

GAINING LIFE BY LOSING IT

by Jon Van Houwe and Carol Duerksen

KEY VERSE:

Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it." —Luke 9:23-24

FAITH STORY:

Luke 9:18-27, Acts 6:8-15 and Acts 7

FAITH FOCUS:

Jesus is making two major points to his disciples in this passage: 1) He is preparing them for his upcoming death; 2) He is teaching them that to truly follow him may mean they will have to suffer.

SESSION GOAL:

Help students think about being willing to suffer in order to gain the real joy and life that comes from following Jesus.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students will:

- Students will study the story of Stephen as an example of someone giving up their life to follow Jesus.
- Students will be challenged to think about what it means for a person to give up their life in order to follow Jesus—in literal terms as well as other aspects of life they may need to give up.

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1** Bibles for each student
- 2** Colorful 3 x 5 notecards and markers for each student
- 3** Be prepared to tell the class a personal story of "One of the hardest things I've ever done." This story should involve some sort of personal sacrifice—of time, what you wanted to do, or any other example of giving something up for the long-term gain.
- 4** Invite one or more persons to class who have made personal sacrifices in order to follow Jesus in their lives.
- 5** A cross necklace, or the supplies to make one, for each student. You can search online for where to purchase or find out how to make one, or purchase them at your local Christian store.
- 6** Write the key verse on newsprint or chalk board prior to class.

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (5–10 minutes)

Welcome students to class and begin by telling them your own story of “One of the hardest things I’ve ever done.” Then go around the class and ask students to share stories of hard things they have done—it could mean training for a game, practicing for a concert, a big exam or school project, etc.

Discuss: How does it feel to do something that’s really hard? Does it feel worthwhile in the long run? Do you believe the phrase, “No pain, no gain”?

Ask: What do you think is the hardest thing that Jesus asked his disciples to do?

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (15–20 minutes)

Read the Luke 9:18-27 passage together. Then ask the students to turn to Acts 6:8-15 and Acts 7. Divide the passages and assign groups (or persons) to read the following and be prepared to tell the class what happens:

- Acts 6:8-15
- Acts 7:1-8
- Acts 7:9-16
- Acts 7:17-29
- Acts 7:30-43
- Acts 7:44-53
- Acts 7:54-60

After each group has shared what happened in their passage, discuss:

- Why was Stephen killed?
- Why did Stephen spend so much time talking about the history of God and God’s people? (*see below)
- Do you think they would have killed him if he hadn’t told that story and challenged them about not keeping the law?
- In what way did Stephen gain life by losing it?
- Do you think Jesus means that we will always have to die if follow him? Or are there things that we have to “die to” in order to follow? What are examples of those things?

*Stephen told the story of God’s involvement in the lives of God’s people. Telling the story of our faith to others is important—it keeps it alive in our hearts and it spreads the word to others. But sometimes, the telling of the story is what can bring suffering into our lives—like it did Stephen. Sometimes the hardest thing to do is to be willing to tell the story of what God has done for us.

APPLY: (5–10 minutes)

Invite your guest(s) to share their stories of sacrifice and giving up aspects of their lives in order to follow Jesus. Lead a discussion with the guest(s) and students:

- What made this sacrifice hard? What made it worthwhile?
- Students, would you be willing to do the same thing this person did? Stand up if yes, remain seated if no. Why or why not?

RESPOND: (10–20 minutes)

Instruct students on how to make a cross with the supplies you've provided; or hand out the crosses you have purchased for the students. When each student has a cross, hand out the note cards and markers and ask students to copy the key verse on their note card. Then ask students to turn the card over and write down what "cross" they may be called to carry if they choose to follow Jesus, and the joy they can experience in their lives as a result.

Some possibilities would include: ridicule from friends, changing their lifestyle in order to give more away to people who need it, being a peacemaker in a violent world, sharing God's love with others. Encourage students to think creatively and realistically about what their cross might be—give them a time of silence to think about this and write it down.

Invite students to put their crosses around their necks, and to repeat the following as they do:

I wear this cross,
and ask Jesus to walk with me,
giving me strength in sacrifice and suffering,
and joy in following his call
in my life.

Form a circle and invite students to offer prayers of encouragement for each other. Close with your own prayer.

INSIGHTS FROM SCRIPTURE:

In our Luke passage, Jesus' prediction of his own death is immediately followed by the word that his disciples must also be prepared to suffer. Discipleship involves three aspects of commitment: self-denial, taking up the cross, and obedience.

"Let them deny themselves" means making sacrifices and giving up interests, but it means more than that—it means a radical reorientation of life in which the self is no longer the center. The will of God, as known to us through Christ and the Holy Spirit, needs to take the place of our own will. Jesus is demanding that we think of others first, only occasionally remembering ourselves.

"Taking up our cross" can mean actual martyrdom, as it did for Stephen. But "taking up our cross daily" may be harder at times than to simply die. A martyr's heroic sacrifice requires

giving up the physical life in one huge act of courage; while sacrificing our self-interests on a daily basis through the years requires moment-by-moment courage.

Finally, self-denial and martyrdom are pointless unless they are done for Christ's sake—unless we are following Jesus, taking his yoke upon us and learning of him.

Verse 24 in this passage refers to the fact that Jesus has accepted his destiny of persecution and death, and he is calling his disciples to be prepared to die an earthly death in order to experience life after death as well. But the passage is true beyond that meaning. It is a simple fact that most people would rather die with a sense of meaning of existence than live without it. "There are two ways to kill men: one is to rob them of life; the other is to rob life of its meaning. There are two ways to enslave men: one is to give them masters; the other is to take away their God... For what we most need—and want—is not things we can own, but the One to whom we can feel justified in belonging. The meaning of life is never found within life itself... Our life has meaning only as it is caught up into a larger meaning altogether beyond it."

WORKS CITED:

The Interpreter's Bible, Abingdon, Nashville, TN; 1952