

LEADER'S GUIDE

A BIBLE STUDY FOR WOMEN

BETHESDA

come to the water



Bonnie Nicholas

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Grand Rapids, Michigan

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These leader materials include the following sections:

- Tips for Leaders
- Session Overview
- Session POPs (Purpose, Outcomes, and Procedures)

TIPS FOR LEADERS

No leader guide can prepare you for every situation that you will encounter. But we offer these guidelines believing that the Lord will give you what you need. Trust God to be with you each step of the way. God bless!

Here are some principles to keep in mind:

The leader sets the tone for the group. This is a participatory group, so you'll want to model openness, honesty, sharing from your heart, and being specific in responses. Sharing and learning from each other will allow group members to benefit from everyone's experience. Present yourself not as the one with all the answers, but rather as a co-explorer and discoverer as group members seek answers together. As leader, your role includes asking open-ended questions that will help group members think deeply about the issues in each session. We've provided plenty of questions for reflection, but you can choose from among them or substitute your own. Trust that the Lord is present with you in his Word and in the hearts of your group members. Know and trust that God is working in your group—though not always in the ways you expect.

Group patterns help establish expectations and build trust. Think ahead about patterns you would like to establish in your group so you can work toward

those from the very beginning. Five to nine people is a good size to aim for. You'll notice that each session includes the same basic components—Introduction, Bible Study, Prayer, Activity, and Blessing. In addition to the group time, Homework Extras are included for those who want to go deeper by spending extra time on the topic on their own.

These materials are designed to fit into a ninety-minute session. Scheduling two hours will give you more flexibility and will allow for more relaxed introductions and entering in to the group experience. If you have ninety minutes for your session, you will want to encourage people to be on time and get into the study more quickly.

You will want to carefully look over each session's Purposes, Outcomes, and Procedures (POPs). These provide a specific plan to lead you through each step of a 90-minute session (or longer, if you choose). You'll find estimates of the time needed for each step so you can keep your group on track.

We can't stress enough that these sessions are designed to be flexible; times suggested are suggestions only. You'll want to adapt them to the needs of your own group. Don't feel that you have to do everything in each session—it's better to choose the elements that are most important to your group. If you are having a good discussion at one point, you may not want to end it for the sake of getting through all the materials. So feel free to

expand or contract each activity as needed, and to add or substitute your own ideas and activities.

Do respect people's time. It's always better to finish a little early than to have people stay past the ending time you've agreed on. If you're running out of time, point out an exercise or activity and encourage group members to pursue it on their own. Some sessions include more printed information than others: for those you'll want to choose which information to read aloud during the group and which to skip over. **Do not, however, skim or rush through the Bible study and application sections, which, along with the blessing, are the core components of Bethesda.** The other activities can be altered and adjusted more easily without losing the main point of each session.

Prayer plays an important role, including imagining through prayer. Imagination is a powerful tool that helps connect head and heart. God can use imagination through prayer to aid belief and build trust in him and in his Word. Group members may have varied experience with prayer. As facilitator, you can acknowledge that fact as you seek to make people of all levels of prayer experience feel at home in the group. When group members are given the opportunity to pray aloud, encourage everyone in the group to pray along silently. Never force anyone to pray aloud. Affirm the value of silence during group prayer; the Lord hears our silent thoughts. Silence also allows time for God to speak.

Encourage group members to use short sentence prayers in plain language. This will make it easier for others who aren't used to praying aloud to join in. Remember to pray for your group members as often as you can on your own. Consider enlisting the help of other people to commit to praying for the Bethesda group regularly.

Building a sense of group community and trust is extremely important. You may want to add additional community-building components, especially in the beginning sessions. Your pastor or church leader may be able to help you come up with ideas for building community in a group. Sharing in the group should be encouraged but never forced. As the group gets

to know and trust each other, the level of sharing will deepen.

Consider whether or not your group will be an "open" group or a "closed" group. A "closed" group has a starting and ending date; new members are encouraged to wait until the beginning of a new group rather than joining in the middle. An "open" group accepts new members at any time. Adding new people after you've started changes the group dynamic and may interfere with the level of trust group members have developed. For that reason, a closed group may work best. Let the Lord guide you in this decision. Encourage group members to attend each session when possible so that group cohesion will remain strong. Make group attendance and group dynamics a matter of prayer and seek the Lord's guidance in responding to potential new members.

SESSION OVERVIEW

This section provides an overview of the components of each session.

Introduction/Orientation

The purpose of this section is to build community in the group and to create a supportive environment that promotes learning together. *Group members need to get to know one another so that each person feels accepted for who she is and can begin to be comfortable sharing thoughts and feelings.* Be as creative as you want with introduction/orientation questions and activities. Snacks can be helpful in setting a warm, friendly tone. Student groups may enjoy a home-cooked meal together as part of the Bethesda group experience. For other groups, offering a beverage may be just right. Remember that as the facilitator, you will set the tone for the group.

Begin by offering group members a chance to share, giving everyone the opportunity to participate. Use a question that will help group members make the transition from their world outside into the group environment to help the group move forward together. In the first session, basic introductory questions are appropriate. For subsequent sessions,

asking what has happened since the last time the group met or an open-ended question that leads into the topic might be helpful. You may want to ask group members to share one good thing that happened to them since the last meeting and then offer prayers of thanks for the Lord to bless your time together. Or ask the group to share anything on their minds that might distract them from focusing, and then pray for those things and for the Lord to help them focus. *Always pray* near the beginning of your time together, recognizing the Lord's presence and asking for the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This group is dependent on the Lord, so prayer is absolutely essential.

Bible Study

Each session focuses on a specific Scripture passage and includes notes on the background and context. We come to the Word with open hearts, waiting to see what the Lord has to say to us. This is a much different approach than coming to the Word with a preconceived idea and finding proof texts for the ideas we want to express (often taken out of context). *You'll want to prepare by studying the passage yourself with an open heart before the Lord. As God's Word speaks to you and your own life, you will be better able to help facilitate others' interaction with the Word.* Remember that God's Word is alive and active, full of transforming power!

In biblical times, Scripture reading was an oral tradition. For the most part we've lost this tradition in our modern world where we each have our own copy of the Bible and read it for ourselves. Hearing the passages read aloud, sometimes dramatically and sometimes more than once in different versions, will help us understand and interact with God's Word in new ways. For that reason, we've printed all Bible study passages in the Bethesda book—usually in two different versions, and sometimes in the form of a dramatic reading. You may also want to visit a website where you can hear the passage read dramatically and professionally (such as www.biblegateway.com). Although it may seem repetitive, reading the passage twice is valuable. Group members will gain new insights the second time around. Have different group members act as readers the second time to give the passage variety.

Encourage readers to awaken their inner thespian and read slowly and dramatically.

Each Bible study includes "Understanding the Passage" and "Applying the Passage" questions. Use them as a guide to structure your discussion.

Prayer

You'll find that these Bethesda group materials use a variety of ways to pray, including prayer through imagining and praying Scripture. Some of these may be a new experience for you and your group members. The important thing to remember is that the Lord is with you. The goal of imagining prayer, for example, is to give the Lord time to speak and to work in our powerful imaginations.

Many people will be touched deeply in these times of prayer. Others may have trouble "connecting." Encourage group members to relax and simply listen. Acknowledge that some people may connect more easily to what is being said than others, and some topics may be more suited to some people than to others. And some days the process may just seem more difficult than other times! Affirm that no two people will have exactly the same experience in prayer—and that's all right.

Group members don't need to worry about what is happening or what doesn't seem to be happening in prayer. The Lord works in many different ways—and knows what each person needs. You, as facilitator, and each of your group members will learn to trust the Lord more and more as you experience his presence in prayer. This will happen best when the group is able to relax and be open to receiving whatever the Lord chooses to give. Ellipses (. . .) are used in the imagining prayer activities to point out pauses or times of silence. These give group members time to imagine what you have described, and also give the Lord time to speak to the situation.

Session Activities

These sessions use a variety of activities to help group members gain a better understanding of how the themes and issues introduced in each session may affect their own attitudes, behaviors, and relationships. Activities may include free writing,

creative art or movement, discussion, and more. Participating in the activities will also provide opportunities for people to relate on a deeper level to each other and to the Lord. Because people have different learning styles, we've made an effort to use different methods and mediums that incorporate all of the senses God has given us.

Another goal of this section is to provide helpful tools that can also be used long after the group is over. This is the section that offers the most flexibility for keeping your session within your group's time frame. Feel free to pick and choose those that you think will be most helpful for your group.

Blessing

Each session ends with a blessing from Scripture directed to group members individually by name. It may be appropriate to add a touch during the blessing, or to anoint with oil or water. If using touch with a blessing, have people keep their eyes open. Since touch can act as a trigger for certain traumatic events, always describe what will take place during the blessing and ask permission before proceeding.

The blessing is a very important part of each session. We live in a world where people are constantly striving to prove that they are worthy to be loved. By contrast, the blessing affirms that we are already loved more than we can know. It is designed to help group members go forward into their everyday lives assured of their identity as beloved of the Lord.

Homework Extras

You will want to look over the Homework Extras so that you can recommend them, if you wish, to the group. You may even want to focus on one of these activities during your session, perhaps in place of another activity. They are designed for those who want more information or a deeper experience. At the end of the group time, you may want to encourage group members to try some of the Homework Extras to continue their learning and growth. If you do so, you may want to allow group members to share some of their experiences with these during the Introduction step of the following week's session.

Creating Safety

These Bethesda materials presuppose faith in the power of the Lord to bring about healing and wholeness in the context of a nurturing small group community. Some women who have suffered physical or sexual abuse or other trauma may require additional resources. You'll want to be aware of community resources such as local crisis hotlines, pastoral care options, healing prayer ministries, or counselors that you know and trust. Always be ready to refer people when you believe that extra care is needed.

Remember that participating in this kind of small group is not for everyone. In several instances group members have left the group because it triggered issues they were not ready to deal with. If that happens, you may want to spend some time with the person outside of the group and seek the Lord's wisdom and guidance in how best to respond. Affirm that the group may not be the best thing for a person who is feeling scared or overwhelmed. Remind her that the Lord is gentle and is always with her. Entrust her to the Lord's care, and suggest that perhaps she may want to try again some other time.

The road to healing from trauma is painful and difficult. Sometimes things get worse before they get better. It's important to consider the timing of that healing work and not push people into something that they are not ready for. Although our hope lies in the Lord, we should never hesitate to also seek wisdom from pastors, church leaders, mentors, or professional counselors when difficult situations arise.

SESSION POPS (Purpose, Outcomes, and Procedures)

The session plans that follow will help you prepare for each session. Each POP provides guidelines for leading your group through each step of the session and time estimates for each step to help you stay on track.

Introduction: Do You Want to Get Well?

PURPOSE

The purpose of this introductory session (and all the sessions that follow!) is to affirm group members in their decision to come to the group and in their value as group members. Another ongoing purpose is to develop relationships and trust between group members. In addition, it sets the groundwork for expectations about how the group will function.

OUTCOMES

- Group members will begin to get to know one other.
- Group members will gain insight into group expectations, purposes, and processes.
- Group members will participate by entering in to the Bible study, discussion, free writing, and prayer.
- Group members will better understand the Lord's goodness and power by studying the story of the paralyzed man at the Bethesda pool.
- Group members will experience the Lord's blessing and know that the Lord is with them.
- Group members will enjoy the group experience and be glad they came.

PROCEDURES

Introduction/Orientation

[25 minutes]

It's important to welcome everyone and make them feel as comfortable as possible. Spending time on this section is an important way to build community

and trust in the group. Here are some suggested questions you can use to help group members get to know each other; feel free to add your own ideas:

- What is your name? Where do you live?
- What do you do when you're not here? What keeps you busiest in your life?
- Why are you here? What made you want to come?
- What do you hope to gain by participating in this group?

After you've gone around the circle and given each person a chance to introduce herself, take time to go over the "Our Purpose" and "Our Agreement" sections together. Especially emphasize confidentiality within your group. Explain that these rules are important in making and keeping the group a safe place. Invite group members to express their questions or concerns, and perhaps add to the ground rules, if they wish. Make sure that everyone can agree to them. Before you begin the Bible study, offer a short prayer asking God to bless your time together.

Bible Study

[30-45 minutes]

You'll want to emphasize to your group the importance of studying God's Word in context. It's very easy to misinterpret and misuse Scripture when individual verses are pulled out of context. Begin by summarizing the background notes. Also emphasize the importance of observation. Too often we read Scripture quickly and don't take the necessary time to really observe. Encourage group members to think of God's Word as a mine where we uncover each precious nugget of gold by looking carefully and thoroughly.

Invite three volunteers to read today's Scripture passage as readers' theater (or take one of the parts yourself). Remind them to read slowly and with expression.

Point out the helpless and hopeless state of the man who was paralyzed. He was fully dependent on Jesus for his healing. This is a beautiful picture of salvation: Jesus came and called us while we were dead in our sin, powerless to atone for our sin or follow him. The fact that Jesus revealed himself to the man *after* he was physically healed shows the spiritual healing that comes only through knowing Jesus. Jesus knew the man's need was more than just physical.

The religious leaders were more concerned with the external keeping of the law rather than the internal state of their souls. They missed what the Lord was doing because of their wrong focus. Even with the best of intentions, we too can miss what the Lord wants to do in our lives because of our focus on the visible, external life. Remind your group that these sessions are designed to help us focus on what's inside: the state of our soul and our relationship with Jesus.

Spend time as a group going over the "Understanding the Passage" and "Applying the Passage" questions. Note that there are lots of questions: you may prefer to pick and choose to discuss only some of them, depending on your time.

Prayer

[15 minutes]

You could read the printed prayer together aloud, have one person pray it aloud, have each person read it silently, or ignore it. The "Imagining through Prayer" exercise is an important part of this session. Our imagination is a powerful tool that can be used to connect with our inner selves and with the Lord. Allow enough time to do this imagining prayer together as described; it's often here that the Lord will meet group members individually at their point of need and be revealed in new ways.

Free Writing Activity

[15-20 minutes]

Free writing is an activity that is used in several of these sessions. It is an extremely valuable tool

in self-discovery, learning, and growth. So take time to explain what it is. Read the "Free Writing" section together or have group members read it on their own. Mention that we miss life lessons when we don't take time to reflect on and process our experiences, and writing is a great way to do that.

You may want to begin with a short writing time; as group members get used to free writing, they may want to spend more time with it. Bring a timer or stop watch for keeping track. Also, be sure to have extra paper available at each session so group members can write down ideas, prayers, or issues that come up during the session. Hand out pens and pencils and paper, and have them choose one of the options for free writing. Then set the timer for eight to ten minutes and begin. Remind group members they can also use the free writing technique on their own as a way to sort out thoughts and experiences.

Blessing

[5 minutes]

You'll want to decide how best to offer the blessing during each session. The important thing is to extend the blessing to each person by name. Depending on the size of your group, you may want to go around to each person while the others wait quietly. Or you could have the group form pairs and take turns giving the blessing to each other. Or you may come up with some other way to give the blessing. It's up to you.

Homework Extras

Point out the Homework Extras, emphasizing that group members will get out of the group what they put into it. Homework Extras are designed to help group members dig deeper into the topic covered in the session and also to deepen their relationship with the Lord. Even if you decide not to suggest the Homework Extras for your group, you'll want to encourage them to reflect and pray in between group sessions about some of the issues that arise. If you wish, mention that you will offer time at the beginning of the next session to share what they've thought about or discovered in between the group sessions.

The **Creating Safety** material in today's Homework Extras is included especially for those who have experienced trauma or have deep wounds. The prospect of allowing something deeply hidden to come closer to the surface can be very scary to people who have experienced deep hurts. Some group members may have undisclosed trauma that has never been identified or labeled. It's important for you as facilitator to be aware of this possibility.

If previously undisclosed trauma causes a group member to become too uncomfortable, you may want to schedule a time with her to discuss what

has happened. You don't need to have all the "right answers" to respond to her experience. Listening to her, believing her story, affirming that she did not deserve what happened to her, and showing compassion may be the best responses. Reassure her that intense feelings are a normal response to traumatic events. It would be abnormal not to feel intense conflicting feelings in the face of extreme circumstances. Be aware of resources in the community such as a crisis phone line so that you can make connections to additional or professional help as needed.

Session 1: Created Good

PURPOSE

The purpose of session 1 is to continue to affirm each group member's value as a part of the group, building relationship and trust between members in deepening relationship with the Lord. In addition, this session will establish the truth that we are created in God's own image.

OUTCOMES

- Group members will enjoy the group session, including the creative art activity, and be glad they came.
- Group members will continue to get to know each other and begin to establish trust.
- Group members will learn from each other as they participate in the Bible study discussion and share their artistic creations.
- Group members will gain a personal understanding of the truth that they have been created in God's image, with the capacity for creativity and for relationship with the Lord and with others.
- Group members will experience the Lord's blessing and be reminded that God created them and knows them by name.

PROCEDURES

Introduction/Orientation

[10 minutes]

Review the ground rules by asking the group to say them without looking. For fun, you may want to

offer applause or a wrapped candy to each person who can name one of the ground rules or who remembers the Bible story from the first session. Here are some suggested introduction questions; feel free to substitute your own.

- Who is your favorite artist, and why?
- If you were the Lord and could create a world any way you wanted it, what would your world look like?
- If you could change this world that the Lord created, how would you change it? What things would you leave as they are? What things would you leave out or change?
- Before beginning your Bible study, offer a short prayer thanking God for this opportunity to meet and asking for God's blessing.

Bible Study

[30-45 minutes]

In preparation for leading this session, read over the entire creation story before you study the passage for yourself. This session and the next provide foundational material for understanding who we are and our relationship with the Lord. We are created in the Lord's own image and declared good! That message alone is very powerful.

We've provided today's Scripture readings from Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 from both Today's New International Version and *The Message*. Reading both versions will help affirm the message of the text. Ask for volunteers to read each passage aloud slowly and with expression. Then use the "Understanding the Passage" and "Applying the Passage" to guide your discussion.

Creative Art Activity

[30-45 minutes]

Take enough time with this creative project to have fun—both in the creating and in the sharing. You may need to encourage group members who think that they are not creative—remind them that they are created in the image of God, who created all things. Supply large sheets of paper so there's plenty of room to be creative. In addition, you'll need to provide a variety of art supplies, including any or all of the following: magazine pictures, colored paper and tissue paper for collages; markers, crayons, colored pencils, and oil pastels; glitter glue and glue sticks; water colors and poster paints and brushes; stencils and pre-cut letters, and so on. You may choose to stretch the activity out over two sessions and let people bring items from home that could add to their creation. Allow at least twenty minutes for the art activity, and use the rest of the time you have for this step to reflect on your completed artwork. Use the "Questions for Reflection," and allow those who are willing to share with the rest of the group.

Prayer

[15 minutes]

Incorporate reflection on the creative art activity into your prayer time. Use the "Imagining through Prayer" prompts to focus on what God may be saying to group members as they reflect on their self-portraits, and then use them for a time of imagining through prayer. You may wish to begin or end your prayer time by having the group read the printed prayer together or on their own.

Blessing

[5 minutes]

Extend the blessing to each group member by name. The focus of today's blessing is the affirmation that we are created in the Lord's own image and have the capacity for relationship with him and with others.

Homework Extras

Remind your group to check out the Homework Extras this week on their own.

Session 2: Created Good . . . Then What?

PURPOSE

The purpose of session 2 is to continue to affirm each group member's value as a part of the group, building relationship and trust between members in deepening relationship with the Lord. In addition, this session establishes that although we live in a fallen world and experience the impact of sin in our lives, forgiveness is available through Christ.

OUTCOMES

- Group members will enjoy the group experience and be glad they came.
- Group members will continue to get to know each other and build deeper trust.
- Group members will learn from each other as they participate in the Bible study discussion, explore the results of sin (especially regarding its effects on relationships), and enter into prayer.
- Group members will gain insight into the power and control dynamic that operates in some relationships and that can become abusive.
- Group members will feel the Lord's acceptance through the "imagining" prayer exercise and will gain a more personal understanding of the concept of making life choices with the Lord.
- Group members will receive a blessing from the Lord and understand that God has redeemed them and forgiven them.

PROCEDURES

Introduction/Orientation

[10 minutes]

Ask group members to share what they remember about the last session and/or ask if anyone has anything to share from the Homework Extras or something related to last session's topic. Here are some suggested introduction questions; as usual, feel free to substitute your own.

- If you could choose to be born a man or a woman, which would you choose? Why?
- Do you know any couple who has a seemingly perfect or very good relationship? What do you think makes it so good?
- You may have heard of the book *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*. What do you think sometimes makes it difficult for men and women to relate to one other and get along?

Before beginning your Bible study, offer a short prayer thanking God for this opportunity to meet and asking for his blessing.

Bible Study

[30-45 minutes]

It's important to remember the last session's Bible passage as the context for today's session: In the beginning God made a perfectly good creation with perfect relationships. Only in recognizing our perfect origins can we realize from what height we have fallen. We live in a world that reflects the consequences of original sin. Things are not the way they were intended to be; we are fallen creatures living in a fallen creation.

A theme in this passage is disobedience, which can be seen as idolatry. Contributing factors include not believing the Word of the Lord and doubting God's good intentions toward us, as well as considering our actions apart from God rather than in relationship with God.

One of the consequences of original sin is an altered relationship between men and women. After sin enters the world, men often “lord it over” women. This is not the Lord's original intent, but a sad description of our new fallen relationship.

Hope appears in the passage as the offspring of women (Jesus) crushes the serpent's head. Jesus provides the way of redemption and life—the way the Lord intended. Although things won't be perfect again until we get to heaven, we have the power of the Holy Spirit in us to overcome the power of sin and its consequences.

Today's Scripture passage is printed in the form of a dramatic reading. Ask for volunteers to read the four parts, and encourage them to read slowly and with expression. Then go over the “Understanding the Passage” and “Applying the Passage” questions. Be sure to bring out in the discussion the underlying truth that our healthy identity rests in the fact that we are created and loved by the Lord, forgiven and made holy in Jesus. Nothing else can ever define us better.

Power and Control and Equality Wheels

[20-30 minutes]

Patriarchy, especially the extreme form that exists in some places in the world, leads to great harm for women. Even in North America, where women have legal rights, women are still sometimes viewed as “less than.” They may receive less pay for equal work, and their voices may carry less weight. They may be portrayed by the media in passive roles or as sex objects rather than as intelligent human beings deserving of equal respect. These sometimes subtle cultural messages take a toll on women as they grow up. Group members may have different views about the roles of women and women in leadership in the church. You may want to remind the group that this

session is not about that: it's about basic dignity and respect, it's about equal value and appreciation for all people.

Read the section “Men and Women: Power and Control or Equal Partners?” together and then spend a few minutes looking at the “Power and Control” and “Equality” wheels. Use the “Questions for Reflection” to lead your group in discussion. Your goal is to help group members become more aware of this dynamic and how it affects their own lives and relationships. Be sure to point out that physical violence is not the only expression of controlling behavior. Relationships don't usually start out being abusive, but controlling behaviors can escalate and end up becoming abusive. Often controlling behavior can be misinterpreted in the beginning of a relationship. For example, jealousy can be interpreted as love; it feels nice to be wanted and protected. But it's not so nice to be falsely accused of infidelity, or to have your freedom limited, leading to isolation and fear. Most women will be able to identify with some of the controlling behaviors on the Power and Control Wheel. You'll also want to focus on the positive relationship characteristics listed on the Equality Wheel. Although no relationship is perfect, these characteristics serve as goals to work toward in a healthy relationship.

Prayer

[25-30 minutes]

The “Imagining through Prayer” activity is designed to help group members strengthen and deepen their connection and relationship to the Lord and to sense God's care and compassion in their everyday lives, even in our fallen world. You will want to leave time to pause (indicated by ellipses: . . .) and let imagination work during the prayer. Don't rush, and leave enough time to process the experience together using the “Questions for Reflection.” You may want to begin or end this activity by reading the printed prayer from the book.

Blessing

[5 minutes]

Extend God's blessing to each person by name. Today's blessing focuses on the gracious forgiveness and restoration available to us in Christ.

Homework Extras

Remind group members of the opportunity to dig deeper on their own this week with the Homework Extras.

Session 3: My Story and the Lord's Providence

PURPOSE

The purpose of session 3 is to continue to affirm each group member's value as a part of the group, building relationships and trust between members in deepening relationship with the Lord. In addition, this session will help group members understand that the Lord knows us intimately and completely.

OUTCOMES

- Group members will enjoy the group experience and be glad they came.
- Group members will continue to get to know and trust each other and feel increasingly comfortable sharing on a significant level.
- Through participation in study of Psalm 139, group members will come to better understand God's presence and complete knowledge of them.
- Group members will sense the Lord's presence as they pray through Psalm 139 and become more familiar with praying Scripture as a prayer technique.
- Group members will learn about themselves as they explore their own experience and relationships in their family of origin.
- Group members will experience the Lord's blessing and be confident that they are known by the Lord.

PROCEDURES

Introduction/Orientation

[10 minutes]

Ask if anyone has anything to share from the Homework Extras or something related to the last session's topic. Ask group members to share one positive family memory or family tradition that they had growing up. Offer a short prayer thanking God for this opportunity to meet and asking for his blessing.

Bible Study

[30-45 minutes]

Psalm 139 is a significant psalm and one that is familiar to many people. You may need to think about ways you can make it fresh and new. We've included a contemporary retelling of it from Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. You may want to have volunteers take turns reading each section aloud slowly to allow the words to sink in. Take time to discuss the "Understanding the Passage" and "Applying the Passage" questions carefully. As usual, feel free to choose from among the questions or substitute some of your own.

Prayer

[15 minutes]

Invite group members to pray through Psalm 139 as suggested. Leave a time of silence at the end of each paragraph to allow God's Word to sink in and take root. You may want to read aloud the sample prayer for each section. Finish by praying the "Group Prayer" together.

Family Exercise

[30-45 minutes]

Family relationships and experience shape who we are. It will be important for you to help group members look back on their childhood from an adult perspective, which may be quite different from the way they experienced their childhood. Try to keep the main focus on how their experiences have influenced the way they think about themselves and their relationship with the Lord. Looking back on family influences may uncover painful experiences. It's important in this discussion to come back often to what we know is true about the Lord and how that compares with these other influences. Don't hesitate to refer people to professional counselors if they need help dealing with painful feelings.

Begin by reading through the "Family: Our First Environment" section together. You'll need to provide paper and pencils for the drawing exercise. Allow about ten minutes for group members to draw the diagram representing their families and to add a few words characterizing that relationship. Then move on to the "Questions for Reflection."

Blessing

[5 minutes]

If you wish, invite each group member to hold out her hand as you offer the blessing. Trace the first letter of her name (or the entire first name) in the palm of her hand as you read the words, "I have engraved your name in the palm of my hand." If you do this, be sure to describe what you will do ahead of time and ask permission before adding touch to the blessing. The focus of today's blessing is the Lord's faithful presence with us.

Homework Extras

As usual, remind group members to check out the Homework Extras. Make special note of the "Developmental Stages" exercise (number 3) and remind the group that our relationship with the Lord develops over time. Just as we grow and develop physically, so our relationship with the Lord grows and develops. Encourage them to do this exercise on their own at home.

Session 4: Exploring Feelings

PURPOSE

The purpose of session 4 is to continue to affirm each group member's value as a part of the group and to build relationships. In addition, this session explores the powerful images of God and the feelings expressed in Psalm 18. We will talk about positive and negative ways to respond to our feelings and explore healthy ways of expressing them.

OUTCOMES

- Group members will enjoy the group experience and be glad that they came.
- Group members will know and trust each other enough to be able to express their feelings and share their thoughts about them.
- By participating in the study of Psalm 18, group members will gain a greater sense of the Lord's power to save.
- Group members will become more aware of their feelings, be able to identify them, understand the concept of controlling them rather than being controlled by them, and learn some healthy ways to express feelings.
- Group members will relax while playing with play dough and listening to music; they will become more aware of how external cues can affect feelings and internal states.
- Each group member will experience God's blessing and be reminded that the Lord, our Rock and Refuge, will rescue when we call on him for help.

PROCEDURES

Introduction/Orientation

[10 minutes]

You may want to begin by asking group members whether anyone has something to share from the Homework Extras or from last week's topic. Mention that the today's psalm includes many vivid pictures or images of God and ask, "If you had to draw a picture of God, what would it look like?" or "How do you picture God?" Before you begin the Bible study, offer a short prayer of thanks for your time together and ask for God's blessing.

Bible Study and Creative Art

[30-45 minutes]

There are several things to note about Psalm 18:

- The psalmist is honest in expressing feelings, and very descriptive. (A wonderful model for prayer or journaling—if the Lord already knows our thoughts, it's OK to say them to him and not hide or "act nice" to try to please him.)
- Many of the psalm's images show that the Lord is very powerful.
- The Lord is on the side of the psalmist and against his enemies (and is on our side, against our enemies).
- The Lord rescues out of distress and brings his beloved into a spacious place. Note the contrast with being entangled in death's cords earlier in the psalm.

We've included the Scripture passage in Today's New International Version and *The Message*. Invite volunteers to read the passages aloud from both

versions. Then move on to the “Understanding the Passage” and “Applying the Passage” questions. Take time with these; such rich images deserve time for reflection.

Hand out paper and crayons, colored pencils, markers, and/or oil pastels in several colors for this activity. Encourage everyone to participate in the creative art exercise—especially those who may not be feeling very creative. Affirm that stick figures are fine; the purpose of this exercise is self-expression, not to come away with a beautiful product.

Exploring Feelings

[20-30 minutes]

This section provides information on living with our emotions and feelings. Many people, for various reasons, are slightly disconnected from the feelings they experience; some even have trouble identifying or naming them. You might want to search online for a list of feelings (or a chart with different kinds of faces indicating various emotions) to use as an extra tool in this session. It’s important to note that feelings are only feelings—they are generally neutral. It’s our response to them and the consequences of those responses that are positive or negative. Also note that feelings are given to us by the Lord for a reason. They have a purpose. It’s good to acknowledge our feelings and pay attention to what they have to say.

Take time to read together the section “Identifying and Living with Feelings” and discuss the “Questions for Reflection.” Then read “Important Things to Know about Feelings” and discuss the additional questions for reflection. There’s a lot of material to cover, so you may want to choose to focus on just one or two questions from each section and suggest group members go over the rest on their own.

Prayer

[10 minutes]

Spend some time in prayer together, thanking God for the gift of feelings and emotions. Use the kind of prayer your group prefers: going around the circle, praying “popcorn” style as the Spirit leads, or praying with a partner. You may want to begin

or end your prayer with the prayer printed in the book.

Music/Play Dough Activity

[15 minutes]

Before breaking out the play dough, discuss some of the methods group members use to diffuse their feelings of anger or frustration—feelings that are common to all of us. Remind people that this is a safe place to express both healthy and unhealthy coping strategies. Identifying which strategies are healthy gives group members different tools for coping with these potentially harmful emotions.

Listening to music and/or changing focus to a creative activity for short periods of time is a tool that can help diffuse anxious, debilitating feelings that may have arisen during the previous discussion about emotions and feelings. For this activity, you’ll need to bring along a CD player and CDs with some different styles of music and provide small containers of play dough for each person. (Inexpensive small play dough canisters created as party favors are available in craft or dollar stores.) Try playing different styles of music—jazz, classical, rock, gospel—and discuss how each makes group members feel as they play with the dough. Different people will respond differently to different styles of music. The important thing is for group members to know how they themselves respond so that they can plan accordingly. Point out that this should be a relaxing, fun time for group members. Using tools like this to care for ourselves is a very valuable skill. Remind the group that God loves us and wants us to pay attention to our feelings and internal states and to take good care of ourselves.

Blessing

[5 minutes]

Today’s blessing focuses on God’s strength as a refuge and rescuer. If you wish, add touch to the blessing by holding each person’s hand as you read the last two sentences. Be sure to explain your intention, and ask permission first. A gentle touch can be a powerful addition to the blessing.

Homework Extras

Remind the group to check out the Homework Extras section, encouraging group members to look at it more closely on their own. If you have time, introduce the idea that lies can be associated with feelings. Sometimes people express feelings that seem much too strong for the situation (overreacting); this can be a clue that something else is going on

inside that person. Feelings that seem out of control may also be a signal that something is not right. This Homework Extras section may be especially helpful to group members experiencing these things. This might be a time to refer one or more members to an inner healing prayer ministry in your area or a professional counselor.

Session 5: Wrestling with the Lord

PURPOSE

The purpose of session 5 is to continue to affirm each group member's value as a part of the group and to build relationships. In addition, this session explores the concept of struggling or wrestling with the Lord in prayer, using the example of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane.

OUTCOMES

- Group members will enjoy the group experience and be glad that they came.
- Group members will know and trust each other enough to share and pray with one another on a deeper level.
- Through participation in the Bible study, group members will gain a better appreciation for the struggle and agony of Jesus as he anticipated the cross.
- Group members will identify with Jesus or the disciples in a free writing activity.
- Group members will spend time in prayer using prayer through imagination or a guided prayer for healing.
- Group members will experience God's blessing by name, and be reminded that the Lord, who has redeemed them and triumphed through the cross, invites them to participate in this victory.

PROCEDURES

Introduction/Orientation

[10 minutes]

You may want to begin by asking group members whether anyone has something to share from the Homework Extras or from last session's topic. The focus of this session is prayer, so you may want to use one or more of the following as an introductory question:

- How would you characterize your prayer life in a nutshell?
- On a scale of 1-5, how satisfied are you with your prayer life?
- What has been helpful or beneficial to you in prayer?
- What seems to hinder your prayers or interfere with your prayer life?

Before you begin the Bible study, spend a few moments in prayer, thanking God for this time together and asking for God's blessing.

Bible Study

[30-40 minutes]

Jesus needed to pray! Although he was one with the Father, he spent time in prayer, even struggling with his Father's will and purposes in prayer. If this is true of Jesus, how much more should it be true for us? Prayer provides an amazing context for the Lord to work in our lives and in the lives of the group members. For that reason, our enemy will be working hard to thwart the plans of the Lord and to destroy these opportunities. For all sessions, but for this one in particular, you will want to pray in

preparation. Pray against the devices of the evil one. Pray for the Lord's purposes to be fulfilled in this session, which focuses on prayer.

We've provided today's Scripture passage in both Today's New International Version and as a dramatic reading from *The Message*. Choose one or both of these ways to read the Scripture passage aloud. As usual, encourage volunteers to read slowly and carefully.

You may want to choose from the "Understanding the Passage" questions instead of trying to cover them all. Leave enough time for the "Applying the Passage" questions, which lead group members to identify with the disciples (questions 1-3) and with Jesus (questions 4-6).

Free Writing

[5-10 minutes]

Most people will be able to identify with both Jesus and with his disciples; for this free writing exercise encourage them to choose one or the other, not both. Hand out paper and pens or pencils, and set your timer. Allow a couple of minutes when time is up for those who wish to share their thoughts with the rest of the group. It's also fine if no one wishes to share.

Wrestling with God

[15 minutes]

It's very important to provide a safe place where these hard questions can come out into the open; where group members know that it's OK to "wrestle" with the Lord. These questions do not have easy answers. Pat answers are not helpful and will not help facilitate the discussion. Remember that for this activity, wrestling with the Lord and the resulting deepening of relationship is the goal, *not* finding the "right" answers. It may be helpful for you, as group facilitator, to share some of your own experience wrestling with the Lord as a well to model how to share on a deep level.

You will have to decide if you want to use all the "Questions for Reflection" or just a few of them, depending on your time. You'll also need to decide if you want to take time to focus on the "Gethsemane Prayer" (sidebar) or simply point it out for group members to read on their own. Because this session's theme is prayer, you'll want to allow plenty of time for the prayer activity below.

Prayer

[30 minutes]

Since this session is about prayer, it's extremely important to spend time actually praying (it's really the best way to learn prayer). You may want to choose only one of the prayer exercises rather than trying to do both. Either will draw group members into a deeper level of prayer than they may be used to. Be sure to leave space for silences as you guide the group in prayer. The ellipses (. . .) are included as a reminder to pause for a time of silence, giving the Lord time to speak.

For either the "Imagining through Prayer" or the "Guided Prayer for Healing," it is important to process the experience afterward as well, using the questions for reflection provided for each. If you choose not to do the "Guided Prayer for Healing," encourage group members to try this later on their own. If you know of an "inner healing" prayer ministry, you may want to point that out as well.

Blessing

[5 minutes]

Today's blessing focuses on Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, which provides complete forgiveness and the power to live with him in his kingdom.

Homework Extras

Encourage group members to check these out, along with any of the prayer activities you did not have time for in class, to do on their own. Point out that the second "Extra" features a number of different prayer techniques your group members may want to try.

Session 6: A Sad Story of Shame

PURPOSE

The purpose of session 6 is to continue to affirm each group member's value as a part of the group and to build relationships. In addition, this session explores the harmful effects of shame and contrasts the false messages women receive from our culture with the truth of who we are from Scripture. Be aware that the subject of today's Scripture, the rape of Tamar, is a "heavy" topic that may be especially difficult for some women. Don't hesitate to suggest professional counseling for those who struggle with this issue.

OUTCOMES

- Group members will enjoy the group experience and be glad they came.
- Group members will get to know and trust each other on a deeper level and will be able to share even difficult experiences with one another.
- Through participation in the Bible study, group members will better understand the dynamics surrounding rape, including power and control, responsibility and blame, and the status of women.
- Group members will understand the difference between guilt and shame and begin to discover ways of overcoming the harmful effects of shame.
- Group members will be experience the Lord's blessing, knowing that the Lord will replace their shame with his glorious joy.

PROCEDURES

Introduction/Orientation

[5 minutes]

You may want to begin by asking group members whether anyone has something to share from the Homework Extras or about last week's topic. Bridge to today's session by inviting group members to share a story about something that happened to them (either good or bad) that they did not deserve. Explain that today's session will focus on a terrible event that was undeserved. Before you begin the Bible study, spend a few moments in prayer, thanking God for this time together and asking for God's blessing.

Bible Study

[30-45 minutes]

Today's Scripture passage covers the difficult topic of rape. It's important to note that the status of women at that time was very different from today. Women did not have legal status or rights; they were considered more like property than full citizens or equal partners. You'll also want to point out that it was more common for relatives to marry one another in those days, even though that seems strange to our ears.

Be sure to point out that this story is in the Bible for a reason. The story of the rape of Tamar tells us that the Lord knows what sinful people are like; he knows what can happen. We can bring even these types of painful situations to him in prayer.

As you begin today's study, it is important for you to consider what statistics tell us regarding rape. Rape is a common and underreported crime in our

country. In a group of four to six women, there is a good chance that one has been the victim of rape. You'll want to be especially sensitive to those for whom this discussion will trigger painful memories. Be ready to suggest professional counseling for those who need help dealing with their feelings.

This is a good opportunity to dispel some myths about rape. The truth is,

- Rape is a violent act, better compared to a mugging or violent robbery than to sex.
- Most rapes are planned ahead of time; they are not acts of passion.
- Rape most often occurs between people who have a prior relationship with one another—friends, couples, or family members—rather than strangers.
- Rape is a “big deal” causing physical and/or mental injury to the survivor.

Note: For more information about rape and sexual assault, visit www.rainn.org (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network). You may want to share this resource with group.

Questions are bound to arise about why bad things happen to undeserving people and how the Lord can allow such suffering. It's good to provide a safe environment for discussion of these very difficult questions. A key point is that it is not God who causes this suffering; it results from sin, which pervades our world and touches all of us.

We've included today's Scripture passage as a dramatic reading. You'll need four readers to tell the story. Ask for volunteers and encourage them to read slowly. Then turn to the “Understanding the Passage” section to guide your discussion. This section is very long; depending on your time, you'll want to choose just some of the questions to use for your group. We suggest you do include the second question: looking at each character individually and at different points in the story will help provide good insight into the passage.

Make sure group members understand that Tamar did nothing wrong; in fact she acted nobly even after she was raped. Many survivors carry false guilt and shame from such an experience when it is in no way their fault. People tend to blame the victim—if it was her fault, it makes them feel safer. It feels less safe to think that rape could happen to anyone. Take note of the responses of the others in the story. Tamar's grief is an appropriate response. The responses of her brother, who minimized it, and of the powerful king, who did not hold his son accountable, are inappropriate.

Applying the Passage/Free Writing

[10 minutes]

Today's “Applying the Passage” section is combined with a free writing exercise. Take time to read over the seven issues suggested for reflection; you may want to ask volunteers to take turns reading the paragraphs out loud. Group members are asked to choose one of them and then spend several minutes in free writing about their chosen topic. Each paragraph includes questions to help stimulate their thinking. Hand out paper and pens or pencils. Set the timer and allow up to ten minutes for this activity.

Shame: It's Not Guilt

[20-30 minutes]

This section covers a lot of information. Begin by explaining that it's important for us to understand the difference between helpful guilt that can lead to repentance and forgiveness and unhelpful shame. You'll want to think through the best way to go over the material: you could either allow several minutes for women to read on their own, or ask volunteers to read each section or sidebar. You may want to assign some sections for group members to read later on their own. Be as creative as possible in encouraging group members to participate in the dramatic role play activity as you discuss the difference between a shame-based attitude and a healthy attitude.

A Cultural Lie

[10-15 minutes]

It's also important to understand that a source of shame for women is the unrealistic expectations

and mixed messages placed on women from the culture around us. In this section you'll have the opportunity to contrast the lies culture tells us about ourselves with the truth about who we are, taken from Scripture. Use the "Questions for Reflection" to guide your discussion, and encourage group members take special note of the "Suggestions for Overcoming Shame and False Attitudes."

Prayer

[10 minutes]

Spend some time in open prayer together led by the Holy Spirit. Choose one of the suggestions for group prayer, and encourage group members to be open with the Lord in prayer. There may be one or two people who seem to need more prayer; that's OK. Spending time praying for them allows group

members to minister to one another. Be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. You may want to open or close your time of prayer by reading the prayer printed in the book.

Blessing

[5 minutes]

Extend the Lord's blessing to each woman by name. The purpose of today's blessing is to offer hope that our shame will be replaced by a glorious inheritance—a double portion (which in ancient times was reserved for the eldest son). In spite of our brokenness, everlasting joy will be ours.

Homework Extras

Remind group members of the opportunity to dig deeper on their own at home in the coming week.

Session 7: Response-ability

PURPOSE

The purpose of session 7 is to continue to affirm each group member's value as a part of the group and to build relationships. In addition, this session will help group members understand that they have choices even in difficult circumstances. "Response-ability" will be defined as the ability to respond, with the Lord's help, in accordance with our true identity in Christ.

OUTCOMES

- Group members will enjoy the group experience and be glad that they came.
- Group members will grow in trust and will be able to share honestly with one another.
- Through participation in the Bible study, group members will better understand choice and "response-ability." They will see Abigail as a resourceful, courageous role model.
- Group members will gain an understanding of defense mechanisms or coping strategies that they have used to protect themselves. They will begin to see how these may be harmful to them and explore ways to change.
- Group members will experience the Lord's blessing and be reminded that the Lord is their strength and a solid foundation.

PROCEDURES

Introduction/Orientation

[10 minutes]

You may want to begin by asking group members whether anyone has something to share from the Homework Extras or the topic from the last session. The Bible study in this session has a courageous, resourceful heroine (and a happier ending than our passage last week). Here's a suggestion for an opening question to bridge to today's session: Who is a favorite hero/heroine of yours? (This person could be real or fictional.) What is it that makes this person a hero/heroine in your eyes? Before you begin the Bible study, spend a few moments in prayer, thanking God for this time together and asking for his blessing.

Bible Study

[30-45 minutes]

Today's Bible study passage is longer than usual, and it tells a gripping story. We've printed it as a dramatic reading for a creative way to involve your group in presenting the story. Unlike the last session, in which we compared and contrasted characters, for this session we will focus only on one character: Abigail. The following points may be helpful in understanding the story:

- David and his men helped protect Nabal's shepherds and flocks. Shepherding was a dangerous job with threats from wild animals as well as thieves. Although David and his men may have had no formal agreement, it was not unusual for him to ask for provisions in exchange for the protection they had given.

- The servants came to Abigail after David's men had been rebuffed. They knew she was the one who could be trusted to take wise action. (Perhaps this was not the first time she had to cover for her husband's foolish actions!)
- The status of women was very different from what we are used to. For Abigail to take the measures that she did, without her husband's permission or knowledge, and to approach King David the way she did, took great courage. She could have been put to death for these actions.
- Note Abigail's wise approach to King David. She appeals to his reputation and his sense of righteousness. (And she adds a lot of ego strokes as well.)

Use the "Understanding the Passage" and "Applying the Passage" questions as a guide for your group discussion. As usual, you may want to spend time on just some of the questions rather than trying to rush through all of them.

Prayer

[15 minutes]

You may want to begin your time of prayer by reading the prayer printed in the book. Once again we've provided an outline for imagining through prayer. Be sure to allow enough time to lead the group through this exercise, and then to follow up with the "Questions for Reflection." Note afterward that Jesus is actually with us all day but we are not often aware of his presence. If you have time, you could ask, "How might our lives be different if we were more aware of Jesus' presence with us throughout the day?"

Response-ability

[30-45 minutes]

In this section group members reflect on their choices and responses to situations in their everyday lives. We often respond from a place of insecurity and fear instead of from the inner strength that is ours in Christ. The "Detach, Analyze, Decide" activity is designed to help group members replace untrue or negative thoughts, feelings, and actions with more positive responses. Remind everyone that there is no one right or wrong answer; many different responses could be used in any given situation. Once again, you'll want to take this opportunity to affirm the truths of Scripture: we are Christ's beloved, and his loving power enables us to respond to situations in healthy ways.

After allowing time for group members to work through the DAD activity individually, have them share their responses with a partner or with the whole group, if they are willing. Finish this activity with a brief time of prayer for each other as the Spirit leads.

Blessing

[5 minutes]

Extend the Lord's blessing to each person by name, encouraging them with the truth that the Lord is our strength, our refuge, and our solid foundation.

Homework Extras

Remind group members of the opportunities to dig deeper on their own in the coming week. Point out the list of common coping strategies and encourage them to do the suggested activities to understand how they may be using them in their own lives.

Session 8: Change: An Ongoing Process

PURPOSE

The purpose of session 8 is to continue to affirm each group member's value as a part of the group and to build relationships. In addition, this session will help group members understand better the process of change and growth, learning new attitudes and behaviors one step at a time.

OUTCOMES

- Group members will enjoy the group experience and be glad that they came.
- Group members will know and trust each other enough to be able to share their life struggles regarding sin and change.
- Through participation in the Bible study, group members will gain an appreciation for the struggle with sin within them. They will begin to recognize the overcoming power available to them in Jesus.
- Group members will be more patient with themselves, accepting change as a process.
- As group members begin to see change as a process, and as they incorporate the Lord's power in the process, they will be able to rejoice in small steps toward the change they seek.
- Group members will receive the Lord's blessing, encouraged that the Lord has good plans to free them from the captivity of sin and offer them hope and a future.

PROCEDURES

Introduction/Orientation

[10 minutes]

You may want to begin by asking group members whether anyone has something to share from the Homework Extras or from last session's topic. Here's a suggested question for bridging to today's session: If you could wave a magic wand and change anything about your life, what would it be? Before you begin the Bible study, spend a few moments thanking God for this time together and asking for his blessing.

Bible Study

[30-45 minutes]

This passage may be difficult to understand at first. You'll want to read these comments ahead of time so you'll be able to keep the focus of the study on the core idea of our identity in Jesus. Through him we have the power to make positive change in our lives.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, the word "law" has more than one meaning. We usually think of it as the law of the Lord, represented by the Ten Commandments. However, here it is better understood as an operating principle. The principle of law points out our sin and leads to death. It is contrasted with the principle of Spirit, which leads to life. These two operating principles are shown to be at war within us.

Learning to live in step with the Spirit is a key in the process of change. The context or backdrop of "no condemnation" is important in understanding the nature of sin as an identity issue rather than a

behavioral issue. Another way to think about it is by using the image of a tree. Good fruit comes from a good tree. A focus on the health of the tree will naturally and automatically produce good fruit; a focus on the fruit itself is less effective. Focusing on our core identity in Christ and living in that identity will naturally and automatically affect our thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. Jesus is concerned with real change and transformation that begins from the inside out. This is the path to lasting change. So although we will be looking at external attitudes and behaviors, it's important to come back to the core issue: Jesus in us. It's through our relationship with him, in step with his Spirit, that we gain the power for change.

We've presented the reading in two versions: Today's New International Version and *The Message*. Decide how you'll read these together: perhaps going around the circle and reading a paragraph at a time, or asking a couple of gifted readers to read the entire passage aloud, one for each version. Afterwards, discuss the passage using the suggested questions from "Understanding the Passage" and "Applying the Passage."

Imagining Through Prayer

[15 minutes]

You may want to begin your time of prayer by reading the printed prayer together. Then move into a time of imagining through prayer. This powerful prayer activity is designed to build up our core identity of acceptance in Christ. Be sure to allow a few minutes to reflect on the exercise together using the "Questions for Reflection."

Living Out Our Identity in Christ

[30-45 minutes]

Understanding that change is a process rather than an all-or-nothing event may represent a new way of thinking for group members. This is an important

concept. Reflection on life choices and consequences, celebrating small steps of success, as well as moving on after mistakes and setbacks can all become part of the process.

This section includes a number of sections, all dealing with change. You'll want to keep an eye on the time to make sure you stay on track, and choose the sections that are most important for your group. Spend about half of your time (about fifteen minutes) to carefully go over the tips, steps, and obstacles to change. Then spend the second half of your time on the "Victory Chart" activity, using the "Questions for Discussion" to shape your conversation. There is a constant tension in thinking about change; tension between accepting who we are, while at the same time striving to become more. When looking over the "Victory Chart," note which path seems more agreeable. Try to fill in your discussion with examples. Sharing examples from your own life as way of illustration can be helpful and also encourages others to share, making the experience more valuable for everyone.

If you have time, read "Autobiography in Five Short Chapters" together and allow group members to reflect on whether their own story has something in common with the poet's; if you don't have time, encourage them to read it at home.

Blessing

[5 minutes]

Extend the Lord's blessing to group members by name, reminding them that the Lord is working to free us from the captivity of sin and give us victory, hope, and a future.

Homework Extras

Encourage group members to use this section on their own at home this week to gain deeper insights into living out our identity in Christ.

Session 9: Forgiveness

PURPOSE

The purpose of session 9 is to continue to affirm each group member's value as a part of the group and to build relationships. In addition, this session allows group members to explore the complex and critically important topic of forgiveness.

OUTCOMES

- Group members will enjoy the group experience and be glad that they came.
- Group members will honestly share about their relationship with the Lord and their own attitudes, questions, and experiences of forgiveness.
- Through participation in the Bible study, group members will understand that the capacity to forgive comes from a deep sense of being forgiven.
- Group members will gain a better understanding of what forgiveness is and what it is not.
- Group members will be experience the Lord's blessing and be encouraged that there is complete forgiveness in Christ.

PROCEDURES

Introduction/Orientation

[10 minutes]

You may want to begin by asking group members whether anyone has something to share from the Homework Extras or from last session's topic. Then briefly introduce the topic of forgiveness as a key component in our relationship with the Lord.

We suggest including the chenille stem craft in your introduction to this session if your group enjoys creative expression. Provide a supply of chenille stems (available from craft stores) and allow a couple of minutes for group members to shape the stems into a creation that reflects their relationship to the Lord at this time. Invite them to share their creations and reflect briefly on the activity, using the questions provided.

Before you begin the Bible study, spend a few moments thanking God for your time together and asking for his blessing.

Bible Study

[30-40 minutes]

We've provided today's Scripture passage from Matthew as written in Today's New International Version and as a dramatic reading based on the passage from *The Message*. Choose one or both ways to present the passage together, asking for volunteer readers from the group. Then use the "Understanding the Passage" and "Applying the Passage" sections to guide your discussion. If the following important concepts don't come up in your discussion, you may want to point to them:

- "The kingdom of heaven is like . . ." The rules in God's kingdom often stand in contrast to the way the world works. Although God's kingdom is here now, it is not yet complete. Forgiveness is a hallmark in God's kingdom; his people live as forgiven people.
- The servant owed so much that he could never pay it back. (One talent was worth about twenty years of a laborer's daily wage.) Therefore the

servant was at the mercy of the king, just as we are at the mercy of our merciful King.

A Question of Forgiveness

[15 minutes]

This true story about Simon Wiesenthal raises important moral questions about the limits and possibilities of forgiveness. Take some time to read it over, and then discuss using the “Questions for Reflection.” As people created in God’s image, we have an innate sense of justice. Forgiveness seems to fly in the face of justice, which is why it is so difficult. It’s important to remember that there is a cost involved in forgiveness: someone pays a price. Our forgiveness is free because Jesus paid the costly price.

Much more is available about Simon Wiesenthal and his book *The Sunflower*. For additional insights, you may want to do some online research to add to the discussion.

Forgiveness in Christian Community

[15 minutes]

Take time to read through this section, including the “Principles of Forgiveness.” As you go through the principles together, invite questions, observations, and discussion. One approach you may use is to have group members take turns reading one principle out loud and commenting on it. You may want to summarize your discussion by having group members read the last principle aloud (“Forgiveness comes from a deep sense of being forgiven. . .”) as a testimony to our calling as followers of the Lord.

Prayer: Free Writing

[15-30 minutes]

You may want to begin your time of prayer by reading the prayer printed in the book together. Then have group members spend some time thanking the Lord for his forgiveness and asking for the Lord’s help in forgiving others.

We’ve also included two options for a free writing activity. Hand out paper and pens or pencils and ask group members to choose one of the options for a free writing prayer activity. Be sure to set your timer for five to ten minutes, depending on the time you have available. Encourage group members who are willing to read their prayers afterward.

Blessing

[5 minutes]

Extend the Lord’s blessing to each group member by name. Today’s blessing focuses on the complete forgiveness available to us through Jesus Christ.

If you have time, you may want to read the sidebar “You’re Free!” together; if not, encourage group members to read it on their own.

Homework Extras

Remind group members of the opportunities they have to do the Homework Extras on their own at home. This week’s Extras includes a couple of additional suggestions for free writing and prayer.

Session 10: Celebration

PURPOSE

The purpose of session 10 is to contemplate and celebrate life with our good shepherd. We also consider the importance of rest and present some stress-management techniques.

OUTCOMES

- Group members will enjoy the group experience and be glad that they came.
- Through participation in the Bible study, group members will understand and rest in the care of our good shepherd, Jesus.
- Group members will participate in a creative writing or art activity that explains who the Lord is; they will gain insight into the Lord's goodness through this exercise.
- Group members will note the importance of stress management and practice several relaxation techniques.
- Group members will experience the Lord's blessing and feel thankful that their good shepherd cares for them.
- Group members will have an opportunity to share what the group has meant to them and offer prayers of thanksgiving and then celebrate the time that they've had together in Bethesda.

PROCEDURES

Introduction/Orientation

[10 minutes]

You may want to begin by asking group members whether anyone has something to share from the Homework Extras or from last session's topic. The focus for today's session is the contentment we can experience under the care of Jesus, our good shepherd. Here's a conversation starter you could use to get this session started: Name one or two things you found helpful as you look back over these Bethesda sessions. Before you begin the Bible study, spend a few moments thanking God for your time together and asking for his blessing.

Bible Study

[30-45 minutes]

This beloved psalm is a familiar passage so you may have to work harder to get below the surface. Here are some interesting facts about shepherds and sheep you may wish to share:

- Sheep from many flocks grazed together on the hills.
- They knew and followed the voice of their own shepherd to find their way back to safety each night. They would not follow a stranger.
- The shepherd knew each sheep by name and provided individual care as needed.
- There were no fences where the sheep grazed, so protection from wild animals and thieves was a big part of the shepherd's job.

- The rod and staff were used to gently guide the sheep or to rescue them and also to beat off enemies. (They were not used to beat the sheep.)
- Sheep are not very smart.
- Sheep will not drink from swiftly moving water; they need still pools for drinking.

The images of Psalm 23 are very powerful and rich. Each sentence can be the source of good discussion. Images include a good shepherd leading contented sheep who have everything they need; the dark valley of death, not to be feared because of the presence of the Lord; the table of abundance and overflowing oil foreshadowing the wedding feast of the Lamb; goodness and love following all the way to where we will live with the Lord forever.

We've included Psalm 23 from Today's New International Version and from *The Message*. Decide how you'll want to present the psalm: having volunteers read both versions aloud, having the group read in unison, or some other way. Read slowly so that group members can savor each of the psalm's rich images. Challenge group members to read the psalm every day in the coming week: by the end of the week they'll have committed it to their memory and their heart. Use the "Understanding the Passage" and "Applying the Passage" sections to guide your discussion.

Free Writing/Creative Art Activity

[10 minutes]

By now we hope your group is comfortable with (or at least willing to try!) short creative activities like this one. Writing a "commercial" or drawing a poster/flyer explaining who the Lord is should be a fun way to get at many aspects of the Lord's goodness to us. Hand out paper and pens, pencils, markers, or other art supplies and explain that they'll have about ten minutes to do the activity. Suggest that group members might want to use some of the images in the psalm, which provides a wonderful, yet brief overview of the Lord's goodness. We can think of Psalm 23 as David's "commercial" for the Lord!

Stress Management

[20-30 minutes]

We live in a hectic world. Stillness and silence are important to our ability to develop a deeper relationship with the Lord that will in turn shape the way we live our lives. Take a few minutes to read the section on stress and relaxation and "The Stress Response." Then focus on the stress management techniques. Allow time to practice them as you go through the list. These techniques are well known and can help reduce the physical stress responses in our body and calm our minds so that we are better able to think and act in situations. Remind group members that the techniques become easier the more often they are used. It's also important to give group members a chance to talk about what they do to relieve stress in their lives, giving opportunity for learning from one another. Use the "Questions for Reflection" to guide your discussion. (You may also want to check out the other resources available on mindtools.com.)

Prayer

[10-15 minutes]

Begin your time of prayer by reading the prayer printed in the book. Then have group members spend a few minutes in silent prayer, focusing on their breathing and visualizing the images of the psalm, resting in the presence of the good shepherd. After a few minutes, close your time of silent prayer by saying the last verse of the psalm: "Surely goodness and mercy . . ." Then move on to the blessing.

Blessing

[5 minutes]

Extend the Lord's blessing to each group member by name. This final blessing focuses on the image of the Good Shepherd's care and provision for us.

Celebration

[25-30 minutes]

Take some time to give group members a chance to share with the group what Bethesda has meant to them and offer prayers of thanksgiving. It's fitting to end your time as a Bethesda group with a celebration of growth, of the Lord's work in your lives, and of the beginnings of positive change. How

you choose to celebrate during this final session depends entirely on you and the group. Here are a few suggestions for you to consider:

- Decorate the meeting room for a party and serve snacks.
- Have a meal together: arrange ahead of time for a potluck, or go out to eat together.
- Do something fun together: go for a walk in a garden, play a game, see a movie.
- Create a small gift for group members: perhaps a bookmark with a picture and/or Scripture passage you choose for each person; laminate and add a ribbon.
- Take a group picture.

- Give each other a manicure or pedicure in keeping with the theme of relaxation: bring supplies such as bath salts and soaking tubs, towels, lotions, clippers, files, and nail polish.
- Encourage group members to stay in touch for support or take advantage of other support networks in their lives.
- Plan a reunion in one or two months.
- Choose prayer partners and agree to keep in touch and pray for each other.

It's our prayer that this journey together has deepened your relationships with each other, and, most important, with the Lord.