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Introduction

The Bible is primarily a God-centered story. It is not designed to be a “Book of Virtues” but a book that tells us who God is and what he has done. The Bible, in other words, is a story that begins with the dysfunction of the early chapters of Genesis, moves to God’s dealings with a particular group of people—his chosen people, the Israelites—and then culminates in what God did through Jesus of Nazareth.

Who Jesus is and what he did is central to the Christian faith. That is why this curriculum begins with teaching children about Jesus. Of course, much of who Jesus is and what he did is rooted in the Old Testament, and we will certainly get to that—but in due time. It is good to remember that the first followers of Jesus were likely far less familiar with the Old Testament than we might think. There were no printed books back then. Peter and the others, when they were called by Jesus to follow him, did not have their Bibles open and may not even have been all that familiar with the Scripture’s content.

When Jesus came on the scene he did not say, “OK, before I begin talking, please open up your Bibles and let me show you how all of this fits together.” Rather, he came on the scene and just started being Jesus. And the point was made well enough.

So we will follow this pattern: beginning this curriculum by acquainting children with Jesus first and then letting the rest of the Bible fall into place. We are intentionally avoiding the “Bible story” approach, which starts with creation, Adam and Eve, the flood, etc., as the basis of moral lessons. We are beginning at the culmination of the story, to see how all of this ends up—acquainting children with the most central truths of the Scripture before we go back to fill in the many interesting details.

A much fuller explanation of the methods behind this program is found in the core text for this series, *Telling God's Story: A Parents' Guide to Teaching the Bible*.

Organization

The lessons for Years One through Four are centered on understanding Jesus: who he was, what he did, and what he taught. The lessons organize the Gospel story into nine categories:

- Stories Jesus Told
- Miracles Jesus Did
- Teachings of Jesus
- Sermon on the Mount
- Jesus' Early Life
- Jesus' Disciples
- Opposition to Jesus
- End of Jesus' Life
- The Rest of the Story

Aim to complete one lesson per week. You may wish to read the scripted lesson to the child on the first day as he or she colors the picture, and then to complete projects on the second and third days. Alternately, you may read the scripted lesson on the first day, complete the coloring picture on the second, and complete a chosen project on the third. In a group setting that meets once a week, plan to read the scripted lesson as the students color and then to conclude the day's study with one of the projects especially designed for group use.

Each of these categories has four or five lessons, which means that you will spend four or five weeks on each category. The order is not unalterable, but neither is it random. We start with the stories Jesus told (parables) because this is one way that Jesus introduced himself to the people of his day. He also introduced himself through miracles and his various teachings, which are second and third on the list. These are the ways the people of Jesus' world got to know him, and it is a good way to introduce Jesus to your children, too.

The fourth category, the "Sermon on the Mount," is really a subset of the previous category ("Teachings of Jesus"). The Sermon on the Mount is so rich and well known, however, that it deserves a separate treatment. So, the first four categories have one thing in common: they all pertain to what Jesus did and said to the people of his day. These were the ways people got to know him.

The next five categories are more biographical. Here the lessons will focus more on Jesus' life, beginning with his birth, then moving to his relationship with his disciples, the opposition he faced toward the end of his earthly ministry, and culminating in his death and resurrection. These categories are also important for children to get to know Jesus. Young students are often not taught the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life in a way that shows just how interesting and challenging the Biblical message is. These last four categories will question some preconceptions, and therefore deepen our understanding of who Jesus is.

Even though the order of the lessons is very intentional, parents should feel free to alter the order to suit their own purposes. For example, you might decide to work through "Jesus' Early Life" during the Christmas season and "End of Jesus' Life" during Easter. The only strong suggestion we make is that each category be completed before moving onto another so that the lessons have a stronger sense of continuity ("Next we are going to look at the miracles for Jesus for five weeks").

The purpose of this curriculum is to get to know Jesus better. In fact, it is very likely that as parents or teachers, you may find yourself re-introduced to Jesus in a fresh way. This is why each lesson opens with a short reading that explains the passage to the instructor; this will help you in helping your children process the content of the lessons.

Toward that end, you should spend a few moments reading the parent section ("What the Parent Should Know") the night before the lesson so you can ponder a bit, or if you prefer, read it right before the lesson so it is fresh in your mind—whatever works for you. The important thing is that you spend some time becoming familiar with the information so you can be of more help to your children. The purpose of these parent sections is to orient you to the biblical passage for that day. The parent sections are more detailed and complex than the scripted lessons; this will give you a broader handle on the issues surrounding each passage. It will also give you a greater vantage point from which to look at the lesson itself, and, perhaps, to address questions that might come up.

All Scriptural excerpts are drawn from the New International Version except where otherwise noted.

Scope

Jesus is the primary subject of this curriculum for the first four years. We want to encourage parents and teachers not to feel as if the child's biblical education is being truncated by focusing on Jesus. Rather, *Telling*

God's Story allows young students to get to know the central figure of the Christian faith in a way that conventional curricula do not do.

But this curriculum can't possibly cover all of the parables of Jesus, or all the events of his life, or even all of the events of Passion Week, in a single year. We assume that this curriculum is not your child's only exposure to the Bible. Your local church should provide your child's foundational education in the Gospel and Scripture. We are partnering with parents, teachers, and local churches to teach the Gospel message; this gives us the freedom to approach the curriculum the way we do.

During each year of the elementary curriculum, the lessons will repeat the nine categories, each year introducing new material and covering it in more depth. This means that a relatively short amount of time each year will be spent on the pivotal events of the Passion Week, Jesus' death, and the resurrection. We assume that your local church will play a major part in telling these stories and explaining their importance. However, it may seem a bit abrupt to end each year without looking in more detail at the crucifixion, resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. So we also offer a supplemental unit to make sure those topics are adequately covered during each year of Years One through Four.

then they change their minds and obey God. They say, “We want to leave behind our sinful life. We believe Jesus. We want to follow him and do what he says.” These sinners understand that they must do what God wants, not just say they will.

Imagine that your mother tells you and your sister to straighten up your rooms. You say yes but then you sit down and watch TV. Your sister says no but then tells your mother she is sorry and spends hours cleaning up her room. So, which one of you is doing what your mother wants? The one who goes to her room and straightens it up, of course!

Doing what Jesus says is what counts with God, not just talking about God. That does not mean that God is watching you to make sure you are doing everything right, or that he will be angry if you make a mistake. God loves you and wants you to grow and to love him. We learn to know and love God when we try every day to do what God wants. For example, someone who says he loves God and then goes out and shows kindness to others is obeying God, not just talking about him. This is how we can grow to know God and love him.

Lesson

2

Mark 4:26–29

The Kingdom of God Grows on its Own No Matter What

What the Parent Should Know: In this brief parable, the seed represents the spread of the kingdom of God as a result of Jesus' preaching—people hear, repent, and believe. Like the seed in this parable, the growth of the kingdom is relentless and inevitable. It cannot be stopped and its success does not depend on whether the seed is properly tended to by someone. And when the grain is fully ripe, it is harvested. This harvest may conjure up images of the Grim Reaper, but that is not what Jesus is talking about. The harvest is a symbolic description, telling us that the growth of the kingdom has reached full maturity. In an agricultural world, harvest represents growth, health, and life.

No one parable is meant to tell the whole story of the Gospel, and this parable is no exception. There are actually three seed parables in a row in Mark 4, and each paints a picture of the kingdom from a different angle. In the first, vv. 1–9, Jesus tells the parable of the sower (which he explains in vv. 13–20). There the seed is somewhat fragile; the quality of the soil determines whether

the seed will grow to maturity. (We will look at this parable in Year Four.) But in our parable, the second of the three, the quality of the soil is irrelevant: the seeds spring up on their own regardless. Then in the third seed parable, in vv. 30–32, Jesus refers to the mustard seed (see Year One, Lesson 3). In that parable the growth of the kingdom is still in view, but the stress is on the surprising nature of the size of the kingdom from small beginnings.

In this parable, the emphasis is on the remarkable vigor and resiliency of the seed he has sown. The kingdom of God is not like a delicate seed, over which farmers fret whether it will yield its crop. It is robust, and certain to grow to full maturity without oversight. It is, after all, the kingdom of God. The harvest will come.

Begin by reading aloud:

In this parable, Jesus is teaching the people about what the kingdom of God is like. He says it is like seed that grows up from the ground. Here is what he says:

“This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.”

Farmers don't just throw seeds anywhere and expect them to grow. They make sure the soil is healthy enough to give the seeds the nutrients they need to live and grow. They also don't just plant the seeds and forget about them. Farmers have to water them carefully every day. The same goes for you if you try to grow a seed in a pot in your house. You need to water it and care for it every day until it is strong.

Seeds need to be taken care of. But in this story, the seeds are scattered on the ground and grow tall and strong, even though no one is taking care of them. They just grow and grow and grow.

If you live near a city, you may have seen something unusual. In sidewalks, overpasses, and roads you will sometimes see grass and even trees growing up out of the cracks. How can that happen? Deep in those cracks is some soil. A single seed is carried by the wind and floats into a crack and sinks into the soil. The only water comes from the rain. No one takes care of that seed, but still you have a tall and strong tree growing out of the crack in the cement.

Jesus tells this story to teach the people about the kingdom of God. This kingdom is not made up of armies and castles. It is made up of people who love God and follow what Jesus teaches about God. Jesus says that the kingdom of God grows like this seed that was scattered on the ground. Those seeds grow and grow no matter what. Nothing can stop them from growing. Just like the seeds, wherever Jesus went and talked about God, people kept coming from all over to listen. More and more people followed Jesus. The kingdom of God kept getting bigger and bigger. Nothing could stop it.

Today, the kingdom of God is still growing, and nothing can stop it. All over the world are people who love God and follow Jesus every day. No one has to stand watch to make sure that God's kingdom keeps growing. This is God's kingdom, and he makes sure it continues to grow no matter what.

Lesson

3

Luke 10:30–37

Everyone is Your Neighbor

What the Parent Should Know: This is one of the best-known and loved parables of Jesus. Jesus told the parable in response to a question posed to him by an “expert in the Law” (v. 25). The expert wanted to know how to inherit eternal life, which was a common question; he probably asked it to see what kind of teacher Jesus was. Jesus responded by putting the ball back in his court: “What is written in the Law?” The expert answered that one must love God fully and unconditionally, and love one’s neighbor (which is a perfectly acceptable answer; Jesus says something similar in Matthew 22:37–40; see also Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18).

But the expert in the Law wanted to corner Jesus into a sparring contest about interpretation (which is what “he wanted to justify himself” means in v. 29—he wanted to look good). So he asked Jesus, “Fine, but what does ‘neighbor’ mean? What are the sorts of people I am called upon to love?”

Jesus’ answer is the parable, and no expert in the Law could have anticipated what Jesus was about to say. By making a Samaritan the center of the story, Jesus is saying that your neighbors are not just people who are part of your group, but people outside of your group—even people you hate.

We might not think much of this today, but in Jesus' day, thinking of Samaritans as neighbors was very troublesome for observant Jews such as this expert in the Law. There are two reasons for this.

First, Jews hated Samaritans for historical reasons. Samaritans claimed to be the true descendents of the northern kingdom of Israel that was sent into exile by the Assyrians in 722 BC. They also claimed that the holy mountain was Mount Gerizim, not Mount Sinai (Deuteronomy 11:29 mentions Mount Gerizim as the place from which the Israelites would be blessed by God). Mainstream Jews, however, considered the Samaritans to have co-mingled with Gentiles after the Assyrian invasion, thus forfeiting their status as pure Israelites. These long-standing tensions were very much alive in Jesus' day. (See also John 4:1–42 and the story of the Samaritan woman at the well.)

Second, even though in the Old Testament there is compassion for non-Israelites (for example, Exodus 22:21), the command to love one's neighbor is directed specifically toward fellow Israelites (Leviticus 19:18). Outsiders were largely thought of as a threat to Israel. This kind of hostility had increased in Jesus' day, with the various political and religious tensions introduced by first Greek and then Roman occupation. These tensions make Jesus' parable all the more striking. (Jesus captured this same sentiment in Matthew 5:43–44, where he said to love one's enemies, not just one's neighbor.) An enemy was not simply an individual you didn't like, but an ethnic entity.

With that in mind, we can see the impact of this parable. First a priest and then a Levite step around a beaten man, feeling no obligation to come to his aid. "Priests and Levites" are two different classes of priests and together represent the religious authorities. Priests were descendents of Aaron, Moses' brother, the chosen line from within the tribe of Levi in charge of the tabernacle and later the temple. All other descendents of the tribe of Levi were called Levites and were given lesser duties in the temple; they were in effect helpers to the priests.

But the hated Samaritan sees the man lying there, and without asking questions about who he is—whether Jew, Samaritan, Greek, Roman, whatever—he helps him. The Samaritan, of all people, acts like a neighbor toward the man who needs help, the very thing the priest and Levite failed to do.

Jesus' challenge to the expert in the Law is clear: "You want to know what God requires? You want to know who your neighbor is? Let this Samaritan teach you. Watch him be a neighbor to the person who crosses his path." "Neighbor" now extends to even one's sworn enemies. In fact, a Samaritan enemy is more like God than this supposed "expert" in the Law.

Members of the kingdom, Jesus preached, are called to love God fully and to love all people—which means old hostilities between Jews and Gentiles

are to be obliterated. Whoever is to be a member of Jesus' kingdom must see himself as a neighbor to everyone.

Begin by reading aloud:

Today's story from the Gospels is one that Jesus tells to a man who comes to talk to him. This man is an expert in the Jewish Law, and he comes to visit Jesus so that he can ask, "What do I have to do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus reminds him of how the Law answers that question: you must love God and your neighbor. But the expert wants to know, "Who is my neighbor?" He wants to know what kind of people he has to be kind to. To explain who a "neighbor" is, Jesus tells a story about a Samaritan.

You should know that Samaritans and Jews were enemies back then. They had been enemies for hundreds of years. Each nation thought it was closer to God than the other. In Jesus' day, Jews looked down on Samaritans. Jews would try to avoid being around Samaritans or even speaking to them.

So, Jesus tells a story about a good Samaritan to show that a neighbor is not someone who lives next door to you, and not just someone you like. A neighbor is anyone in need, even someone you think you should hate.

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

In this story, a man is walking along a rocky road from Jerusalem to the town of Jericho. That is a long walk (17 miles), and there are plenty

of places for robbers to hide and jump out and rob people. Sure enough, this man is robbed and beaten so badly he almost dies.

Two Jewish leaders, a priest and a Levite (priests took care of the temple and Levites were their helpers), come along and find him. Even though the man is almost dead, they just keep on walking. They should have stopped to help him. This is what God would want them to do, because in the kingdom of God people are supposed to love each other the way God does.

Along comes a Samaritan, a hated enemy of the Jews. He stops and helps the beaten man. He bandages the man's wounds, takes him to an inn (there were no hospitals back then), and gives the innkeeper money to give the beaten man anything he needs to get better. The Samaritan even promises to come back and pay more if needed.

Jesus tells this story to show that members of God's kingdom are those who are kind to others, even going out of their way to be kind if that is what it takes. Some of the religious leaders thought the kingdom was only for them and their fellow Jews—and especially not for the hated Samaritans—but they were wrong. Jesus shows that the kingdom of God is open to everyone who wants to follow God, no matter where they are from.

Lesson

4

Matthew 18:21–35

Don't Stop Forgiving Others

What the Parent Should Know: Peter approaches Jesus to ask him how many times he should forgive a brother who sins against him. Peter suggests “seven times” (v. 21), and he is hardly being stingy, for the Jewish custom was to forgive as much as three times. By going beyond the custom, Peter likely assumed he would receive Jesus' approval. But Jesus answers famously, “Not seven times, but seventy times seven” (or “seventy-seven times”—the Greek can be read either way). Of course, this number is not to be taken literally. Jesus means, “Don't stop forgiving.”

In this parable, the sin in view is not a life-threatening situation between the powerful and powerless, such as emotional or physical abuse. So, this parable should not be read as commanding the weak and oppressed to suffer

mistreatment. It has to do with social and personal relationships between people, where one party does some harm to the other.

As the story goes, a servant owes a considerable sum of 10,000 talents to a king. One talent was worth 60 minas, and one mina was about a hundred days' wage for a worker. So, one talent was worth about 6,000 days' wage, or about 16 ½ years. Ten thousand talents is therefore an astronomical sum, and is probably more or less equivalent to how we use "a bazillion dollars" to indicate a ridiculously large amount of money. The sum simply cannot be paid, so the king threatens to sell him and his family into slavery, along with his belongings to repay it. And before we are too hard on this king, his act was accepted practice, even hinted at in the Old Testament (2 Kings 4:1).

The servant begs for the king's patience, which is almost comical, since there is no hope of paying the king back—this would be like asking a factory worker to pay off the national debt ("Give me some time, I'll do it"). Still, the king forgives the debt entirely, an incalculable display of forgiveness and mercy.

But the servant also has someone in his debt. Someone owes him "a hundred denarii"—one denarius was about a day's wage for a laborer. So 100 denarii is no small amount for a worker, although still in the realm of reality. The man begs for patience, too, but the forgiven servant is deaf to his pleas and has him thrown into prison. The king hears of it, and turns the servant over to be tortured.

This parable is a concrete illustration of why followers of Jesus are to display limitless forgiveness. As we see elsewhere in the New Testament, sin is understood as a debt the offender owes to the offended. (Jesus uses the same idea in the Lord's Prayer, Matthew 6:12.) Our debt to God is astronomical, and only his boundless forgiveness can pay it. We who are now members of the kingdom of God must reflect that same mercy to those whose debt to us is laughably small by comparison—free, limitless forgiveness. Failure to forgive another is unthinkable to someone who claims to believe in a God who forgives so generously.

Begin by reading aloud:

Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was

not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

“The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt, and let him go.

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’

“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

Peter comes up to Jesus and asks him how many times he needs to forgive someone who does something wrong to him. Peter asks if seven times is enough. If you think about it, seven times is a lot. What if your brother or sister took your favorite shirt and cut it up with a pair of scissors, and then asked you for forgiveness? You should forgive them when they ask. But what if they do something else to you . . . and then something else, again . . . and again—six more times in all? It would be very hard to forgive that many times.

But Jesus doesn’t say to Peter that seven times is good enough. He says “seventy times seven.” That doesn’t mean that you should multiply and come up with 490. That is Jesus’ way of saying that we should *always* be ready to forgive others when they sincerely ask to be forgiven.

Why does Jesus say we should always be ready to forgive? Because God is always ready to forgive us. So, Jesus tells this story about a king and his servant to explain how we are to forgive. The servant owes the king 10,000 talents. Just one talent was a lot of money back then—about as much money as a worker would make in sixteen years! So 10,000

talents is like Jesus saying, “The servant owed like a bazillion dollars!” It is much, much more than a servant could ever hope to pay back. He would have to work for 160,000 years to earn that much money!

Instead of making the servant pay it back, the king forgives the debt. That means the man won’t be thrown into prison, and his wife and children won’t be sold into slavery either (which is something kings did back then if they did not get paid back). The king had great mercy on his servant.

The servant is so relieved that he has been forgiven. But what does he do? He goes out and finds someone who owes him a lot less money—a hundred denarii. One denarius was a Roman silver coin worth about one day’s payment for a worker. He couldn’t pay it back, so the servant had him thrown into prison. When the king hears about this, he throws the servant into prison to be tortured.

The servant had been forgiven a lot by the king—more than he could count. But he could not forgive someone else even a little bit.

Jesus is saying that God forgives us again and again, more than we can count. Whenever we do something to hurt others—like speaking angrily or making fun of them—we need God’s forgiveness. And if we think about it, we do and say things probably every day that hurt others. But God is always ready to forgive us.

In this story, Jesus is teaching us to always be ready to forgive others, just the way God is always ready to forgive us. When we forgive others, we know that God is truly living in our hearts, because we will be acting toward others the way God acts toward us. And when we forgive others, we are also giving them a taste for how much God is ready to forgive them, too.

Lesson

5

Matthew 20:1–16

God is Equally Gracious to All

What the Parent Should Know: In this parable, Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who goes out and hires workers for the vineyard. In order to understand Jesus’ meaning, we must keep in mind that the kingdom of heaven is not the afterlife. As we have seen in the other parables

Jesus is Greater than Death

What the Parent Should Know: The fifth of John's "I AM" statements (see Lesson 13) is "I AM the resurrection and the life." Like the other "I AM" statements, this one describes who Jesus is, not what he can do. So, in 6:35, Jesus is the bread of life, not someone who gives bread; in 8:12, he is the light of the world, not one who gives light. So, by claiming to be resurrection and life, Jesus means that he is the end to death itself. He will show this later in his own resurrection. Traveling back to Judea from Bethany (11:7) to raise his friend Lazarus is a preview.

Judea was a place of "double-death" for Jesus. First, Lazarus was already dead for four days (v. 17), a fact that Martha laments greatly (v. 21). Second, Judea meant certain death for Jesus. Earlier the Jews had tried to stone Jesus (10:31), but he escaped (10:39). To go back to Judea is virtual suicide, and Thomas even resigns himself to the fact (11:16; Thomas's words are borne out in vv. 45–57: no sooner does Jesus raise Lazarus than the chief priests and Pharisees plot to kill Jesus, which introduces the Passion Week in chapter 12). So, why would Jesus go to such a hopeless place? Jesus' willingness to return to Judea is not a heroic show of bravery or even a demonstration of his love for his friend. Rather, Judea is the ideal location for Jesus to show "I AM the resurrection and the life": for Lazarus, for Jesus himself, and for all who believe in him.

When he arrives, Jesus assures Martha that her brother will rise again (v. 23). Martha assumes Jesus is talking about the resurrection that will happen "at the last day" (v. 24), meaning at the end of the world (see Daniel 12:1–4). But Jesus means now, not later. Jesus is not denying the idea of a future resurrection. He means that his very presence among them means the future has invaded the present. Resurrection is no longer something that merely will happen—it has already begun. Death not only will be conquered. Its end has already arrived in the person of Jesus. That is what Jesus means by saying, "I AM the resurrection and the life." Wherever he is, death does not have the final say.

The conquering of death is a spiritual truth in addition to a physical truth: resurrection and life already now touch all those who live in Jesus and believe in him (v. 26). All who believe have already "crossed over from death

to life,” as Jesus says in John 5:24. But now with the raising of Lazarus, Jesus begins to show that the death he conquers is physical as well.

The raising of Lazarus is not a rescue story where Jesus comes sweeping in to snatch someone from death. The story is about Jesus—not what he can do, but who he is.

Begin by reading aloud:

Lazarus is the brother of Mary and Martha and a close friend of Jesus. Jesus hears that Lazarus is very sick and about to die, so he travels to Judea where Lazarus is. Judea is dangerous for Jesus. Some of the people in Judea are angry with him. Jesus was there once before and told the people that they could only know God by listening to him. Some of those listening wanted to stone Jesus to death, but Jesus escaped. Now Jesus goes back to Judea because of Lazarus. Here is what happened.

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

“Lord,” Martha said to Jesus, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”

Jesus said to her, “Your brother will rise again.”

Martha answered, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.”

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

“Yes, Lord,” she told him, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.”

By the time Jesus gets to Lazarus’ house, the house is full of people comforting Mary and Martha. Lazarus died four days ago. Now Lazarus is in a tomb, which is a small cave with a big rock in front of the opening.

Martha is brokenhearted. She comes up to Jesus and says, “If only you had gotten here sooner, you could have healed Lazarus. But now he is dead and it is too late.”

Jesus tells Martha that Lazarus will not stay dead but will rise again. Martha thinks that means way in the future, at the end of the world. But Jesus is not talking about God raising Lazarus from the dead one day in the future. Jesus means he is going to raise Lazarus right now. That is what Jesus means when he says to Martha “I am the resurrection and the life.”

Death does not have any power over Jesus. So he is not afraid to march right into Judea, even though he knows people there want to arrest him and have him put to death. Death does not have any power over Lazarus, either, because Jesus is there to raise him from the dead. Jesus tells Martha that he is going to raise Lazarus from the dead, and a little later in the story that is what he does.

Jesus also tells Martha that death has no power over anybody who believes in him. That doesn't mean that if you believe in Jesus you won't die. Everyone dies. But throughout your whole life, no matter where you are or what you do, you belong to Jesus. Even when you die for real, you still belong to Jesus, and he will one day raise from the dead all who believe in him. Raising Lazarus from the dead shows everyone that Jesus can do that.

Lesson 15

John 15:1–8

Staying Connected to Jesus

What the Parent Should Know: In this passage we see the last of the seven I AM statements in John's Gospel (see Lesson 13). Jesus is speaking to his disciples and says he is the vine and they are the branches. This means that the disciples—and all believers after them—can only “bear fruit” by “remaining” in Jesus. This passage teaches that Jesus' followers must remain “connected” to him as they live out their mission of living and spreading the gospel.

A glimpse at the Old Testament will help explain this metaphor. In the Old Testament, God is the gardener who cares for Israel, his vines (see Isaiah 5:1–7). The vines are to bear fruit, which means living in faithfulness to the covenant (the Law). Israel's faithfulness will spread news of Israel's God by attracting the nations to him.

But in the end, Israel did not bear such fruit. Instead of attracting the nations to God, Israel was taken into exile in Babylon. By saying “I AM the

vine,” Jesus claims to be taking over Israel’s role. Jesus is the true vine, the true Israel, who will fulfill Israel’s mission of faithfulness to God and reconciliation of the nations.

Jesus is the true vine and he extends the metaphor to include his followers: they are the branches that grow from the vine, and they are to bear fruit. Jesus and his followers together are the “new Israel” (see Galatians 6:16), the true fruit-bearing vine. Understanding the church as the “new Israel” is also a pivotal point made throughout the New Testament. Jesus calls to himself a people made up of Jew and Gentile to continue Israel’s mission. The church is the new Israel that continues the mission begun by Jesus in his teachings, death, and resurrection—the reconciling of the nations to the true God.

Therefore, the metaphor of the vine and branches is not a catchy way of saying “you need Jesus.” It gets at the heart of New Testament teaching: a new people (branch) “grows out” of the crucified and risen Lord (vine). As a branch, this new people of God has its source of life in the vine. Individuals can only bear fruit by staying connected to the vine, by “remaining” in Jesus (vv. 4–5). “Remaining” means more than believing things about Jesus. It means a continual attitude of trust and surrender to Jesus—in other words, more than “believing” intellectually a set of doctrines.

In v. 6, failure to remain in Jesus means the branches will wither and be burned. Along with vine, branches, and fruit, fire is a metaphor that conveys a deep truth: apart from Jesus, a disciple is as useless as a withered branch, fit for nothing but being burned up.

The metaphor of “vine and branches” illustrates the absolutely vital, life-giving, non-negotiable connection Christians have to Jesus as they fulfill God’s mission to reconcile the world. The mission is a daunting task to be sure, but not if the branch remains in the vine.

Begin by reading aloud:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever

you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Jesus is talking to his disciples. He knows he is going to be crucified soon. So he is telling the disciples to remember what he taught them and to keep following him always. That way they will be ready to keep teaching others about God.

Jesus explains what he means in a way that will help the disciples remember. Jesus says, "Think of me as a vine. You are branches that grow from the vine. If you don't continue to grow, you will dry up and break off. Branches like that aren't good for anything other than being tossed into a fire."

Jesus is talking about grape vines here, which were very common back then. Most of us don't see grape vines very often, so think of a shade tree instead.

Where I live there are a lot of shade trees. One of them is huge, probably 150 feet high with a trunk a grown-up can't even get his arms halfway around. This tree is also completely dead. In the spring, when all the other trees are budding, this tree just sits there—as dry and lifeless as it was in the winter. This tree has stopped producing leaves—like the vines in Jesus' story that have stopped bearing grapes.

A tree like that has to be cut down. It is useless. It doesn't give off any shade for us, nor does it grow leaves and acorns for food for animals. It is also dangerous. The branches—some of them very big—are so dry that they come crashing down during a strong wind.

When those dead branches fall down, I pick them up and put them in a woodpile in the backyard. In the winter we burn that wood in our fireplace. And that's what I need to do with the whole tree. I need to get someone to cut it down and chop it up so I can use it for firewood.

Why does Jesus tell a story about vines, branches, and fruit? Jesus is telling his disciples that if they forget what he taught them and stop trusting him, they will become like dried-up branches with no fruit growing on them. Disciples like that will not be ready to obey God or teach others about God. But those who keep following Jesus are like green branches with a lot of fruit. They will love God and show others that God loves them, too.

[Note to Parents: This lesson includes a brief description of crucifixion. We have made it as age-appropriate as possible, but we encourage you to preview the narration before presenting it to your child.]

What the Parent Should Know: This passage begins and ends by John saying that Jesus' death fulfills Scripture (vv. 28 and 36–37). The first is an allusion to one or two Psalms. At the end of the passage, there are two details of Jesus' death that John alone of the four Gospel writers mentions as specific fulfillments of the Old Testament: None of Jesus' bones would be broken and his body would be pierced. Through these allusions, John shows that Jesus' death is not an unfortunate tragedy but part of God's plan, echoed already in the Old Testament.

Knowing that his final moments are near, Jesus asks for something to drink. He is given some wine vinegar—the common man's wine—to drink. It is dipped in a sponge and lifted to him on a hyssop branch. John says that this act fulfills Scripture, though it is not clear which passage he has in mind. Likely we see here an echo of Psalm 22:15 (“My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth”) and 69:21 (“They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst”). John and the other New Testament writers sometimes hear “echoes” of the Old Testament in something Jesus does or says. By alluding to the Old Testament here, John means that Jesus' suffering on the cross is not an accident but follows the Old Testament pattern spoken of in the Psalms.

After Jesus takes a drink, he says, “It is finished,” and with that last utterance he dies. Jesus means more than just “My life is at an end.” He means that, by his death, his mission in the world is complete. Jesus was sent by God to redeem the world (e.g., 3:16). Now that task is completed.

What remains now is for Jesus to be taken down from the cross and buried. John explains that Jesus dies on the “day of Preparation” (Friday), the day before the Sabbath (Saturday) when the Jews prepared ahead so that no work would need to be done on the Sabbath. In addition, this Sabbath was a “special Sabbath” (v. 31) because it coincided with the Passover. The Jews have every reason to make absolutely sure that the bodies do not remain on the cross once the sun goes down on Friday. To ensure quick death, they ask Pilate to break the legs of Jesus and the two men who had been crucified with

him. Crucifixion is a slow process of asphyxiation where one's body weight prevents air from entering the lungs. The condemned rely on their ability to push themselves up with their legs in order to breathe. Breaking their legs ensures a more speedy (and even more painful) death.

The soldiers break the legs of the two men crucified with Jesus who are still alive. Since Jesus has already died, his legs are not broken. Instead, a soldier stabs Jesus in the side with a spear to make sure Jesus is dead. The blood and water that flow from the wound are normally explained as evidence that Jesus was literally pierced in the heart—the clear liquid is what filled the sac around the heart (pericardium, literally “around the heart”), whereas the blood is from the heart itself.

John, however, was not interested in such details from a medical standpoint. His focus was on how Jesus' death further echoed Israel's story in the Old Testament. John sees Jesus' intact legs as a fulfillment of the Passover law in Exodus 12:46 (see also Numbers 9:12 and Psalm 34:20), where none of the lamb's bones are to be broken. Jesus is the “lamb of God”: his blood delivers the people from death, as did the Passover lamb (see Lesson 34).

John also sees the piercing of Jesus' side to be a fulfillment of Scripture, specifically Zechariah 12:10 (see also Isaiah 53:5). In Zechariah, the identity of the “one they have pierced” is a bit tricky to understand. In context, it probably refers to God himself being pierced by sorrow, although Jewish tradition came to understand the one pierced as the future messiah. John may be following both lines of thinking—God himself, in Jesus the Messiah, is pierced.

By linking Jesus' suffering and death to the Old Testament, John is saying that Jesus' death is not an afterthought or accident. Everything is proceeding according to plan. Jesus is the new Passover lamb, who suffers and is sacrificed on behalf of the people in fulfillment of Scripture.

Begin by reading aloud:

Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty.” A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. The soldiers therefore came and

broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. These things happened so that the scripture would be fulfilled: "Not one of his bones will be broken," and, as another scripture says, "They will look on the one they have pierced."

This story tells us about Jesus' death. Jesus' followers are full of despair and sadness that Jesus is hanging on a cross, nearly dead. They do not understand how this could be happening to Jesus. They believe that Jesus is God's Son. How can God's Son come to such a horrible end, dying on a cross like a criminal?

John tells us that Jesus' death on the cross is not an accident but fulfills Scripture. That means that God knew all along that Jesus needed to die for our sins. John shows us that the Old Testament talks about Jesus' suffering.

So, John says that Scripture is fulfilled when Jesus says, "I am thirsty." In one of the psalms from the Old Testament, the writer of the psalm, David, is suffering because he is being attacked by his enemies. He is totally exhausted and in one verse he says, "My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth." When John sees that Jesus is parched with thirst, he understands that the psalm is not just talking about David's suffering but Jesus', too.

After Jesus says "I am thirsty," someone (probably a soldier) takes a sponge, soaks it in wine vinegar, sticks the sponge on the end of a long branch, and holds it up to Jesus' mouth so he could drink. (Wine vinegar is a kind of wine that people drank back then instead of water, since water could be dirty, not filtered and purified as water is today.) After Jesus takes a drink, he says, "It is finished." Jesus means he is now finished with what God sent him to do. God loves the world, so he sent Jesus to die on the cross. Now that Jesus is about to die, he says, "I have done what God sent me to do."

Jesus has died, but the two criminals on either side of Jesus are still alive. This causes a problem for the Jews. It is Friday afternoon and the Sabbath begins at sundown, in just a few hours. The Old Testament law says that Jews may not work on the Sabbath—and that includes taking

the bodies off of the crosses and preparing them for burial. So, they ask the Roman governor Pilate if they could break the legs of all three.

Why would they ask that? So that the three would die more quickly and they could be buried before the Sabbath started. The way someone dies when they are crucified is through asphyxiation—when you can't get enough air in your lungs. Hanging on a cross pulls the body's weight down, and the only way to keep breathing is to push up with the legs to get some air. If the criminals' legs are broken, they won't be able to push up and breathe. Breaking the legs will bring death more quickly, and that means that the Jews will be able to bury the bodies before the Sabbath begins.

When they get to Jesus, though, they see that he already looks like he is dead. So, instead of breaking his legs, a soldier stabs Jesus in the side with a spear to make sure he is actually dead.

The Gospel writer John sees two other ways that Jesus' death on the cross fulfills Scripture. The Old Testament says that the Passover Lamb is to be sacrificed but without any of its bones being broken. The Old Testament also says that, one day, the people in Jerusalem will look at God's servant and see him pierced with a spear. When John sees Jesus dying on the cross—with no broken bones and with a spear that pierced his side—John is reminded of what the Old Testament says and understands that Jesus' death is not an accident. Everything is happening according to God's plan as the Old Testament says.

Lesson

3

John 20:10–18

Mary Magdalene Spreads the News that Jesus is Alive

What the Parent Should Know: John is the only Gospel that records this encounter between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Mary is the one who sees Jesus first after his resurrection, although she does not recognize him at first. After she hears Jesus' voice, Mary realizes that the man in front of her is the risen Jesus. Mary alone brings the news of the resurrection to the disciples.

In the previous passage, Peter and John (called "the other disciple" in 20:2) have seen that the tomb was empty, but they still do not understand what has happened (20:9). They return to their home, but Mary remains at

the entrance of the tomb, crying. (The Greek word means “wailing” in grief and mourning.) Mary sees two angels seated in the tomb where the head and feet of Jesus had been. They ask her why she is crying. Mary does not recognize that they are angels. She simply answers that Jesus’ body was taken away, and that she does not know where it is (v. 13). Like the disciples, Mary has no idea that Jesus has been raised from the dead; she assumes Jesus’ body was stolen.

When Mary turns around, she sees Jesus but thinks he is a gardener—again, the thought of Jesus being alive is not even on her radar screen. The only explanation she can think of for the empty tomb was that the body has been removed, either by this “gardener” or someone else.

Mary does not recognize Jesus by sight, but when Jesus speaks Mary’s name she finally knows who is standing before her. Recognizing Jesus by his voice appears earlier in John’s Gospel, in 10:3: “The sheep listen to his voice. He calls his sheep by name and leads them out.” Upon recognizing Jesus, Mary addresses him with the familiar Aramaic title “Rabboni.” Aramaic was the main language of Jews at the time, and Rabboni—as John himself explains—means “teacher” (or perhaps “my teacher”). This title only occurs elsewhere in the New Testament in Mark 10:51. It means the same thing as “Rabbi,” which is a common word used in the Gospels to refer to Jesus.

Mary then either hugs him or is about to, but Jesus tells her no. His reason is a bit cryptic: “for I have not yet returned to the Father.” Scholars have pondered long and hard what is happening here. Some think that Mary is trying to “hold on” to Jesus—to keep him from going away a second time. A better explanation is that Jesus is in a rush to have Mary bring the news to the disciples because his time on earth is limited (according to Acts 1:3, the ascension took place forty days after the resurrection). In other words, to paraphrase v. 17, Jesus means, “Stop wasting time holding on to me. I am returning to the Father soon, so you’d better get a move on and start spreading the news.”

Mary alone remains at the tomb and sees the risen Jesus. Now her task is to hurry off and tell the disciples that Jesus will soon be returning to where he came from. There is no time to waste spreading the news: Jesus is alive.

Begin by reading aloud:

Today’s story begins on Sunday. Jesus was crucified on Friday, and his body has been in the tomb for the last two days. The Jewish Sabbath began Friday night and lasted until Saturday night, and Jews were not allowed to do any work on the Sabbath. So, the disciples had to wait until Sunday morning to come to Jesus’ tomb. And when they arrive Sunday

morning, they see that the tomb is empty. Jesus is gone, and they cannot believe their eyes. Even though Jesus has told them all of this was going to happen, they don't understand. So the disciples go back to their homes. But Mary stays behind. She will be the one to tell all the others that Jesus is no longer dead, but alive.

Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

"Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' "

Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Mary is alone at the tomb of Jesus. Jesus' body is gone and she does not know what has happened to Jesus. So she stands outside the empty tomb and cries—not softly but loudly. She is wailing because she is so distressed that Jesus was crucified and now on top of that his body is missing. Who would do such a horrible thing and take Jesus' body?

Then Mary sees two angels sitting in the empty tomb—one angel is sitting where Jesus' head was and the other where Jesus' feet were. Mary does not know they are angels. They ask her why she is crying, and she says, "Someone took Jesus' body and I don't know where it is."

Mary turns around and sees Jesus standing there, but she doesn't recognize him, either. She doesn't understand what Jesus had told all the disciples about rising from the dead. Mary just doesn't expect to see Jesus standing there. She thinks he is a gardener.

But then Jesus calls Mary by her name. At last, she recognizes him. She calls him “Rabboni.” That is an Aramaic word that means “teacher” (Aramaic is the language that the Jews spoke.) “Teacher” is what Mary and the disciples always called Jesus.

If you were sad like Mary and then saw Jesus, who you thought was dead, what would you do? Mary goes over to hug Jesus. Has one of your parents ever gone away on a long trip, and then they finally come home? When you see them you run up and hold on to them because you are so happy to see them. Mary thought Jesus was gone forever, but now he is back.

But Jesus tells her not to hold on to him. He tells Mary this because he wants her to run right away to spread the news. Jesus is alive, and that is great news! There is no time to waste.