spirit reveals them to*

us. Without the Holy Spirit, our eyes would forever be closed to the truth of who Jesus is and what He has done for us—see 1 Corinthians 2:9-14; Ephesians 1:17.)

- What about speaking in tongues? Does that still happen today? *(The gift of tongues by the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 was used to speak the gospel to people who would have never understood it any other way. And that could happen today, just like any other miracle we read about in the Scriptures. Rather than focusing on the gift, though, we should focus on the Giver of the gift—the Holy Spirit. We want the Spirit to motivate our words, no matter what language we are speaking, so that others will clearly hear the message of what Jesus has done for them.)*
- If the Holy Spirit's power is in us, then why is it that nothing seems to happen when we witness to others about Jesus? *(It would be great if miracles occurred every time we told others about Jesus. But the goal is not to see miracles like wind, fire and speaking in tongues. The goal is to see the miracle of new birth. A lot of times, however, we don't see anything happen at all. It's during those times that we must remember that the power is in the message [see Romans 1:16], not in us or in our ability to communicate it [see 1 Corinthians 2:4-5]. We can trust that the Holy Spirit is at work even when we can't see it.)*

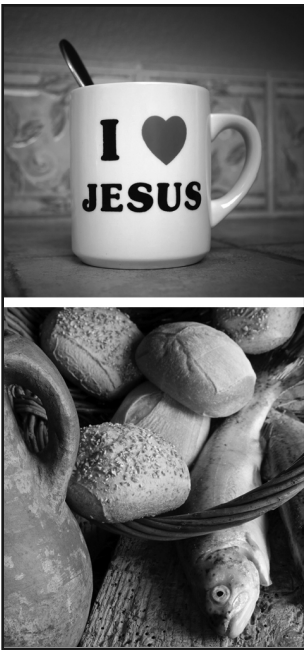
APPLY

Let the Light In. For this option, you need one large candle on a stand, enough small candles for each student (votive candles or tea lights would work best), matches, worship music (live or recorded), and a table. Protect the table with aluminum foil or metal cookie sheets for students to place their candles on. Set the candles on a table near the front of the room.

Light the large candle. Begin by explaining that today you've talked a lot about the necessity of the Holy Spirit to be effective witnesses for Christ. Witnessing is not just something we *do*; it is who we *are*. The evidence that the Holy Spirit lives in us is not just speaking in tongues or walking around with fire over our heads; it is a life that has God's ability to love, to believe and to persevere. When the Holy Spirit comes to live in us, He brings the very life of God. We become God's house, His dwelling place. But it starts by accepting the wonderful gift of salvation.

Explain that you are going to give everyone an opportunity to show that they are opening their lives to the power of the Holy Spirit. The large candle represents God and His ability to light our lives with His power. Have students who want to show that they are opening their lives to the lordship of Jesus come forward, pick up a small candle, light it from the main candle and then place it on the table. After everyone has returned to their seats, lead a time of worship that focuses on the power and majesty of God.

Conclude by giving students an opportunity to pray for each other that the Holy Spirit will fill them and use them during the upcoming week.



FROM DENIER TO DEFENDER

STARTER

Rorschach Test. For this option, you need five Rorschach cards (you know, the “inkblot test”). This is available in many places online—just search for “Rorschach” and print out a few samples. (As an option, you can also make your own inkblots by placing a small blob of paint in the center of a piece of white construction paper. Fold the paper in half, smoothing out the paint. Carefully open up the paper and let dry.)

Greet students and show them the inkblot pictures. Have them tell you what they see as they look at each one and make sure everyone has a chance to answer at least once (be prepared for all sorts of answers!). Then discuss the following:

- Why don't we all see the same thing when we look at one picture? *(What we see often depends on our perspective, on where we're coming from in our own life experience.)*
- How could this idea relate to the way people view each other? *(We judge people based only on our view of their lives.)*
- How about the way they view events that have happened in the past? *(We tend to see the past through the same limited perspective—ours.)*

Explain that when some people think about the Church, they only see the mistakes and failures of God's people. But it all depends on how you look at it. God has often used the weaknesses and failures of His people to be the very doors for miracles to happen. This is because the power of God is not based on our ability, but on His message. And being a witness means simply telling others what God has done and letting the message speak for itself.

Read Romans 1:16, and then discuss the following:

- What is the power of God for salvation? (*The gospel.*)
- What is the gospel? (*The good news of the kingdom of God, demonstrated in what Jesus did for us in defeating sin, death and Satan.*)
- Have you ever tried to be a witness for Jesus and ended up making a mess of things? (*A personal example of your own would be nice here.*)
- How did you feel afterward? (*Like a failure; like you disappointed God.*)

Explain that there are many examples in Scripture of God turning people's total failures into awesome miracles in His name. If we don't give up, God can turn everything around for good. It is not our ability that matters, but His message! Our goal as believers in Jesus is to pass on His message to those around us. We can only do this through the power of the Holy Spirit. Today we're going to read about a man who went from denying Jesus to defending Him. God used this man to do miraculous things that brought thousands of Jews to Christ because the power of the gospel is in the message, not the messenger!

MESSAGE

Flawed. For this option, you will need several Bibles and a piece of flawed fabric (available at any fabric or craft store—or create your own).

Hold up the fabric. Explain that this fabric was really cheap because it's flawed. That means that it is stained, faded or has inconsistencies in the weaving that mess up the design of the material. Most people won't buy flawed fabric because they only want to use material that is perfect. God isn't like that though. He uses flawed fabric—imperfect people—all the time to make wonderful things. That's because it isn't the fabric that matters; it is what the Creator can do with it that counts. And He has the power to create awesome things out of even very flawed people.

Peter, one of Jesus' disciples, is a great example of this. He denied that he even knew Jesus (see Matthew 26:69-75), but God took this denier and used

him as a great defender of the gospel in the Early Church. Let's look at three awesome miracles God did through Peter that resulted in many Jews coming to faith in Christ.

Read Acts 3:1-16 and discuss the following:

- Where were Peter and John going? (*The Temple.*)
- What did the beggar want from them? (*Money.*)
- What did Peter give the beggar? (*"The name of Jesus Christ"—meaning he gave the beggar the only valuable thing he had—the power of Jesus.*)
- What happened to the beggar? (*He was instantly healed.*)

Have a volunteer read Acts 3:12-16 aloud again. Explain that Peter made sure that everyone who saw the miracle knew that it wasn't because he had any power in and of himself, but because the message of the gospel—faith in the name of Jesus—had the power to heal. Read Acts 5:1-11, and then discuss the following:

- What was the problem with Ananias and Sapphira's offering? (*They had purposely lied about the amount to make it seem to others that they had given more than they did.*)
- Who did Peter say Ananias had lied to? (*God, the Holy Spirit.*)
- What happened to Ananias and Sapphira? (*They dropped dead in front of everyone!*)

After holy fear seizes your students and they throw themselves prostrate on the floor begging for mercy, say, "Isn't it amazing that God used Peter—a liar himself at one time—to expose the lies of this couple?" Explain that God often works through imperfect people like Peter to reveal His glory. Miracles occur through imperfect people because it is God's power at work, not their own. Now read Acts 5:12-16 and discuss the following:

- What happened as a result of the miracles God did through Peter and the other apostles? (*Many people became believers.*)
- What miracle happened that involved Peter's shadow? (*The sick were healed when Peter's shadow fell on them.*)

Explain that these awesome miracles did not happen through Peter because he was perfect or smart or educated—in fact, we know that he wasn't any

of those things. He had once openly denied Jesus! God used Peter because he was open to being used. It wasn't Peter; it was Jesus! The power of the gospel message changes lives, not the power of the messenger.

DIG

Wrestling with Witnessing. For this option, you need several Bibles and these questions. Ask the group to discuss the following:

- What are miracles for? (*Miracles reveal the glory of God and give people an opportunity to put their faith in God. They are not for entertainment, like a circus act or something. Miracles are the visible evidence of the kingdom of God at work with the intent of bringing people to faith in Jesus—see John 2:11.*)
- Did only the apostles do miracles? (*In the book of Acts, miracles often occur through the apostles, but not just through them. We read in Acts 6:8 about Stephen doing “great wonders and miraculous signs among the people” and Philip in Acts 8:6 who brought joy to a whole city when they “saw the miraculous signs he did.” First Corinthians 12:9-11 tells us that gifts of healing and miraculous power are given to believers as the Holy Spirit desires.*)
- What happens when miracles are criticized? (*When miracles occur, there are two possible responses: joy or skepticism. The apostles faced both reactions—often at the same time. Peter was beaten, jailed, thrown out of the city and persecuted by people and religious leaders who reacted to the miracles with jealousy or anger. In Matthew 11:12, Jesus said that the kingdom of God would advance forcefully—it wouldn't happen without confrontation and effort. In this sense, criticism of God's work in our lives means we are on the right track.*)
- Why does it seem like there are fewer miracles today than in the book of Acts? (*Good question; it's hard to say. It's hard to know God's plan and timing for miracles; but no matter what, we should do two things: First, remember that God is a huge God who can do anything at any time, and second, pray that God will work in new ways in us and through us. Who knows? God might let you see a miracle that is just as cool as the ones Peter saw and did.*)

- What's the difference between the gift of evangelism and simply witnessing? *(All believers in Jesus have the job of passing on His message to those around them—that is what witnessing is all about! It's telling what we know to be true. The Bible also speaks of the gift of evangelism, which is a special ability to communicate the gospel in a way that many people respond. It's like the difference between teaching and being a teacher. Everyone can teach, but some people have a special ability from God to bring understanding to people—not unlike your brilliant youth pastor! So you might not hold tent crusades in Africa, but you can share your own experience of God's saving power with those around you.)*
- What if we don't want to share the gospel with others? *(Being honest is a good place to start. God is never shocked by what we think or feel. However, at those times, we should come to God and seek His help. Daily prayer and Bible reading keep our own relationship with God fresh and give us the desire to share His love with others.)*
- What if we have blown our witness for Jesus too many times? *(Think about Peter for a second. He hung out with Jesus, but then denied Him when it got tough. And yet later, God worked through him. The same is true with you. You can't blow it too many times! When we fail in our witness, like chickening out of saying the truth for fear of what others might think, we are being human. That's when we must remind ourselves that it is God's power—not our ability—that matters. First John 1:7-9 tells us that if we confess our sins, ask for His help, and get back up, He can still cause good things to happen.)*

APPLY

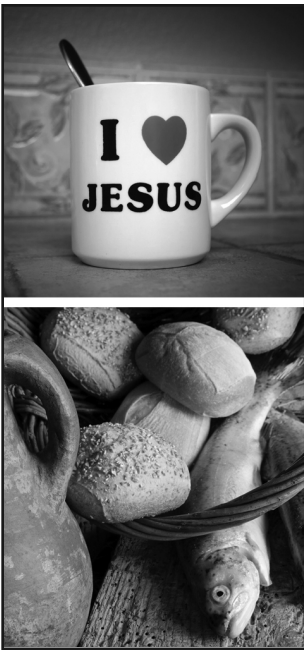
Cart Before the Horse. For this option, you need a toy horse and cart (or a picture of a horse and cart) and several adult volunteers.

Hold up the horse and cart. Explain that there is an old saying that goes, "You can't put the cart before the horse." The meaning is pretty obvious: The horse has to be in front of the cart in order to pull it. Sometimes we live our Christian lives that way. We put Christian activities in front of having a personal relationship with Christ. And it just won't get us anywhere. In order to share the gospel, we must know it from personal experience.

Discuss what it means to have a personal relationship with Jesus and lead students in a time of prayer. There are undoubtedly students who have been

attending the church (the cart) but haven't asked Jesus to take over their lives and be their Savior (the major, humongous horse). Have adult leaders ready to pray individually with those who are accepting Jesus for the first time.

Conclude by stating that a witness tells what they know to be true. We can share the power of God with others this week by sharing what He has done for us personally. The Holy Spirit will give us all the boldness we need!



LET'S EAT

STARTER

Three-Legged Soccer. For this option, you need a whistle, several 3" x 18" strips of cloth, a soccer ball, lots of open space and two soccer goals (chairs spaced 15-18 feet apart will work fine!).

Greet students and ask what they remember from the last two sessions. If all you get are blank stares, a few gentle reminders might help, such as the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit, Peter, beggars leaping around, and other wild miracles. Explain that today you are going to talk some more about the Early Church—but first, you're going to play a game!

Divide students into two teams for a game of three-legged soccer. Have each team group into pairs, tying the pairs' ankles together as they would for a three-legged race. When the students are all tied up—I mean, when they're ready—blow the whistle and let them kick the soccer ball around. If you are more competitive, you can set up goals and do the whole soccer thing, but remember that the object is just to get them all moving, trying to run and kick the ball while tied together.

After a few minutes, signal to stop by blowing the whistle. Have students untie their ankles and sit down, and then discuss the following:

- How did it feel to run and kick the ball while tied together? (*Hard, painful, couldn't do it.*)
- Why was it hard? (*Because I couldn't move the way I wanted to; the other person kept getting in my way.*)
- Did it get easier as the game went on? (*Yes, we began to coordinate our steps a little bit better.*)

Explain that this game is a perfect way to experience how the Early Church felt when Gentiles—that is, non-Jewish people—started getting saved and becoming a part of their group. It was tough and awkward at first, but once they got the hang of it, it worked really well. Today we'll look at how the Jews first struggled to understand that the gospel was meant for everyone.

MESSAGE

The Ends of the Earth. For this option, you need a cape, a sword, a small bag, chocolate coins, a tunic, a scroll, a hot dog and a globe. Ahead of time, put the chocolate coins in the bag.

Begin by explaining that the central theme for the book of Acts is Acts 1:8. Read the verse aloud, and then explain that so far we have focused primarily on how we are called to be witnesses of Jesus Christ, but today we're going to look at to whom we're supposed to be witnesses. Reread the last part of Acts 1:8, emphasizing the words "Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Continue by explaining that right from the start, Jesus said that His message was meant to be taken not just to the Jewish believers but to the Gentile world as well. This is no news to us, but it was radical to the Early Church, who were primarily Jewish believers! They had been raised to think of themselves as God's chosen people—because they were His chosen ones.

The father of the Jewish people, Abraham, had received this promise from God: "I will make you a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:2-3). What the Jewish Christians didn't know yet is that Jesus' death was the fulfillment of that promise! God sent His Son, Jesus, to bless all people—Gentiles included—with the gift of salvation. Peter and the other Jewish believers learned in a dramatic way that the gospel wasn't just for them, but for all who respond.

Explain that the first man in our story is Cornelius. (*Ask a volunteer to come forward to play the role of Cornelius.*) Cornelius was a Roman centurion. (*Hand Cornelius the cape.*) He commanded 100 soldiers. (*Give him the sword.*) And he was also a God-fearer. That means he was a devoutly religious man who worshiped the God of Israel. He went to the Temple, prayed faithfully and gave money to the poor. (*Give the volunteer the bag of chocolate coins to throw into the crowd by the handful.*)

Cornelius was an all-around great guy, except for one thing: He was a Gentile. Though he believed in the Jewish God, he was not considered a true Jew. One day while he was praying, God gave Cornelius a fantastic vision. (*Motion for Cornelius to kneel down.*) Read Acts 10:3-8, and then state that God heard Cornelius's prayer and answered him even though he was not a Jew. This shows us that God hears and answers anyone who honestly calls out to Him. (*Motion for Cornelius to stand.*)

Next, explain to the group that we are now moving to a more familiar character: Peter. (*Ask another volunteer to play the role of Peter.*) We know from previous sessions that Peter was an important leader in the Early Church. (*Give him the tunic.*) God used him in supernatural ways to bring the gospel to His people, the Jews. In fact, most all of Jesus' followers at this time were Jewish, including Peter. (*Give him the scroll.*) Peter was still Jewish in his thinking, which, among other things, meant that he couldn't enter a Gentile's house or even eat with a Gentile. Jewish law and tradition forbade it.

Tell the group that you are now going to pick up the story in Acts 10 and find out what happened next. Read Acts 10:9-28 and give Peter a hot dog when you come to verse 13. (*The volunteer should refuse to eat it, just as Peter refuses to accept the sheet full of unclean animals in the passage.*) At the end of the passage, motion for Peter to take a big bite to show his acceptance of God's command. Explain that the vision showed Peter that God had made the offer of salvation available to all men—even Gentiles. It was so hard for Peter to believe that God had to show him the same vision three times. But he finally got it!

Now Read Acts 10:34-48. Explain that God's vision is for unity and love to radiate from His people all over the world. Display the globe where students can see it. At first, point out the country of Israel as the birthplace of the gospel, but then give the globe a spin. Conclude by stating that no matter what color, what language, or what custom a person has, if Christians are truly God's people, He desires for them to love and accept one another and bring that message of love to the whole world.

DIG

Unity in Diversity. For this option, you need several Bibles and these questions.

- If we're all Christians, why are there so many denominations? (*Different denominations are not just because of disagreements. Sometimes they reflect a different perspective about a non-essential biblical issue. Any denomination that embraces the fundamental, non-negotiable truths of Scripture—such as Jesus as fully God and fully human, the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and salvation by faith alone—are united by the bond of Christ and should be loved and embraced as family.*)
- Does being nice to non-Christians mean you don't ever question their beliefs or actions? (*We should treat all people with kindness and respect, no matter what they believe. However, we should not accept any beliefs that contradict what the Bible clearly teaches. We should know what our friends believe; sometimes questioning them can lead to great opportunities to share the truth of the gospel.*)
- How do I know if someone is really a Christian? (*Well, the ultimate key is whether or not he or she has asked Jesus to be his or her Savior and Lord. But even then, many who claim to be Christian live a lifestyle contrary to followers of Jesus Christ. Jesus said we would know His followers "by their fruit." This means that their lifestyles match up with their words. People who say they belong to Jesus should be living it out in how they speak and behave.*)

APPLY

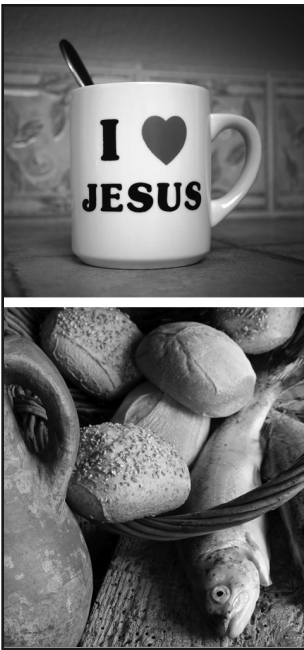
Multifaceted Church. For this option, you need several Bibles, a prism, a high-intensity light and a piece of white paper. (Note: To get the prism to split the light beam takes a little patient practice. Try it before the meeting to make sure you can get it right.)

Explain that even though we are believers in Jesus, we are still very different. This difference is not meant to separate us, but to give us the ability to better reflect to the world the multifaceted love of God. Distribute Bibles and ask a volunteer read 1 Corinthians 12:12-14,27 and 1 Peter 4:10. Continue by stating that even nature demonstrates this truth. We see light as being white, but it is actually made up of all the colors of the rainbow put together.

Illustrate this by shining the high-intensity light through the prism at the white paper. (If done right, the prism will break the light into its color bands and make a really cool rainbow.) Continue by stating that this is a lot like the Church. Jesus is the light, but He breaks up His gifts and callings among His Body so that we each share in it in a special way. We all have a color to shine, and when we all reflect His light, the beauty of His love is displayed to the world. Read John 17:23, and then explain that the bottom line is that we need each other if we're going to impact the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Close in prayer, asking God to release His favor among the students, that they would honor Him by loving and accepting all of His children.

SESSION 10



FROM KILLER TO CRUSADER

STARTER

Twisted Baseball. For this option, you need a baseball bat, a volleyball and lots of room to run.

Greet students and ask if anyone can recite Acts 1:8. Remind them of the main ideas covered in the last three sessions, and then divide the group into two teams (or more if your group is larger than 40 students) and let them know they're going to play a game we like to call "Twisted Baseball."

Select a team to bat first (the other team will play outfield), and then have the team designate a pitcher (to pitch to his or her team). Designate foul-ball lines (which count as used pitches but don't count as hits) and explain that each batter will get three pitches. When a batter hits the ball, the team in the outfield must go to where the ball lands and line up from the ball toward the pitcher. To get the ball back infield to the pitcher, the outfielders must pass the ball through the line between their legs.

Meanwhile, the batter will run around his or her own team (standing closely together), scoring one run for every complete circle around. A batter is out if (1) he or she fails to hit one of the three pitches; (2) if one of the outfielders catches the ball; or (3) if he or she doesn't complete at least four circles around his or her team before the ball is returned to the pitcher. Whew!

Got it? Good, because here's another little twist: Every two times a batter completes a circle around his or her team, he or she must turn around and run the opposite way!

Play as many innings as time permits, and then explain that in this game, the batters had to switch direction pretty quickly. One minute they'd be running clockwise around their team, and the next they were sprinting counterclockwise. Today we're going to continue studying from the book of Acts and learn about a man who went the complete opposite direction of where he started. He was a strong opponent of the Early Church's message, but after a radical encounter with Jesus, he became a defender of the very gospel he had attacked.

MESSAGE

Changing Direction. For this option, you need several Bibles, a small pulley, a rope, a weighted object and a scarf. Secure the pulley to a fixed object (such as a ceiling beam) and thread the rope through the pulley, tying one end of the rope to the weighted object.

Ask, "What does a pulley do?" (*It changes the direction of the force; it helps in lifting things.*) Explain that this pulley is a good illustration of how God's power can change our lives and get us going in the right direction. Tie the scarf to the weighted end of the rope. Slowly pull down on the free end of the rope, causing the scarf to go up. Point out that the direction of the force is being changed; instead of falling to the ground, the scarf is being lifted. Tie off the rope to keep the scarf suspended.

Continue by stating that when we encounter God's power, our lives change direction. We can be heading one way, but His power—like the pulley—turns us in the opposite direction. We go from death to life because of Jesus. A great example of this is the apostle Paul. He went from being a killer of Christians to a crusader for the gospel because of a personal encounter with Jesus.

Have students take turns reading Acts 9:1-22, and then discuss the following questions:

- Why was Paul going to Damascus? (*To take believers as prisoners.*)
- What did he see while on his way? (*A bright light.*)
- What was his response? (*He fell to the ground.*)
- What did he hear? (*A voice saying, "Why do you persecute me?"*)
- Who was speaking to Paul? (*Jesus.*)

- What was different about Paul when he got up? (*He was blind.*)
- Who did God tell to go to Paul? (*Ananias.*)
- How did God speak to Ananias? (*In a vision.*)
- Why was Ananias uneasy about doing this? (*Paul had a reputation as a persecutor of Christians, and Ananias knew that he had come to Damascus to arrest believers.*)
- What happened when Ananias prayed for Paul? (*Scales fell from Paul's eyes and he could see again.*)
- What does verse 20 say Paul immediately began to do? (*Preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God.*)
- What was the effect of Paul's changed life? (*Jews and believers were astonished and some were convinced that Jesus is the Christ.*)

Conclude by explaining that Paul was headed to destroy God's people, but because of the power of Jesus Christ, he was redirected to become a defender of the gospel message. A personal experience with Jesus will always change us and cause us to head in the right direction. God wants to redirect all of us into His perfect plan and that plan includes sharing the gospel with those around us.

DIG

How to Change the World. For this option, you just need this book.

Discuss the following questions with the group:

- Why does God often use unlikely people instead of the strong, smart, good-looking people? (*We are told in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 that God deliberately uses the unlikely so that our faith will rest in Him, not in somebody else. It's His message and His power that change lives. And He's so good that He lets us be part of it!*)
- How can we be sure that we're on the right path? (*The only way to be certain is to fully surrender to the lordship of Jesus, committing ourselves to consistent prayer and Bible study. Then by faith, we must daily give our lives to Him, loving and serving Him however we can. As we trust God to make us what He wants us to be, He will direct us into His perfect will.*)
- What if we're afraid of doing something God has shown us to do? (*First, we need to share our idea with a trusted, spiritually mature person, such*

as a parent, small-group leader or pastor, and allow that person's wisdom to help us discern whether or not God is moving us to act. If He is, we need to realize that many people have been called by God to do things way beyond their abilities and have felt uneasy about doing them. Ananias is a perfect example. He had to double check with God before going to pray for Paul. God wants us to move beyond what we can do to spread the gospel and believe in what He can do to get His message out. Our part is to be willing and ready to obey. He'll take care of the rest.)

- What if we changed direction but then went back to our old ways? *(God's grace is deeper than any sin. We cannot move beyond His reach. If we sincerely want to follow God and fulfill His plan for our lives, we have to keep coming back to Him—repent, pray and study His Word. He won't let us down.)*

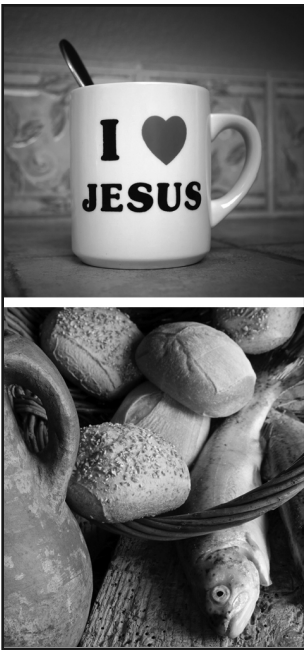
APPLY

Saul-Paul Prayer Challenge. For this option, you need five dot stickers for each student.

Wrap up this session by putting out a three-week “Saul-Paul Prayer Challenge.” Distribute five dot stickers and ask each student to think of one person that he or she can't imagine ever becoming a Christian—much like the Early Church felt about Paul. Then, as a reminder that God can use unlikely people to do great things, challenge them to find five unusual locations at home and school (inside a locker, on a toothbrush handle, on the TV power button) to place their stickers so that when they see the sticker, they will be reminded to stop and pray for that person to come to Christ.

Explain that their prayers can be simple statements of blessing such as, “Lord, thank You for drawing (person's name) to Yourself. Open (his or her) eyes so (he or she) can see Your love and receive Your forgiveness.” They can choose a different person each week or continue praying for the same one. Remind them that God wants to use them to impact others—and consistent prayer is where it begins!

SESSION II



OUT OF THE FRYING PAN AND INTO THE FIRE

STARTER

What's that Sound? For this option, you need several Bibles, an adult volunteer, some open space and a Vortex ball (the football-shaped ball that makes a whistling sound when thrown).

Greet students and review the last session by asking them to think of adjectives that describe Paul before and after his conversion. Explain that, so far, we've been studying the Early Church's effort to spread God's message and have seen that God often uses very unlikely people to do this. Today, we are going to look at God's part in the process. God will confirm His Word when we are faithful to preach it.

Have students line up for a contest to see who can throw the Vortex the farthest. Ask the adult volunteer to judge, based on its *first* bounce, not on how far the ball goes. Applaud the winner with wild fury, and if you have more time, do a second round for height, and a third round for accuracy (you'll have to point to some target that students can aim for).

After everyone is seated, discuss the following:

- When the ball was thrown, what happened? (*It made a whistling sound.*)
- Can you hear the sound when you're just holding the ball? (*Nope.*)

Ask the group to pretend that this ball is the gospel message. God has given the gospel to the Church, along with instructions for sharing it with the world. God confirms His message every time the ball whistles. If we never share it, or throw the ball, we will never hear the sound—we won't hear God confirm His Word.

Read Acts 14:3. Sum up by stating that we have to take the first step and share the gospel. Then God will send His power to prove that His Word is true. Paul experienced God's confirmation in his ministry. God confirmed His Word in many dramatic ways when Paul spoke it. We're going to look at a few of those ways in this session.

MESSAGE

Option 1: God Proved His Word. For this option, you need several Bibles, four adult volunteers, copies of "God Proved His Word" (found on the next two pages), and pens or pencils.

Read Acts 14:3. Explain that today we are going to look at some of the ways that God confirmed His Word in Paul's ministry. To "confirm" means to add supporting proof to it. For example, if I said I that loved M&Ms, you might believe me. However, if you then found six empty candy wrappers on the floor of my car, you would know that what I said was definitely true—the wrappers would confirm it.

The same thing happens when we share God's message with others. He will do something to show that the message is not something we just made up, but that it comes right from His own heart. It is His message, and He will always confirm it.

Divide students into four groups (each with an adult leader) and distribute "God Proved His Word" and pens or pencils. Assign each group one of the passages (Acts 13:4-12; 14:8-10; 16:11-15; 17:1-9) to read and prepare as a skit. Every person needs to be involved in the skit, so groups may have to be creative and use people as props and scenery.

After the skits have been presented, discuss the following:

- What was Paul doing in the city? (*Sharing God's Word with others.*)
- In what different ways did God confirm His Word? (*In Cyprus [Acts 13:4-12], it was confirmed by a clear demonstration of the power and authority of God over the power of the darkness; in Lystra [Acts 14:8-10], it was*



GOD PROVED HIS WORD



1. PAUL IN CYPRUS (ACTS 13:4-12)

Read the passage and write a brief description of what happened. Include what Paul was doing when Elymas opposed him and what the end result was for Sergius Paulus. Then prepare a skit based on what you’ve read.

Main Characters	Role
Paul	Missionary
Barnabas	Missionary
John	Helper
Bar-Jesus (a.k.a. Elymus)	Jewish sorcerer and false prophet
Sergius Paulus	Proconsul

2. PAUL IN LYSTRA (ACTS 14:8-10)

Read the Bible passage and write a brief description of what happened. Be sure to include what Paul was doing when the man looked at him, what Paul saw in the man and what happened when Paul spoke to him. Then prepare a skit based on what you’ve read.

Main Characters	Role
Paul	Missionary
Crippled man	Man who could not walk

3. PAUL IN PHILIPPI (ACTS 16:11-15)

Read the above Bible passage and then write a brief description of what happened. Be sure to include where Paul was going and why, who he spoke to and what happened when he spoke. Then prepare a skit based on what you’ve read.

Main Characters	Role
Paul	Missionary
Women	Gathered at the river
Lydia	A cloth dealer
Lydia’s family	Relatives and servants

4. PAUL IN THESSALONICA (ACTS 17:1-9)

Read the Bible passage and write a brief description of what happened. Include what Paul was doing, why the Jews gathered a mob to start a riot and what happened to Jason. Then prepare a skit based on what you’ve read.

Main Characters	Role
Paul	Missionary
Silas	Missionary
New believers	Jews, God-fearing Greeks, women
Unbelieving Jews	Assemble a mob
Unruly mob	Put together by the jealous Jews
Jason	Believer in whose house Paul was staying
City officials	Roman rulers



confirmed by a miraculous healing; in Philippi [Acts 16:11-15], it was confirmed by the salvation of an entire household; and in Thessalonica [Acts 17:1-9], it was confirmed by rejection and persecution. Make sure to stress that as we see in these passages, sometimes God confirms His Word through happy things, but other times He confirms it through persecution and hardship.)

Conclude by stating that these Bible passages aren't just stories; they really happened. The Early Church experienced the power of God in dramatic ways. And we can expect God to support us as well. It's the same message!

DIG

Questions for Confirmation. For this option, you need to talk about these important issues.

- I have shared the gospel and nothing happened. What gives? *(Maybe it appeared to you that nothing happened, but God will always confirm His Word. Sometimes He does this in ways that we can't see or don't understand. The important thing to remember is that we are called to share His message. The results are up to Him!)*
- I wouldn't know what to share even if I wanted to, so what am I supposed to do? *(Crack open the Book and get educated! The Bible is not a boring, ho-hum, outdated list of rules. It is alive with the power of God. Through the Bible God reveals Himself to us, changes us to be like Him and guides our lives day in and day out. The single most important part of learning about God is reading what He says. Commit to daily Bible study and you'll definitely have a lot to say!)*
- If God proves His Word is true, then why do people still not believe it? *(Think of the different responses from the sorcerer and the proconsul in Cyprus. Both of them heard the message, but one opposed it and one surrendered to it. God confirmed His Word in both their lives, but the results were radically different. Everyone has to step out and by faith receive what God says. Sometimes the obstacles in our lives keep us from giving in to God even when we want to—but He never stops reaching out to draw people to Himself, and neither should we.)*

- Okay, so miracles happened in the Bible. They don't happen now, do they? (*Hebrews 13:8 tells us that Jesus remains the same forever. His character and nature don't shift depending on how He feels or what has happened around Him. He is always the same. So when we talk about Him acting to confirm His Word, we can believe that the same God who did miraculous things to prove His Word was true in the Early Church, will also act to prove His Word is true today. God's power has not diminished over time. He has not withdrawn His promises to reveal Himself. What He wants from us is faithful obedience. The real questions are: Do we believe? Will we step out in faith to obey his Word?*)

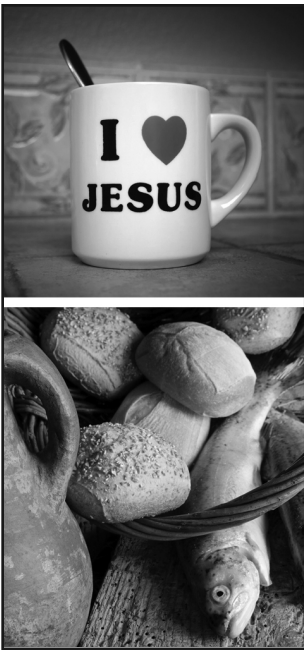
APPLY

Circle of Prayer. For this option, you need some students who are ready to pray.

Begin by stating that we want to see God's Word touch every life within our reach, but it starts with prayer. So, we are going to end this session by specifically praying for the power of God to touch lives in our community, our schools and our families. God will confirm His Word—you can count on it!

Have students gather in a circle and hold hands. The leader (you or someone you designate) will choose a topic and each student in the circle will take turns praying for someone who fits that topic. For example, if the topic chosen is "school," everyone in the circle should pray for teachers, administrators, other students, safety, revival, and so forth. (*Note: Anyone who isn't comfortable praying aloud can simply say "pass" and the next person can pray.*) When you've gone all the way around the circle for one topic, choose another!

SESSION 12



A LINK IN THE CHAIN

STARTER

Domino Effect. For this option, you need dominos and a flat surface on which to set them up.

Greet students and distribute a few dominos to each one. Have them set the dominos on end to create a straight chain. Once they're all set, remove a few of the dominos toward the beginning of the chain so that when they start knocking each other over, the domino effect will stop without reaching the end—but don't start the toppling yet! Discuss the following:

- What does the “domino effect” mean? (*That one event can set off another and another and another.*)
- What are some examples of this? (*Yawning, humming a certain song, the latest clothing fad, and so on.*)

Explain that this long line of dominos reminds us of how God uses people to pass His message on from one generation to the next. Each life counts if we're going to make it to the end. Not one life is insignificant.

Now discuss the following:

- Who are some people you know from the Bible that faithfully carried God's message to others? *(Allow time for students to name as many people as they can.)*
- Can you think of anytime in Bible history when the line was threatened with interruption? *(There are several examples of this—most notably the 400 years of silence in between the Old and New Testaments—but even then God had a faithful group of believers.)*

To illustrate, knock over the first domino. Others should follow, but not far because of the missing pieces. Reset the fallen pieces, insert the dominos you took out so that the line will run all the way to the end and knock over the first one again. Discuss the following:

- How important is each piece to the whole? *(Very important!)*
- What does this say about the importance of your life to the whole work of God? *(Every believer is an important part of what God wants to do. Of course, this doesn't mean that if we fail, the gospel fails. God's will cannot be stopped by our shortcomings! Isn't that a load off your mind?)*

Transition to the next step by stating that today, we are going to look at our part in God's plan to spread the gospel to the whole earth.

MESSAGE

Paul's Three Trials. For this option, you need a gavel, three laurel wreaths (these can be made by using fake ivy garlands available at most craft stores), three white sheets to use as Roman togas (wrapped under one arm and tied together on the opposite shoulder), a large palm branch, three chairs, a table and a bowl of grapes. Place the chairs in the front of the meeting room (elevated if possible, so that students can easily see the performance) and place the table in front of the chairs.

Begin by explaining that Paul's Christian life started off with a powerful vision of Jesus, which gave him the strength and conviction to become one of the strongest defenders of Christianity ever. Throughout Paul's ministry, he never compromised in his efforts to pass on what he had received: the good news of salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. Now we come to the end of Acts and read

about Paul's last recorded opportunities to be a witness for the Lord he loved and served. We'll look at his three trials and see how he used those hard circumstances to continue to spread the Word of God.

Explain that Paul's first trial was before Felix, the Roman governor of Caesarea. Select a student to play the part of Felix and give him a sheet to wear (over his clothes, of course!) and a laurel wreath. Hand him the gavel and instruct him to sit down in the first chair. Choose two volunteers to be attendants, one to fan him with the palm branch and the other to feed him grapes. Explain that Felix listened to the Jews' accusations against Paul that he had stirred up riots and broke their laws. Read Acts 24:1-27. Explain that Felix spent two years questioning Paul on and off, but even though he didn't think Paul was guilty, he never released him. (Cue "Felix" to pound the gavel on the table and declare "Not guilty, but I can't let you go!") Even though Paul was in prison, he used that as an opportunity to share the gospel message.

Continue by stating that Festus replaced Felix as governor. Select another volunteer to play the part of Festus and give him a toga to wear, and then have him take the seat next to Felix (who should give him the gavel but stay where he is) and cue the attendants to pamper him instead. Read Acts 25:10-12. Continue by stating that the Jewish leaders came to Festus to restate their accusations against Paul. Like Felix, Festus found no reason to consider Paul a lawbreaker and wanted to send him back to Jerusalem. Paul knew that the Jews would not give him a fair trial in Jerusalem so, as a Roman citizen, he appealed to Caesar. Festus granted his appeal. (Cue Festus to pound the gavel on the table and declare "Not guilty, but I can't let you go!") Again, Paul used imprisonment as a chance to speak to people who might otherwise never have heard about the gospel.

State that now we come to Paul's last trial before he is sent to Rome. Select another volunteer to play the part of Agrippa and give him a toga—you know the drill. Next, explain that Emperor Claudius Caesar made Herod Agrippa II king over an area in Palestine. Agrippa was the great-grandson of Herod the Great—the one who ordered the killing of the baby boys when Jesus was born. He had come to visit Festus and was asked to listen to Paul's case in order to know what to write to Caesar about the case.

Read Acts 25:13–26:32, and explain that Agrippa heard Paul's testimony and decided that Paul was not guilty of breaking any law, just like Felix and Festus did. But since Paul had appealed to Caesar, he had to be sent to Rome. (Cue Agrippa to pound the gavel and declare, "Not guilty, but you're going to Rome!")

Conclude by stating that the book of Acts ends with Paul's confinement in Rome. He was under house arrest and spent the rest of his life encouraging others to live for God. Some of his letters, which became part of the New Testament, were written while he was in prison. In his last letter, before he was beheaded by Nero, Paul wrote, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7). Many others also sacrificed their lives to see that the gospel could be passed down to us.

DIG

Questions About Persecution. For this option, you need to listen well.

Discuss the following questions with the group:

- If someone is afraid to be a martyr, does that mean that he or she is a wimp? *(It's doubtful that anyone is truly excited at the thought of dying for his or her belief in God until the choice is staring that person in the face. Then, by God's grace, over and over again people have testified to the ease of the choice to give their lives for the gospel. From the early believers who suffered under Nero's persecution to the current times of suffering in Sudan and China, Christians have sacrificed their lives—and done so with peace in their hearts, knowing that this life on earth is not the only life they will enjoy. In other words, if and when we ever face that situation, God will give us what we need to respond in a way that glorifies His name. Don't worry about dying; just concentrate on living for Him!)*
- What if someone denied God instead of keeping firm to the end in fear of persecution or death? Would that person lose his or her salvation? *(God knows our hearts. If we are completely trusting in Him, then we can rest secure about our salvation. He will save us! To truly deny Jesus would mean to completely renounce your trust in Him and turn away from His love with a purposed and defiant act of rebellion. Being under pressure can make us say things we don't truly believe. Jesus promises to give us His strength to endure persecution. If we fail to stand firm in persecution, it is a serious failure, but there is a way back to God through repentance—through the forgiveness of the cross.)*
- Why does God let people die for their faith? Why doesn't He rescue them instead? *(Good question! It doesn't seem logical to us, but that's*

because we have a limited perspective. We see only the here and now of this life on earth. God, who inhabits eternity, sees every point in time all at once. In His unsearchable wisdom, people are allowed to die for their faith. But is this really a loss? In John 15:13, Jesus said that offering your life is the greatest sacrifice a person can make. Remembering that eternal life is every believer's final destination might help us reconcile these hard-to-deal-with facts. Hebrews 11:35-40 tells of many faithful men and women of God who, although they died on earth, ended up in a much better place.)

APPLY

Become a Domino. For this option, you need several adult volunteers, dominos, several glitter glue pens and a nicely wrapped box—something that would make students think there is a really cool gift inside.

Hold up the wrapped box and begin by stating that the story is told of a three-year-old girl who was opening presents on Christmas morning. As she tore open a big box and pulled out a brand-new toy, she exclaimed, “Oh! This is what I’ve wanted all my life.”

Continue by stating that sometimes we don’t really know what we want—we think we do, but we don’t. So we seek to fill that need with stuff—relationships, clothing, food, popularity, things, and so on. But God, our Creator, knows not only what we want, but also what we need: salvation. And He has freely given that gift to us. We’ve talked a lot about the sacrifices people have made to ensure that the gospel message would be passed on. But you can’t sacrifice your life for something you don’t know is true. You have to experience it for yourself. Jesus proved His love for you by laying down His life for your sins. Will you accept His gift of forgiveness by surrendering your life to Him?

Give students a minute of silent reflection and then invite anyone who would like to commit their life to Jesus to come forward. Have adult volunteers ready to pray with them. Afterward, distribute one domino to each student and have students write their names or initials on their dominos using the glue sticks. Explain that whenever they see their domino, they should remember that their lives count for the kingdom of God. They are a vital part of seeing the gospel message passed on to others, and He will give them the opportunity and the grace to share it.

Close in prayer, thanking God for His incredible gift of salvation.