

Daily Bible Study (Unit 3)

October 26

Psalms 95:1-11

October 27

Genesis 8:15-22

October 28

Genesis 12:4-8

October 29

Genesis 28:1-7

October 30

Genesis 28:10-22

October 31

1 Samuel 7:2-6

November 1

1 Samuel 7:7-13

November 2

Psalms 74:1-12

November 3

Matthew 9:35-38

November 4

Matthew 12:9-14

November 5

John 18:19-24

November 6

Acts 15:14-21

November 7

Luke 4:31-37

November 8

Luke 4:38-44

November 9

Matthew 16:13-20

November 10

Acts 20:17-28

November 11

1 Corinthians 12:3-18

November 12

Romans 12:3-18

November 13

Acts 2:42-47

November 14

Matthew 18:15-20

November 15

Hebrews 10:19-25

November 16

Psalms 100:1-5

November 17

John 18:33-37

November 18

1 Timothy 6:11-16

November 19

Revelation 1:4-8

November 20

John 1:29-36

November 21

Revelation 4:1-11

November 22

Revelation 5:1-14

November 23

Psalms 92:1-15

November 24

Genesis 5:1-5

November 25

Job 10:8-12

November 26

Isaiah 44:1-5

November 27

Ecclesiastes 11:1-5

November 28

Genesis 1:24-28

November 29

Psalms 139:13-18

Unit 3

In This Place

The final unit of lessons pushes the church to a deeper understanding of worship. In worship, the church acknowledges the lordship of Jesus the Christ and offers praise, gratitude, and surrender to God.

In the story of Jacob, we see how God appears in unexpected places and ways. God even appears and blesses those who are unworthy, including the shady character of Jacob/Israel.

As a faithful Jew, Jesus participated in synagogue worship. We learn from Luke 4 that worship and preaching involve challenge as well as comfort and promise. Worship includes our resistance to the evil of the world, the promise of healing, and our commitment to those who suffer.

Worship requires commitment and endurance. Worship reminds us of the promise of resurrection. That promise enables us to continue worship when we grow tired or frustrated at the problems within the church and in the world.

November 1

Lesson 9

Sacred Spaces

Focal Passage: Genesis 8:20-21; 12:6-8; 28:16-22; 1 Samuel 7:10-12

Background Text: Genesis 8:20-22; 12:6-8; 28:10-21; 1 Samuel 7:7-12

Purpose Statement: To look for God's presence in unlikely places and critical events

Genesis 8:20-21

²⁰Noah built an altar to the LORD. He took some of the clean large animals and some of the clean birds, and placed entirely burned offerings on the altar. ²¹The LORD smelled the pleasing scent, and the LORD thought to himself, I will not curse the fertile land anymore because of human beings since the ideas of the human mind are evil from their youth. I will never again destroy every living thing as I have done.

Genesis 12:6-8

⁶Abram traveled through the land as far as the sacred place at Shechem, at the oak of Moreh. The Canaanites lived in the land at that time. ⁷The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "I give this land to your descendants," so Abram built an altar there to the LORD who appeared to him. ⁸From there he traveled toward the mountains east of Bethel, and pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and worshipped in the LORD's name.

Genesis 28:16-22

¹⁶When Jacob woke from his sleep, he thought to himself, The LORD is definitely in this place, but I didn't know it. ¹⁷He was terrified and thought, This sacred place is awesome. It's none other than God's house and the entrance to heaven. ¹⁸After Jacob got up early in the morning, he took the stone that he had put near his head, set it up as a sacred pillar, and poured oil on the top of it. ¹⁹He named that sacred place Bethel, though Luz was the city's original name. ²⁰Jacob made a solemn promise: "If God is with me and protects me on this trip I'm taking, and gives me bread to eat and clothes

to wear, ²¹and I return safely to my father's household, then the LORD will be my God. ²²This stone that I've set up as a sacred pillar will be God's house, and of everything you give me I will give a tenth back to you."

1 Samuel 7:10-12

¹⁰While Samuel was offering the entirely burned offering, the Philistines advanced to attack Israel. But the LORD thundered against the Philistines with a great blast on that very day, throwing the Philistines into such a panic that they were defeated by Israel. ¹¹The Israelite soldiers came out of Mizpah and pursued the Philistines. They struck them down until they reached a place just below Beth-car. ¹²Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Jeshanah. He named it Ebenezer, explaining, "The LORD helped us to this very point."

Key Verse: "When Jacob woke from his sleep, he thought to himself, The LORD is definitely in this place, but I didn't know it" (Genesis 28:16).

When I taught preaching courses as an adjunct professor at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, one of my students had a sensitivity to perfume and other fragrances. In all of her classes, she had to request that none of her fellow students wear fragrances if they attended a class with her.

She came to seminary to prepare for a ministry with people like her. She had a goal of conducting worship for people with these kinds of sensitivities. She began her ministry while she attended seminary. By necessity, they worshiped in outdoor settings. In a church building, even the residual smell of perfumes might have triggered a reaction. Watery eyes, sneezing, inability to breathe, or itching do not promote a spiritual experience. In order to worship, these persons need the open spaces of a woodsy setting.

The times I have worshiped outdoors, the unregulated temperature, the presence of bugs, and the various sounds sometimes distracted from focusing on God's message. Nevertheless, worship in a campground or in a clearing in a forest often reminded me of the beauty of God's creation. God's presence transformed the trees, rocks, dirt, and grass into worship space. My former student would never pastor a megachurch, but she felt a call to preach for and pray with those who could not attend a bricks-and-mortar church.

We will look at four passages from the Old Testament in this lesson, three from Genesis and one

from 1 Samuel. Each passage makes a contribution to our understanding of worship. We will look at two of the Genesis passages in order, jump to the 1 Samuel passage, and then finish with Genesis 28.

God's Reaction

Genesis 8:20-22 appears in a crucial place within the Noah flood story. We often forget the dark message of the Noah story. In the narrative, God decided that people had become too corrupt. God could solve the problem only by destroying humanity. God then decided to spare one family, an act of grace but also of risk. God took a risk that the one family worth saving might lead to a new and better humanity. That didn't happen.

When we read the Noah story, we should avoid the tendency to ask how the story could have happened, or even whether it happened. The story raises the question of why God hangs in there with us. The story teaches the important lesson that God loves us because of God's character, not because of our inherent goodness. God grieves the damage we do to one another: our wars, crime, racism, hatred, divisions, abuse. Nevertheless, God does not give up on us.

After Noah came out of the ark, he built an altar to God. From Noah's perspective, even after a harrowing experience, he offered worship to God. We might find the most interesting idea in the passage to come from God's reaction to the burnt offering. The pleasing smell of the offering (Leviticus 1:13) influenced God's decision about cursing the earth because of people.

Even though "the ideas of the human mind are evil" (Genesis 8:21), God made a commitment to people: "I will never again destroy every living thing as I have done," God said (verse 21). Noah's act of worship had an effect on God. Whenever or wherever we worship, we can remember that our worship matters to God.

Have you ever considered the fact that your worship has an effect on God? What do you think your worship does for God?

God's Presence

In Genesis 12, Abram responds to God's call to go to the land God would show him. Verse 3 includes an important part of the mission: first, of the children of Israel, then, Judaism and then Christianity. God's people became a blessing to all the families of the earth. The original mission included all people.

Abram built an altar at Shechem to the Lord, "who appeared to him" (verse 7). We learn from

this verse that our worship responds to the recognition of God's presence. We can experience God's presence in a worship service on Sunday morning, but we might also experience God's presence in a hospital room, as people gather around a dying family member to pray or sing. We might experience God's presence in the home as family members share love.

Some of my friends have gone to the Texas border to minister to immigrants. They lived out the words of Leviticus 19:33-34, to love the immigrants as themselves. They tell about experiencing God's presence in the courage of the sojourners who have no permanent home. We can experience God's presence in a variety of places. Worship can take many forms, including spontaneous prayer, or awestruck silence.

Where have you experienced God's presence outside a church building?

God's Purity

The passage from 1 Samuel presents us with interesting ideas, which we must carefully consider. Throughout 1 Samuel, we read about how the people of Israel battled the Philistines. Although the Philistines occupied the land before the people of Israel arrived, the best solution might have involved peaceful coexistence. Nevertheless, the war dragged on.

In the opening part of 1 Samuel 7, Samuel challenged the people of Israel to put away their idols (verse 3). After the people of Israel purged their idols, Samuel "cried out in prayer to the LORD" (verse 9). The description of prayer as "crying out" indicates the emotion of the moment and the vulnerability of the people.

In verse 10, Samuel presents a burnt offering. When the Philistines attacked, God acted through nature to enable the people of Israel to defeat them. Samuel then set up a stone as an act of worship (verse 12). The valuable takeaway from this passage comes in its emphasis on the purity of worship.

We should put away any other "idols" we worship. We typically feel the temptation toward idolatry in times of vulnerability. Even when we feel helpless against the world's power, we should worship God in purity.

The danger of the passage comes in the temptation to assume that, if we pray, God will give us whatever we want. The people of Israel wanted to defeat the Philistines. God responded to their worship. We affirm God taking the side of the vulnerable, but we cannot affirm that God will give us whatever we want.

We also face the temptation to believe that God loves us more than God loves our enemies. God will not "smite" our enemies if we pray fervently. We trust God to act, but God will not give us whatever we want.

When have you been tempted to trust something or someone other than God?

God's Commitment

What a character we find in Jacob! The passage from Genesis 28 reveals the problems in Abram's descendants. We who value Scripture must come to grips with the reality that God chose a dysfunctional family to serve as the patriarchs and matriarchs of the community of faith.

In Jacob's family, we see parents choosing favorites, sibling rivalry, dishonesty, and selfishness. Rebekah, who chose Jacob as her favorite, warned him of his brother's desire for revenge. As Jacob fled from his brother, he slept at Bethel.

The passage describes the well-known "Jacob's Ladder." We notice important ideas in the passage. God took the initiative. God appeared to Jacob in a dream. God promised presence to Jacob. God promised to use Jacob as an instrument. Despite all of God's initiative, Jacob set conditions on his own response. Jacob promised that the Lord (*Ha-Shem*, "the name," in Hebrew) would become the deity he worshiped (verse 21). God promised much, but Jacob gave back little.

This passage demonstrates God's presence and commitment, even in the messiest of situations. In the midst of betrayal, spiritual immaturity, and family crisis, God shows up. God's love does not depend on our situation, or even our response. We seek to respond in faith to God out of gratitude and because spiritual growth is an end in itself, but God does not wait until we "get it" to love us and commit to us.

As you read these texts, which lesson stands out for you as a message you need to hear? Among those messages, we learn that God does not give up on us, that we worship in response to God's presence, that God takes the initiative, that God calls for purity of worship, and that God appears in the messiest of situations. Which of these messages speaks to you most helpfully? What about the message speaks to you? In what ways does it apply to you?

We can consider worship distinctive if it happens in an unexpected place or outside of an official sanctuary. If we worship in a campground or a hospital room or spontaneously after a dramatic event, we might consider that worship distinctive.

Some churches and pastors offer ashes in a public place on Ash Wednesday. We may mumble out a prayer if we narrowly avert a car wreck. We can consider a worship service distinctive if the service has a special purpose. We may know of churches that offer a Blue Christmas service during Advent to minister to people who feel grief during the holidays.

I know of a pastor who held a worship service for rape survivors. A United Methodist church in Dallas, Texas, hosts a worship service every year for people who have died on the streets and for

whom no funeral was held. A worship service for a distinctive purpose proclaims that we can know God's presence in difficult circumstances.

St. Martin-in-the-Fields--an Anglican church in London, England--has held a worship service for families of those who have committed suicide and for those who have attempted suicide. The church hosts the service for a number of reasons. Suicide brings its own forms of grief, with feelings of guilt and helplessness and wondering if something could have been done.

Suicide raises questions about the salvation of the person who took his or her own life. We believe in a God of grace, whose love goes deeper than any sin we can commit. Nevertheless, some people question how suicide affects salvation. The church in London affirms the grace of God. The impetus for the service came from an associate pastor who lost his son to suicide.

The annual service has the same structure each year. The liturgy moves in three parts. The first part addresses the grief of losing a loved one to suicide. The second part deals with the experience of having attempted suicide. The third part moves toward solace. Each part contains music, testimony, and symbolic actions. The symbolic actions include the laying of a rock, the lighting of a candle, and the placing of a rose.

Those who attend have experienced healing, catharsis, and community. Some have traveled long distances to attend. Some have come to a church for the first time in decades. According to the Reverend Dr. Samuel Wells, the vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, "vital to the whole event is the opportunity to gather informally afterward over coffee. It's a unique pastoral moment. Small talk is unnecessary--everyone is there because their lives have been shaped forever by suicide in some way. Conversations emerge rapidly and honestly."¹

When have you attended a worship service for a special purpose? How did the service affect you? In what ways did the service feed your spirit?

We thank you, O God, for the ways you make yourself known to us and become present to us. We thank you for formal services of worship in which we come prepared to experience your grace. We thank you for times when you show up unexpectedly. Enable us to worship free from idols, so that we worship you genuinely. May our worship bring healing to those who need it, and draw others to your grace when they have felt excluded. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

¹From "Liturgy at the Edge of Life," by Samuel Wells, *The Christian Century*, Volume 136, Number 5 (February 27, 2019); page 33.

The Spiritual Practice of Thankful Worship

When we talk about worship and thankfulness, we might start with Paul and Silas in jail in Acts 16. The story begins in verse 16 where the two cast out a spirit from a slave girl. They ended up in jail for this act of ministry. Sore from their beating, feet in stocks, in a jail cell, they prayed and sang hymns at midnight. The story makes the point that thankfulness does not arise from our circumstances. We can choose thankfulness, even in difficult times.

Different activities work for different people. Some keep a gratitude journal in which they write down at least one thing each day for which they feel thankful. Some people sing or listen to music as a way to enable their gratitude. Talking with a friend or a trusted confidant can help us to dissipate whatever brings us down, so that we can make room for gratitude. We might keep a file folder of devotional sayings that inspire us and look through it when our spirits need a boost.

A service of worship should include opportunities for gratitude. In one of the churches that I served, we separated "joys and concerns." We listed our concerns in one part of the service and named joys in another, so that we shared our joys all at once. It helped remind us that we all had something about which we could feel grateful.

Perhaps you can simply write down your joys and reasons for gratitude before you leave for Sunday school or worship service. Our individual prayers can include words of gratitude along with petitions and confession.