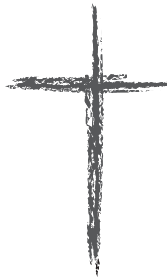


THE INSANITY *of* OBEDIENCE



WALKING WITH JESUS
IN TOUGH PLACES

NIK RIPKEN

Lifeway Press®
Nashville, Tennessee

Published by Lifeway Press® • © 2016 Nik Ripken Ministries • Reprinted April 2022

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ISBN 978-1-4300-5512-9 • Item 006104042

Dewey decimal classification: 248.84 • Subject headings: CHRISTIAN LIFE / DISCIPLESHIP / SPIRITUAL LIFE

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Printed in Canada

Groups Ministry Publishing • Lifeway Resources • 200 Powell Place, Suite 100 • Brentwood, TN 37027

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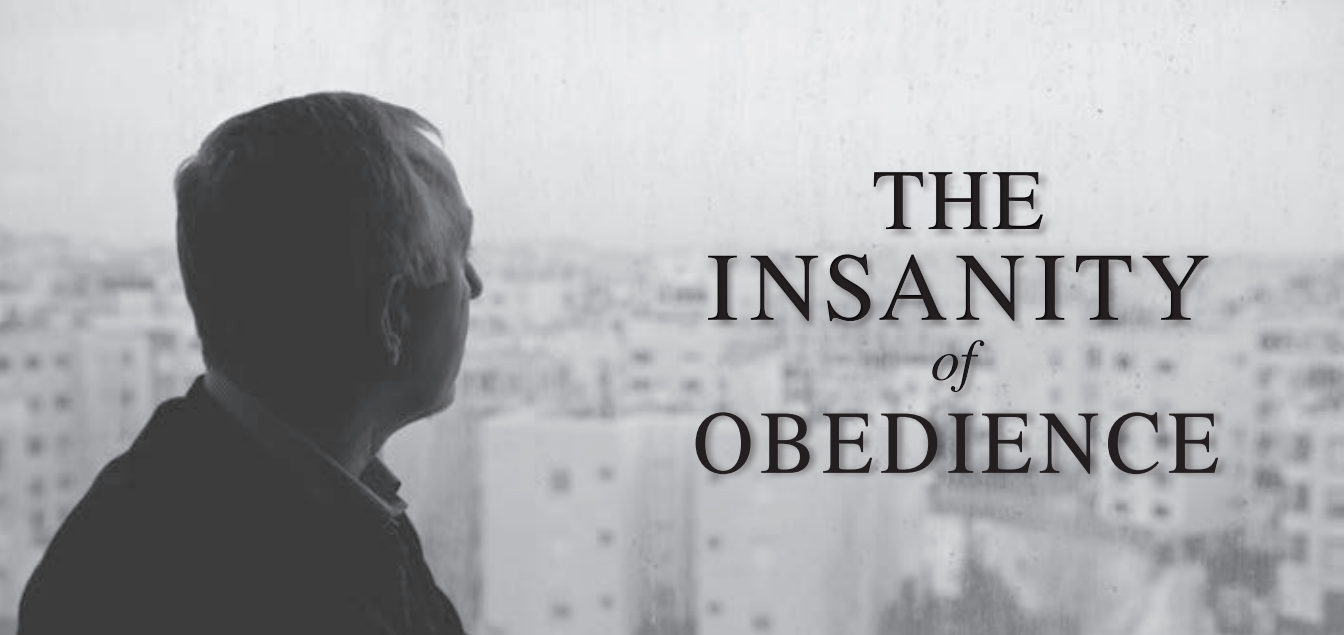
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About the Author

Nik Ripken is one of the world's leading experts on persecution, especially in Muslim contexts. He is a missions veteran of 32 years, having served primarily in North Africa and the Middle East.

Nik is the author of *The Insanity of God* and *The Insanity of Obedience*. He and his wife have done extensive research on believers in persecution in approximately 72 countries.

*You can find out more about Nik and his ministry at
NikRipken.com and GodsInsanity.com*

Letter from the Author

It is our joy to greet you in the name of Jesus Christ. We are so grateful to God for you and that you have decided to take some time away from your busy schedules to participate in a small group fellowship that could have eternal consequences; both for you and for others you have yet to meet.

I have looked at every setting on this computer and I cannot find the one that will allow me to write to you with a southern accent! Our sons loved to tease me when introducing us to new people by saying, “This is our father who had to take ESL, English as a second language, when he went to college.” That is a blatant lie! I didn’t have to take ESL until I went to seminary.

I like to say that Ruth and I are both PK’s; she was a pastor’s kid and I was a pagan kid. Ruth cannot remember a time when she did not know Jesus. I can remember being 18 years of age and not knowing where I would go when I died. I came from such a rough family that, oftentimes, good church people would cross the street to avoid having to talk to us. I know what it means to be lost and not have anyone looking for us—for me.

This, perhaps, is at the heart of what we are about in meeting together for the next six weeks. It is our prayer that if you do not know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, this time together will assist you in giving your entire being to Jesus. Secondly, it is our prayer that being together will help you to cross the street with the Good News, as well as cross the oceans with whom you know Jesus to be. So you can see, Ruth’s and my ambition for this time together is extremely high.

About 30 years ago we took two boys, three and a half and five and half years old, to East Africa. There we started a grand adventure that included having malaria multiple times, serving in a harvest field, serving in a country where missionaries had lived for about 300 years, and eventually making our way to one of the toughest places on the planet—Somalia.

We know that Jesus sends out His followers as “sheep among wolves.” We just did not know how mean the wolves were, nor how unprepared we were as sheep. You see we had spent most of our lives as sheep among sheep.

THE INSANITY OF OBEDIENCE

We had little or no clue concerning how to share our faith where the wolves were in the majority. We do not want the same experience for you.

The problem was not that the places where we worked were hard places. The problem was that we had experienced little that prepared us to serve where the wolves were in the vast majority. We knew intellectually that serving Jesus across the street or across the oceans was based in a command found in Matthew 28 and Acts 1.

You will find in your time together and in your study that God “calls” people, usually in groups and usually as families. You will find that a call usually has to do with serving God for a specific period of time in a specific location. Yet, all of us are commanded to be in Christ and to go with Christ. No one gets a pass as all are commanded.

It is our prayer that we can assist you on your journey, whether it takes you across the road, to those who are without Christ, or across the oceans to those with little or no access to Jesus 2,000 years after the resurrection. Understand please, if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, you do not get to decide whether or not you are a partner with Him. What you can decide is whether or not you’re a good or a bad partner!

Ruth and I have PhD’s in mistakes—what not to do. It is not necessary for you to repeat our mistakes. Therefore, it is our intention to help you with your journey so that you can become wise sheep among the wolves—even in the hardest places on earth. Don’t worry, you will make mistakes. But they will be your own mistakes and you will make them much further down the road and at much less cost to others.

Over the years we have been allowed to worship and learn from some of the most faithful and daring followers of Jesus. Most of these we met in settings just like you are experiencing: small groups, seldom more than 30, changing the days of the week when they meet, moving from house to house, and changing the hours of the day when they met. Why? In China, for example, 40 percent of all pastors, evangelists, deacons, elders, and church planters have been imprisoned for three years. They suggested to us that prison is their “theological seminary.” It’s where they go for training. Prisons are where their leaders are formed.

Just like the disciples did with Jesus, we sat at their feet, breaking bread, singing, praying, and telling stories from the Bible—especially those about Jesus. We listened and recorded over 600 of their stories in 72 countries. They taught us that, in the Bible, persecution is normal. They modeled for us how they pass their faith from one generation to the next—from grandparents to parents to children and onto their grandchildren. They have a genealogy of faith that is astounding. Their main place of worship is in the home, led by their fathers.

It is their stories that you will watch, hear, and repeat. Their stories are a modern-day reminder of those in the Bible. They live a Bible that is in present-active-tense. They know that everything that God has ever done He is still doing.

We want to give you some tools for the journey—some ways of thinking and acting. What you do together for these seven weeks we hope you will keep on doing once these weeks together finish. We pray that what you do these seven weeks will enable you to break bread in the homes of those without Jesus—Americans, Muslims, Hindus, and atheists—wherever they are to be found. It is our prayer that those without Jesus will find their way to your home; a safe place to share a meal, to hear stories from the Bible, and from your own experiences. We pray that it will become normal for you to break bread and tell your story in the homes of Americans that do not know Jesus, as well as among internationals.

We pray that these six weekss will be life-changing as you eat together, pray together, laugh together, and cry together. The important thing is that you will do this together, and do so in the presence of the resurrected Jesus. Have a great time! We wish we could see your faces and hug your necks! We hope to hear from you and to learn how God blessed you through your time together, watching video clips of our experiences with Christians around the world, unpacking God's Word, all the while learning how to be faithful and confident sheep among wolves. We love you and pray for the opportunity to break bread with you somewhere down the road.

Blessings,

Nik and Ruth Ripken

INTRODUCTORY SESSION

Start

Start each week by sharing time with food and conversation.

A common way for Christians to meet with one another and to reach out to others in the community is to share a meal, build relationships while they eat together, talk about life, and share a story from Scripture. In order to identify with believers around the world and throughout history, your group session will follow the same format each week.

- ☐ Share a meal or snacks.
- ☐ Ask how everyone is doing. (This is a time to talk casually about life in general—work, family, activities, etc.)
- ☐ Ask group members for any updates about prayer requests.
- ☐ Watch a video clip from Nik and Ruth Ripken's life stories.
- ☐ Respond with discussion related to the video clip and to the week's personal reading from the Bible study books.
- ☐ Conclude your time together in worship and prayer.

Individuals will prepare before meeting together as a group by completing the pages in their Bible study books. Each week follows the same format:

- ☐ One story from the Old Testament.
- ☐ One story from the New Testament.
- ☐ A personal study including the words of Jesus and exploring other biblical content within the context of the two stories.

You will learn how to read biblical stories in a way that helps you:

- ☐ Recognize important details.
- ☐ Memorize a conversational summary of the story.
- ☐ Identify practical applications in your own life.
- ☐ Consider different circumstances in which you can tell the story to others.

A central component of your time as individuals and as a group will involve reading and telling biblical stories. Because this format may be new to your group, allow extra time for the “Respond” portion of each weeks session.

During the “Respond” portion of each session, group members will not only respond to the story shared by Nik and Ruth Ripken in the video clip, group members will also practice telling and discussing the biblical stories they studied and memorized during the week.

Even if the suggested format isn’t the normal routine of your time individually or together, allowing everyone the opportunity to fully immerse themselves in this experience will help them see the Christian life in a fresh perspective.

Watch

Each week, we will see a story from Nik and Ruth Ripken’s life as they join God’s work around the world. This opening video will provide an overview of what to expect during the next six weeks.

Play the promotional video for *The Insanity of Obedience*.

Respond

This section and the next will provide a guide for a simple routine of group discussion and prayer each week.

What’s your immediate response to the video?

What emotions did it evoke in you?

What statements were challenging or intriguing in the video?

What do you hope God will do in you over the next six weeks of this study?

Pray

Conclude each group session with a time of prayer. You may also choose to include a time of worship through a musical instrument or song. This type of worship experience reflects how Christians meet in house churches around the world.

Read Matthew 28:18-20.

Why are the phrases “All authority has been given to Me” and “observe everything I have commanded you” vital to our understanding of how to pray in our daily lives?

How is the phrase “I am with you always” vital to our prayers?

Use the space below to record names and contact information of group members. This will allow you to pray for each person by name and to personally connect with one another during the week outside of your time together as a group.

Pray that the next six weeks would be life-changing for each person in the group.

Week 1

MISSIONS

[Jesus] said to His disciples, "The harvest is abundant, but the workers are few. Therefore, pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest."

MATTHEW 9:37-38

Old Testament Story

ABRAHAM COMMANDED TO GO

*The LORD said to Abram:
Go out from your land,
your relatives,
and your father's house
to the land that I will show you.
I will make you into a great nation,
I will bless you,
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
I will bless those who bless you,
I will curse those who treat you with contempt,
and all the peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.*

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated, and the people he had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan.

When Abram was 99 years old, the LORD appeared to him, saying, "I am God Almighty. Live in My presence and be blameless. I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will multiply you greatly." Then Abram fell facedown and God spoke with him: "As for Me, My covenant is with you: you will become the father of many nations. Your name will no longer be Abram, but your name will be Abraham, for I will make you the father of many nations."

GENESIS 12:1-5; 17:1-5

Identify

Circle any key people in this story.

Draw a box around any key words or phrases in the text.

Underline promises, commands, or verses you want to remember.

What's the main point of this story?

How do you relate to a person or a circumstance in this story?

When could this story have been helpful to you or to someone you know?

What other situations may present an opportunity to share this story?

Why would the truth revealed in this story be particularly meaningful in the situations you have identified?

Reflect

No matter where you are, how old you are, or what you're currently doing, God is at work. His plan has always been to call people into relationship with Him and then to send them out as a blessing to the nations.

What encouragement, conviction, or application do you sense the Holy Spirit impressing on your heart?

Whom do you know that would benefit from hearing this story?

We'll see later in the study that going can sometimes be easier than staying. The challenge isn't merely to go but to model obedient and sacrificial faith among people who need to be blessed by hearing (and responding to) the gospel. What's required of you isn't a casual or temporary response to the command to go but a radical, lifelong commitment. The result of this kind of commitment is the gospel takes root deeply within the culture, wherever it may reside.

Pray

Close your time of reflection by praying for the courage to step out in faith and to be a blessing wherever God chooses to use you.

New Testament Story

JESUS' FOLLOWERS COMMANDED TO GO

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to view the tomb. Suddenly there was a violent earthquake, because an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and approached the tomb. He rolled back the stone and was sitting on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his robe was as white as snow. The guards were so shaken from fear of him that they became like dead men.

But the angel told the women, "Don't be afraid, because I know you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here! For He has been resurrected, just as He said. Come and see the place where He lay. Then go quickly and tell His disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead. In fact, He is going ahead of you to Galilee; you will see Him there.' Listen, I have told you."

So, departing quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, they ran to tell His disciples the news. Just then Jesus met them and said, "Good morning!" They came up, took hold of His feet, and worshiped Him. Then Jesus told them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell My brothers to leave for Galilee, and they will see Me there."

The 11 disciples traveled to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had directed them. When they saw Him, they worshiped, but some doubted. Then Jesus came near and said to them, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

MATTHEW 28:1-10,16-20

Identify

Circle any key people in this story.

Draw a box around any key words or phrases in the text.

Underline promises, commands, or verses you want to remember.

What major events take place?

What's the main point of this story?

How do you relate to a person or a circumstance in this story?

When could this story have been helpful to you or to someone you know?

What other situations may present an opportunity to share this story?

Why would the truth revealed in this story be particularly meaningful in the situations you have identified?

Reflect

Jesus' instruction is compelling in its clarity. It's not a suggestion; it's a command. "Go!" He says. "Make disciples of all nations." You have the high privilege of joining Jesus' mission. But be absolutely sure about this: you go on His terms, not yours.

What encouragement, conviction, or application do you sense the Holy Spirit impressing on your heart?

Whom do you know that would benefit from hearing this story?

No matter what other tasks the church undertakes, going and making disciples are essential and defining tasks. The church is not doing as Christ commanded unless it is going and making disciples.

Pray

Close your time of reflection by praying for obedience to make disciples, knowing that Jesus is with you as you go.

Personal Study

HOW TO GO

This week's stories of Abraham's family and of Jesus' disciples revealed God's plan has always been to set a group of people apart from the world in order to bless the nations. Jesus' command to go make disciples was a fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. Through faith in Jesus, who came from the ancestral line of Abraham, people from every nation are adopted into God's family. Now that we have a greater context for missions, let's look at Bible passages that provide further insight into how we're to go.

Words of Jesus

Read Acts 1:1-11.

What actions and events are recorded as historical facts?

What's the importance of Luke's emphasis on proof and historical events?

Why is it significant that verse 2 uses the phrase "He had given orders"?

Missions

The Holy Spirit is repeatedly mentioned in this final moment with Jesus. In the account in Matthew 28, Jesus also mentioned the Holy Spirit.

What's the role of the Holy Spirit in God's mission to go to the nations?

Record each action with which the Spirit is connected in Acts 1:1-11.

In Jesus' command to go as His witnesses throughout local communities and to the ends of the earth, it's clear that this mission can be accomplished only with the direction, presence, and power of the Holy Spirit. This command isn't optional. But verse 6 reveals that even Jesus' disciples—now referred to as *apostles* (see v. 2), which means *sent-out ones*—had questions about what God was doing instead of how they could obey.

Summarize Jesus' words in verses 7-8.

The question about God's timing wasn't necessarily a lack of faith and willingness, but Jesus' response was clear that their only concern about God's timing should be their obedient response in the moment. The apostles were a lot like most of us today. We want to know God's plan before we obey His command. Like the apostles, and like Abraham before them, we must be willing to go whenever and wherever God leads.

The story concludes with angels essentially asking, "What are you doing? Stop standing around and do what Jesus said to do. Go now."

In what ways are you just standing around instead of going?

Testimony of Scripture

Read Hebrews 11:1-3.

Identify each element in this definition of *faith* and record the elements here.

The definition of *faith* in Hebrews 11 encompasses everything we've studied so far—reality, proof, hope, obedient people in the past, and understanding the power of God's command.

Which phrase in the description of *faith* did you need to be reminded of today?

Read Hebrews 11:8-16.

Though Abraham literally left his home—and you may be called to do the same—what does it mean to live for a better city and for a heavenly home?

What freedom exists in knowing that this world is temporary?

These definitions and examples of faithfulness provide a framework with which we can understand that responding in faith to God's call is not only a matter of our own salvation but also of God's mission.

Read 1 Peter 2:9-12.

What's the result when God's people—His holy nation—bears witness through a faithful lifestyle to a watching world?

Missions

Faith means more than believing these things in theory. That may come easily to you. Faith means doing whatever “good works” (v. 12) God commands.

You might think that the world does not want to hear the gospel of Jesus; that your neighbors, coworkers, family, and people you interact with daily do not seem interested; that there are not many people to witness to or who you can make disciples of Jesus.

Read Matthew 9:35-38.

According to Jesus, what group of people are too few in number?

The world is full of people who are weary and tired. Countless men, women, and children desperately need the gospel. Our compassionate Savior says people not only need the gospel but are also ready for it.

Just as the angels promised the apostles that Jesus would return and Peter promised that nations would “glorify God on the day of visitation” (1 Pet. 2:12), Jesus promised that there will be a harvest. The faithful will be gathered.

Pray

Pray that you will answer Jesus’ command to be a worker sent out for the harvest. Now is the time to go. How? Go in the power of the Holy Spirit wherever and whenever He leads. Go in the freedom of knowing that this world and the things in it are temporary. God has prepared an eternal home for you and for all who follow Jesus.

For more about God’s command to go to the nations, read Part One (Chapters 1–8) in *The Insanity of Obedience* by Nik Ripken (B&H, 2014).

Group Session

MISSIONS

Start

Start each week by sharing time with food and conversation.

This group session establishes the weekly rhythm for this study. Everyone should have prepared for this session by reading, studying, and memorizing an Old and New Testament story. Because this format may be new to your group, allow extra time for the “Respond” portion of each session.

- ☐ Share a meal or snacks.
- ☐ Ask how everyone is doing. (This is a time to talk casually about life in general—work, family, activities, etc.)
- ☐ Ask group members for any updates about prayer requests.
- ☐ Remind everyone about the group format—read and study during the week, gather as a group for food and conversation, watch a video clip, respond to the story in the video, tell the stories studied during the week, discuss the truth of God’s Word and personal application, and then pray.

During this time each week, we will see a story from the Ripken family’s life as they join God’s work around the world. This week, we’ll begin by getting to know a little bit about Nik and Ruth Ripken and how they left everything they had ever known in order to follow Jesus.

Watch

Play the video for Session 1, “Missions.” As you watch, note anything especially meaningful presented in the video or in your response to the story.

Respond

This page and the next provide a guide for discussion and prayer. It models a simple routine for group discussion and prayer each week.

What's your immediate response to the video?

What have you never considered before?

Ask a volunteer to tell the story of Abraham from Genesis 12:1-5; 17:1-5 as everyone follows along in their own Bibles.

In what way is the Old Testament story of Abraham being commanded to go a key to understanding God's mission?

How do you relate to Abraham's story, even if it is a completely different circumstance?

Ask a volunteer to tell the story of Jesus' followers from Matthew 28:1-10, 16-20 as everyone follows along in their Bibles.

Why are the New Testament stories about the women at the tomb and the men on the mountain being commanded by Jesus to go essential in understanding God's mission?

Jesus' final words in Matthew are known as the Great Commission. What actions are mentioned as the essence of making disciples?

When would the biblical truths in the story of Abraham, of the women at the tomb, or of the Great Commission been helpful in your own life?

In what circumstances would these biblical stories and your own testimony be most appropriate to share with someone, Christian or non-Christian?

Before transitioning from reflection to prayer, leave time for other thoughts or questions about the week's focus—in this case, God's mission. This prioritizes the habit of intentionally creating an opportunity for the Spirit to move in the lives of unique individuals and their circumstances.

Pray

Conclude each group session with a time of prayer. You may also choose to include a time of worship through a musical instrument or song. This type of worship experience reflects how Christians meet in house churches around the world.

This week you studied a definition of *faith* found in Hebrews 11:1-3.

How does faith relate to the way we should pray about missions?

You also read Jesus' sobering, yet encouraging words about workers and the harvest in Matthew 9:35-38.

How does the image of workers and the harvest shape the way we view and pray about missions?

Encourage group members to share specific prayer needs, especially those related to the faith needed to join God's mission. Also remind everyone to pray for these requests and for each person by name during the week.

Conclude by praying for the spoken requests of the participants, for faith to be sent out as workers in the harvest, and for reliance on the Holy Spirit to go wherever, whenever, and to speak to whomever He leads you to in order to bless those individuals and make disciples of all nations.

Use this space to record prayer requests.

Week 2

PERSECUTION

"Look, I'm sending you out like sheep among wolves."

MATTHEW 10:16

Old Testament Story

THE FIERY FURNACE

Nebuchadnezzar asked them, “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, is it true that you don’t serve my gods or worship the gold statue I have set up? Now if you’re ready, when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, drum, and every kind of music, fall down and worship the statue I made. But if you don’t worship it, you will immediately be thrown into a furnace of blazing fire—and who is the god who can rescue you from my power?”

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied to the king, “Nebuchadnezzar, we don’t need to give you an answer to this question. If the God we serve exists, then He can rescue us from the furnace of blazing fire, and He can rescue us from the power of you, the king. But even if He does not rescue us, we want you as king to know that we will not serve your gods or worship the gold statue you set up.”

Then Nebuchadnezzar was filled with rage, and the expression on his face changed toward Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He gave orders to heat the furnace seven times more than was customary, and he commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and throw them into the furnace of blazing fire. So these men, in their trousers, robes, head coverings, and other clothes, were tied up and thrown into the furnace of blazing fire.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar jumped up in alarm. He said to his advisers, “Didn’t we throw three men, bound, into the fire?” “Yes, of course, Your Majesty,” they replied to the king. He exclaimed, “Look! I see four men, not tied, walking around in the fire unharmed; and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.”

Nebuchadnezzar then approached the door of the furnace of blazing fire and called: “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, you servants of the Most High God—come out!” So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out of the fire. When the satraps, prefects, governors, and the king’s advisers gathered around, they saw that the fire had no effect on the bodies of these men: not a hair of their heads was singed, their robes were unaffected, and there was no smell of fire on them. Nebuchadnezzar exclaimed, “Praise to the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego! He sent His angel and rescued His servants who trusted in Him. They violated the king’s command and risked their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God.

DANIEL 3:14-28

Identify

Circle any key people in this story?

Draw a box around any key words or phrases in the text.

Underline promises, commands, or verses that you want to remember.

What major events take place?

What is the main point of this story?

How do you relate to a person or circumstance in this story?

When could this story have been helpful to you or to someone you know?

What other situations may present an opportunity to share this story?

Why would the truth revealed in this story be particularly meaningful in the situations you have identified?

Reflect

While we simply cannot choose to be silent about God's ability to save, we cannot ignore the high cost of witnessing either. It's natural to think that if God is real then He would spare those who worship Him from suffering. In the instance of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego the Lord chose to reveal His power by intervening supernaturally. This is not always the case.

The Bible reveals that God's ability to rescue people from temporary circumstances is secondary to His desire to make His name known to all nations. This reality is most clear in the abuse and crucifixion of Jesus. God's plan of salvation included—and required—the death of His Son. Like our Savior, the hope we have is that even death is temporary, and that every tongue will confess and every knee will bow to Jesus Christ as Lord.

What encouragement, conviction, or application do you sense the Holy Spirit impressing on your heart?

Whom do you know that would benefit from hearing this story?

Faithfulness today, as in the Bible, requires spiritual discernment and psychological strength in the face of adversity. At times, especially for our brothers and sisters around the world facing persecution for the name of Jesus, physical endurance and even a willingness to die is needed. Even if the Lord does not rescue His people from a situation, refusing to compromise with the world gives testimony to the worthiness of the one true God.

Pray

Close your time by praying for families and individuals around the world facing persecution and even death. Declare God's worthiness of your total devotion no matter the cost of your faithfulness.

New Testament Story

PAUL & SILAS

Bringing [Paul and Silas] before the chief magistrates, they said, "These men are seriously disturbing our city. They are Jews and are promoting customs that are not legal for us as Romans to adopt or practice."

Then the mob joined in the attack against them, and the chief magistrates stripped off their clothes and ordered them to be beaten with rods. After they had inflicted many blows on them, they threw them in jail, ordering the jailer to keep them securely guarded. Receiving such an order, he put them into the inner prison and secured their feet in the stocks.

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the jail were shaken, and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's chains came loose. When the jailer woke up and saw the doors of the prison open, he drew his sword and was going to kill himself, since he thought the prisoners had escaped.

But Paul called out in a loud voice, "Don't harm yourself, because all of us are here!" Then the jailer called for lights, rushed in, and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he escorted them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" So they said, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household."

Then they spoke the message of the Lord to him along with everyone in his house. He took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds. Right away he and all his family were baptized. He brought them into his house, set a meal before them, and rejoiced because he had believed God with his entire household.

ACTS 16:20-34

Identify

Circle any key people in this story?

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Underline promises, commands, or verses that you want to remember.

What major events take place?

What is the main point of this story?

How do you relate to a person or circumstance in this story?

When could this story have been helpful to you or to someone you know?

What other situations may present an opportunity to share this story?

Why would the truth revealed in this story be particularly meaningful in the situations you have identified?

Reflect

It's clear that the Holy Spirit wants us to out-grow and out-love our persecutors. In the prayers and hymns of Paul and Silas we see a reality that's vital for spreading the gospel throughout the world today. It's impossible to take away God's Word when believing communities have absorbed it, committed it to memory, and are active in boldly sharing the good news of Jesus.

What encouragement, conviction, or application do you sense the Holy Spirit impressing on your heart?

Whom do you know that would benefit from hearing this story?

Even in suffering, our focus is not to be on the persecutor and the persecution. Our focus is on Jesus and on witnessing. Each generation of believers must decide when to stay in jail, so to speak, even when it is possible to gain release.

God's people may or may not always need rescuing. If Paul and Silas had fled when the doors were opened, if others had sought to remove them by force or in secret, or if they had displayed an angry protest, the prisoners would not have heard their words and the jailer and his family would not have been saved.

We may or may not experience the joy of seeing a person come to faith as the result of a faithful testimony. Even when we don't understand, we can be certain that He has a purpose even through unspeakable pain.

Pray

Thank God for His goodness. Ask for contentment in any circumstance. Pray that you would be a humble witness to those around you and to take every opportunity to share the gospel.

Personal Study

SHEEP AMONG WOLVES

Why God uses persecution and suffering for His purposes is a holy mystery, but the fact that He *does* use persecution and suffering is a certainty.

Jesus was ridiculed, beaten and murdered. Crucifixion and resurrection are central themes of the gospel story. Followers of Christ not only believe in the resurrection, they are defined by His resurrection. With those things in mind, persecution should not be alarming. Jesus promised His disciples that to follow Him was a grand and frightening adventure.

Words of Jesus

Read Luke 19:10.

According to Jesus, why did He come to live with—and ultimately die for—us?

Your church, like many organizations today, may have a purpose statement to define and to focus on a primary objective. Jesus has made His purpose perfectly clear. In the context of Jesus' statement, He had just turned the religious world's framework upside down. A notorious sinner named Zacchaeus had met Jesus and repented of sin. The fact that Jesus would associate with such a man, let alone spend time in his home breaking bread, was unthinkable. But Christ didn't come to please the religious community; He came to save sinners—even those who take advantage of and oppress others.

Persecution

Read Matthew 10:16-22.

What specific examples does Jesus provide for persecution?

What is a positive way God uses persecution (vv. 18-20)?

Jesus defines persecution as suffering because of His name. There are many forms of suffering that are the result of things other than our faith in Jesus. For example, in certain countries persecution may be due to being American, not a Christian. This type of persecution is from a secondary issue, not the result of identifying with Jesus and advancing the gospel.

What we call persecution in our culture does not fit the description provided by Jesus—not even areas in which adversity or unfair treatment exists. Often adversity that we face is more of a result of attitudes or tone in which beliefs are expressed, political stances, or convictions on social issues.

What are some secondary issues that result in Christians facing pressure, adversity, or isolation?

How do Christians in your culture typically respond to these forms of adversity? How do you respond?

Today's popular theologies advise us that suffering can be avoided and that there is a way to be both faithful and comfortable at the same time. These theologies indicated that even if we are sheep, it is possible to minimize our exposure to the world filled with wolves. In fact, many Christians believe that we should avoid wolves all together.

THE INSANITY OF OBEDIENCE

If there is any confusion or question about following Christ into tough situations, ask yourself if you believe that He understood the natural relationship between sheep and wolves. Despite the inherent danger, Jesus will use His sheep to complete His mission.

Testimony of Scripture

Read Isaiah 43:1-2.

The prophet Isaiah recorded this promise from God over 100 years before Daniel and his friends were taken into captivity and trained to serve Nebuchadnezzar. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego didn't necessarily know this prophecy, but God knew the ways His people would face persecution. In their case, this promise was literal.

Though God doesn't always save His people from physical harm, what hope does the promise in Isaiah give you?

The Israelites had literally walked through waters before the Book of Isaiah was written. During the exodus, God had parted the Red Sea as Moses led the people of God. After Moses' death, Joshua had also led God's people through the Jordan River.

What is the benefit of looking back on God's work in the past when facing adversity or persecution in the present?

Read Romans 12:1-2.

How do these verses speak to the realities of adversity as a Christian?

Persecution

How do these verses also speak in a way that reassures Christians?

What are some areas in your life that are not acts of worship?

In what ways are you seeking to know God's will?

How will you renew your mind, especially in areas where tempted to conform to the world?

God has spoken through His Word. He reminds us of His faithfulness in the past and reassures us of His ongoing work in and through our lives today.

What if the Bible is more than history? What if a passage like Matthew 10 is a true word for Jesus' followers of every day and age. What if it is true today? What if we are sheep and the world really is filled with wolves, yet Jesus has sent us out anyway?

Live in confidence. Live each day as an act of worship—even when facing personal sacrifice in order to obey God's good and perfect will.

Pray

Pray for confidence in the face of adversity and for a refusal to compromise your beliefs. Ask God for a bold testimony to the life-changing power of the gospel.

For more about faith in persecution, read Part Two (Chapters 9–11) in *The Insanity of Obedience* by Nik Ripken (B&H, 2014).

Group Session

PERSECUTION

Start

Start each week by sharing time with food and conversation.

- ☐ Share a meal or snacks.
- ☐ Ask how everyone is doing. (This is a time to talk casually about life in general—work, family, activities, etc.)
- ☐ Ask group members for any updates about prayer requests.

Christians all over the world gather in homes and in places where they can be together for the sake of spiritual growth. Many of these house churches and groups of believers meet at the risk of persecution. In fact, according to Paul Marshall of Freedom House, 80 percent of the world's believers who are practicing their faith live in persecution. For these men, women and children the name *Christian* is not one to be taken lightly. To follow Christ as a disciple who makes disciples, worshiping the name of Jesus is a matter of life or death. This is exactly where we see that *obedience* appears to be *insanity*.

Let's watch as Nik and Ruth Ripken share the story of their family's experience with persecution for spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Watch

Play the video for Session 2, "Persecution." As you watch, note anything especially meaningful presented in the video or in your response to the story.

Respond

This page and the next provide a guide for discussion and prayer. It models a simple routine for group discussion and prayer each week.

What's your immediate response to the video?

What had you never considered before?

Ask a volunteer to tell the story of the fiery furnace from Daniel 3:14-28 as everyone else follows along in their Bibles.

In what way is the Old Testament story of the fiery furnace a key to understanding persecution?

How do you relate to the story of the fiery furnace, even if it is a completely different circumstance?

Ask a volunteer to tell the story of Paul and Silas from Acts 16:22-34 as everyone follows along in their own Bibles.

Why is the New Testament story about Paul and Silas a key to understanding persecution?

What was different between Paul and Silas' interaction with the prisoners and their interaction with the jailer? What does that teach us about our own witnessing to others?

When would the biblical truths in the stories of Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, Paul and Silas have been helpful in your own life?

In what circumstances would these biblical stories and your own testimony be most appropriate to share with someone, Christian or non-Christian?

Before transitioning from reflection to prayer, leave time for other thoughts or questions about the week's focus—in this case, persecution. This prioritizes the habit of intentionally creating an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to move in the lives of unique individuals and their circumstances.

Pray

Always conclude with a time of prayer and worship.

This week you read about Jesus' sending out the apostles in Luke 19:10.

While both are real, how would you distinguish between adversity and persecution?

How have you experienced adversity as a Christian?

Where do you need prayer for boldness in sharing the gospel?

What are some specific things we can pray about knowing that Christians are suffering for spreading the gospel of Jesus?

Encourage group members to share specific prayer needs. Remind everyone that even if we are not facing persecution like other brothers and sisters in Christ around the world, this doesn't mean that our prayer requests are insignificant.

Conclude by praying for the requests, for faithful obedience to God's Word, and a refusal to conform to social pressures. Beg God that you would never take your freedom for granted, giving up what those facing persecution never would—sharing the gospel. Ask God to keep your perspective focused on the reality of people needing to hear the gospel and of the sacrifices being made each day by families and individuals throughout the world in the name of Jesus.

Use this space to record prayer requests.

Week 3

FAMILY

Listen, Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is One. Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. These words that I am giving you today are to be in your heart. Repeat them to your children. Talk about them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

DEUTERONOMY 6:4-7

Old Testament Story

SARAH & ISAAC

Then the LORD appeared to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre while he was sitting in the entrance of his tent during the heat of the day. He looked up, and he saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to meet them and bowed to the ground. Then he said, "My lord, if I have found favor in your sight, please do not go on past your servant. Let a little water be brought, that you may wash your feet and rest yourselves under the tree. I will bring a bit of bread so that you may strengthen yourselves. This is why you have passed your servant's way. Later, you can continue on."

"Yes," they replied, "do as you have said."

So Abraham hurried into the tent and said to Sarah, "Quick! Knead three measures of fine flour and make bread." Meanwhile, Abraham ran to the herd and got a tender, choice calf. He gave it to a young man, who hurried to prepare it. Then Abraham took curds and milk, and the calf that he had prepared, and set them before the men. He served them as they ate under the tree.

"Where is your wife Sarah?" they asked him. "There, in the tent," he answered. The LORD said, "I will certainly come back to you in about a year's time, and your wife Sarah will have a son!" Now Sarah was listening at the entrance of the tent behind him. Abraham and Sarah were old and getting on in years. Sarah had passed the age of childbearing. So she laughed to herself: "After I have become shriveled up and my lord is old, will I have delight?"

But the LORD asked Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Can I really have a baby when I'm old?' Is anything impossible for the Lord? At the appointed time I will come back to you, and in about a year she will have a son." Sarah denied it. "I did not laugh," she said, because she was afraid. But He replied, "No, you did laugh."

The LORD came to Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what He had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time God had told him. Abraham named his son who was born to him—the one Sarah bore to him—Isaac.

GENESIS 18:1-15; 21:1-3

Identify

Circle any key people in this story?

Draw a box around any key words or phrases in the text.

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What major events take place?

What is the main point of this story?

How do you relate to a person or circumstance in this story?

When could this story have been helpful to you or to someone you know?

What other situations may present an opportunity to share this story?

Why would the truth revealed in this story be particularly meaningful in the situations you have identified?

Reflect

This story is shocking in a male-dominated culture, especially when shared among Muslims today. God's promise was not only to Abraham, it was also through one specific woman named Sarah. Although the appearance of the Lord and the birth of Isaac are miraculous, to have the blessing centered around both a man and his wife, is more than surprising—it's astounding.

The supernatural work of God interrupts people's lives and expectations. It can come when it is least expected. We need to be ready to respond in faith. The Lord is never limited in the way He moves. Scripture is full of promises and commands. Like Sarah, we must never laugh at or dismiss God's Word. Nothing is impossible with the Lord. God fulfills His promises in His timing.

What encouragement, conviction, or application do you sense the Holy Spirit impressing on your heart?

Whom do you know that would benefit from hearing this story?

God blesses a family in order to bless the world. Abraham and Sarah's family not only had a biological genealogy forming the nation of Israel, but also a spiritual legacy through faith in the Lord. We, too, should pass on our faith by sharing the gospel with our parents, children, and relatives so that we may experience the joy of second, third, and succeeding generations born again into the family of God. Our heavenly Father gave His only Son so that whosoever believes in Him would have eternal life (see John 3:16).

Pray

Close this time by praying for God to work in and through your family to bring new generations to faith at the appointed time.

New Testament Story

ANDREW & PETER

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the One I told you about: 'After me comes a man who has surpassed me, because He existed before me.' I didn't know Him, but I came baptizing with water so He might be revealed to Israel."

And John testified, "I watched the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He rested on Him. I didn't know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The One you see the Spirit descending and resting on—He is the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and testified that He is the Son of God!"

Again the next day, John was standing with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look! The Lamb of God!"

The two disciples heard him say this and followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and noticed them following Him, He asked them, "What are you looking for?"

They said to Him, "Rabbi" (which means "Teacher"), "where are You staying?"

"Come and you'll see," He replied. So they went and saw where He was staying, and they stayed with Him that day. It was about 10 in the morning.

Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, was one of the two who heard John and followed Him. He first found his own brother Simon and told him, "We have found the Messiah!" (which means "Anointed One"), and he brought Simon to Jesus.

JOHN 1:29-42

Identify

Circle any key people in this story?

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What major events take place?

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How do you relate to a person or circumstance in this story?

When could this story have been helpful to you or to someone you know?

What other situations may present an opportunity to share this story?

Why would the truth revealed in this story be particularly meaningful in the situations you have identified?

Reflect

Two things should be pointed out in this story. First, John was calling people to repent of their sins, so why was Jesus baptized (He had no sin.)? Jesus' baptism revealed a new community and a spiritual family from which His ministry began. The Holy Spirit descended from the heavenly Father and John identifies Jesus as the Son of God.

Secondly, after following Jesus, the first thing Andrew did was go to tell his brother. After sharing about his encounter with Christ, Andrew brought Simon Peter to Jesus. We do not know much else about Andrew, but Peter was used after the Holy Spirit descended again from heaven at Pentecost. He preached the first gospel sermon resulting in 3,000 baptisms and the birth of the Church (see Acts 1-2). We never know what God will do through our families and the people whom we bring to Jesus by our testimony.

What encouragement, conviction, or application do you sense the Holy Spirit impressing on your heart?

Whom do you know that would benefit from hearing this story?

Most practitioners of the Christian faith, regardless of background, agree that baptism is a profoundly significant point of personal identification with the death of Jesus and with the faith community. Throughout the New Testament it is paired with the repentance and belief for new followers of Jesus. Baptism represents a new alignment with the kingdom of God and a new way of relating to family and friends. Quite simply, baptism represents a new way of life.

Pray

Thank God for the forgiveness of sin through faith in Jesus. Ask God to renew your enthusiasm for sharing the gospel—especially in your family.

Personal Study

MINISTERING IN YOUR HOME

How do we, especially in environments defined by adversity and persecution, make disciples who are committed to making disciples of others and as a result to building multi-generational churches? As individuals come to Christ, how can that faith spread and grow?

One way to define *generation* is when someone receives the gospel in faith from another person. Of course, *generation* is also a literal term for families.

While we may have some say in expanding our own biological families, conversion and spiritual growth is the work of the Holy Spirit. We can, however, engage in healthy behaviors that help increase spiritual generations. This type of growth, empowered by God, happens through multiple generations of faith.

Words of Jesus

Think back to the story of Paul and Silas in jail. Notice in Acts 16:30-34 that the jailer and his household believed in Jesus and were immediately baptized. The father led his family to hear the gospel in order to believe in Jesus. Christ became the head of their family. It was expected at the time that a family would believe in, serve, and worship the same God.

We also saw in the Great Commission that baptism also has a family dynamic. As disciples are to grow the faith family using baptism and teaching as keys to making new disciples. In His command, Jesus also described the relationship within the trinity in family terms.

Family

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

MATTHEW 28:19

This language is also seen at Jesus' baptism. The heavenly Father declares:

*This is My beloved Son.
I take delight in Him!*

MATTHEW 3:17

So what does it mean to be a part of God's family through faith in Jesus?

Read Mark 3:33-35.

How does Jesus identify His family?

What does this description about family reveal about true faith?

Read Matthew 10:32-39.

What does Jesus say about the priority of spiritual family?

In the same chapter as Jesus' command to go as sheep among wolves, He is clear that we do not always have the jailer's experience where the whole family believes. In fact, we may have to choose between devotion to our biological families or to our new spiritual family.

THE INSANITY OF OBEDIENCE

Brothers and sisters in Christ who face persecution around the world may literally lose their families for identifying with Jesus. It's even possible that a believer may lose his or her life.

Jesus promises that disciples of all nations will join the larger family of God, even if it means losing their biological families (see Matt. 19:29). But He also warns that not honoring our fathers and mothers and neglecting our families out of a false devotion to God is condemnable (see Mark 7:8-12). While we never reject or treat harshly our biological family, they may reject and persecute us. But we never use Jesus as an excuse not to care for our biological parents.

Testimony of Scripture

God's design for raising up new disciples has always been rooted within the home. God commanded the family of Abraham to go out from their home and that He would bless all nations through his descendants. The children of Israel were commanded to raise their families to know of God. The desire was to spread faith from generation to generation within families.

*Train up a child in the way he should go,
Even when he is old he will not depart from it.*

PROVERBS 22:6, NASB

Read Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

How frequently should we seek to make disciples within our own families?

Family

The New Testament is clear about how followers of Jesus should relate to their immediate families. Since churches met in people's homes, there are qualifications for a leader of the church to have healthy relationships among his or her family members. If that leader is unfaithful to the gospel, he or she could not lead a church in faithfulness.

Read 1 Timothy 3:1-16.

What qualifications must men have to lead and serve the church?

What qualifications must women have to serve the church?

Read Ephesians 5:22–6:4.

How are husbands to show the love of Christ in their homes?

How are wives to show the love of Christ in their homes?

How are children to learn the love of Christ in their homes?

How is a parent to show their children the love of Christ?

Pray

Pray for obedience to God's command to make disciples within your family. Ask Him to bring salvation and a Christ-like love to your home. Confess the ways that you have neglected to love and to lead your family. Thank God for making you a part of His family. Thank God for your spouse. If you are single, thank God that you have a large spiritual family.

For more about reaching the family, read Part Three (Chapters 12–17) in *The Insanity of Obedience* by Nik Ripken (B&H, 2014).

Group Session

FAMILY

Start

Start each week by sharing time with food and conversation.

- ☐ Share a meal or snacks.
- ☐ Ask how everyone is doing. (This is a time to talk casually about life in general—work, family, activities, etc.)
- ☐ Ask group members for any updates about prayer requests.

Transition by asking if anyone has a favorite family tradition or memory.

Today we're going to look at a legacy (a tradition) of faith being passed from one generation to the next. We will see families whose lives were forever changed by God. Each story—the video clip, the Old Testament, and the New Testament—show what happens when husbands, wives, children, and siblings trust God from one generation to the next.

Watch

Play the video for Session 3, "Family." As you watch, note anything especially meaningful presented in the video or in your response to the story.

Respond

This page and the next provide a guide for discussion and prayer. It models a simple routine for group discussion and prayer each week.

What's your immediate response to the video?

What had you never considered before?

Ask a volunteer to tell the story of Sarah and Isaac from Genesis 21:1-7 as everyone else follows along in their Bibles.

In what way is the Old Testament story of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac a key to understanding the value God puts on each person in a family?

How do you relate to Sarah's story, even if it is a completely different circumstance?

Ask a volunteer to tell the story of Andrew and Peter from John 1:29-41 as everyone follows along in their own Bibles.

In what way is the New Testament story about Andrew and Peter a key in understanding God's work in a family?

Why is it essential that we remember to identify Jesus as both the Savior who takes away our sin and a Teacher whom we follow?

When would the biblical truths in the story of Sarah and Isaac or of Andrew and Peter have been helpful in your own life?

In what circumstances would these biblical stories and your own testimony be most appropriate to share with someone, Christian or non-Christian?

Before transitioning from reflection to prayer, always leave time for other thoughts or questions about the week's focus—in this case, families. This prioritizes the habit of intentionally creating an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to move in the lives of unique individuals and their circumstances.

Pray

Always conclude with a time of prayer and worship.

This week you read Deuteronomy 6:4-7. These verses are known as the *Shema*—which is the first word in Hebrew meaning *Hear* or *Listen*. These verses contain a core belief in the one true God and the life of His people. The Shema begins a prayer often repeated twice daily in Jewish culture.

Was prayer and belief in God a part of your upbringing?

How has the presence or absence of family discipleship affected your life?

How can we pray for you regarding opportunities to share the gospel and to disciple members of your family—children, siblings, parents, or relatives?

Encourage group members to share specific prayer needs, especially those related to the spiritual lives of their families. Also remind everyone to pray for these requests and for each person by name during the week.

Conclude by praying for the requests, for discipleship to transform families, and for the gospel to spread to each generation. Thank God as your heavenly Father for the joy of being adopted into His family through His Son.

Use this space to record prayer requests.

Week 4

PERSONAL

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, self-control. Against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, we must also follow the Spirit.

GALATIANS 5:22-25

Old Testament Story

THE WIDOW & THE OIL

One of the wives of the sons of the prophets cried out to Elisha, "Your servant, my husband, has died. You know that your servant feared the Lord. Now the creditor is coming to take my two children as his slaves."

Elisha asked her, "What can I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?"

She said, "Your servant has nothing in the house except a jar of oil."

Then he said, "Go and borrow empty containers from everyone—from all your neighbors. Do not get just a few. Then go in and shut the door behind you and your sons, and pour oil into all these containers. Set the full ones to one side."

So she left.

After she had shut the door behind her and her sons, they kept bringing her containers, and she kept pouring. When they were full, she said to her son, "Bring me another container."

But he replied, "There aren't any more." Then the oil stopped.

She went and told the man of God, and he said, "Go sell the oil and pay your debt; you and your sons can live on the rest."

2 KINGS 4:1-7

Identify

Circle any key people in this story?

Draw a box around any key words or phrases in the text.

Underline promises, commands, or verses that you want to remember.

What major events take place?

What is the main point of this story?

How do you relate to a person or circumstance in this story?

When could this story have been helpful to you or to someone you know?

What other situations may present an opportunity to share this story?

Why would the truth revealed in this story be particularly meaningful in the situations you have identified?

Reflect

Notice three very important key elements to this story. First, and most obvious, God met the practical needs of this woman and her sons. Our heavenly Father knows what we need and is able to care for His children. Second, the widow actively sought God's provision. She found Elisha and responded in faithful obedience to his instruction. We are not to sit idly by, expecting God to miraculously drop what we need into our laps. Third, the "man of God" did not simply give her what she needed. Of course there are times to meet an urgent need, as in the example of the good Samaritan; but we must be careful not to establish relationships of *givers* and *receivers*. Nobody should be seen as an object of ministry or salvation.

What encouragement, conviction, or application do you sense the Holy Spirit impressing on your heart?

Whom do you know that would benefit from hearing this story?

As a Christian you must keep in mind what it means to personally trust God to meet your every need. It is equally important to ask for spiritual eyes to see other people and their needs in the way God sees them. Be generous with your resources but remember that all of us are ultimately dependent upon God's provision. If Elisha had simply provided food for the widow and her sons, what would have happened after he left? He was not the hero of the story. Yes, God miraculously met this practical need, but the widow and her sons were invited to join God's work through faithful obedience.

Pray

Thank God for His provision in your daily needs. Ask Him to give you spiritual eyes to see everything you have as a gift of grace. Pray for families and individuals around the world to be provided for in their daily needs.

New Testament Story

PHILIP & THE ETHIOPIAN OFFICIAL

An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip: "Get up and go south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is the desert road.) So he got up and went. There was an Ethiopian man, a eunuch and high official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to worship in Jerusalem and was sitting in his chariot on his way home, reading the prophet Isaiah aloud. The Spirit told Philip, "Go and join that chariot." When Philip ran up to it, he heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you're reading?"

"How can I," he said, "unless someone guides me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the Scripture passage he was reading was this: He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb is silent before its shearer, so He does not open His mouth. In His humiliation justice was denied Him. Who will describe His generation? For His life is taken from the earth.

The eunuch replied to Philip, "I ask you, who is the prophet saying this about—himself or another person?" So Philip proceeded to tell him the good news about Jesus, beginning from that Scripture. As they were traveling down the road, they came to some water. The eunuch said, "Look, there's water! What would keep me from being baptized?"

[And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart you may." And he replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."] Then he ordered the chariot to stop, and both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him any longer. But he went on his way rejoicing. Philip appeared in Azotus, and he was traveling and evangelizing all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

ACTS 8:26-40

Identify

Circle any key people in this story?

Draw a box around any key words or phrases in the text.

Underline promises, commands, or verses that you want to remember.

What major events take place?

What is the main point of this story?

How do you relate to a person or circumstance in this story?

When could this story have been helpful to you or to someone you know?

What other situations may present an opportunity to share this story?

Why would the truth revealed in this story be particularly meaningful in the situations you have identified?

Reflect

The Book of Acts did happen. This may sound trite, but it's something that often needs to be remembered. Christians cannot abdicate their Spirit-empowered giftedness and responsibility in advancing the gospel to professional ministers in our Western church model. The Word of God and the prompting of the Holy Spirit are not past-tense realities. Sadly, you would not be alone if you believed the stories in the Bible to be true but also feel that they are *too good to be true today*. God acted this way once and He can act this way again. He does not change His actions.

What encouragement, conviction, or application do you sense the Holy Spirit impressing on your heart?

Whom do you know that would benefit from hearing this story?

This story is incredibly practical in this simple truth: Philip was open to the Holy Spirit's prompting, taking an opportunity to share the gospel of Jesus with someone who had crossed his path. It should also be pointed out that the Ethiopian admitted what he didn't understand and asked for help. After helping, Philip did not stay long enough for the Ethiopian to become dependent upon the outsider.

You never know what God is doing to prepare someone to respond in faith to the gospel. Don't be afraid to ask questions about things you still do not understand. You were once the person needing the gospel explained. Let that fuel a desire to bring people to Jesus anywhere the Holy Spirit leads you.

Pray

Thank God that He provides opportunities to share the gospel. Thank Him that He also provides people like the ones in this group to help you understand the truth found in Scripture. Ask God for the courage to take every opportunity given to you to spread the gospel and to recognize and obey the Holy Spirit's work in and through you.

Personal Study

PRACTICAL MATTERS

Believers who are persecuted around the world today reveal a perspective that most of us do not fully appreciate. For many, God's provision and intervention are not seen unusual; God is simply acting the way God acts. His activity is expected and completely in character as revealed in the Bible. The word *miraculous* is often reserved for describing more dramatic acts, especially a person's conversion.

Believers who are persecuted do not take God's activity for granted; rather they know God in a way that is so personal, they are not surprised when He acts in well-timed ways that are needed in the moment.

Words of Jesus

As seen with the widow collecting oil jars and Philip's response to the Spirit's prompting, faith in God's ability to work does not negate a person's responsibility.

It is not nonspiritual to recognize daily needs, nor is it a lack of faith to plan for the future. Ultimately our needs and our plans are in God's hands. Spiritual wisdom in our daily lives go hand in hand with God's plans. Jesus often spoke to practical matters of personal faith.

Read Matthew 6:19-24.

Jesus draws a sharp distinction, saying there are only two options for where we look to find hope and security.

Personal

What does Jesus warn us about regarding earthly security?

Summarize each comparison and contrast made by Jesus.

What you value (heart):

Where you look for meaning (eyes):

Who or what determines your decisions (master):

Read Matthew 6:25-34.

When or about what are you most prone to worry or have anxiety about?

How does Jesus' awareness of your practical needs give you hope?

Testimony of Scripture

Obedying the words of Jesus to “*seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness*” has two phrases to focus on. First, what does it mean to “*seek first the kingdom of God*”?

THE INSANITY OF OBEDIENCE

Paul wrote to the church in Colossae about practical philosophy for living as part of the kingdom of God.

Whatever you do, do it enthusiastically, as something done for the Lord and not for men, knowing that you will receive the reward of an inheritance from the Lord. You serve the Lord Christ.

COLOSSIANS 3:23-24

Where do you have a hard time being enthusiastic (or literally *from the soul*)?

When or where do you do things in order to receive people's approval?

Now, what does it mean to “*seek His righteousness*”?

Read Galatians 5:22-25.

Notice the text says fruit, not fruits. We can't pick and choose which parts of godly character we want while dismissing the others. A Christian should be marked by and growing in each of these characteristics throughout life.

This description of righteousness is found in the Book of Galatians, which was written to a church that faced adversity among itself. Arguments were causing division and doubt among believers. The church in Galatia was challenging the validity of the gospel, the authority of the apostle Paul who preached the gospel, and the sufficiency of faith instead of strict legalism.

The Christian life is not a legalistic system of self-righteous routines; it is an adventure walking in the freedom of the Spirit.

Personal

With which characteristic(s) of the Christian life do you most struggle?

- ☐ Love
- ☐ Joy
- ☐ Peace
- ☐ Patience
- ☐ Kindness
- ☐ Goodness
- ☐ Faith
- ☐ Gentleness
- ☐ Self-control

Beside the box(es) you checked, write a word or phrase describing when or why this is a struggle. Use the prayer prompt below to complete this study.

Pray

Believers in persecution choose leaders based on their exhibiting the Fruit of the Spirit, more than the Gifts of the Spirit. Write a prayer asking God to help you put to death these earthly struggles and for the desire to worship Him through your character and your daily life.

For more about practical matters in personal growth, read Part Four (Chapters 18–22) in *The Insanity of Obedience* by Nik Ripken (B&H, 2014).

Group Session 4

PERSONAL

Start

Start each week by sharing time with food and conversation.

- ☐ Share a meal or snacks.
- ☐ Ask how everyone is doing. (This is a time to talk casually about life in general—work, family, activities, etc.)
- ☐ Ask group members for any updates about prayer requests.

Transition by reminding group members that a major part of this study—both in format and in content—is to identify with the experience of Christians around the world and throughout history.

In today's video clip, we'll see practical implications of faith in the lives of Christians facing persecution. We'll also consider how these practical implications play out in our own personal lives each day.

Watch

Play the video for Session 4, "Personal." As you watch, note anything especially meaningful presented in the video or in your response to the story.

Respond

This page and the next provide a guide for discussion and prayer. It models a simple routine for group discussion and prayer each week.

What's your immediate response to the video?

What had you never considered before?

Ask a volunteer to tell the story of the widow and the oil from 2 Kings 4:1-9 as everyone follows along in their own Bibles.

In what way is the Old Testament story of the widow a key to understanding our personal responsibility while also trusting God's provision?

How do you relate to the widow, even if it is a completely different circumstance?

Ask a volunteer to tell the story of Philip and the Ethiopian official from Acts 8:26-40 as everyone follows along in their own Bibles.

In what way is the New Testament story of Philip and the Ethiopian official a key to understanding your personal life with God in day-to-day circumstances?

What had God accomplished in the Ethiopian's life before Philip enters the story?

When would the biblical truths in the story of the widow's oil, or Philip and the Ethiopian official have been helpful in your own life?

In what circumstances would these biblical stories and your own testimony be most appropriate to share with someone, Christian or non-Christian?

Before transitioning from reflection to prayer, always leave time for other thoughts or questions about the week's focus—in this case, God's work in our personal lives. This prioritizes the habit of intentionally creating an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to move in the lives of unique individuals and their circumstances.

Pray

Always conclude with a time of prayer and worship.

This week your personal study addressed topics of finances, material needs, work ethic, and godly character.

What effects do practical matters of faith have on your personal spiritual life? What effects do they have on your gospel witness?

How often do you deliberately plan and then share your faith with others?

Which area of your personal life do you need the most prayer?

Encourage group members to share specific prayer needs, especially those related to Christian character and practical faith. Remind everyone to pray for these requests and for each person by name during the week.

Conclude by praying for the requests, for growth and faithfulness in the practical matters of your daily lives, and for a personal awareness of the Holy Spirit's work in you and around you. Ask each participant to write down five names of people who do not yet believe in Jesus. Personally pray for these people, asking God to use you as a witness to those listed.

Use this space to record prayer requests.

Week 5

VICTORY

*Who can separate us from the love of Christ?
Can affliction or anguish or persecution
or famine or nakedness
or danger or sword?*

As it is written:

Because of You

*we are being put to death all day long;
we are counted as sheep to be slaughtered.*

*No, in all these things we are more than victorious
through Him who loved us.*

*For I am persuaded that not even death or life,
angels or rulers,*

*things present or things to come, hostile powers,
height or depth, or any other created thing
will have the power to separate us*

from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord!

ROMANS 8:35-39

Old Testament Story

BABY MOSES

"When you help the Hebrew women give birth, observe them as they deliver. If the child is a son, kill him, but if it's a daughter, she may live." The Hebrew midwives, however, feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, "Why have you done this and let the boys live?"

The midwives said to Pharaoh, "The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before a midwife can get to them." So God was good to the midwives, and the people multiplied and became very numerous. Since the midwives feared God, He gave them families. Pharaoh then commanded all his people: "You must throw every son born to the Hebrews into the Nile, but let every daughter live."

Now a man from the family of Levi married a Levite woman. The woman became pregnant and gave birth to a son; when she saw that he was beautiful, she hid him for three months. But when she could no longer hide him, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with asphalt and pitch. She placed the child in it and set it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. Then his sister stood at a distance in order to see what would happen to him.

Pharaoh's daughter went down to bathe at the Nile while her servant girls walked along the riverbank. Seeing the basket among the reeds, she sent her slave girl to get it. When she opened it, she saw the child—a little boy, crying. She felt sorry for him and said, "This is one of the Hebrew boys."

Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Should I go and call a woman from the Hebrews to nurse the boy for you?"

"Go," Pharaoh's daughter told her. So the girl went and called the boy's mother. Then Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse him for me, and I will pay your wages." So the woman took the boy and nursed him. When the child grew older, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, "Because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

EXODUS 1:16-22, 2:1-10

Identify

Circle any key people in this story?

Draw a box around any key words or phrases in the text.

Underline promises, commands, or verses that you want to remember.

What major events take place?

What is the main point of this story?

How do you relate to a person or circumstance in this story?

When could this story have been helpful to you or to someone you know?

What other situations may present an opportunity to share this story?

Why would the truth revealed in this story be particularly meaningful in the situations you have identified?

Reflect

The Hebrew women were in the midst of a situation that appeared to be completely hopeless. They were forced to make decisions in the face of their blatant evil and oppression which was a matter of life and death for them, and the children. The persecutors tried to force God's people to persecute themselves through systematic murder.

How could a good God put His people in a situation like this? In the midst of this suffering God raised up a leader to save His people. Moses was born as the result of the Hebrew women choosing to obey God instead of obeying an oppressive government. God worked miraculously through Moses to deliver Israel while revealing His name and power to the world.

What encouragement, conviction, or application do you sense the Holy Spirit impressing on your heart?

Whom do you know that would benefit from hearing this story?

You never know exactly what God will do through your faithfulness, but you can be sure that He has a plan to make His name and power known to the world. He has given a Savior to His people when generations earlier another king ordered baby boys to be killed. This Savior—Jesus—has defeated sin and death. He is victorious in this world and for all of eternity. Unlike Moses, Jesus lives and still saves His people. He is alive and His kingdom is eternal. Like Moses, you are commanded to go and proclaim salvation, despite the seemingly impossible or dangerous circumstances.

Pray

Pray for confidence in Christ's victory over sin, death, and overwhelming circumstances. Ask God for the faith to obey Him knowing that He has a plan to save His people and to make His name and power known.

New Testament Story

JESUS APPEARS TO THOMAS

In the evening of that first day of the week, the disciples were gathered together with the doors locked because of their fear of the Jews. Then Jesus came, stood among them, and said to them, "Peace to you!" Having said this, He showed them His hands and His side. So the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." After saying this, He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But one of the Twelve, Thomas (called "Twin"), was not with them when Jesus came.

So the other disciples kept telling him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "If I don't see the mark of the nails in His hands, put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will never believe!" After eight days His disciples were indoors again, and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them. He said, "Peace to you!"

Then He said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and observe My hands. Reach out your hand and put it into My side. Don't be an unbeliever, but a believer." Thomas responded to Him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said, "Because you have seen Me, you have believed. Those who believe without seeing are blessed."

JOHN 20:19-29

Identify

Circle any key people in this story?

Draw a box around any key words or phrases in the text.

Underline promises, commands, or verses that you want to remember.

What major events take place?

What is the main point of this story?

How do you relate to a person or circumstance in this story?

When could this story have been helpful to you or to someone you know?

What other situations may present an opportunity to share this story?

Why would the truth revealed in this story be particularly meaningful in the situations you have identified?

Reflect

Thomas was a faithful and devoted follower of Christ. Following the crucifixion, the other disciples had seen Jesus but Thomas was not with them. Thomas would not believe in the resurrection without a personal encounter. In the midst of Thomas' lonely disbelief and confusion about the crucifixion, Jesus made Himself known. Thomas' questions immediately became a bold declaration of worship of Jesus as God and surrender to Jesus as his Lord.

What encouragement, conviction, or application do you sense the Holy Spirit impressing on your heart?

Whom do you know that would benefit from hearing this story?

Sometimes the victory that is needed in your life is personal. The struggle is not entirely from external circumstances but also from internal pain and confusion. In those moments, you need God to overcome questions, doubts, and to meet you where you are in order to see you through your grief.

Christ is not afraid of your questions. He is not afraid of your doubt. But as He makes Himself known to you through the testimony of others and personal experiences, you have a choice to make. Will you believe and confess Him as your Lord and your God? He has made Himself known to you so that you can make Christ known to those who do not believe in Him.

Pray

Thank God for meeting you in your darkest moments and overcoming your disbelief. Declare His Lordship over your life and pray that you would take the good news of Jesus' resurrection to those who do not know Him so that they too will be blessed by believing in Jesus.

Personal Study

OVERCOMING THE WORLD

We often assume that we know exactly what God is doing. We tend to believe that we have a good understanding of both His methods and His purpose. But the reality is that while we know God's eternal purpose, we don't always know what He is doing in the moment. In fact, we may not ever fully understand how and why God would use situations we experience or witness to accomplish His mission. But we can be assured that He is good and that just as the crucifixion appeared to be defeat in the moment, that was not the end of His story. In the resurrection we see the ultimate victory over sin and death.

Words of Jesus

Read John 3:1-21.

How did Nicodemus reveal a lack of understanding in verses 1-15?

How did Jesus promise His victory and ours in verses 16-21?

During Jesus' life, nobody understood His mission. Men like Nicodemus knew Scripture and recognized God's work in Jesus, but they did not fully grasp the significance of Jesus' life and teachings until seeing the big picture in light of the resurrection.

Victory

This lack of understanding about God's kingdom (and the gospel story of salvation through belief in Jesus) also included His closest disciples. They were easily confused or discouraged, but Jesus pointed them to an eternal perspective based on a certain reality.

Before His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus prayed that all believers will be united in the mission of advancing the gospel. This process will be one of sanctification and glory in the midst of adversity. Christians will be hated in this world as they refuse to conform to the world—not conforming for acceptance or compromising their message of joy and love when under pressure.

“I have told you these things so that in Me you may have peace. You will have suffering in this world. Be courageous! I have conquered the world.”

JOHN 16:33

Read John 17:13-26.

In this prayer, what surprising contrast is spoken regarding the mission Jesus gave His disciples (see verses 13-14)?

What role does the word of truth have for remaining faithful to the mission in the world?

What victory did Jesus promise to those who believe (see verses 21-26)?

Even after His ascension into heaven, Jesus provided a promise of victory in His final words to believers in the world.

THE INSANITY OF OBEDIENCE

Read Revelation 22:12-21.

What relation do belief and action have according to Jesus' words?

What rewards are promised?

How do these words give hope to Christians?

Testimony of Scripture

Before Jesus radically changed his life, Paul persecuted Christians. Following his conversion, Paul became a great evangelist, church planter, and apostle who instructed and encouraged churches. Most of Paul's letters were either written from prison or while traveling among churches that faced practical hardships like financial strain, adversity and strife within the church itself, or persecution from religious and political establishments.

At some point, a person is radically changed. While some conversions may appear more radical on the surface—the apostle Paul's testimony for example—all conversions are truly miraculous.

Paul not only had a powerful testimony to share regarding his conversion, he also had a powerful testimony about his life on mission for spreading the gospel of Jesus. He endured nearly every hardship imaginable, but look at his word to believers. (For the full context of this amazing declaration of certain victory, read all of Romans 8.)

Victory

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us.

Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can affliction or anguish or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: Because of You we are being put to death all day long; we are counted as sheep to be slaughtered. No, in all these things we are more than victorious through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that not even death or life, angels or rulers, things present or things to come, hostile powers, height or depth, or any other created thing will have the power to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord!

ROMANS 8:18,35-39

This confidence and victory is firmly anchored in the truth of resurrection—Jesus' resurrection and of ours. We know that Jesus will return to this world. If the resurrection is true, it changes everything. With this perspective, all of the church prays:

Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!

REVELATION 22:20B

Pray

Thank God that He has overcome the world and that in all circumstances you are more than victorious through His love.

For more about a victorious faith, read Part Five (Chapter 23) in *The Insanity of Obedience* by Nik Ripken (B&H, 2014).

Group Session

VICTORY

Start

Start each week by sharing time with food and conversation.

- ☐ Share a meal or snacks.
- ☐ Ask how everyone is doing. (This is a time to talk casually about life in general—work, family, activities, etc.)
- ☐ Ask group members for any updates about prayer requests.

In this week’s video clip, we will see the deeply personal experience of Nik and Ruth Ripken. Through a devastating loss a question had to be answered regarding their faith.

Watch

Play the video for Session 5, “Victory.” As you watch, note anything especially meaningful presented in the video or in your response to the story.

Respond

This page and the next provide a guide for discussion and prayer.

What's your immediate response to the video?

What had you never considered before?

Ask a volunteer to tell the story of baby Moses from Exodus 1:15-20 and 2:1-10 as everyone follows along in their own Bibles.

In what way is the Old Testament story of baby Moses a key to understanding God's victory?

Whom do you relate to in this story—the Hebrew midwives, Pharaoh, Pharaoh's daughter, or Moses' sister, even if in a completely different circumstance? Why?

Ask a volunteer to tell the story of Jesus appearing to Thomas from John 10:19-29 as everyone follows along in their own Bibles.

Why is the New Testament story about Jesus' appearance to Thomas, after the resurrection, a key to understanding God's willingness to meet us in our doubts and to overcome our doubts?

How do the stories of baby Moses and Jesus' appearance to Thomas tell us about God's victory over death?

When would the stories of the Hebrew midwives, the rescue of baby Moses, or of Thomas' doubt have been helpful in your own life?

In what circumstances would these biblical stories and your own testimony be most appropriate to share with someone, Christian or non-Christian?

Before transitioning from reflection to prayer, always leave time for other thoughts or questions about the week's focus—in this case, a life of victory. This prioritizes the habit of intentionally creating an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to move in the lives of unique individuals and their circumstances.

Pray

Always conclude with a time of prayer and worship.

This week you read Paul's powerful and inspiring words of affirmation in Romans 8:35-39.

What overwhelming situations are you facing currently?

How do the words in Romans 8:35-39 give you hope?

In the video clip, Nik said, "*For every resurrection there's a crucifixion.*" How does the certainty of adversity and victory shape your view of the Christian life? How should it shape the way we pray?

How can we pray together for men, women, and children around the world facing adversity, persecution, imprisonment, violence, and even death for believing in Jesus—many of whom are pressured by persecutors to carry out persecution against their own people?

Encourage group members to share specific prayer needs, especially those related to hurt, confusion, or a need for hope. Remind everyone to pray for these requests and for each person by name during the week.

Conclude by having everyone read Romans 8:35-39 in unison (see page 75). Let the words of Scripture be a declaration of hope in the promises of God.

Pray for the requests, for confidence in the love of Christ, and for identity marked by the crucifixion and resurrection.

Use this space to record prayer requests.

Week 6

CHURCH

*So if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it;
if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.
Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it.*

1 CORINTHIANS 12:26-27

Old Testament Story

DANIEL IN BABYLON

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and laid siege to it. The Lord handed Jehoiakim king of Judah over to him, along with some of the vessels from the house of God. Nebuchadnezzar carried them to the land of Babylon, to the house of his god, and put the vessels in the treasury of his god.

The king ordered Ashpenaz, the chief of his court officials, to bring some of the Israelites from the royal family and from the nobility— young men without any physical defect, good-looking, suitable for instruction in all wisdom, knowledgeable, perceptive, and capable of serving in the king's palace—and to teach them the Chaldean language and literature. The king assigned them daily provisions from the royal food and from the wine that he drank. They were to be trained for three years, and at the end of that time they were to serve in the king's court. Among them, from the descendants of Judah, were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. The chief official gave them other names: he gave the name Belteshazzar to Daniel, Shadrach to Hananiah, Meshach to Mishael, and Abednego to Azariah.

Daniel determined that he would not defile himself with the king's food or with the wine he drank. So he asked permission from the chief official not to defile himself. God had granted Daniel favor and compassion from the chief official, yet he said to Daniel, "My lord the king assigned your food and drink. I'm afraid of what would happen if he saw your faces looking thinner than those of the other young men your age. You would endanger my life with the king."

So Daniel said to the guard whom the chief official had assigned to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, "Please test your servants for 10 days. Let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then examine our appearance and the appearance of the young men who are eating the king's food, and deal with your servants based on what you see."

He agreed with them about this and tested them for 10 days. At the end of 10 days they looked better and healthier than all the young men who were eating the king's food. So the guard continued to remove their food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables.

God gave these four young men knowledge and understanding in every kind of literature and wisdom. Daniel also understood visions and dreams of every kind.

At the end of the time that the king had said to present them, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. The king interviewed them, and among all of them, no one was found equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. So they began to serve in the king's court. In every matter of wisdom and understanding that the king consulted them about, he found them 10 times better than all the diviner-priests and mediums in his entire kingdom.

DANIEL 1:1-20

Identify

Circle any key people in this story?

Draw a box around any key words or phrases in the text.

Underline promises, commands, or verses that you want to remember.

What major events take place?

What is the main point of this story?

How do you relate to a person or circumstance in this story?

When could this story have been helpful to you or to someone you know?

What other situations may present an opportunity to share this story?

Why would the truth revealed in this story be particularly meaningful in the situations you have identified?

Reflect

Today, despite strong opposition, God's kingdom is growing globally and God is revealing that His power is more than sufficient. This reality has not changed since the Old Testament. Daniel and his friends were captives in Babylon. Their homes were destroyed. Everyone they knew and loved was killed or deported. Daniel had every reason to believe that if he rejected his belief in God—the God who may have seemed absent or powerless in the suffering—he would suffer severe consequences from Babylon.

Under the pressure to conform to a godless culture, Daniel refused to compromise his faith. But notice that he didn't cause a scene. He didn't demand justice. He respected his oppressors and accepted his situation as the new normal. Daniel made the most of the opportunities he was given, yet he never shied away from his identity as one of God's people.

What encouragement, conviction, or application do you sense the Holy Spirit impressing on your heart?

Whom do you know that would benefit from hearing this story?

Not all of God's people have the same experiences under the same circumstances. We read Daniel's story because he was an exception, and that exception is obviously worth noting. As part of God's people, you can trust the wisdom, timing, and provision of God—no matter what government is in power, or what culture, pressure, or pain surrounds you. God is sufficient.

Pray

Close your time by thanking God for His faithfulness, even if your situation does not seem favorable. Ask for wisdom in how to accept your situation humbly without giving in to any pressure to conform to the culture.

New Testament Story

PENTECOST & THE CHURCH

When the day of Pentecost had arrived, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like that of a violent rushing wind came from heaven, and it filled the whole house where they were staying. And tongues, like flames of fire that were divided, appeared to them and rested on each one of them. Then they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different languages, as the Spirit gave them ability for speech.

There were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men from every nation under heaven. When this sound occurred, a crowd came together and was confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language. And they were astounded and amazed, saying, "Look, aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? How is it that each of us can hear in our own native language?"

So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about 3,000 people were added to them. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the prayers. Then fear came over everyone, and many wonders and signs were being performed through the apostles.

Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as anyone had a need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple complex, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with a joyful and humble attitude, praising God and having favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to them those who were being saved.

ACTS 2:1-8,41-47

Identify

Circle any key people in this story?

Draw a box around any key words or phrases in the text.

Underline promises, commands, or verses that you want to remember.

What major events take place?

What is the main point of this story?

How do you relate to a person or circumstance in this story?

When could this story have been helpful to you or to someone you know?

What other situations may present an opportunity to share this story?

Why would the truth revealed in this story be particularly meaningful in the situations you have identified?

Reflect

God is at work in His world. And even in a world filled with persecution and suffering, God is building His church. Though it seems impossible, God is drawing people to have faith in Jesus Christ, and those people are responding with faith and courage. In persecution, the church still “holds all things common,” caring for one another and meeting each others’ needs.

As amazing as the stories are in the Bible, it is important to remember that this is the same God at work today. The same Holy Spirit empowers believers today. The church has the same mission today as yesterday—to advance the gospel.

What encouragement, conviction, or application do you sense the Holy Spirit impressing on your heart?

Whom do you know that would benefit from hearing this story?

Devote yourself as part of God’s church. Make disciples who will make more disciples. Teach and learn the truth of Scripture. Eat, pray, worship, and share your life with the believers God has put around you.

Become distinct among your culture as a genuine church community who know God and experience His power in real and meaningful ways. It was God who worked through the apostles. It was not the apostles working for God. The same is true for you. God is at work. Your job is to be obedient as you follow the Holy Spirit.

Pray

Close by begging God to move in your church and in your unbelieving community. Confess areas that need personal repentance. Devote yourself to the life of the church and to making the most of every opportunity to share the gospel.

Personal Study

THE BODY OF CHRIST

If you are “in Christ” you do not get to decide if you are a partner with Jesus. You only get to decide if you are a good or bad partner. To become a Christian is to join the Body of Christ. The spiritual health and growth of individual members leads to the spiritual health and growth of the entire church. Likewise, when the Body of Christ is healthy, individual members should be growing. This cyclical growth happens as disciples make disciples.

The mission of the church is to make disciples, not just converts. This was emphasized in week 1. This Bible study, the books (*The Insanity of God* and *The Insanity of Obedience*), and the research behind them are an attempt to discern some answers to key missiological and theological questions for the church. Those are big words for “how do we get off the couch, walking and working with God, especially in tough places?”

Words of Jesus

Given that Jesus led His disciples every day and clearly said that His mission was “to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10), why would He feel it necessary to command them to go make disciples in Matthew 28:18-20, Mark 16:14-16, and Acts 1:4-8?

Can it be that what Jesus lived and commanded the most, we ignore the most? Today are we willing to follow Jesus to the tough places anywhere and anytime He still commands? This conviction and commitment starts by recognizing who He is—not what we have heard about Him. We are to know Him through a personal relationship of faithful obedience within the body of believers.

Church

Read Matthew 16:13-18.

How does Peter's confession relate to the foundation of the church?

What does Jesus say about hell?

What does it reveal about the nature of the church that Jesus only mentions two things: a personal confession of His identity and the forces of hell not overpowering it?

Testimony of Scripture

Read 1 Corinthians 12:20-27.

What metaphor does Paul use to describe the church? Why is it an important picture for understanding the nature of the church?

What does Paul emphasize about our relationships with one another?

The words of Paul, as recorded in the Bible and inspired by the Holy Spirit, were not just for the church in Corinth 2,000 years ago. The Word of God speaks to us today. It applies to people in the toughest places in the world. It applies to people in the suburbs and modern cities.

THE INSANITY OF OBEDIENCE

We need one another. There are no more or less important parts of the body. There are no more or less important people. And there is no persecuted church and free church. We are all the church. We are all one body of Christ.

While this is a shift for most Western believers, it is a clear reality to most Christians living in persecution. They do not cry out in need of being rescued. They proudly live—and die, if necessary—for the sake of the gospel, knowing that Jesus is worth it and that His church is worth their individual sacrifices.

We see a clear picture of this reality at the end of the Bible. The Book of Revelation includes vivid imagery to reveal God's plan for how He will bring judgment and salvation to the people of the earth. Many of these plans are contained in what is described as a scroll—one which nobody on earth is able to open or to read. This reality is overwhelming for the author of the book until he sees a vision of people falling before Jesus in worship.

Read Revelation 5:9-10.

What reason is given for Christ being “worthy” of worship?

Who is a part of God's eternal kingdom?

In what ways can Jesus identify with and comfort people who are enduring adversity and persecution?

In Revelation 5:9-10, you can read the result of Christ's work as the sacrificial Lamb of God who lived and died for the glory of God and the sake of His church. God is gathering people from every tribe, language, and nation. In this next passage, we read about the future reality of life in His eternal kingdom.

Church

Read Revelation 21:1-8.

What emotions do you feel as you read this description of our future?

What sense of urgency do these words create for sharing the gospel?

How do these words provide tremendous hope while acknowledging the harsh realities of life in this world?

When you read the Book of Revelation, you know how everything will end. There is victory, hope, and the assurance of an eternal life for those that believe in Jesus. When we know the end of the story, we do not have to fear anything we may face in the moment. God is making all things new. He wipes away every tear. There is eternal justice for those opposed to God's kingdom. There is eternal peace for all who trust Him.

This is God's plan. It will happen. The blood of Christ was not shed in vain.

God has determined that those who receive salvation in Jesus Christ are to be His partners in the global spread of the gospel. This is His decision. This is His method. Our decision is whether or not we will partner wisely and obediently with Him in His work.

Pray

Thank God for redemption in Christ. Ask for a sense of urgency in taking the gospel to every person—whether across the ocean or across the street.

For more about the church, read Part Five (Chapter 24 and the Afterward) in *The Insanity of Obedience* by Nik Ripken (B&H, 2014).

Group Session

CHURCH

Start

Start each week by sharing time with food and conversation.

- ☐ Share a meal or snacks.
- ☐ Ask how everyone is doing. (This is a time to talk casually about life in general—work, family, activities, etc.)
- ☐ Ask group members for any updates about prayer requests.

Remind group members one last time that a major part of this study—both in format and in content—has been to understand and identify with the experience of God’s people around the world and throughout history.

At the end of today’s group session we will reflect on how God has opened our eyes and hearts to realities of the Christian life outside of our own context.

This entire study has followed the Ripken’s story as they sought to answer the question: *Is Jesus worth it?* In this final video clip, Nik will invite us to answer that question for ourselves and to determine what the implications are for our lives today.

Watch

Play the video for Session 6, “Church.” As you watch, note anything especially meaningful presented in the video or in your response to the story.

Respond

This page and the next provide a guide for discussion and prayer. It models a simple routine for group discussion and prayer each week.

What's your immediate response to the video?

What had you never considered before?

Ask a volunteer to tell the story of Daniel in Babylon from Daniel 1:2:1-10 as everyone follows along in their own Bibles.

In what way is the Old Testament story of Daniel's refusal to eat the king's food and his request that included his friends a key to understanding the character of God's people?

How do you relate to Daniel's story, even if in a completely different circumstance?

Ask a volunteer to tell the story of Pentecost and the church from Acts 2:1-8 and 42-47 as everyone follows along in their own Bibles.

Why is the New Testament story about receiving the Holy Spirit a key to understanding God's work in and through the church today?

What actions are mentioned in the description of the church and why is each one important for understanding what God's people should prioritize?

When would the stories of Daniel, Pentecost, or the first church have been helpful in your own life?

In what circumstances would these biblical stories and your own testimony be most appropriate to share with someone, Christian or non-Christian?

Transition to a final time of review and prayer as you finish *The Insanity of Obedience*. Invite everyone to share their final thoughts during this time.

Review

What has been the most encouraging, challenging, or significant thing that you will take away from the past six weeks studying *The Insanity of Obedience*?

Which session was particularly meaningful and why?

- ☐ Mission
- ☐ Persecution
- ☐ Family
- ☐ Personal
- ☐ Victory
- ☐ Church

Pray

As always, conclude with a time of prayer and worship.

This week you read the end of the biblical story, so to speak, in Revelation.

Ask two volunteers to read aloud Revelation 5:9-10 and 21:1-10.

How does the vision of the future summarize everything we've studied the past six weeks?

What conviction and sense of urgency do these verses provide? What hope and confidence does this vision instill?

Encourage group members to share specific prayer needs, especially those related to the mission of the church and their response to this study.

Conclude by praying for the requests, for faithfulness, and for a sense of confident urgency in advancing the gospel, even when facing adversity and persecution. Thank God that one day He will bring justice and peace, making all things new and right—living forever with His people.

Church

Determine a time and place for your group to continue meeting for Bible study. Whether this has been a new group or has been a part of an ongoing group, discuss what you will be studying next study. Write that information below.

Use this space to record any final thoughts and prayer requests.