



Learning from Bible Characters Who *Messed Up*

A Small Group Guide

compiled by Rev. John Odhner and Sasha Silverman

1 WEEK ONE: ADAM AND EVE

Cynicism vs. Innocence

Introduction

What makes babies so kissable? Those soft cheeks certainly help, but there's also this irresistible sweetness, this sense of purity. We were all born like that—innocent, naked, and totally trusting. Much of that innocent state continues into childhood, when we watch, absorb and follow what adults tell us. But there comes a time when we realize our nakedness; we may even feel ashamed for having been so gullible or naïve. Logic and physical senses dominate, as we prefer to figure things out our own way. In this process, we may turn a cold shoulder to ideas of God and religion. A picture of this phase can be seen in the story of Adam and Eve who, after a period of innocence, choose to eat from the one tree that is off limits: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As a result, they suddenly realize that they are naked, and the early state of innocence is now gone. But are we “bad” for coming to this state? Not at all. Babies must grow up. This stage is just the beginning of a process of learning to become more wise and loving. Through a lifetime of experiences, we may gradually come to the humbling realization that all love and wisdom come from God.

Readings

Genesis 2:4-25, Genesis 3:1-24

Swedenborg writes that this story did not literally occur, but contains symbolic meaning: “Anyone may recognize that Jehovah God did not speak to a serpent, and indeed that there was no serpent.... These statements embody something different: that people could tell that their senses deceived them, but selfishness caused them to want to know if statements about God were true before they were ready to believe them” (*Secrets of Heaven* 229).

In general, this story refers to times when we let our physical senses deceive us. We give up our innocence, and become suspicious of anything that we can't see or touch.

As A Group

Discussion Questions

Do you remember having an innocent, unquestioning belief in God? What was that like? Have you experienced a cynical phase, where you needed tangible proof in order to believe? What does it feel like to live in that kind of mentality?

Task

This week, try putting yourself back in the a state of childlike curiosity. Set aside your bitterness or skepticism, if only for a moment, and allow yourself to be moved by the wonder and beauty of creation.

“Every life
is a march from
innocence, through
temptation, to virtue
or vice.”
-Lyman Abbott

“Faith is not something to grasp, it is a state to grow into.”
- Gandhi

WEEK TWO: JONAH 2

My Way (Fear) vs. God’s Way (Trust)

Introduction

We want things to go our way; it’s only human. If only life would mold and bend to our desires, and if fate would just dutifully play out our expectations, maybe then we’d be happy. . . right? Much of our desire to control our world, however, can be traced back to our own deeper fear: that we can’t trust in God.

In this week’s story, God chooses Jonah to “cry out” against the city of Nineveh. But since Jonah is afraid, he takes a different path, and ends up in a rough and unpleasant situation. Even after Jonah eventually makes it to Nineveh, he disagrees with God’s decision about showing mercy on the people. Again and again, Jonah fails in the sense of thinking he knows better than God.

Readings

Jonah 1:1-17, 2:1-10, 3:1-10

The Writings of the New Church explain that Jonah’s call to arise and go preach to Nineveh represents the call we may feel for spiritual renewal – for a renewed connection with God, and with our higher ideals. But this can be scary, and we’re often tempted to veer off into an easier, safer path of not confronting our issues. The story reminds us of not only the importance of having the courage to look at ourselves and make changes, but also reminds us of God’s mercy and forgiveness.

Secrets of Heaven 3696 describes the inevitability of life’s “storms.” It explains that as we get older, we often lose trust in the Lord, and consequently we begin to experience more turmoil in our lives. As this happens, evils and falsities will “emerge and show themselves, and these trouble a person, so much so at length that he undergoes temptations and trials from the devil’s crew who try all the time to destroy...his...state of life.”

“Trust is an attribute of love expressed through faith. For that reason, trust in the Lord exists only in those who love the Lord and the neighbor. Faith does not reside with any others.” (*Secrets of Heaven* 8240)

As A Group

Discussion Questions

In what ways might we try to control situations or the behavior of others - how they act, think or feel? Why do we do this? What is often the result?

Task

This week let go of over-controlling your world. Let people and events flow as they will, and enjoy flowing along with them. When you feel that desire to control, bring this phrase to mind: “Trust in the Lord and do good.” (Psalm 37:3)

“All I have seen teaches me to trust the creator for all I have not seen.”
- Ralph Waldo Emerson



3 WEEK THREE: JACOB

Deception vs. Honesty

Introduction

What do you do when you can't get something that you want? Despite the many positive choices, sometimes deception seems the easiest route. In this story, Jacob uses deception to win the patriarchal blessing that was rightly due to his older brother. As you read, notice the hurt and anger left in the wake of this decision.

"He who permits himself to tell a lie once, finds it much easier to do it a second and third time, till at length it becomes habitual; he tells lies without attending to it, and truths without the world's believing him. This falsehood of the tongue leads to that of the heart, and in time depraves all its good dispositions."
- Thomas Jefferson

Readings

Genesis 27:1-46

The Writings of the New church explain that the "birthright" represents our loves. The trickery of Jacob stealing the birthright serves as an example of times when we might choose immediate gratification instead of a little bit of work with long term happiness.

"When we abstain from false testimonies and turn away from them as sins, the love of truth and the love of justice flow in from the Lord through heaven. . . . As a consequence our words become words of truth, and our works become works of justice." (*Apocalypse Explained* 1020:2)

As A Group

Discussion Questions

What times might you feel compelled to lie? Why? Do you remember any stories of lying as a child? What did you learn from that experience?

Task

Make sure that what you convey to others, whether in word or action, is truthful.



Introduction

Some days we go along our merry way, humming, smiling, and treating others with patience and kindness. We feel pretty good about our relationships. But then comes the night of poor sleep, combined with stressful deadlines, and no food in the fridge, and suddenly everyone around us seems in our way, or loud, or irritating. In this state, we might close a door a little too hard, or speak in an abrupt way. In this story, Moses had been faithfully leading the Israelites for a long time. But now, he was tired, hot, thirsty, and sick of all the complaining. When God told him to speak to the rock in order to bring water, he instead hit it hard, and twice. Read this passage, reflecting on our own tendencies to overreact, or use unnecessary aggression.

Readings

Numbers 20:1-13

On a deeper level, we can think of Moses striking the rock in terms of the way we pray hard to the Lord for truth, but come full of angst and impatience. What then emerges is more of a contentious kind of communication with God instead of a peaceful knowingness. Just as Moses cannot enter Canaan, we can't come to that peaceful state when we're so aggressively searching for Truth, without love and gentleness.

A "rock," ... means the Lord; "waters," ... mean truths; they were called "the waters of Meribah" because there was contention about them (*Secrets of Heaven* 1678:3).

As A Group

Discussion Questions

What might it mean to entreat the Lord with a hard heart, compared to a soft and humble heart? Moses hit the rock hard –twice– - instead of just speaking to it. As a result, he couldn't enter the Promised Land. What meaning does this have for you? In what ways would more gentleness impact your relationship with others?

Task

Pray with for a humble heart. When irritated, respond in a gentler way.

"Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned."
- Buddha

"There is nothing stronger in the world than gentleness."
- Han Suyin



5 WEEK FIVE: DAVID

Lust vs. Self-Discipline

*"Everyone must choose one of two pains: The pain of discipline or the pain of regret."
- Jim Rohn*

Introduction

We all have weak moments. We might give in to the temptation to say something mean, to eat the third piece of cake, to take the cigarettes out of the trash to sneak cigarettes, to tell that juicy bit of gossip, or to procrastinate when we have important work to do. Most of these weak moments slide by, and no one is terribly hurt. Occasionally, though, giving in to an unhealthy desire can cause real suffering in the lives of those around us. In this week's Bible story, David gives in to his desire for another man's wife. His decision leads not only to deception and adultery, but even to murder.

Readings

2 Samuel 11:1-26

In the New Testament, Jesus shows kindness to the woman caught in adultery, dispelling her persecutors, and telling her, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." (John 8:10-11) Before we "throw stones" at others for their failings, or even at ourselves, let's take a breather. We all have weaknesses, and we've all done things we're not proud of. With that in mind, this week's focus and task, and the general task moving forward is to take Jesus' words to heart, both in our responses to our own failures as well as the failures of others. We won't condemn and accuse, but will pick ourselves up, and go on to do our very best.

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." (Psalm 51:10)

As A Group

Discussion Questions

What was your response to this story? What parts stood out to you? What message will you take away from it in regards to self-discipline?

Task

Resist the urge to condemn yourself or others for making mistakes, but use self-discipline to "go and sin no more."



Introduction

The Lord wants to give us important work to do and wants us to feel capable and significant. He wants us to feel joy in the abilities and talents He has given us. At the same time we can be distracted by paying too much attention to ourselves and our abilities and not recognizing our need for the Lord. One of the reasons we go through difficult trials is so that we can learn to depend on the Lord. Peter was feeling very confident that he would be better than everyone else at standing by the Lord, even in the face of death, but he would soon go through a test that would teach him some humility.

One of the most important keys to spiritual growth is humility. Just before Peter's claim that he would be the most faithful, Jesus had said to His disciples, "He who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves." Luke 22:25-27. Success in spiritual life is not thinking more of ourselves than others, but thinking less of ourselves. If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." Mark 9:33

Readings

Matthew 26:31-35, 69-75

"No one is saved because of temptations if he places any merit in them, for if he places any merit in temptations he does so from self-love, in that he boasts about his temptations and believes that he has merited heaven more than others, and at the same time he is thinking about his own pre-eminence over others, despising others in comparison with himself, all of which is contrary to mutual love and consequently to heavenly blessedness. The temptations in which a person is victorious entail the belief that all others are more worthy than he, and that he is more like those in hell than those in heaven, for ideas such as these present themselves to him in temptations. When therefore after temptations a person enters into ways of thinking that are contrary to this outlook it is a sign that he has not been victorious, for the thoughts he had in temptations are those towards which the thoughts that he has following temptations can be turned. But if the thoughts he has after temptations cannot be turned in the direction of those he had during them, he has either given way in temptation, or he has departed into similar, and sometimes graver ones, till he has been brought to that healthier outlook in which he believes he has merited nothing. " (*Secrets of Heaven* 2273)

As A Group

Discussion Questions

What is your response to this reading? When do you find yourself being proud?
What events precede this feeling? What would it look like to depend on the Lord? What is preventing you from doing this?

Task

Task: Do not judge your success or failure by what you have accomplished, but by how much you learned to be humble and depend upon the Lord.

"Meet with triumph and disaster and treat these two imposters just the same." -Rudyard Kipling

