



A DISCIPLE-FORMING RESOURCE

from the Department of Christian Formation  
of the Evangelical Covenant Church

Doreen Olson, *Executive Minister*

# rocksolid

LEADERS GUIDE

FOOTHOLDS  
FOR YOUR FAITH  
JOURNEY

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FOR INDIVIDUAL & SMALL GROUP USE



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The “Footholds” include Scripture passages from the following translations: Today’s New International Version (TNIV), Revised Standard Version (RSV), New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New Living Translation (NLT), New International Version (NIV).

The “Journal” key verses and all quotations are from Today’s New International Version (TNIV), Zondervan unless otherwise noted.

The “Climbing Higher” articles have been adapted from the following historic resources of The Evangelical Covenant Church.

Discipleship/Confirmation Sources: *According to Thy Word* by Clifford W. Bjorklund, Harry J. Ekstam, Karl A. Olsson, and Donald C. Frisk; *Called to be His People* by Glen V. Wiberg; *God’s Friends, Called to Believe and Belong* by Wesley W. Nelson; *The Story of the People of God* by F. Burton Nelson.

Other Sources: *Christian Formation in the Local Church*, “Introduction” by Doreen L. Olson; *The Covenant Book of Worship*, 2003; *Glad Hearts—The Joys of Believing and Challenges of Belonging* compiled and edited by James R. Hawkinson, “So What’s a Covenant Church?” by Richard G. Mylander; “Nice People or New” by Glen V. Wiberg.

## CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	
On Belay . . . . .	vii
SESSION ONE	
God . . . . .	1
SESSION TWO	
The Bible . . . . .	3
SESSION THREE	
God and the World . . . . .	7
SESSION FOUR	
Humanity . . . . .	11
SESSION FIVE	
Sin . . . . .	15
SESSION SIX	
Results of Sin . . . . .	19
SESSION SEVEN	
Covenant . . . . .	23
SESSION EIGHT	
God's Faithfulness . . . . .	27
SESSION NINE	
Prophets . . . . .	31
SESSION TEN	
Jesus Christ . . . . .	35
SESSION ELEVEN	
Baptism . . . . .	37
SESSION TWELVE	
Becoming a Christian . . . . .	41
SESSION THIRTEEN	
The Kingdom of God . . . . .	45
SESSION FOURTEEN	
Life in God's Kingdom . . . . .	49



SESSION FIFTEEN	
The Lord's Supper . . . . .	53
SESSION SIXTEEN	
Salvation . . . . .	57
SESSION SEVENTEEN	
Jesus's Death and Resurrection. . . . .	61
SESSION EIGHTEEN	
Atonement . . . . .	67
SESSION NINETEEN	
Christian Hope. . . . .	73
SESSION TWENTY	
Holy Spirit. . . . .	77
SESSION TWENTY-ONE	
Trinity. . . . .	81
SESSION TWENTY-TWO	
Source of Church's Life . . . . .	85
SESSION TWENTY-THREE	
The Church. . . . .	89
SESSION TWENTY-FOUR	
Purpose of the Church . . . . .	93
SESSION TWENTY-FIVE	
Sacrament. . . . .	97
SESSION TWENTY-SIX	
Christian Growth . . . . .	101

This small group guide is offered with the prayer that Christ's church will be strengthened and renewed through its use. From the very beginning of this movement called the Covenant, we have recognized the value of meeting in small groups for spiritual growth. Initially called conventicles, small groups of Covenanters met for the purpose of reflecting on God's word and its application in our lives.

While leading a Rock Solid small group does not require biblical or theological expertise, it is important that someone is prepared to facilitate each group session, guiding conversation that centers on the purpose of spiritual growth. Thank you for being willing to use your gifts and your time in this way.

The church of Jesus Christ, in general, and the Covenant church, in specific, is in need of disciples who are radically obedient to all of Christ's teachings. Furthermore, we need to be always ready to give reason for the hope that lies within us. I pray that this teaching-learning experience will see such an outcome, for God's glory and neighbor's good.

"Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."—Ephesians 3:20, 21

With hope and gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Doreen L. Olson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

DOREEN OLSON  
Executive Minister of Christian Formation  
The Evangelical Covenant Church





# INTRODUCTION On Belay

Welcome to the Rock Solid Leader's Guide. This resource provides discussion guides and additional resources for using the Rock Solid Journal in a group. The Leader's Guide includes twenty-six sessions, one for each Foothold. Each session is written so that it is simple to use and adaptable for a variety of settings. The Climbing Higher Exploration section intentionally contains more questions than can be discussed in a session. You, the leader, are free to choose the questions best suited to your group or design your own. The session plans also incorporate a variety of learning styles. Some people prefer visual learning, others learn better while doing, still others like to listen or talk. Be sensitive to these varying styles and be sure to include them all as you design your discussions.

There are three learning objectives for each session.

The participant will:

- Define the key topic in his/her own words. (Head)
- Determine personal beliefs related to this topic. (Heart)
- Decide how his/her Christian life could be different because of this discussion. (Hand)

You are encouraged to keep these objectives in mind as you plan for your group. You will note that although the objectives are the same for each session, the questions and activities in the Leader's Guide allow the objectives to be achieved in a variety of ways.

## how to use the leader's guide

### Preparation

As the leader, you will need to complete the Rock Solid Journal along with the other participants. Each session in the Journal contains the following: a Foothold question, answer, and Scripture verse; a Climbing Higher article along with seven Scripture passages; and reflection questions that expand the biblical understanding of the Foothold question. Even if you are leading a group for a second or third time, completing the Journal will refresh your thinking about each Foothold.

### Small group discussion time

The goal of Rock Solid is to enable participants to become more receptive to the Holy Spirit in order to further form or strengthen their faith. The Climbing Higher article and the Scripture passages explore the main ideas and should be read by all participants

prior to the small group discussion. The questions and activities in the Leader's Guide are designed to help members of the group examine the content and explore ways of making it applicable to their Christian lives. Some of the suggested questions are challenging or tend to be avoided because they are difficult to answer. The article and Scripture will address these difficult questions but be aware that easy answers will often not be possible as these questions have been debated by Christians for centuries.

## session flow

### Welcoming Conversation

Arrive early so you can participate in casual conversation with others in your group. Make time to get to know everyone personally and learn about each person's life joys and struggles. Allow time for the group to get to know you.

### Bible Reading and Prayer

A Scripture passage is listed at the beginning of each session. Read this passage, or another one that you select, to set the context for the discussion. Follow the reading with prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit to guide the discussion. This brief moment of worship will set the tone for your time together. Encourage other members in your group to take leadership for this part of the session so that they gain experience reading and praying in a group context.

### Foothold Review

Take a few minutes to read the Foothold together two or three times. This review provides an opportunity to be sure that words are defined and understood. These statements are suitable for memorizing and a review reinforces the memory. At times you may want to review Foothold statements studied earlier.

### Getting Started

This activity introduces the topic for the session in a hands-on manner. The activity and follow-up discussion allow participants to share their thoughts and ideas on the topic. If you have not included activities like this in learning sessions you have previously led, please give it a try with Rock Solid. It requires extra effort but the results and the positive group dynamics may surprise you.

### Climbing Higher Article

This article should be read by everyone prior to the small group session. However, providing a few minutes to review the article will allow participants opportunity to refresh their memories and better prepare themselves to discuss the ideas in the article.

### Climbing Higher Exploration

The discussion time is divided into three sections: Head, Heart and Hand.

- *The Head*—Knowing section focus is on content, the facts and information.
- *The Heart*—Believing section allows participants to explore beliefs and feelings about the topic.
- *The Hand*—Doing section includes questions to guide participants in applying the discussion to their lives and their church and to identify activities or actions that can be undertaken as a result of the discussion.



The discussion questions are based on the Foothold statement and Scripture, the Climbing Higher article, and the Scripture reading for the week. At times you may want to focus the discussion on all of these elements, while at other times you may focus on only one.

### **Closing**

A brief time of worship concludes each session. Litanies, guided prayers, reflection and commitment to action will encourage participation. These suggestions provide a place to begin. You should add appropriate elements in order to make the closing meaningful and personal for your group. Encouraging the group to share prayer requests and pray for one another can be meaningful.

## **ideas for leading a rock solid group**

Rock Solid was written to be used in small groups, Sunday school classes, mentoring relationships and personal study. Youth and adults who are interested in strengthening their faith and understanding will find it helpful.

The twenty-six sessions are appropriate for groups meeting once a week from September to May but can easily be adjusted to fit other schedules.

Sixty minutes is a good length of time for this type of discussion.

Be sure to start and end on time. Beverages can be conducive to good conversation but be careful that the refreshments do not dominate the discussion time.

When beginning a Rock Solid group, consider hosting a meal in order to encourage group members to get acquainted. This would be a great time to distribute the Rock Solid Journals and introduce the process for using them. Beginning the study in this way allows participants to be better prepared for the initial session.

Have a chalk board, whiteboard or chart paper available to record ideas. This affirms the person making the comment, reinforces the learning, and provides a record of the discussion. The Leader's Guide uses these terms interchangeably.

Some sessions include activities that require more time than is normally allotted. To accommodate this, you could plan to use one of your regular meeting times for these activities and postpone the discussion until the next session. Or, you could meet for a longer session or schedule an additional session at another time. These activities are usually good group building times and will benefit the dynamics of your group as well as reinforce the learning.

Often the Leader's Guide suggests that participants write a response to a question or topic. Usually the directions suggest finding a space in the participant's Journal or on a blank piece of paper. Writing in the Journals encourages a more permanent record. Be sure participants record the question or topic as they begin writing. This will help clarify responses as they reread these in the future.

## **conclusion**

The Journal includes two questions to consider following each Scripture passage. These are important as they affirm two questions that have shaped and formed us throughout the history of the Evangelical Covenant Church. The first question "What does this passage say?" is closely related to the Covenant question, "Where is it written?" The second question, "What do you hear God saying to you in this Scripture passage?" relates

to the Covenant question, “How goes your walk?”

The Appendix section of the Journal includes prayer resources. Several of these resources will be suggested in the session plans. Participants will be able to make use of these resources in the group as well as individually.

## SESSION ONE **God**

### foothold

#### Q | who is God?

God is personal, eternal Spirit, Creator of the universe, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and our Father:

*“Lord, through all the generations you have been our home! Before the mountains were born, before you gave birth to the earth and the world, from beginning to end, you are God.”—Psalm 90:1-2, NLT*

## climb on

### Welcoming Conversation

**Bible Reading**—Read Psalm 89:11-17.

### Prayer

**Foothold Review**—Recite the statement and the scripture together several times.

Ask: What do we learn about God from this statement and scripture verse?

### Getting Started

*Picture of God* (You will need markers and drawing paper for this activity.)

Invite the members of your group to draw a picture of God. Of course this is impossible but the activity allows them to express their thoughts about God. Some pictures may be quite concrete while others will be more symbolic.

Encourage each person to explain his or her picture.

Discuss the following questions:

- What characteristics of God were illustrated in the pictures?
- Where do these ideas about God come from?
- How accurate are these pictures of God?
- How do we know what God is like?

**Climbing Higher Article**—Give the group a few minutes to review the article.

## climbing higher exploration

Select appropriate questions from the following list and discuss them.



## Head—Knowing

- 1) Ask: When did you first become aware of God? When during your day or week are you most aware of God's presence?
- 2) Read the following scripture passages. You can read the passages aloud together or assign each passage to a person in your group to read aloud. Read each passage and list on the board what it teaches about God. Note these have been selected to reinforce the points in the Climbing Higher article.
  - Psalm 51:10-12 (Spirit)
  - Psalm 139:7-10 (Everywhere)
  - Psalm 121 (Almighty)
  - Psalm 139:1-4 (All knowing)
  - Psalm 71:22-24 (Holy)
  - Psalm 117:1-2 (Love)
- 3) What do the following words mean?
  - Omnipresent
  - Omnipotent
  - Omniscient
- 4) Why are qualities like these important for God to possess?
- 5) Review the scripture passages in the Journal and identify what we learn about God in each of them.

## Heart—Being

- 1) How would you feel if you met God like Moses did in the burning bush?
- 2) What makes you feel good in knowing that God is everywhere? What makes you feel uncomfortable about this characteristic of God?
- 3) If God is all powerful why are pain and suffering present in the world?
- 4) If God was omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient but not also a God of love, how do you think it would change God's relationship with people?
- 5) How would you describe your relationship with God right now? Consider having participants find a space in their journals to write their response to this question.

## Hand—Doing

- 1) If you take the climbing higher article's understanding of God seriously, how will it change the way you live?
- 2) How can understanding God in this way help when you join the church in worship?
- 3) God is spirit, everywhere, almighty, all knowing, holy and love. These characteristics infuse all of life and yet we can sometimes go through an entire day without enjoying God's presence. What practices do you incorporate into your life to remind you of God's presence? How specifically can you become more aware of God in the coming week?

## closing

Read Psalm 100 as a closing prayer. Consider reading the five verses aloud, together. Or, how about reading the verses responsively with one group reading verses one and three, the other group reading two and four and both groups joining together for verse five? One final possibility is having each person read one verse with a pause between verses for personal prayer either aloud or silent.

## foothold

### Q | what do we believe about the Bible?

We believe that the Holy Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, are the word of God and the only perfect rule for faith, doctrine, and conduct.

*“All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.” —2 Timothy 3:16-17, NLT*

## climb on

### Welcoming Conversation

**Bible Reading**—Read Psalm 1.

### Prayer

**Progress Check**—Ask: Where did you experience God's presence during the past week?

**Foothold Review**—Recite the statement and the scripture together several times.  
Ask: What do we learn about the Bible from this statement and scripture verse?

**Getting Started**—Choose one of the following activities.

*Find the verse in the Bible* (Bring 3"x5" pieces of paper.)

The purpose of this activity is to have your group identify important scripture verses and become more familiar with finding references in the Bible. Invite the members of your group to write the reference for a favorite scripture verse on a 3"x5" piece of paper. They could write more than one reference if you have time. If some do not have a favorite verse, allow them to find any verse and write the reference on the paper. Collect the pieces of paper and place them in a box or hat. Instruct the group members to sit with their Bibles closed between the palms of their hands. Select one of the pieces of paper, read the reference and tell them to find the verse. The first person to find the correct verse should raise his or her hand or stand. When all have found the verse ask the person who found the verse first, to read it. After a verse is read invite the person who submitted the verse to explain why he or she chose that verse.



Conclude the activity by asking: What did we learn about the Bible from this activity?

#### *Lectio Divina (Holy Reading)*

(Make copies of the session 2 handout, "Lectio Divina (Holy Reading)" to guide this time of prayer.) Lectio Divina is a model for prayer that helps people talk with and listen to God as they contemplate the scriptures. The following directions will help guide your group through this time of prayer using Psalm 1.

(Enter into prayer.) Begin by centering, focusing on God's presence. Sit comfortably, breathe deeply, relax your body, acknowledge and release distractions, invite God's presence. (Allow time for silence.)

(Read the passage 1 or 2 times.) Stop when a word or phrase stops you, becomes vibrant or attracts you. Is there a word or image that impresses you? Bring your senses to the text. What do you hear, see, smell, taste, and feel? (1-2 minutes of silence.)

(Read the passage again.) Listen to discover how this passage touches your life today. What does it mean? What is God saying to you? Do not try to force a meaning. Stay open. This is a time of reflection, involving thinking, feeling, and/or intuition. (1-2 minutes of silence.)

(Read the passage once more.) Listen to discover the invitation. What is God calling you to do or be today or this week? Be aware of resistance. Open your heart and will to the action that may be needed. (2-3 minutes for silence and responding to God. At the end of this time say "amen" and invite participants back into the discussion.)

(Share and express what was heard from God.) What word, insight, or invitation did you receive? (After several insights have been shared invite participants to pray, asking God to help the persons next to them respond to the invitation or word received.)

Note: Lectio Divina can also be effective for individual prayer using the scriptures. When practicing Lectio Divina alone consider journaling impressions, words, or a prayer that expresses your response to God.

**Climbing Higher Article**—Give the group a few minutes to review the article.

## climbing higher exploration

Select appropriate questions from the following list and discuss them.

### Head—Knowing

- 1) According to this article, what is the Bible all about? What is the key word used in the article? (God acted) Why do you think that word was used?
- 2) If a friend asked you to explain why the Bible is so important, what would you say?
- 3) 2 Timothy 3:16 provides four concise reasons for why the Bible is useful, what are they?
  - Teach us what is true (NLT), teaching (TNIV)
  - Make us realize what is wrong in our lives (NLT), rebuking (TNIV)
  - Corrects us when we are wrong (NLT), correcting (TNIV)
  - Teaches us to do what is right (NLT), training in righteousness (TNIV)

How does the Bible accomplish each of these things? Encourage the group to state specific examples.



### Heart—Believing

- 1) What do you think the world would be like if we did not have the Bible?
- 2) According to the article what is the Bible? List key ideas and phrases on the board.
- 3) In Psalm 119:97 the psalmist says that he loves the law and that he meditates on it all day long. How does the psalmist's feelings about the law compare with your feelings about the Bible? What do you think contributes to the difference in the psalmist's feelings and your feelings?
- 4) Why do you think the Ten Commandments were included in the reading for this session? (The Ten Commandments represent the law referred to above.)
- 5) Review the scripture passages for this session and encourage participants to identify statements and ideas that they noted as important or meaningful. Some ideas to address include: The Ten Commandments, Jesus as the Word, doing the word, role of the writer in Revelation.

### Hand—Doing

- 1) Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the Bible, recounts one person's relationship to God's word and law. Sprinkled throughout the chapter are suggestions for engaging and responding to God's word. Ask your group members to read Psalm 119:9-18 and identify what can help God's word come alive. List their suggestions on the board. Here are two examples. First, in verse 10, the psalmist says he seeks with his whole heart, which means he has a great attitude and desire regarding the word. Also, in verse 18, the psalmist asks God to open his eyes which means he wants God to help him understand.
- 2) Invite your participants to reflect on their feelings about God's word and to respond to the following questions. What do you like about reading God's word? What do you dislike? What could you do to make your reading more enjoyable and helpful? If specific things are mentioned related to the dislike question try to address them. For example, a person may say that he or she does not understand the Bible. In that case reading a more modern translation like the New Living Bible might help.

### closing

In your closing prayer encourage the members of your group to invite God to help them love God's word just like the psalmist loved God's word.

## lectio divina (holy reading)...

Lectio Divina is a model for prayer that helps people talk with and listen to God as they contemplate the Scriptures. The following directions will help guide your group through this time of prayer using Psalm 1.

- 1) (Enter into prayer.) Begin by centering, focusing on God's presence. Sit comfortably, breathe deeply, relax your body, acknowledge and release distractions, invite God's presence. (Allow time for silence.)
- 2) (Read the passage 1 or 2 times.) Stop when a word or phrase stops you, becomes vibrant or attracts you. Is there a word or image that impresses you? Bring your senses to the text. What do you hear, see, smell, taste, and feel? (1-2 minutes of silence.)
- 3) (Read the passage again.) Listen to discover how this passage touches your life today. What does it mean? What is God saying to you? Do not try to force a meaning. Stay open. This is a time of reflection, involving thinking, feeling, and/or intuition. (1-2 minutes of silence.)
- 4) (Read the passage once more.) Listen to discover the invitation. What is God calling you to do or be today or this week? Be aware of resistance. Open your heart and will to the action that may be needed. (2-3 minutes for silence and responding to God. At the end of this time say "amen" and invite participants back into the discussion.)
- 5) (Share and express what was heard from God.) What word, insight, or invitation did you receive? (After several insights have been shared invite participants to pray, asking God to help the persons next to them respond to the invitation or word received.)

**Note:** Lectio Divina can also be effective for individual prayer using the Scriptures. When practicing Lectio Divina alone consider journaling impressions, words, or a prayer that expresses your response to God.

# God and the World

## foothold

### Q | what is God's relationship to the world?

God created the world by his Word, sustains it by his power, and entrusts it to the care of human beings.

*"You are worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power. For you created all things, and they exist because you created what you pleased."—Revelation 4:11, NLT*

## climb on

### Welcoming Conversation

**Bible Reading**—Read Psalm 8.

### Prayer

**Foothold Review**—Recite the statement and the Scripture together several times.

Ask: What do we learn about God and the world from this statement and Scripture verse?

### Getting Started

*Care for your World*

The Foothold says that God entrusts the care of the world to human beings. Discuss what that means and then choose one of the following activities to put this statement into practice. These ideas may require finding an additional time to meet, using one of your regular meeting times to accomplish them, or having the group follow through individually on the action.

- Prepare and plant a garden. You could plant bulbs in the fall or annuals in the spring. Set up a schedule to maintain your flower bed.
- Ask your pastor to arrange for your group to help someone in your church who needs assistance.
- Conduct an energy audit for your church. Where could energy be saved? A do-it-yourself home audit can be found on the internet at [www.eere.energy.gov](http://www.eere.energy.gov). Search for "Do-It-Yourself Home Energy Audits."
- Clean up the church property.



- Arrange for your group to serve at a food pantry, homeless shelter or soup kitchen.

**Climbing Higher Article**—Give the group a few minutes to review the article.

## climbing higher exploration

Select appropriate questions from the following list or create your own for discussion.

### Head—Knowing

1) The article lists five statements in the Genesis creation accounts that describe what we learn about God's relationship to the world. Ask each participant to write the statements on a piece of paper. The statements are:

- God is the maker of all things
- Creation is the free act of God
- God's reason for making the world is love
- Everything God created was good
- Humans are the crown of creation

As a group, define what each of the five statements means.

- 2) Next read Genesis 1:1-2:3 and identify specific verses that address each of these five statements. Tell participants to write the verse reference next to the appropriate statement on their paper. For example, Genesis 1:1 says that God created the heaven and the earth which illustrates the first statement, God is the maker of all things. This activity can be done individually or in small groups. Ask: What statements are only minimally addressed in this Scripture passage? What other Scripture passages support these statements?
- 3) Why do you think that some religions have viewed creation as evil?
- 4) What do you think about the following statement; "It is important to remember that it is not the purpose of Genesis to speak in scientific language. After all, science is continually changing."
- 5) What do the Scripture passages for this session tell us about God's role and our role in the world?

### Heart—Believing

- 1) The article stresses that the relationship between God and humans is a key element presented in the creation account. How would you describe that relationship to someone who doesn't know God?
- 2) Reread Genesis 1:26-30. The Bible says that humans are special, created in the likeness of God and because of that they rule over the rest of creation. What do you think that means? (The Foothold uses the phrase, "entrusts it to the care of human beings.") In what ways are humans doing a good job with this responsibility? Where do we need to improve? How does this responsibility make you feel? What do the Scripture passages for this session tell us about how people should live?
- 3) How would you explain the statement "there can be no real conflict between science and the Scriptures if each is rightly understood"?

### Hand—Doing

(Make copies of the session 3 handout, "Responses to God," to guide your group's discussion.) Following are a few statements about God from the Psalms. Because of God's re-

relationship to the world and to humans, these statements illustrate some of the responses that humans have made to God. Which ones do you like? What does each mean? Which make you uncomfortable? What do they teach about God? What do they teach about humans? What statement would you add to the list?

- Psalm 1: 6            “For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,  
But the way of the wicked will be destroyed.”
- Psalm 4: 8            “In peace I will lie down and sleep,  
for you alone, LORD, make me dwell in safety.”
- Psalm 7:17            “I will give thanks to the LORD because of his righteousness;  
I will sing the praises of the name of the LORD Most High.”
- Psalm 8:1             “LORD, how majestic is your name in all the earth!  
You have set your glory above the heavens.”
- Psalm 10:17, 18      “You, LORD, hear the desire of the afflicted;  
you encourage them, and you listen to their cry,  
defending the fatherless and the oppressed,  
so that mere earthly mortals  
will never again strike terror.”
- Psalm 27:4a           “One thing I ask from the LORD  
this only do I seek:  
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD  
all the days of my life...”

## closing

Close this session by reading the Scripture verses from the Doing section as a litany of praise and thanksgiving.

## responses to God...

Following are a few statements about God from the Psalms. Because of God's relationship to the world and to humans, these statements illustrate some of the responses that humans have made to God. Which ones do you like? What does each mean? Which make you uncomfortable? What do they teach about God? What do they teach about humans? What statement would you add to the list?

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I will sing the praises of the name of the LORD Most High."
- Psalm 8:1            "LORD, how majestic is your name in all the earth!  
You have set your glory above the heavens."
- Psalm 10:17, 18    "You, LORD, hear the desire of the afflicted;  
you encourage them, and you listen to their cry,  
defending the fatherless and the oppressed,  
so that mere earthly mortals  
will never again strike terror."
- Psalm 27:4a         "One thing I ask from the LORD,  
this only do I seek:  
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD  
all the days of my life..."



## foothold

### Q | what does it mean to be a human being?

To be a human being means to be created by God in his likeness, free and responsible in relation to God, the world, neighbor, and self.

*“Then God said, ‘Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground.’”—Genesis 1:26, NLT*

## climb on

### Welcoming Conversation

**Bible Reading**—Read Genesis 1:26-31.

### Prayer

**Foothold Review**—Recite the statement and the Scripture together several times. Ask: What do we learn about human beings from this statement and Scripture verse?

### Getting Started

*Great Inventions* (Each participant will need a ball of modeling clay for this activity.)

Make a list together of the greatest inventions of the last century, which means from about the time that cars were invented. Next, as a group try to agree on the five greatest inventions of all time. Encourage debate and discussion as you seek agreement.

Distribute the modeling clay and encourage each person to make a model of the greatest invention to be invented in the next ten years. When the models are finished invite the group members to explain their inventions.

**Climbing Higher Article**—Give the group a few minutes to review the article.

## climbing higher exploration

Select appropriate questions from the following list or create your own for discussion.

### Head—Knowing

1) List on chart paper the five ways identified in the article that humans are like God. Ask

participants to restate the meaning of each in their own words.

- We are to be creative.
- We can make many choices.
- We were created male and female.
- We are to care for and use the earth.
- We can return God's love.

- 2) Read the following Scripture references one at a time. Encourage your group to look them up and identify which of the five characteristics each one explains. The references are listed below in order but mix them up as you read them.
  - We are to be creative: Ephesians 4:16 (We are given gifts for a purpose.) How does Psalm 23 demonstrate creativity? (David translates his experience into a song of praise to God.)
  - We can make many choices: Joshua 24:15
  - We were created male and female: Matthew 23:37 (God is compared to a mother hen in this passage.)
  - We are to care for and use the earth: Psalm 8:5-8
  - We can return God's love: Deuteronomy 6:5, John 3:16
- 3) What additional characteristics would you add to the above list? What additional Scripture passages could be used to further illustrate the characteristics?
- 4) The Foothold says that we are "free and responsible in relation to God, the world, neighbor, and self." What does that mean? The answers should include the idea that humans are created in God's image or likeness.

### **Heart—Believing**

- 1) Read Psalm 139:13-16. This psalm explores the intimate relationship between humans and God. Ask: How do you think the psalmist felt about being created by God?
- 2) The Bible often speaks of love as a primary characteristic of Christian relationships. How does love as described in 1 Corinthians 13 expand our understanding of being human?
- 3) The article says that sex should only be shared in marriage. How do you feel about that? Do you think this is still true today? Why or why not?
- 4) We have learned that God is the creator of the universe and yet we also think of God as our friend. How do you feel about this relationship with God? How can God create the universe and also be your friend?

### **Hand—Doing**

- 1) (Make copies of the session 4 handout, "Created in God's Likeness.") The article identifies five ways that we are created in God's likeness. List the five areas on chart paper or the board but change the statements from plural to singular as follows.
  - I am to be creative.
  - I can make many choices.
  - I can accept myself as the person that God created me to be.
  - I can care for and use the earth.
  - I can return God's love.

Distribute the handout and note the change in wording. Following each statement, have participants list actions, decisions, challenges from their lives relating to that statement. If unsure about the meaning of a statement they should refer back to the article. After a few minutes encourage participants to reread their lists and put a star next to three or

four they could address or commit to working on during the coming week. Close the session with prayer. At the beginning of the next session check with the group members to see how they did in following through on their commitments.

2. How do our relationships with other people reflect the image of God? How can the five areas listed above be illustrated in the way we treat each other?

## closing

*ACTS prayer.* The word ACTS can be used as an acronym to guide a time of prayer for individuals and groups. It helps prayer become more balanced; not just asking God for help. The four words of the acronym are:

- Adoration
- Confession
- Thanksgiving
- Supplication

Use this acronym to guide the group through a time of prayer. Check to be sure that the group understands each word. During the prayer time, invite the group to reflect on what it means to be a human being. When hearts are quiet before God, say the word Adoration and invite the group to respond with prayers of adoration. After an appropriate amount of time say Confession and again allow time for the group to respond. Continue until all four words have been used to guide the prayers.



## created in God's likeness...

The article identifies five ways that we are created in God's likeness. Here they are changed from plural to singular. Following each statement, list actions, decisions, challenges from your life that related to that statement. If you are unsure about the meaning of a statement refer back to the article. After a few minutes reread your list and put a star next to three or four you could address or commit to working on during the coming week.

I am to be creative.

I can make many choices.

I can accept myself as the person that God created me to be.

I can care for and use the earth.

I can return God's love.

## SESSION FIVE Sin

### foothold

#### Q | what is sin?

Sin is all in thought, word, and deed that is contrary to the will of God.

*“Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.”—James 4:17, NRSV*

## climb on

### Welcoming Conversation

**Bible Reading**—Read Psalm 32:1-11.

### Prayer

**Progress Check**—If your participants made commitments during the last session check on their progress.

**Foothold Review**—Recite the statement and the Scripture together several times. Ask: Based on this statement and what you know, how would you define sin?

### Getting Started

*What Does Sin Look Like?* (You will need watercolor paints, finger paints or colored markers and paper for this activity.)

Invite your participants to paint a picture of sin. Encourage creativity. When the pictures are finished and the paints cleaned up, ask your artists to explain their pictures. After hearing the explanations, compare the elements identified in the pictures with the main points stated in the Foothold.

**Climbing Higher Article**—Give the group a few minutes to review the article. After reading the article, make a list of additional insights for understanding sin that were presented in the article.

## climbing higher exploration

Select appropriate questions from the following list or create your own for discussion.

## Head—Knowing

1) Write responses to the following questions. It may be helpful to write these on chart paper.

- How do we sin in thought?
- How do we sin in word?
- How do we sin in deed?

The article says that sin is not so much about breaking rules but about breaking relationships. How is breaking relationships illustrated in the three lists we just made?

2) The Foothold talks about things that are “contrary to the will of God.” What is the will of God? How do we know what is “contrary to the will of God”?

3) The following passages from 1 John describe sin and the will of God. Read one passage at a time and list insights about sin and the will of God gained from it. Scripture passages: 1 John 1:5-10, 2:1-2, 2:15-17, 3:4-6, 3:7-10, 3:16-20, 3:21-24. Conclude this discussion by asking: What did we learn about sin? What did we learn about the will of God?

4) Read together the following Scripture passages from the letters in the New Testament. For each passage identify what it teaches about sin.

- Romans 3:22-24 - All have sinned
- Romans 6:11-14 - Dead to sin, alive to God
- Romans 6:21-23 - Gift of God is eternal life
- Galatians 6:7-10 - You reap what you sow
- Ephesians 4:25-5:2 - Live a life of love
- Hebrews 12:1-3 - Not grow weary or lose heart

What other references could you add to this list to help us understand sin?

## Heart—Believing

1) Read Psalm 32:3 and 4. These verses describe how the Psalmist feels under the weight of sin. As a group, list other words or phrases that describe how you feel when you have sinned and not asked for forgiveness.

2) Read Psalm 32:5. What is different in this verse? What other words can be used to describe this feeling?

3) Why does it take us so long to ask for forgiveness? What things could we do to help us remember this verse when we sin?

4) How does it make you feel to know that God loves you enough to wipe away and forgive your sin?

## Hand—Doing

(Make and distribute copies of the session 5 handout, “Prayer of Examen.”)

*Prayer of Examen.* Many churches encourage using, at the end of each day, an outline similar to what follows. Its purpose is to examine all that has happened during the day, the good and the bad, and to give it to God. Guide your participants through the four steps and encourage them to pray silently or to record their prayer in a journal format.

*First step—Recall you are in the presence of God.* We are always in God's presence, but in prayer we place ourselves in God's presence in an especially attentive way. God knows you intimately. He loves you in the deepest way possible. In John 15, Jesus says, “Abide in me and I will abide in you.” This invitation is to make our home in him. As you still yourself, be aware that God is present both around you and within you.



*Second step—Look at your day with gratitude.* After a few moments, begin to give thanks to God for the gifts of today. Special pleasures will spring to mind: a good night's sleep, the smell of the morning coffee, the laugh of a child, a good meal or lesson learned. As you move in gratitude through the details of your day give thanks to God for his presence in the big and the small things.

*Third step—Ask help from the Holy Spirit.* Ask that God's Spirit might help you to look at your actions and attitudes. Ask for help to understand the motivation of your heart, to see the gifts of God and how you've responded to them. Ask that you'd learn and be shaped as you reflect. Remember, this is not a time to dwell on your shortcomings. Rather, it is a gentle look at how you have responded to God's gifts. It is an opportunity for growth of self and relationship with God.

*Fourth step—Review your day.* This is the longest of the steps. Here you review your entire day, watching it like a movie that replays in your mind. Be sure to notice the details, the context of what happened and how you acted. As you look through the day, notice especially your motives and feelings. This is not psychoanalysis; rather it is a time for you to discern your daily motives, actions and reactions. Don't try to fix everything in this stage, just examine how conscious you have been of God's presence and actions in your life. End with giving thanks for the day.

*Discussion.* What did you like about this prayer? What did you dislike? How often would praying this prayer be helpful? What would happen to your relationship with God if you ended each day with this prayer? What would happen to your relationships with other people? What keeps you from praying like this every day?

## **closing**

Join hands as a group and pray the Lord's Prayer together. (Note: Check the next session plan for possible preparation assignments for the Getting Started activity.)

## prayer of examen...

Many churches encourage using, at the end of each day, an outline similar to what follows. Its purpose is to examine all that has happened during the day, the good and the bad, and to give it to God. Guide your participants through the five steps and encourage them to pray silently or to record their prayer in a journal format.

**FIRST STEP—Recall you are in the presence of God.** We are always in God's presence, but in prayer we place ourselves in God's presence in an especially attentive way. God knows you intimately. He loves you in the deepest way possible. In John 15, Jesus says, "Abide in me and I will abide in you." This invitation is to make our home in him. As you still yourself, be aware that God is present both around you and within you.

**SECOND STEP—Look at your day with gratitude.** After a few moments, begin to give thanks to God for the gifts of today. Special pleasures will spring to mind: a good night's sleep, the smell of the morning coffee, the laugh of a child, a good meal or lesson learned. As you move in gratitude through the details of your day give thanks to God for his presence in the big and the small things.

**THIRD STEP—Ask help from the Holy Spirit.** Ask that God's Spirit might help you to look at your actions and attitudes. Ask for help to understand the motivation of your heart, to see the gifts of God and how you've responded to them. Ask that you'd learn and be shaped as you reflect. Remember, this is not a time to dwell on your shortcomings. Rather, it is a gentle look at how you have responded to God's gifts. It is an opportunity for growth of self and relationship with God.

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## SESSION SIX Results of Sin

### foothold

#### Q | what are the results of sin?

The results of sin are broken relationships, a weakening of ability to obey God, and finally, eternal separation from him.

*“But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.”*

—Isaiah 59:2a, NIV

*“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”—Romans 6:23, NIV*

## climb on

### Welcoming Conversation

**Bible Reading**—Read Isaiah 30:12-18.

### Prayer

**Foothold Review**—Recite the statement and the Scripture together several times.

Ask: What do we learn about sin from this statement and Scripture verse?

### Getting Started

*Forgiveness and the “Bar-b-que”* (Bring a charcoal grill, hamburgers, etc. With a little prior planning the members of your group can bring other food to fill out a meal.)

Cook hamburgers as people arrive so that all experience the aroma and smoke. As you enjoy the food together ask: What similarities can we identify between grilling for this session and dealing with sin? Your group will probably chuckle at the absurdity of the question but will come up with some analogies. After several suggestions have been identified invite group members to open their Bibles to read Leviticus 4:27-31. Note that the aroma of the “bar-b-que” filled the camp when the priests sacrificed animals several times each day on the altar as various offerings to God. For the fellowship offerings, the meat was eaten by the priests and the people, but for the sin offering, the meat was reduced to ash.

**Climbing Higher Article**—Give the group a few minutes to review the article.

## climbing higher exploration

Select appropriate questions from the following list or create your own for discussion.



## Head—Knowing

- 1) Begin by having the group list from memory the Ten Commandments and write the responses in a column to the left on the board or chart paper. If the group cannot remember all of the commandments refer to Exodus 20:1-21 to complete the list. In a second column list together the ways that each commandment is broken today. As part of the discussion you may want to remind the group of Jesus's words from Matthew 5:21-22 regarding the connection between murder and anger. What do the Ten Commandments have to do with sin? What are the results when they are broken?
- 2) Ask: How do we encounter temptation? What makes the sin so enticing? What makes it seem good rather than bad?
- 3) What happened when Adam and Eve sinned? What do you think of God's punishment for Adam and Eve's disobedience? What happens when we sin? Be sure to include the Foothold answer in your discussion. Review the other Scripture passages for this session and add to the insights about what happens when we sin.
- 4) Discuss the parable of the weeds, Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43. How can we apply this parable to daily life? Who represents the wheat? Who are the weeds? How can you discern which is which?

## Heart—Believing

- 1) Why do you think people often want to do the one thing they are told not to do? What examples can you give? What responses have you developed to overcome this temptation?
- 2) The article asks, "Why is it that disobedience seem so much more enjoyable than obedience?" How has this been true in your experience? What specific examples from your life or from the lives of others illustrate its truth today?
- 3) One result of sin is guilt. An old saying states that "guilt is the gift that keeps on giving." Ask: What do you think this saying means? How much of a problem is living with guilt or getting rid of guilt? Webster defines guilt as "a feeling of self-reproach from believing that one has done a wrong." Aside from not sinning in the first place, how do you deal with guilt?

## Hand—Doing

The session 6 handout, "Handling Guilt," lists a few suggestions for handling guilt. Make copies of this handout and talk through each point. Personal illustrations of the points are always helpful.

## closing

Use the *Prayer of Examen* that was introduced during the last session. Guide your group through the five steps and encourage them to pray silently or to record their prayer in a journal format.

*First step—Recall you are in the presence of God . We are always in God's presence, but in prayer we place ourselves in God's presence in an especially attentive way. God knows you intimately. He loves you in the deepest way possible. In John 15, Jesus says, "Abide in me and I will abide in you." This invitation is to make our home in him. As you still yourself, be aware that God is present both around you and within you.*

*Second step—Look at your day with gratitude.* After a few moments, begin to give thanks to God for the gifts of today. Special pleasures will spring to mind: a good night's sleep, the smell of the morning coffee, the laugh of a child, a good meal or lesson learned. As you move in gratitude through the details of your day give thanks to God for his presence in the big and the small things.

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*Fourth step—Review your day.* This is the longest of the steps. Here you review your entire day, watching it like a movie that replays in your mind. Be sure to notice the details, the context of what happened and how you acted. As you look through the day, notice especially your motives and feelings. This is not psychoanalysis; rather it is a time for you to discern your daily motives, actions and reactions. Don't try to fix everything in this stage, just examine how conscious you have been of God's presence and actions in your life. End with giving thanks for the day.

Conclude your prayer time with the Lord's Prayer.

Consider inviting your group to pray the prayer of examen at the end of each day during the coming week. If your group is willing to practice this discipline be sure to check at the next session regarding its helpfulness.



## handling guilt...

No one is perfect, but we have a God who loves and wants to free us from our guilt and sin. In fact guilt can be helpful in helping us change for the better:

- 1) In Luke 5:8 Peter says, "Go away from me Lord; I am a sinful man." Jesus however responds with love when he answers, "Don't be afraid." Jesus welcomes us with that same love.
- 2) The Bible says in Psalm 51:2 "Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin," and in 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." Why is Jesus able to accomplish this? 1 John 2:1b-2 tells us, "But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."
- 3) Jesus has paid the price for our forgiveness. God removes our sin. Psalm 103:12 says, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."
- 4) You may need to find someone to talk to about the sin. James 5:16 suggests, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective." Our confessor could be a pastor, a spiritual director, a trained counselor or a trusted friend.
- 5) If we sin against someone else it may be necessary to make restitution. In Luke 19:8 Zacchaeus promised to give back four times the amount to those he cheated.
- 6) As Jesus advised the woman in John 8:11 after interrupting her stoning, you should "Go now and leave your life of sin."
- 7) The Bible provides many assurances regarding Jesus and guilt. Check them out.
  - "When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy." Psalm 94:19
  - "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." Matthew 11:28
  - "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." 1 Peter 5:7
- 8) God forgives us but sometimes we are not ready to forgive ourselves. A not-so-technical term for this is "stinkin' thinkin'." Here are some ideas to try when we have trouble getting "forgiven sin" out of our heads.
  - If your mind goes there, get up and do something else
  - Get some exercise
  - Talk to a friend, not about the guilt but about something else
  - Go do something nice for someone else
  - Read a good book, play with a pet, watch TV, or listen to the radio.

All of these help to occupy the mind and eliminate the negative thinking. How do you respond to these suggestions? Which of the suggestions need more explanation? Which seem easy to implement? Which are difficult?
- 9) Closing thought: Sinning is easy, but so is forgiveness. Neither, however, should be taken for granted.
- 10) If guilt becomes overwhelming seek help from your pastor or a trained counselor. Don't be afraid they are there to help.



## SESSION SEVEN Covenant

### foothold

#### Q | what is meant by a covenant between God and his people?

A covenant between God and his people is an agreement in which God promises his care and faithfulness as his people respond in faithful obedience.

*“Understand, therefore, that the LORD your God is indeed God. He is the faithful God who keeps his covenant for a thousand generations and lavishes his unfailing love on those who love him and obey his commands.”—Deuteronomy 7:9, NLT*

## climb on

### Welcoming Conversation

**Bible Reading**—Read Hebrews 8:7-13.

### Prayer

**Foothold Review**—Recite the statement and the Scripture together several times. Ask: What do we learn about a covenant from this statement and Scripture verse?

**Progress Check**—If your group committed to end each day with the prayer of examen at the last session, take a few minutes to discuss responses to this commitment.

### Getting Started

*Take a Journey* (You will need to design a scavenger hunt for this activity.)

Create a scavenger hunt for the members of your group. If necessary limit the hunt to your meeting area, but it would be more fun to hunt through the whole church or larger area around where you meet. There are many styles of hunts. Participants could look for objects that you hid ahead of time. You could create clues that require a written response, e.g. the date on the corner stone. The point of this activity is to go on a journey in search of a hidden item or information, unlike Abraham who embarked on a journey and did not know where he was going. After the hunt is completed ask the members of your group to compare their journey to Abraham's. How was it similar and how was it different?

**Climbing Higher Article**—Give the group a few minutes to review the article.

## climbing higher exploration

Select appropriate questions from the following list or create your own for discussion.

### Head—Knowing

- 1) Make and distribute copies of the session 7 handout, “The World of Abraham and His Family...” Assign the Scripture passages to members of your group, asking them to identify the location and the event.
- 2) Define “covenant” in contemporary terms. Ask: What covenants have you agreed to in your life? How many other covenants can we list? (You could divide the group into teams of two and make this activity a competition.) How are these covenants alike and how are they different from the covenant that God and Abraham established?
- 3) Reread the Scripture from the Foothold. What does it teach about God's covenant? What does God do? What do humans do? Read other biblical covenants and identify significant characteristics of each. Consider the following: Genesis 9:9-11, Exodus 19:3-6, and Isaiah 31:31-34.
- 4) Ask the group to define: faith, faithful obedience and covenant. It might be helpful to look up these words in a Bible dictionary. How are these terms illustrated in the Scripture passages read for this session?
- 5) Your group may be interested to know that the word, “covenant” in the Foothold is different from the meaning of the word as it is used in the name of the denomination, The Evangelical Covenant Church. In the name of the church, covenant refers to an agreement made by the people and churches of the denomination to work together as a family of Christians.

### Heart—Believing

- 1) How do the covenants that we have discussed apply to us today?
- 2) How does God's covenant, as described in Deuteronomy 7:9, apply to our lives today? How does that make you feel?
- 3) The article talks about a “New Covenant.” In this covenant, what does God promise you and what do you promise God? What do the Scripture passages from Jeremiah and Hebrews add to this discussion? How does that make you feel?

### Hand—Doing

(You will need stones, permanent markers, a 2'x2' piece of plywood and a small amount of cement for this activity.)

Ask: If you consciously lived according to this covenant with God, what would your life look like? After a few responses have been shared, invite participants to go for a walk (a journey) to consider what this covenant means to their lives. Tell them to dialogue with God as they walk. Are there things they would like to do better? Are there things in their lives they would like to change? This walk could be outside if the weather is nice or it could be through the hallways or around the sanctuary.

Encourage participants to look for a stone while they walk. Some guidance as to appropriate size might be needed. If the walk takes place inside, you will need to place stones throughout the area prior to the session. After they walk and talk with God for several minutes, gather the members of the group and distribute permanent markers. Invite each person to draw a symbol on their stone to describe how they want to live in light of God's covenant. While they are drawing, mix up a small amount of cement.

When the drawing on the stones is completed tell the group that often covenants were marked with altars or stones to remind people of the commitments they had made. (Genesis 12:6) Suggest that you want to make an altar today to mark their decisions. Place a piece of plywood in the center of the group. Invite group members (one at a time) to bring the stones forward and make a pile on the plywood. As participants place their stones on the pile add a little of the cement to hold them in place. Encourage the group to pause and silently reflect on the altar of stones and what it represents.

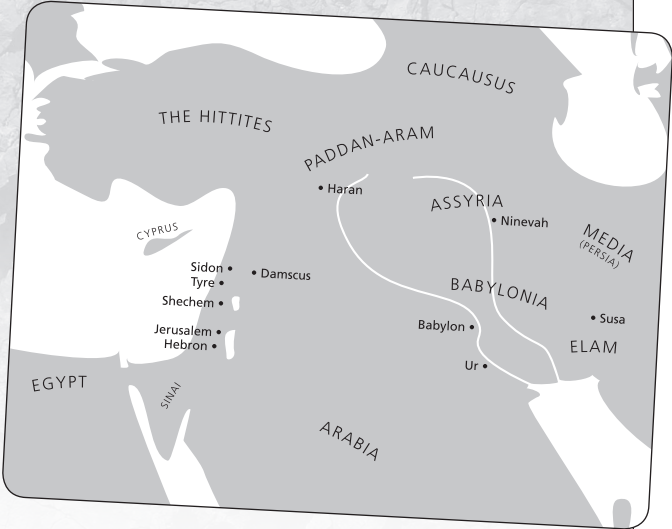
## **closing**

After a few minutes of silence, close the time with prayer asking God to help each person live up to the commitments, the covenants, that these stones represent. Keep the stones in your gathering place as a reminder of these covenants.



# the world of Abraham and his family...

Look up each scripture references below and identify an important location and event from this period in Bible History.



Scripture	Location	Event
Genesis 11:31		
Genesis 12:1,5		
Genesis 12:6,7		
Genesis 23: 1,2		
Genesis 25: 19b-21		
Genesis 28:1-4		
Genesis 28:18-22		
Genesis 35:27-29		
Genesis 37:28		
Genesis 50:10		

# God's Faithfulness

## foothold

### Q | what is meant by God's faithfulness?

God's faithfulness means God loves and cares for us throughout all our lives, both in good times and bad times.

*"Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning, great is your faithfulness."—Lamentations 3:22-23, NIV*

## climb on

### Welcoming Conversation

**Bible Reading**—Read Genesis 50:15-21.

### Prayer

**Foothold Review**—Recite the statement and the Scripture together several times. Ask: What do we learn about God's faithfulness from this statement and Scripture passage?

### Getting Started

#### An Experiment

Have a little fun with this opening activity. Set it up as a science experiment to demonstrate faithfulness. You will need the following materials:

- 1 tablespoon of baking soda
- 1 tablespoon of laundry detergent
- 3/4 cup of water
- 1/4 cup of vinegar
- food coloring (optional)
- 12-ounce drinking glass
- a tray and a mixing spoon

Prior to the session, mix the baking soda, laundry detergent, food coloring (if desired) and water in the glass. Place the glass on the tray. By mixing the first three ingredients ahead of time the result will be more surprising.

Place all of the materials on a table in the middle of the group. Quickly pour the vinegar into the glass. The resulting mixture should fizz and foam out of the glass.

Explain the ingredients for the experiment and ask: If we did this experiment again what will happen? Why will you always get the same result? (Albert Einstein said that "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.") What do we learn about faithfulness in this experiment?

**Climbing Higher Article**—Give the group a few minutes to review the article.

## climbing higher exploration

Select appropriate questions from the following list or create your own for discussion.

### Head—Knowing

- 1) In addition to the examples in the article, list other examples of God's faithfulness in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob (Israel) and Joseph.
- 2) Divide into groups and assign different Scripture passages from the Journal to each group. Encourage each group to review its passage and answer the following questions. It might be helpful to write the questions on a piece of chart paper.
  - What is God's role in the passage?
  - What does the passage say to human beings?
  - What do you learn about God's faithfulness in the passage?
  - How does the passage expand the definition of faithfulness from the Foothold?After 5-7 minutes bring the groups together and discuss the new insights. List the ideas on chart paper to reinforce the learning.
- 3) When is it difficult to believe in God's faithfulness? In those difficult times what should Christians do? What insights do the Scripture passages in the Journal provide for getting through these difficult times? What other Scripture passages could be helpful in difficult times?

### Heart—Feeling

- 1) In the following Scripture passages, imagine that you are Joseph. In each, identify how you would feel. How do you think Joseph was able to get through these challenging experiences?
  - Genesis 37:2-8 – Brothers hated him
  - Genesis 37:23-28 – Sold as a slave
  - Genesis 39:6b-20 – Falsely accused
  - Genesis 40:20-23 – Cupbearer forgets Joseph
- 2) What does God's faithfulness mean to the following people?
  - A homeless person on the streets of a city
  - A "self-made millionaire"
  - A high school student before a big test
  - You
- 3) Encourage participants to share stories of times they experienced God's faithfulness. How did they feel during those times? Encourage participants to share stories of times they felt alone and God seemed to be silent. What helped them to get through those times? Where was God during those times?

### Hand—Doing

- 1) Joseph said, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good..." (Genesis 50:19,20). Invite participants to reflect on these



words and share stories from their lives or the lives of others that would tell a similar story about God's faithfulness.

- 2) What circumstances are you facing as individuals or as a church that need to be seen in the light of "God's faithfulness"? What response or action would be helpful to address this situation?
- 3) Encourage the group to think about your church. Are there people in the church who are experiencing life's challenges, like Joseph did? What can this group do to show God's faithfulness to these hurting people? Create an action plan based on this discussion.

## **closing**

Distribute copies of the session 8 handout, "Footprints in the Sand," or project it on a screen. Read the poem aloud, together. Following the reading pause for a few moments for individual reflection and then close with prayer.

## footprints in the sand...

One night I dreamed I was walking along the beach with the Lord. Many scenes from my life flashed across the sky.

In each scene I noticed footprints in the sand. Sometimes there were two sets of footprints, other times there was one only.

This bothered me because I noticed that during the low periods of my life, when I was suffering from anguish, sorrow or defeat, I could see only one set of footprints, so I said to the Lord,

“You promised me Lord, that if I followed you, you would walk with me always. But I have noticed that during the most trying periods of my life there has only been one set of footprints in the sand. Why, when I needed you most, have you not been there for me?”

The Lord replied, “The years when you have seen only one set of footprints, my child, is when I carried you.”

MARY STEVENSON, 1936

Postscript: The history of this poem is very interesting and several people claim to be the author. For more information check out the discussion on the website: [www.wowzone.com/fpnews.htm](http://www.wowzone.com/fpnews.htm)

## foothold

### Q | who are the prophets?

The prophets are chosen by God to show nations and individuals their sin, to call them to obedience, and to present the hope of the Messiah.

*“Then the LORD said to me, ‘What they have said is right. I will raise up a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites. I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell the people everything I command him. I will personally deal with anyone who will not listen to the messages the prophet proclaims on my behalf.’”—Deuteronomy 18:17-19, NLT*

## climb on

### Welcoming Conversation

**Bible Reading**—Read Luke 4:14-21.

### Prayer

**Foothold Review**—Recite the statement and the Scripture together several times.  
Ask: What do we learn about the prophets from this statement and Scripture passage?

### Getting Started

*A Prophet Responds to the News* (Bring enough news magazines so that each person has one.)

Distribute one copy of a current news magazine to each person in the group. Tell the group to go through the magazine quickly and identify situations where a prophet would have a comment to either support or criticize the situation. Invite the group to share the articles and make a list of the issues identified. After several issues have been listed either:

- Review the list and try to identify Scripture passages that present the prophet’s message on that issue (using a concordance might be helpful for this activity), or
- Ask: If you were God’s prophet how would you respond to the situation in light of your understanding of God and God’s word?

**Climbing Higher Article**—Give the group a few minutes to review the article.



## climbing higher exploration

Select appropriate questions from the following list or create your own for discussion.

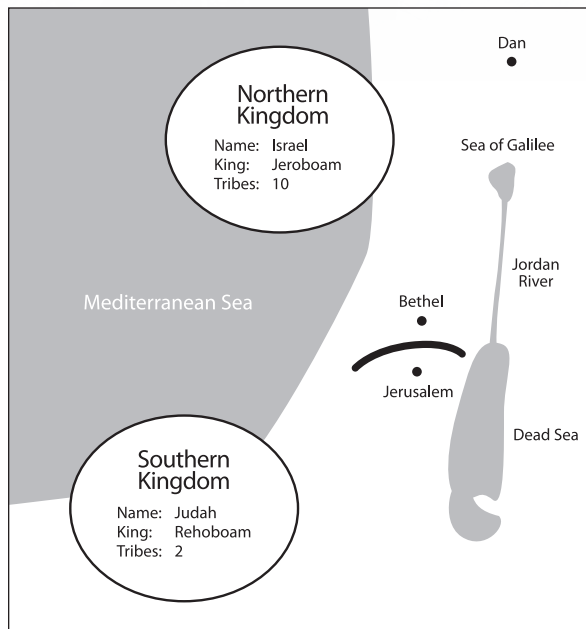
### Head—Knowing

1. Ask: The Foothold summarizes the message of the prophets with three phrases, what are they? Write the phrases on chart paper:

- show nations and individuals their sin
- call them to obedience
- present the hope of the messiah

Take a few minutes to be sure that the members of your group understand the meaning of these three phrases. Next ask the group to review the Scripture reading in the Journal and identify verses that specifically relate to each of these phrases. Listing the verses by the phrase on the chart paper will reinforce the learning.

2. Copy and distribute copies of the session 9 handout, “The World of the Prophets,” or draw a rough map of the divided kingdom on a piece of chart paper and review the information presented in the article. Note the dates and names of the prophets by writing them on the chart paper next to either Israel or Judah.



3. (Bring several Bible dictionaries.) Divide into groups and give each group a Bible dictionary and the name of one prophet. Tell the groups to read about their prophets and identify five interesting facts about them. After several minutes invite the groups to share their information.

### Heart—Believing

1. Imagine that a prophet comes to your church next Sunday. What would he or she say to your church? How do you think your church would receive this message?
2. Why do you think the message of justice and mercy continues to be a challenge to God's people today? It might be interesting to present some information on the Evangelical Covenant Church's Department of Compassion, Mercy, and Justice. This new department was established in 2006. More information about this department can be

found online at [www.covchurch.org/cmj](http://www.covchurch.org/cmj).

3. Look at Isaiah 1:13-20 together. View this Scripture passage as a tool for evaluating the ministries of your church. Begin by identifying key points in the passage. Your points might include: wash and make yourself clean (confession/forgiveness); learn to do right; seek justice; encourage the oppressed; defend the fatherless; and plead the case of the widow. Review the key points and identify ways that your church includes each in its ministry. Remember that your church is much larger than your local congregation because it is part of a denomination.
4. Why was it so hard for the disciples to see that Jesus was God's Messiah? Look up Messiah in a Bible dictionary and define this term together.

### Hand—Doing

1. In light of the message of the prophets discussed during this session, which of the messages do you need to hear as a call to action? As a group, list things you can do during the coming week to act on this message. Encourage each member of your group to commit to one action and check back next week for a report.
2. Ask participants to read Isaiah 9:6-7 and take a few minutes to identify ways this passage, regarding the coming Messiah, has impacted their lives. This would be a good topic for group discussion or individual journaling.

## closing

Invite the members of your group to open their Bibles to Matthew 25:31-40. In many ways this passage summarizes the message of the prophets. Use Lectio Divina to review this Scripture passage. Read the passage aloud and pause for individual reflection as indicated.

The following directions will help guide your group through this time of prayer using Matthew 25:31-40.

(Enter into prayer.) Begin by centering, focusing on God's presence. Sit comfortably, breathe deeply, relax your body, acknowledge and release distractions, invite God's presence. (Allow time for silence.)

(Read the passage 1 or 2 times.) Stop when a word or phrase stops you, becomes vibrant or attracts you. Is there a word or image that impresses you? Bring your senses to the text. What do you hear, see, smell, taste, and feel? (1-2 minutes of silence.)

(Read the passage again.) Listen to discover how this passage touches your life today. What does it mean? What is God saying to you? Do not try to force a meaning. Stay open. This is a time of reflection, involving thinking, feeling, and/or intuition. (1-2 minutes of silence.)

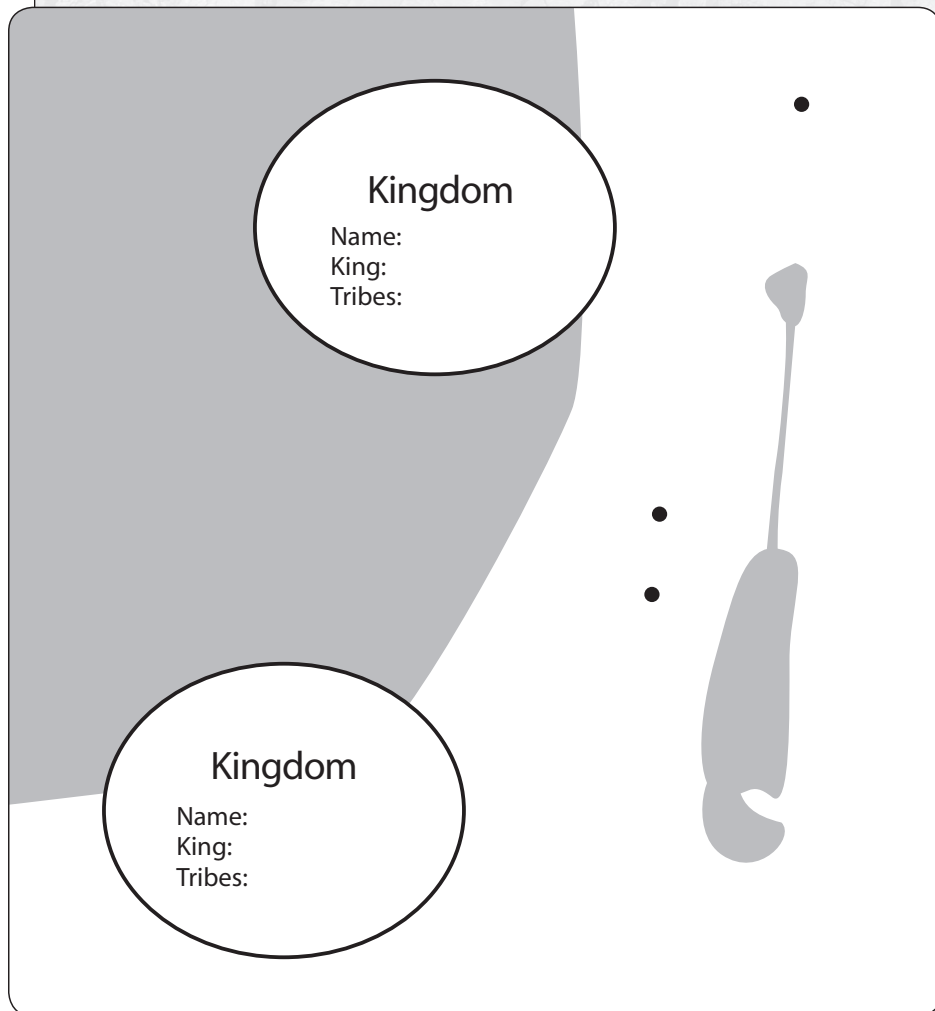
(Read the passage once more.) Listen to discover the invitation. What is God calling you to do or be today or this week? Be aware of resistance. Open your heart and will to the action that may be needed. (2-3 minutes for silence and response to God. At the end of this time say "amen" and invite participants back into the discussion.)

(Share, expressing what each person heard from God.) What word, insight, or invitation did you receive? (After several insights have been shared invite participants to pray, asking God to help the persons next to them to respond to the invitation or word received.)

Note: Lectio Divina can also be effective for individual prayer using the Scriptures. When doing Lectio Divina alone, consider journaling impressions, or words, or a prayer that expresses your response to God.

# the world of the prophets...

Use the names and locations from the list (at bottom) to fill in the map of the divided kingdom. Fill in the information for each kingdom. Then, use the Climbing Higher article to list the names of the prophets, and the kingdom in which they each prophesized.



Prophets to the Northern Kingdom:

Prophets to the Southern Kingdom:

- Israel
- Judah
- Jeroboam
- Rehoboam

- Dead Sea
- Bethel
- Jerusalem
- Dan

- Jordan River
- Sea of Galilee
- Mediterranean Sea



# SESSION TEN Jesus Christ

## foothold

### Q | who is Jesus Christ?

Jesus Christ is the Son of God, fully human and fully divine, the promised Messiah who came into the world to redeem people from sin and establish his kingdom on earth.

*“Then he asked them, ‘But who do you say I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’” —Matthew 16:15-16, NLT*

## climb on

### Welcoming Conversation

**Bible Reading**—Read Philippians 2:5-11.

### Prayer

**Progress Check**—Talk about progress on the assignment from the last session.

**Foothold Review**—Recite the statement and the Scripture together several times. Ask: What do we learn about Jesus from this statement and Scripture passage?

### Getting Started

*Learning About Jesus in Christmas Carols or Hymns* (Bring a copy of a hymnbook or Christmas carol book for each person.)

Distribute books and tell participants to open to the Christmas section. Encourage them to read a few Christmas carols and identify phrases that describe Jesus. List the phrases on the board or on chart paper. Review the list of phrases and define any that seem unclear. Based on these phrases, write a definition that explains who Jesus is. Ask: What does this definition tell you about Jesus? How would this definition help a non-Christian understand who Jesus is?

**Climbing Higher Article**—Give the group a few minutes to review the article.

## climbing higher exploration

Select appropriate questions from the following list or create your own for discussion.

## Head—Knowing

- 1) What do the following words tell us about Jesus? Jesus is: (a) God, (b) fully human, and (c) fully divine. Why are these words important?
- 2) What is a prophet and why was this title given to Jesus? What does the article mean when it describes Christ as the message as well as the messenger?
- 3) What did a priest do? Why was the title priest given to Jesus?
- 4) Consider the Scripture passages for this session and identify what we learn about Jesus in them.
- 5) How would you describe your relationship with Jesus right now?

## Heart—Believing

- 1) The article says Jesus's message proclaimed that God's rule was about to begin. What does that mean? Is this true today? (Refer to the Foothold 13: What is the Kingdom of God? as another resource for this discussion.)
- 2) What does Christ as a suffering servant mean? How did Christ sacrifice himself and why was that important? Think about Christ's sacrifice for a moment, envision it, how does that make you feel?
- 3) "He is now Lord and King over death, power-structures, false gods and idols, and the Evil One." What does this statement from the article mean? What is hard to believe in this statement?

## Hand—Doing

- 1) Reread the final paragraph of the article. Review the statement phrase by phrase and then encourage your participants to thoughtfully consider the following questions. You may want to write the questions on a piece of chart paper for easy reference. Encourage participants to record their thoughts in the blank space in their Journals, page 94.
  - How do you let Christ rule in your heart? Where do you find this difficult?
  - How do you demonstrate your love for Christ?
  - How do you obey Christ? How do you disobey Christ?
  - Do you "live toward the future in hope"? When is this easy? When is it difficult?
- 2) How would your life be different if you lived each day, minute by minute, in a relationship with Jesus that honored him as prophet, priest and king?

## closing

Begin your closing time by singing a few Christmas carols. Or if the season of the year is appropriate you could close the session and then go Christmas caroling as a group.

Explain that you will read verses of Scripture that describe Jesus and after each reading you will pause for a time of silence to allow the members of the group to meditate on what that selection says about Jesus. Before reading the verses, state the word that precedes the Scripture reference to identify the characteristic. Read slowly and thoughtfully.

- *Prophet*, Luke 4:17-21
- *Priest*, Hebrews 4:14-16
- *King*, John 18:36-37

Finally read John 17:20-23 and invite your group to pray aloud for unity, God's love and his message to the world regarding Jesus.

## foothold

**Q | what is the sacrament of baptism?**

Baptism is the sacred use of water, commanded by Jesus Christ, to signify God's cleansing of our sins and our welcome into the family of God.

*"Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."—Matthew 28:19-20, NLT*

**climb on****Welcoming Conversation**

**Bible Reading**—Read Matthew 28:16-20.

**Prayer**

**Foothold Review**—Recite the statement and the Scripture together several times. Ask: What do we learn about baptism from this statement and Scripture passage? Consider listing each phrase in the answer and discussing its meaning.

**Getting Started**

*Water Challenge*

Divide your group into teams of 2-4 and ask them to list as many uses for water as possible within a two minute time limit. After the two minutes elapse review the lists and discuss the significance of water in our lives. You could award a prize to the team with the longest list. The prize could be one of the most valuable commodities on the planet - a glass of water.

**Climbing Higher Article**—Give the group a few minutes to review the article.

**climbing higher exploration**

Select appropriate questions from the following list or create your own for discussion.



## Head—Knowing

- 1) What is a sacrament? (refer to Foothold 25) What is the outward sign in baptism? Why is water used in this sacrament? What is the invisible and spiritual grace?
- 2) (Bring a scallop shell or a picture of the scallop symbol.) Explain that this shell has been a symbol for baptism for centuries. The three drops of water in most pictures represent the trinity. In some churches the shell is used to pour the water over the head of the person being baptized. In early Christian and Jewish art the shell was a symbol of immortality and became a symbol of the new life. Some churches believe this happens at baptism. In the Covenant church we believe the new life begins when we become Christians. How can knowing that a shell is a symbol for baptism help you in your Christian life? (When you see a shell it can remind you of your baptism and God's redeeming love and prompt a prayer of thanksgiving.)
- 3) Read aloud, together some of the following Scripture references and identify what each one says about baptism.
  - Mark 1:4-12
  - Matthew 28:18-20
  - Acts 8:9-17
  - Acts 10:44-48
  - Acts 16:13-15
  - Acts 16:25-34
  - Romans 6:1-4
  - I Corinthians 12:12-14
  - Galatians 3:26-29
- 4) Review the article. Invite the group to identify key characteristics of each mode of baptism. Ask: How are infant and believer's baptism alike? How are they different? Be sure to stress that being baptized as an infant does not make a person a Christian. At some point the child needs to respond to the Holy Spirit, confess his/her sins and confess Jesus as Savior and Lord.
- 5) What is the difference between infant baptism and blessing or dedication of a child? The *Covenant Book of Worship* describes the blessing of a child in the following way. Read through the statement and compare it to the description of baptism in the Climbing Higher article. "The blessing of a child, also commonly referred to as the dedication or presentation of a child, is a service for parents who want more than anything else the blessing of God on their child but believe that baptism is to be reserved for those who make a conscious choice in confession of faith. Grateful for the gift of a child, the parents are accepting their responsibility of nurturing the child in the love and grace of God."
- 6) Copy and distribute the session 11 handout, "What Is Baptism?" Read and discuss the descriptions of infant baptism and infant dedication at the top of the handout. How are they alike? How are they different?

## Heart—Believing

- 1) Review the words of institution that are included in the *Covenant Book of Worship* printed below and on the session 11 handout. This statement is possibly used in your church during the act of baptism. Key words to consider are underlined.

*"Obeying the word of our Lord Jesus Christ and certain of his presence with us, we baptize those he calls to be his disciples. In so doing, we celebrate God's gift to us of this new life, and the new life in Christ which he freely offers to*

every child of God. By the sacrifice of Christ, God our Father has redeemed and made covenant with us and our children to incorporate us into the body of Christ. This covenant is confirmed by God in this sacrament, which is a sign of our cleansing, of our being joined to Christ, and of our welcome into the family of God."

What do these words tell us about the significance of baptism? What do these words tell us about Jesus?

- 2) Invite the members of your group to identify whether they were baptized and the mode of baptism that was used. Ask: What is the significance of your baptism? If they suggest a limited significance, take time to discuss it further. *The Covenant Book of Worship* provides an Affirmation of Baptismal Covenant order of service to help people reconnect with the vows made at baptism. After discussing baptism with your group, some may be interested in affirming their baptism. It is recommended that this be incorporated into a regular worship service.
- 3) Encourage your group members to intentionally remember their baptisms each time they witness a baptism, thanking God for the gift of Jesus, the cleansing of sin and welcome into the family of God.

### Hand—Doing

- 1) Invite parents of children who were baptized and also parents of children who were dedicated to talk about their experience and intention in choosing the mode that they did.
- 2) Encourage the group members to define their understanding of baptism in a blank space in their Journals and to reflect on the significance of their baptism. If some in your group have not been baptized, encourage them to consider when they would be ready to receive this sacrament, or why they do not want to receive it.

## closing

Closing litany (You will need a bowl of water and a cup for every one or two participants.) Instruct them to fill the cup with water and let it pour through their fingers as you slowly read each line in the litany. Tell the group to repeat the words in the list below after you say them.

The leader says: As this water passes through our fingers, God, help us to remember the importance of baptism. This water is a sign of:

- your gift to us,
- new life,
- sacrifice,
- forgiveness,
- redemption,
- welcome.

Thank you God for reminding us that this water is a sign of your love and grace. Amen.



## what is baptism?

The following definitions are from “What does it mean to receive a child into the Church? Infant Baptism and Dedication,” Covenant Publications, [www.covenantbookstore.com](http://www.covenantbookstore.com)

### Infant Baptism

The sacrament of baptism, through the sacred means of water and the Word, is a sign and seal of the new covenant in Jesus Christ, whereby God cleanses our sin and welcomes us into the family of God.

When parents bring their child for baptism, they acknowledge in the sacrament God’s promise and the unmerited gift of his prevenient and redeeming grace. Its emphasis is not on our response, but on what God has already graciously done for us through Jesus Christ. God has already provided the means of salvation and nurture within the community of faith, with the hope that one day the child may acknowledge his or her acceptance of new life in Christ. Through water and the Word, the child is indelibly marked with the sign of the covenant, conveying a new identity to the baptized in the name of the triune God-Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

### Infant dedication

The Evangelical Covenant Church recognizes and values children who have not been baptized as infants to be full participants in the community of faith. The rite of blessing a child, also commonly referred to as the dedication of a child, is a service for parents who want the blessing of God on their child but believe that baptism is to be reserved for those who make a conscious choice in confession of faith. Grateful for the gift of a child, the parents are accepting their responsibility of nurturing the child in the love and grace of God. The emphasis in infant dedication is on the personal pledge of parents to raise and nurture their child in a loving Christian home. There is anticipation and hope of the child’s personal commitment of faith in Jesus Christ.

**Words of Institution**—Review the words of institution that are included in the *Covenant Book of Worship* printed below and possibly used in your church during the act of baptism. Key words to consider are underlined.

*“Obeying the word of our Lord Jesus Christ and certain of his presence with us, we baptize those he calls to be his disciples. In so doing, we celebrate God’s gift to us of this new life, and the new life in Christ which he freely offers to every child of God. By the sacrifice of Christ, God our Father has redeemed and made covenant with us and our children to incorporate us into the body of Christ. This covenant is confirmed by God in this sacrament, which is a sign of our cleansing, of our being joined to Christ, and of our welcome into the family of God.”*



# Becoming a Christian

## foothold

### Q | how does one become a Christian?

A person becomes a Christian by trusting in what God has done through Christ's death on the cross and resurrection from the dead. This is God's gift received through repentance of sin and faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

*"But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God."—John 1:12-13, NRSV*

## climb on

### Welcoming Conversation

**Bible Reading**—Read Romans 10:9-13.

### Prayer

**Foothold Review**—Recite the statement and the Scripture together several times.

Ask: What do we learn about becoming a Christian from this statement and Scripture passage?

### Getting Started

*Bible Search* (You will need 3"x5" note cards for this activity.)

Write each of the following references on a 3"x5" note card. Prior to your gathering hide the cards in your meeting area. Encourage the group to find the cards and look up the references. Read the Scripture passages together and identify what each says about becoming a Christian. As a passage is considered, list the reference and one or two words to identify its meaning on one side of chart paper or a board. You will use this list again under the "Heart—Believing" section.

- Acts 3:18
- Acts 3:19
- Acts 17:30-31
- John 3:16
- Mark 1:16-18

- 1 Corinthians 15:3, 4
- John 1:29
- Romans 1:16
- 1 John 1:9
- Romans 10:9

**Climbing Higher Article**—Give the group a few minutes to review the article.

## climbing higher exploration

Select appropriate questions from the following list or create your own for discussion.

### Head—Knowing

- 1) Nicodemus was an educated man, a Pharisee, but in John 3:1-8, 16-18 he had only questions. What were his questions and what were Jesus's answers?
- 2) The article says that God has done everything necessary for our salvation. What did God do? (remember the Foothold and Nicodemus)
- 3) If God has done everything, what do people have to do?

### Heart—Believing

- 1) What is faith? The following quotation is from Martin Luther. Distribute copies of the session 12 handout, "What is Faith?," or write it on a sheet of chart paper. Read though the definition and ask your group to identify key points as well as questions raised by the definition. What does faith have to do with becoming a Christian?

*"Faith is a living, bold trust in God's grace, so certain of God's favor that it would risk death a thousand times trusting in it. Such confidence and knowledge of God's grace makes you happy, joyful and bold in your relationship to God and all creatures. The Holy Spirit makes this happen through faith. Because of it, you freely, willingly and joyfully do good to everyone, serve everyone, suffer all kinds of things, love and praise the God who has shown you such grace. Thus, it is just as impossible to separate faith and works as it is to separate heat and light from fire!"*

Martin Luther's definition of faith, excerpted from "An Introduction to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans," *Luther's German Bible* (1522).

- 2) What are examples of faith in daily life? (We have faith that the chair will not collapse.) What are examples of faith in our Christian life? (We have faith that the Bible is God's word.)
- 3) Why is repentance so important and how do we repent?
- 4) What does it mean that Jesus is our Lord? How do we confess Jesus as our Lord in our words and actions?
- 5) How do the words of the Foothold relate to our understanding of God's grace and love? Consider looking up the word "grace" in a Bible dictionary and discussing its meaning.
- 6) Write the following statements in a second column on chart paper or on the board used in the Getting Started activity.
  - a) depend on what God has done
  - b) repent
  - c) confess Jesus as Lord

Review each passage and draw a line from the reference to the phrase in the second

column to which it relates. The answers (in parenthesis) follow the references below:

- Acts 3:18 (a)
- Acts 3:19 (b)
- Acts 17:30-31 (b)
- John 3:16 (c)
- Mark 1:16-18 (c)
- 1 Corinthians 15:3, 4 (a)
- John 1:29 (a)
- Romans 1:16 (c)
- 1 John 1:9 (b)
- Romans 10:9 (c)

Ask: How do these verses help us understand becoming a Christian?

### **Hand—Doing**

(Bring blank paper for this activity or direct the participants to find a space in their Journals for this writing.) Tell us your story. Have your participants write their story of becoming a Christian on a blank sheet of paper or in their Journals. If some have not made this commitment, they should still write their story, including the reasons they have not made this commitment as yet. When the stories are complete invite volunteers to read their stories. Be sensitive to the fact that some will not be ready to share their stories with the group.

### **closing**

Close in prayer thanking God for the invitation that he gives each of us to follow him and become a Christian. The image of Christ standing at the door knocking from Revelation 3:20 could be incorporated into the prayer. This might be a time to include an invitation to become a Christian or renew that commitment as part of the prayer.

Listening to, singing or reading an appropriate hymn or song could add meaning to this closing time.



## what is faith?

“Faith is a living, bold trust in God’s grace, so certain of God’s favor that it would risk death a thousand times trusting in it. Such confidence and knowledge of God’s grace makes you happy, joyful and bold in your relationship to God and all creatures. The Holy Spirit makes this happen through faith. Because of it, you freely, willingly and joyfully do good to everyone, serve everyone, suffer all kinds of things, love and praise the God who has shown you such grace. Thus, it is just as impossible to separate faith and works as it is to separate heat and light from fire!”

Martin Luther’s definition of faith, excerpted from “An Introduction to St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans,” Luther’s German Bible (1522)

# The Kingdom of God

## foothold

### Q | what is God's kingdom?

The kingdom of God is the rule of God breaking into history through Jesus Christ, working in the world and expressed in the hearts and lives of God's people.

*"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink but of righteousness, and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."*—Romans 14:17, NRSV

## climb on

### Welcoming Conversation

**Bible Reading**—Read Mark 12:28-34.

### Prayer

**Foothold Review**—Recite the statement and the Scripture together several times.

Ask: What do we learn about the kingdom of God from this statement and Scripture verse?

### Getting Started

*The Kingdom Illustrated* (Collect four or five items used by Jesus to illustrate the Kingdom of God. See list of parables below. Place them on a table for the group to see.)

Ask: What do these items have in common? (They represent the images used by Jesus to teach about the Kingdom of God.) Consider the items one at a time and list what each teaches about the kingdom. If the participants are not sure, read the Scripture passage together and add insights to the previous discussion. Ask: What other items did Jesus use to illustrate the kingdom? Add them to your list along with their meaning.

- Matthew 13:33 (yeast), 13:44 (bag of coins - treasure), 13:45-46 (pearl), 13:47-50 (fishing net), 22:1-14 (fancy serving platter)
- Mark 4:26-29 (packet of seeds or plant), 4:30-32 (container of mustard—a small twist on the parable to complicate the discussion a little)
- Luke 14:15-24 (cane)

**Climbing Higher Article**—Give the group a few minutes to review the article.

## climbing higher exploration

Select appropriate questions from the following list or create your own for discussion.

### Head—Knowing

- 1) Ask: What do we know about kings and kingdoms? How does that information compare with the picture of the kingdom of God from the article and the parables?
- 2) Refer the participants to the article and discuss their understanding of each of the following statements:
  - The kingdom refers to God's reign or rule in people's lives and in the world
  - The kingdom is here and now
  - The kingdom will also be coming in the future
- 3) Review the Scripture passages for this session and identify what each teaches about the kingdom of God.

### Heart—Believing

- 1) The kingdom of God is said to exist in the past, present, and future. Discuss what this means. How does the kingdom of God exist in the present? How does the kingdom of God exist in the future? How does knowing this make you feel?
- 2) The Foothold answer and Scripture verse identify roles for God and God's people related to the kingdom of God. Identify the roles of each and then define what they mean. How does your church encourage or address these roles? You might ask the group to identify or find Scripture verses that illustrate each of the following statements paraphrased from the Foothold.
  - God's rule expressed in the hearts of God's people
  - God's rule expressed in the lives God's people
  - Kingdom of God is not what we eat or drink (If there are questions about this statement check the context of the verses in Romans 14:13-23.)
  - Kingdom of God is righteousness
  - Kingdom of God is peace
  - Kingdom of God is joy

After you complete the discussion related to your church, review the list again and discuss how these roles are demonstrated in the lives of the people in your group. Sum up the discussion by asking: What do you believe about the kingdom of God? It might be helpful for participants to write this response in their Journals.

### Hand—Doing

1. (Make copies of the session 13 handout, "My Parable" for this activity.) Common images have changed since the time of Jesus. Most people today have not seen a mustard seed or know much about sheep. Imagine that you were with Jesus in your neighborhood and he was teaching about the kingdom of God. What images do you think he would use today to help his followers understand the kingdom of God? After a few ideas have been suggested, encourage your participants to write a new parable to illustrate the kingdom of God. Suggest that they begin in the way Jesus did when he said, "The kingdom of God is like..."
2. Reread the final paragraph of the article. Ask: Based on what we have learned during this session how can you live more consciously in God's kingdom this week? Encourage the group to be as specific as possible. This might be an assignment that you want to check on at the beginning of the next session.



## closing

- 1) If you wrote parables, invite volunteers to read their parables before closing in prayer.
- 2) If participants identified ways to live more consciously in God's kingdom, give volunteers an opportunity to share some items from their list. Commit these actions to God in prayer.
- 3) In either 1 or 2 above conclude by inviting participants to pray for each other and then to pray the Lord's Prayer together.

my parable...

The kingdom of God is like...