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Introduction to

OLD PLACES, NEW FACES

Places have to do with geography. In the Bible we find God's people in many different places, both physically and spiritually, in their relationship to the Creator and Savior. We, like them, journey through many lands in our Christian walk. We move from chaos to order, from Ur to Canaan and from disobedience to obedience. The geographical locations of Biblical characters can symbolically refer to places we find ourselves with respect to our faith. As we become more acquainted with our spiritual geography, we will better discern where God would have us go or what changes we need to make in order to serve Him better.

Old Places, New Faces seeks to make the stories and places of the Bible a reality in our lives today. It seeks to get at the relevant messages for today as found in the pages of the Scriptures. This study relates to the Bible as a book that speaks clearly about present realities through stories of the past. The Bible is not only intended to give the reader knowledge about events and people in the past, but through these events and people, inspire greater faith.

Old places from within the Bible can come alive with present significance to *new faces* – that is, us. May this be true for you as you use this study.

LESSON 1:

LIVING WITH SUFFERING

Goshen

There are sufferings that have clear and understandable sources. A person dies early of lung cancer because she smoked three packs of cigarettes a day. Somebody else loses his spouse to divorce because of an affair he had maintained for years. A young person ends up in jail because of using illegal drugs. Then there is suffering that happens for no apparent reason. That is the kind that is confusing to humans, especially to those who believe that God loves them and guides them in all areas of life.

This was the problem that the Hebrew people faced in their four hundred-year imprisonment in Egypt. Human sin had caused the banishment of Adam and Eve from the garden, the exile of Cain, the flood during Noah's life, and the destruction of the tower of Babel. But human sin was not the apparent cause of the Egyptian bondage. The Bible never gives us a reason for that suffering or for its cause. It is as confusing to us in our times of unexplainable suffering as it must have been to the Hebrew people. When we experience this type of suffering, we are in Goshen.

There is so much we do not understand. God gives us few answers for most of the mysteries of life. We often get sidetracked by these unanswerable questions and it leads us to frustration, bitterness, and often anger at God – which only makes matters worse. It only brings harm when we focus our attention on what we can not know or explain. Instead, we need to focus on the things we do know. We know that God loves us, that He will never leave us, and that He will not allow circumstances to destroy us. These truths may not answer the whys of suffering, but they provide the help we long for when we sit in Goshen.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

READ GENESIS 47:5-6

1. Where did Pharaoh allow Joseph's family (the Israelites) to settle and live?

READ EXODUS 1:6-14

2. What happened to the good relationship between the Egyptians and the people of Israel?

3. Why was Pharaoh worried about the Israelites in his land? (Exodus 1:10)

4. What did the Egyptians do to the Israelites? (Exodus 1:14)
Find two words in the story that describe how they treated them.

The Israelites were slaves in Egypt for 400 years. They suffered tremendously for a long period of time. At the same time they believed in a God Who was both loving and powerful enough to do anything.

5. Why do you think that they may have seen a contradiction between what they believed and what they experienced?

LESSON 9

LIVING WITH THE POWER OF PRAYER

In the Cloud

Exodus 24:15 states: “When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it and the glory of the Lord settled on Mt. Sinai.” Moses spent forty days in the cloud with the Lord, talking and listening. In that conversation, although Moses was high above the surrounding land, he could not see any of it because the cloud had descended upon the top of the mountain. He could not see if any armies were preparing to engage the Israelites in battle. He could not see the desert or the mountains that would be obstacles to the future journey of the people. He saw only God’s glory and simply sat in His presence.

Prayer is our way to “sit in the cloud of God’s glory” in order to converse with the Almighty. We lay our requests before Him without having a clear picture of the future or understanding all the details of our present affairs. The cloud represents God’s awesome power and His ability to accomplish anything He wants. We enter into His glorious presence with the confidence that God can do anything.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

READ EXODUS 24:15-18

1. What hints are there that God’s power was present on the mountain?

The amazing thing is that Moses' prayer actually changed God's mind about destroying the Israelites.

6. What word does your Bible translation use to express God's change of mind? (Exodus 32:14)

God's activity in the world does not seem to be predetermined or set in stone. He responds to human choices and mistakes in different ways and He truly listens to and is changed by the prayers of believers.

READ 2 KINGS 20:1-7

7. Can you find any loopholes in God's declaration that Hezekiah was going to die? (20:1b)

What words seem to suggest that God's decision was predetermined and irrevocable? (20:1b)

8. Did Hezekiah think God's mind could be changed? (20:23)

What did he do?

9. How did God respond to Hezekiah's plea? (20:4-6)

READ JAMES 5:13-18

10. What were the amazing results of Elijah's prayer? (5:17-18)

11. How does James describe the prayers of a believer? (5:16b)

12. What does James suggest we do because of prayer's power? (5:13-15)

13. What personal behaviors betray your lack of faith in the ability of prayer to move God?

14. What behaviors of your congregation betray a lack of faith in prayer's ability to move God?

For the past two and a half years, the author has served as pastor of a Lutheran church. Two years ago he began to have prayer at the altar following some worship services, laying hands on people of the congregation who had physical or other needs. The first time this was done, two people were miraculously healed, one of severe chronic headaches the individual had suffered with for fifteen months, and the other of pain and chronic numbness from carpal tunnel syndrome. Over the next six months, three more people were healed. Most reported a feeling of heat around the injured area as the healing occurred. (See *Miracles and Milestones* by Kent Groethe).

The author believes that few dramatic healings were experienced before this time because he did not pray much for healing or for other things that seemed impossible, and because he did not have much faith that God was able to do the miraculous.

As we begin to approach God as Moses did in the cloud, confident that He can do anything if He chooses, we will notice God's movement. Even though most of our prayers may not be answered as we would like and a vast majority of people may not be immediately or completely healed or helped, we should still expect that God at times will perform miracles. When He doesn't, we should trust that He has other purposes for certain circumstances which will ultimately accomplish His work far better.

15. How could you and your congregation use prayer more effectively?

CLOSING

Read Mark 11:22-24.

Sing or read *Lord, Teach Us How To Pray Aright*. (LBW #438)

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, increase my faith in Your power to help and care for Your people. Give me a new confidence that You hear my prayers and are able to accomplish anything that accords with Your will. I pray in Jesus' name, Amen.