

Step Out
Called to Tell – Sent to Share

How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the Good News! Romans 10:15

Welcome to the new 2014-2015 Women's Ministry Bible Study. This year you will "hear the voices" of six different women who will explore the theme – *Step Out*. Each one brings their own unique insight and perspective to a wide variety of scripture texts and themes. We hope that these studies will stimulate discussion, but more importantly, they motivate us to be messengers of God's grace and love – both in words and deeds.



THANKS!

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Does My Popularity Bring Me to God?

Mark 6:14-29

Popular King Herod was the governor of the region of Judea at the time of Jesus' ministry. Herod loved the status his fellow citizens gave to him and used it as a way to measure his political standing. For instance, he married the daughter of King Aretas, IV. This marriage brought peace and a good financial partnership along the border between Perea and the Nabatean kingdom. It brought popularity to the king in that region. Herod was perceived as a very talented politician and king of his people.



King Herod WAS popular because he was a man of the people. He liked to entertain the citizens of his region. Herod knew that John the Baptizer was a preacher and storyteller, and was followed by many. Therefore, Herod made John one of his friends (vs. 20b). Apparently, the preacher was regularly invited to Herod's social events and political meetings. Herod enjoyed his sermons and advice. Even though John disagreed publicly with Herod's divorce and re-marriage to Herodias, the governor was pleased to hear John's words.

Herod also increased his popularity by becoming a benefactor of the weak. This was the reason exposed in the gospel for John's imprisonment. Herod was protecting this great storyteller against his wife's grudge. Herod allowed John to continue his ministry from jail. In fact, John continued to tell his stories at Herod's events and meetings. Not only did Herod protect John while in jail, but also the king publicly praised the preacher with very eloquent expressions like "righteous man" and "Holy man." Residents of Judea agreed with the positive praise of their king.

With the people and with the leaders, Herod enjoyed high ratings in positive reception. He used to throw parties in honor of visitors, distinguished delegates from the Roman Empire, and his officials. The event referenced in this passage was a party in honor of his birthday (vs. 21). His goal was to make sure his popularity and acceptance remained undamaged by any circumstances, including John's opposition to his new marriage.

Everyone knew Herod's generosity and bigheartedness. His kindness was shown using the expression, "Ask me for anything you want. Whatever you ask, I will give you, up to half of my kingdom." Kings would usually close this affirmation with an oath to emphasize the seriousness of their words. Obviously, King Herod and his guest were very pleased with Herodias' daughter performance because he made her such an offer.

However, the admired man didn't weigh his own limits as well as his wife's hold against the preacher. John became the object of a power struggle between Herod and Herodias. She used her beautiful dancing daughter to ignite his passion at the public event. She knew he would offer some generous gift at the end of her daughter's dance. After he saw her erotic dance, he offered her half of his kingdom to the ears of everybody in the ballroom. In other words, Herod offered for the dancer to be his queen. It didn't matter that the young dancer was his niece, because in the past it didn't matter that his lover was his sister-in-law! Now, with the king's proposal to the young dancer, the only way Herodias would win against John was advising her daughter to ask

John's head, which the young girl did. The pleasing-people ruler would not go back on his promise, so he beheaded John, the popular preacher and storyteller.

The text doesn't indicate if Herod's popularity was affected by the killing of John, the Storyteller. But that experience left Herod submerged in his own paranoia. Herod was tremendously puzzled by the stories people were telling about Jesus on the streets. The King had heard many explanations about the powers of the new preacher in his region. The supposed "resurrection" of the already-executed-by-him John the Baptizer" was the most popular explanation for Jesus' power. Herod had beheaded John the Baptizer, the last credible, ethical storyteller. Because Herod was so guilt-laden, he didn't give much attention to the other widespread story of Jesus being the prophet Elijah. The popular King Herod now feared any encounter with Jesus. Jesus, who fed five thousand and healed many, was growing in popular acceptance. And it was only Jesus, who could have a remedy for Herod's distressful condition.

Questions for Discussion:

Many people would measure their popularity based on the number of Facebook friends or Twitter followers. Others count the number of people they greet every day, or the number of loyal friends at church. Popularity has to do with the way one person is perceived by others in her own community. In other words, popularity has to do with being loved and accepted by others. *Do you think that popularity helps people be fully accepted in their own community? Explain your answer.*

Reflect upon this statement - *Popularity helps you to be a better person as Christian?*

Can you recall moments in your life when you have experienced a wonderful moment of popularity? How did that experience bring God's kingdom to others? What would you do different if you were to experience again that moment of being accepted?

John the Baptizer was killed because of a struggle for popularity and status quo. *Can you tell a story of a person who was "sacrificed" due to others' desires for popularity and power?*

How do you relate with those who crave to be accepted but are not? Can you think of opportunities where you or your women's ministry group could help someone to shine?

Jesus Christ is the healer of many, the one who accepts each of us as we are, and is the main character in Christianity. *What teachings of Jesus could we apply to our lives and what might be the results?*

If we are not famous people, how can we relate with Herod's story, his decisions, and the consequences for others?

Prayer:

Dear God, we want to be accepted, popular, and recognized. Give us the courage to assume the risks of exposing our frailties so others can see your power at work on us. When telling our stories, let only your name be glorified, because you are the main character not us. Amen.

He Has Done Everything Well

Mark 7:31-37



Jesus was on a teaching/preaching tour far away from his native land. He was traveling through Gentile territory, a place where no good Jew would visit. He probably wanted to have some respite because of the crowds, so a Gentile territory might offer him a small break. However, he couldn't keep his presence a secret and couldn't escape from those wanting something from him such as healing. (Mark 7:24-30). So, he performed many miraculous healings among the "unclean people" in Tyre, Sidon, and the region of the Decapolis.

Citizens of the region lived far away from the political and religious cities; they were also considered unclean and impure. Therefore, they were on the religious, political, and social margins of life, which meant they were rejected, neglected, and sometimes abused by the worldly powers. In addition, their customs were totally different from those of the Jews. One story to help us understand the difference is found in Mark 5:1-18, the story of Jesus healing a Gentile man living in this region with unclean spirits. When Jesus cast the demons out of the man, the unclean spirits entered into a herd of nearby pigs, then the animals rushed down to the cliff and drowned in the sea. This region's economy was based on raising pigs. Even though pigs were considered detestable animals for a regular Israelite, for the sake of their economy, the inhabitants of that area expelled Jesus because of the exorcism and its adverse financial consequences.

Why would Jesus go back to a place where he had been previously expelled? Why would he come back to those who didn't want to listen to him, to those who made themselves voluntarily deaf to his teaching? From a Jewish perspective, Jesus was not "doing everything well" because he was ministering to impure people in a foreign land. He was in the wrong place hanging out with the wrong people. Apparently, they were voluntarily deaf to God's message for them.

Unpredictably, on his way back to Galilee, Jesus encountered a group of citizens in that region that brought a deaf and speech impaired man to be healed. The man seemed to be much loved by his friends, because they insisted that Jesus heal him by laying hands upon him. They had a preconceived methodology of healing. They suggested to Jesus just how to perform this miracle: by the laying on of hands. One might ponder at this point, if the people could see in Jesus some healing powers, but they could not hear his message. Maybe this beloved deaf friend of theirs was a representation of their general deaf condition to hear God's voice. Maybe this was a community unable to speak appropriately about godly matters. If they couldn't hear God, then they certainly could not speak well about Jesus. Thankfully, Jesus in his mercy and love forgot the previous rejection and healed the man.

According to the gospel, the procedure to heal this man would be different and probably unorthodox. The treatment would be intrusive and odd instead of simply the laying on of hands. The healing process began by taking the impaired man apart of the deafening crowd. Privacy with Jesus would help him to regain listening skills. The healing miracle started with a private appointment with Jesus.

Questions:

Can you tell us a story of a time when you were with Jesus and you could touch him, hear him, or feel him? Do you remember what Jesus healed or assured in your life during those particular circumstances of yours?

The next thing Jesus did was to pierce the obstructed ears instead of just touching them. This quite possibly was a painful action. Disregarding the issue of contamination caused by touching ear secretions, Jesus' intrusion to destroy obstacles in communication could be uncomfortable for both parties - Jesus and the sick man. Was there some divine anesthesia involved? Maybe the poor man was crying out in pain, and many could hear his painful voice.

Questions:

Have you heard beloved people of God crying out in pain? How can we comfort those we think are in close relationship with God but are suffering? How do you explain pain and suffering in the lives of faithful Christians?

This was not the end of the healing process. While having his fingers busy piercing the man's ears, Jesus also spat saliva out on the man's tongue. Some might say that this was a disgusting action. From a Jewish perspective, it sounded more like a curse than a blessing. This process of overcoming the impairment was certainly unusual. For sure, what came out of Jesus didn't defile the man. But at this point surely the man's facial expressions showed his distress.

Question:

What would a witness think about this scene? Was Jesus healing or cursing or doing something else? Where have you been surprised by God's odd actions?

This particular healing was taking longer than expected. After spitting on the man's tongue, Jesus looked up to the heaven because the healing in this case would certainly be a gift from heaven. Wonderful! This was not your "run of the mill" healing. Jesus loved these people, and restored that man. Amen! With this most unusual healing, Jesus was uniting the broken physical and spiritual realms in the community represented by this man.

Questions:

List some loving actions you performed for other where there was a visible result. Now, from that list, name those actions that you repeat even though there were not tangible results of your efforts – only done to express your love to someone else.

At this point in the story, the healing process needed more intervention. Jesus opted for the use of body and verbal language. Jesus' frustration was visible through his sigh. Have you ever breathed that deeply as Jesus did to express his fatigue? Jesus used his native language, Aramaic, to express himself, instead of Greek, the official language. The word Jesus used, "Effatha," means, "Open up." Maybe Jesus was tired, but he continued healing the man's inability to speak.

Questions:

What is your reaction when you hear others speaking with their native language, with unique slang and accent, which is different than yours? Are you curious or offended? Knowing that Jesus used his native language during a miraculous healing, instead of the local language, how might your native language or communication skills be useful to bless or "heal" others?

As soon as the man was healed, the community's speech was released as well. Even though Jesus commanded them not tell anyone about what happened, the restored community testified that "Jesus has done everything well." Even when they learned that Jesus spat on the man, they realized that whatever comes out from Jesus' body cannot defile any person. This is Good News! Jesus does do all things well

Prayer:

Surprising Jesus, sometimes, you do unexpected things to heal us personally, and communally. It doesn't matter how odd, intrusive, invasive or unclean it might seem, everything coming out of you will heal our deafness and speech impairment, and it will cleanse us. Jesus, you do everything well. Amen.

“He is Out of His Mind”

Mark 3:13-34

Jesus was developing a mission as he was establishing the Kingdom of God. The central theme of his preaching, since the beginning of his ministry was, “The Kingdom of heaven has come near.” So the announcement of the kingdom sounded loud and clear since the Israelites understood that this mission was viable through the twelve tribes.



Surprisingly, while preaching, Jesus went to the mountaintop to call his disciples and appoint them in just the same way Israel was constituted as a nation by God, at Mount Sinai, centuries before. Observers would interpret Jesus' action as if he was creating a new Israel and a new family of God. His actions could very well be viewed as a change or substitution; or more likely, a revolution against the Jewish tradition. Jesus' family concluded that, “he was out of his mind.” In addition, the teachers of the Law inferred that Jesus was the prince of demons. In other words, Jesus was mentally ill to his family, and Satan's personification to the others

Questions:

What do you suppose were the intentions of these people? How did Jesus respond to these two accusations?

One might tend to agree with Jesus' family in believing that he was out of his mind. By choosing the twelve, he was telling his relatives that he was about to embrace a new family in order to establish his new “Kingdom of God.” This idea was not a reality for the present world. Hallucinations, deliriums, or even brain damage could make individuals think in that way. Jesus' family needed to do something immediately. They needed to stop the madness. Mary and her children were ashamed and humiliated. For this reason, they stood outside the house where Jesus was, and spoke out in an effort to stop Jesus' irrational vision and mission. Sadly, with their harsh words, Jesus' dignity was denied.

When the religious leaders from Jerusalem heard of Jesus' mission to set up a “new Kingdom,” they sent teachers of the law to convince both his followers, and the public in general, that Israel would remain, much as God intended from the beginning. They suggested that people were sticking to Jesus like the flies held on to Beelzebub, the Lord of the Flies. The only explanation they found for Jesus' authority over demons was that he was their prince. Their strategy was to discredit his purity. If Jesus was demon possessed, his actions were worthless. However, the teachers of the Law didn't realize that with their words, they were offending his disciples and followers as well.

In response, Jesus showed the inconsistency of their insults. First of all, it wasn't logical that Satan would fight against himself and his own. That would be evidence of a divided kingdom at risk of collapsing. The same principle applied to his nation. If Israel were divided, “Its end has already come,” Jesus said. But it was not true, according to Jesus, and to Israel's history.

Then, Jesus exposed the purpose of their insults. The teachers were trying to trip him up with his own words, and in his own house, in order to distract his followers. In addition, his family had similar intentions of distracting his followers and getting them to leave the house where they

were gathered. Even though the teachers of the law blasphemed against the Holy Spirit, people stood in favor of Jesus because he countered their insults and accusations in an articulate and apologetic manner, with great wisdom.

At this point in the story, Jesus' family was unaware of his defense as they stood at the door waiting for him to come out. His followers were anxiously awaiting his actions. Would Jesus go back to his family or would he continue forward with his "new kingdom?" People inside the house were comforted to hear Jesus' determined answer, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and my sister and mother." (Mark 3:34). This is the new family and the kingdom of God.

Questions:

Today, individuals and families around us are lost - in their minds, their prejudices, their addictions, fears and unfaithfulness. How can we respond to this "lostness" by following Jesus' testimony?

Is there a family member of whom we may be ashamed or embarrassed by? How can we protect their dignity even if we don't understand them?

We have been witnesses of persecution against others. Children and youth have been victims of bullying at school. Adults have suffered "persecution" when their leadership has been diminished in church, at their work, in their families, etc. Elderly people often live in isolation because of their age and other issues. *How can we stand for them with the power of the Holy Spirit, instead of letting them suffer those injustices?*

Discuss how you can stand up for your Christian faith within your church, community, school, or family.

Prayer:

Almighty and loving Parent, we praise you for Jesus' strength to stand in our behalf. We adore you for making us part of your family and kingdom. Forgive our tendency to ignore persecution and suffering of our neighbors as many did in your time. Close our mouths when we are tempted to insult your name and offend our loved ones and neighbors. Strengthen us to step out to do your will, not ours. For the glory of your name, we pray. Amen.

Testing the Lord?

Isaiah 7:1-14

The situation couldn't be worse for the nation of Judah. Its neighbor Edom got renewed strength and recaptured some cities that were long ago under Judah's kingdom. The few Jews that lived there were deported. Furthermore, Jerusalem, the last stronghold standing, was besieged by an alliance between Syria and the north Kingdom of Israel. It seemed like Judah was about to disappear. King Ahaz and Judah's people "*were shaken as the trees of the forest are shaken by [a strong] wind.*" (7:2)



Questions:

When have you been in the middle of a situation where everything seemed lost? How did you feel? What were your fears? Did your relationship with God and others change? Why?

Under those circumstances young King Ahaz conceived a plan. He made an alliance with Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria, to overcome the forthcoming attack. To seal this favor, the king of Judah, Ahaz, *took the silver and gold from the temple of the Lord and the royal palace and sent it as a gift to the king of Assyria* (2 Kings 16:8). After visiting with the king of Assyria, Ahaz asked the priest Uriah to build an altar like the one in Damascus. The temple of God was transformed in an extension of the pagan temple of Assyria. The priest would burn offerings each morning and evening, as well as seek guidance for the king. In addition, he protected the city water supplies. It looked like he had all things under control.

Questions:

Have you tried Plan A, and it didn't work out, then went to plan B expecting a good outcome for your goals? What was your motivation to keep trying out different plans or ideas? Do you think age influences the way we make plans to endure and overcome difficulties? What might have been Ahaz's motivation to call on the king of Assyria instead of negotiating with the king of Israel (Israel and Judah were brothers)? In your experience, is it more difficult to keep good relationships with relatives or with those whom we are not related? Why?

At the end of the aqueduct of the upper pool, Isaiah met King Ahaz to deliver a message from the Lord. The message had several components. The first directive was "Take heed" meaning be careful! The second directive was "'be quiet.'" The Lord was suggesting that the men keep calm. The third directive was "do not fear." The last directive was to not 'lose heart.'

Questions:

Why do you think King Ahaz needed all those words of encouragement? Did King Ahaz deserve such a gracious treat from God after all the damage he caused to Judah's faith? [History reveals that King Ahaz was the worst king ever for the kingdom of Judah. He sacrificed some of his children to pagan gods and led his people to worship those gods. (2 Chronicles 28:5-21)]. Why do you think King Ahaz did all those horrible things? Do you think he was a desperate leader? Why or why not? Do you know of someone who turned away from God and placed their faith and confidence in a person, a job, a possession, etc.? If you are comfortable, share your story.

In order to call Ahaz back to exclusive faith in the Lord, Isaiah brought along his son, Shear-jashub, whose name meant, "A remnant will return." The Lord also gave Isaiah a beautiful poem expressing that God gave to Judah's enemies a timeline of 65 years to exist. After

those years Jerusalem would still remain as fortified city; the kingdom of Judah wouldn't come to an end. Isaiah's son would remain until those days, while the sons of his enemies would pass away.

Questions:

What promises from God have you kept close to your heart throughout the years? Describe how those promises help you, your family, church, or community to stand firmly in faith?

As a confirmation of Jerusalem standing for the 65 more years, God spoke to Ahaz through Isaiah: "Ask the Lord your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest highs." (Isaiah 7:10) The truth was that God wanted to show his commitment to Judah despite the atrocious apostasy they endured. God wanted to reclaim his people's faith even though the Lord wasn't the one who failed.

Questions:

If you were in Ahaz's shoes, what would be your answer to God's request? What would you say to a person or group who has been waiting a long time for a respite from some difficulty in their lives?

God said to the king, "If you don't stand firm in your faith, you won't stand at all." (7:9) We don't know Ahaz's thoughts at that moment. Maybe the king was confident hiding the water supplies of Jerusalem from its enemies. Maybe he thought that the pagan gods from the dominating nations were more powerful than the Lord. Maybe that's why he made an alliance with a mighty and conquering nation like Assyria. Apparently its gods had shown amazing results. At the same time, Ahaz wasn't discarding the God of his ancestors. It wouldn't be politically correct. On the contrary, discarding God would be offensive and discouraging for the entire nation of Judah. So he decided to use his diplomatic skills with the prophet and responded politely, "I won't put the Lord to the test." (7:12) Sadly, Ahaz refused to ask God for a sign.

Questions:

Why did Ahaz not ask for a sign? Have you tried to ask God for a sign? Why? What were the results? Have you used diplomatic skills to refuse God's call in your life?

God was very upset with Ahaz's unfaithfulness. Even though the perverse king didn't ask for a sign, God gave him one. God told him that a child, who would be born of a virgin, would be a sign. Those Ahaz never valued would be the hope for the nation. The child, Emmanuel, "God with us," would be a vision of what was to come for those who loved God.

Questions:

If children are a sign of God's presence among us, what should be our attitude and behavior toward them? How does our society sacrifice children to vain causes? What activities are you involved in that promote the welfare of children? Contact the Discipleship Ministry Team to learn more about creating "Safe Sanctuary." The 183rd General Assembly said, "All congregations, presbyteries, synods, and denominational facilities, camps, events, etc. have a plan to keep everyone safe." (ministrycouncil.cumberland.org/safesanctuary)

Prayer

Patient and merciful Father, we often try to organize our own lives, trusting more in our plans than in you alone. Forgive our indecision and "diplomatic skills" when we relate to you. Help us to follow the sign provided in your Son, Jesus Christ, in order to minister to our children as sign of your presence with us today. Amen.

Beautiful Feet!

"The message is very close at hand. It is on your lips and in your heart. And that message is the very message about faith that we preach." Romans 10:8

"And how can they call on Him to save them unless they believe in Him? And how can they hear about Him unless someone tells them? And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? That's why the scriptures say, "How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news." Romans 10:14-15



This verse has always made me chuckle. I don't think feet are beautiful at all ... at least not mine. I have had several surgeries on my feet to relieve bunions and then the results of infections, lack of care on my part, a joint replacement and finally joint removal and an ugly "Stubby" toe. No, my feet are not beautiful! But let us delve deeper into this verse. It doesn't stop at "feet." It *qualifies* those feet as it continues on to "of them that preach the good news."

We have been challenged in our three-year initiative to "Meet People Where They Are," to "Tell Your Story," and now, this year to "Step Out."

Meeting people where they are involves an act of the heart. It involves being non-judgmental, respectful, loving and kind in all we say and do. Yes, like Jesus would have us be in relation to other people. Our own journey begins in within our hearts - understanding, believing and receiving the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ, and then allowing the Holy Spirit to guide our thoughts, words, and deeds.

Questions for Discussion:

Share with a neighbor your own faith journey – What, or who has been important in that journey. Next – talk with your neighbor about where you are right now in your faith journey. Share in the group ways you have stepped forward to meet people where they are? On newsprint, list all the ways that your women's group tries to meet people right where they are.

Telling our story means we must have a story to tell. It isn't complicated. Remember, there are many ways to hear God's voice. Elijah heard just a "still small voice" and Jonah had to be swallowed by a whale before he listened to God. Life happens to everyone - good, bad, boring, indifferent, exhilarating, depressing, challenging, and all of the above. How a Christian handles life circumstances is the story we tell. There is someone who needs to hear your encouraging story of overcoming a circumstance with Jesus at your side.

Questions:

Share with someone the story of what your life was like before Christ, how you accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior and then what a difference having Christ in your life has made. If you can't remember "life" before Jesus, talk about how being a Christian has influenced your decisions. Is there a significant faith story that has made an impact upon your life - one that made a difference in how you saw yourself in your circumstances? Is there someone you know that needs to hear your story? Share that story within your group.

And that brings us to this year's theme - "Step Out." You are the messenger with the Good News,

and you just need be willing to use those feet to share that message with others. Willingness is what makes my ugly feet beautiful. We never know what moccasins God has asked someone we know to walk in each day. Meeting them where they are, sharing a message of encouragement and overcoming adversity begins by taking that first step. Becoming vulnerable is scary, but not when Jesus calls you to step out and holds your hand all the way. I have very often said that God doesn't really NEED me. There really isn't anything special about me. I'm pretty ordinary. If I don't respond to God's leading and nudging, He will get someone else to listen to Him and minister to that person in my path. And then who misses out? ME!!! The person I was to minister to was indeed sought out by someone else who was willing to Step Out. God is faithful to those who are seeking Him.

Questions:

What are some of the feelings that pop up inside you as you think about "stepping out" to share the love of Jesus with others? Have you ever told someone about Jesus and they rejected the message? How did that make you feel? Have you ever shared the good news with someone and their response was positive and affirming? How did that make you feel? What do you think would be important to prepare yourself to "step out" with the good news of Jesus Christ?

Feet can be stinky, dirty, and calloused by the roads we are led to walk. Those roads may be made easier by walking with a companion ... someone who knows what the road is like and can lead you through it. Are you that person? Are you willing to have your feet made beautiful?

How can I Step Out? How can I minister?

- As a starting point, wash each other's feet at your next women's ministry meeting.
- Consider going as a group to a nursing home, domestic abuse shelter or homeless shelter to give manicures or paint toenails. This would be a great way to include the teen girls in your church in women's ministry and in acts of love.
- Keep a journal for one week logging where you see Jesus each day. Share your journal entries with a family member, or with someone in church.
- Pray for random people who are pumping gas alongside you at the gas station this week.
- What other ideas can you think of to meet people, tell your story, and step out!

As long as you are stepping out, step out of the box and search for new areas of ministry that have not been touched. And then just Step Out with BOTH FEET!!!!

"How beautiful are the feet of those that messengers that bring good news!" Share the good News that God loves them. Be His eyes, ears, hands, heart and feet.

Prayer:

Thank you loving God, for giving me a beautiful story to tell of your great love. Give me the courage to step out with that story so that others will be able to hear of your great works. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Stepping Out through Service with Love

Romans 10:15

Have you ever wondered what the world would be like if every Christian took seriously the words of Christ? Really, what would the world be like? I can only imagine. Can you? As you go through this program, ask yourselves the questions and discuss them together.



When tested by the Pharisees with the question, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” Jesus answered plainly, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matt. 22:36-39) Because we are sinful, not one of us lives up to this commandment faithfully. We often forget that love is not just a “feeling.” Love is an action. It requires us to step out, perhaps even getting out of our comfort zone.

Jesus also commanded His disciples to be His witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:8b) Sharing His love and making disciples begins at home and with those around us. Sometimes `stepping out` at home can be very hard. Think about how we treat our families. Do we act like Christians at home? Are we always showing Jesus` love? We serve our families in various ways; we cook, clean, wash, make a living, deliver children, etc. Do we serve our families with love and compassion, or are we resentful? What difference does our attitude make? Are we making disciples in our homes?

How about those around us - neighbors, friends, the sick, the lonely, the abused, and the homeless? Are we making disciples of those around us? Do we excuse ourselves, saying that we don`t have time or energy? Do we leave it to others? As a Christian, do we have any responsibility to those around us? There are many opportunities to help those around you no matter what your physical condition or time allotment. Donations of food, clothing, money and prayer, even notes, cards and visits can help those in need of an encouraging word. Could we help at a homeless shelter, deliver meals, drive those without transportation to the doctor, provide a safe haven or be a voice for the abused and trafficked, or help with job training for those out of work. Keep your eyes, ears, and hearts open for opportunities. How are you `stepping out` for those around you (in Jerusalem)?

Looking at a wider venue, how about those across our country? Many people are hurting from personal problems, economic issues, natural disasters, injustices, etc. There are a multitude of opportunities across our denomination, and our country, to spread Christ`s love, compassion and the Good News. Short-term mission trips to help rebuild communities after tornadoes and other natural disasters, supporting cross-cultural ministries, working with groups such as Habitat for Humanity and Carpenters for Christ, and volunteering for Children`s Fest are just a few ideas. What are you doing individually and as a church? Are you making disciples across our land? How are you `stepping out` in your Judea?

There are situations when we feel especially uncomfortable. Working with the disenfranchised, cross-cultural ministries, low-income ministries, hospital visitation and volunteering, prison ministries, and human trafficking can make us very uncomfortable. This may be our Samaria. Are you `stepping out` in your Samaria?

Many times when we mention missions, we are thinking about missions in foreign lands. In the last few years, there have been more opportunities for individuals to make mission trips to other countries. Of course, not all of us can travel abroad to help carry the Gospel by serving others. However, we can support those who do travel and reach out in other ways. We now have the opportunity of supporting missionaries through the Stott-Wallace Missionary Offering. Does your Women's Ministry or you as an individual contribute to the Least Coin, Dimes for Clean Water, World Vision, or Compassion International? Do you contribute to the South American hot lunch program or scholarships? And, most importantly, do you remember to pray for people and projects all around the world? Are you `stepping out` to the ends of the earth?

As Jesus sat with His disciples on the Mount of Olives answering their questions and teaching them (Matthew 25:34-46), He very clearly spoke about our responsibility to Him and others. If we do not serve "the least of these," we are not serving our Lord. No one knows when the end of our time comes. We could have a heart attack, an accident or even Christ could come again; therefore, we must "make hay while the sun shines." Take a chance and `step out` today!

Group Activity and Discussion:

1) Divide a sheet of newsprint into four sections. Label each section with one of the four following categories –Jerusalem (local city/town), Judea (US/Country), Samaria (places we might avoid), Ends of the Earth (International)

2) Now list all the activities that your church or women's ministry group does in each of the four areas. This should take about 5-10 minutes.

3) Now reflect upon the list – are there some areas that are lacking in your attention? Is there an area that tends to receive more of your efforts? Why? What can you learn from this exercise? Are there things you might want to change now that you've seen your ministries listed in such a way?

Prayer:

Most loving Heavenly Father, we praise You and thank You for Your great love, mercy and grace. Give us strength and courage to `step out` in all the ways that You would have us to serve. May we truly be Your hands, feet, voice and heart here on earth as we serve with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We ask these things in the name of our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Stepping Out
Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World
a Book Review



Having a Mary Heart in a Martha World is a book about the familiar story of Mary and Martha. Did you know there are actually three stories about these sisters and their brother Lazarus? Who are they? How can their interactions with Jesus influence my relationship with Him? What on earth do they have to do with the Cumberland Presbyterian Step Out initiative?

ACTION: *Forget what you remember about the sisters and read the story again from Luke 10:38-42, preferably from a version that is different from your regular readings. Reading from a new version can bring freshness to the story. I love using *The Message* along side other versions.*

How many of us can relate to Martha? Dear Martha, so overloaded with service. So overwhelmed while trying to do the right thing for this special guest in her home – plus all the guys he brought with him. The author, Joanna Weaver, quotes a woman who said, "My life is like a blender – and it's stuck on frappe!"

ACTION: *Take a moment to discuss one of the questions from the book's study guide: "I guess I'm just a Martha and that I'll always be a Martha.' Is it possible for our basic character to change, or are we destined to live our lives stuck in a predetermined nature? Look up the following scriptures and see what the Bible says about change: Ezekiel 36:26-27; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Philippians 1:6." How does this attitude about an unchangeable frappe lifestyle affect our prayer time and Bible study?*

ACTION: *In the chapter titled "The Diagnosis", Weaver describes worry as the main problem. Proverbs 3:5-6 and Philippians 4:6-7 tell us what to do with our worries and concerns. Find a command and a result in each of these two scriptures.*

Weaver claims the cure to the diagnosis of worry is "Living Room Intimacy." We have so many things trying to keep us from this time of intimacy with our Lord. Unworthiness, busyness, guilt, shame, pride and depression all creep into our minds and convince us that we should not even try. If we just follow the rules we can leave intimacy for those with nothing else to do, and who are far better women than we believe ourselves to be.

So, what do I do with service – stepping out? It needs to be put into its proper place with our times of intimacy. Intimacy first will direct our service. Sometimes it seems it would be easier just to mind our own business and stay behind in the crowd rather than sit at his feet and actually do what it takes to get more of Him.

I asked a young friend to proof this study for me. I love one of her comments: "When I was reading over your notes and thinking back on the book, I wondered how often we confuse "stepping out" to work towards the Lord's will and legalistic obligations. We serve on committees and make sure the normal functions of the church are running, but if this is our only focus, like Martha's, we're never really sitting at Jesus' feet to hear if he has other work for us to

do. Mary was in a much better position to hear what the Lord wanted from her." Amanda Groves, Good Prospect CPC, Trilla, IL.

Being teachable, while in intimacy with God, is the beginning of transformation. How teachable are we? The answer comes with looking at how we take criticism. How did Jesus answer Martha when she came with her complaints? He was gentle, but it was still a rebuke. It would be so easy to react with a huffy and self-righteous attitude: "Well, I'll go back to the kitchen and do what I am suppose to do." Proverbs 12:1 says, "He who hates discipline is stupid." Stupid?!? Hummmmm . . . think about that for a moment.

But Martha was able to accept what Jesus said to her. It is evident in John 11 when her brother Lazarus died. We see a different Martha here. When she hears Jesus is approaching, she leaves her tasks and runs to him. Though she does not understand the delay in his coming to them, she places her whole trust in him. To this open, teachable heart, Jesus reveals, "I am the resurrection, and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies." Then he asks her if she believes this.

ACTION: *Read John 11:1-27. How does Martha answer this question about belief? Are we willing to hear Jesus? When we enter into a time of prayer or Bible Study, do we come with pre-set ideas of how prayer should be answered? Do we believe Jesus has a better way? Did He actually let Lazarus die to show God's glory instead of healing him?*

We have just touched the tip of the iceberg with this book. I encourage your group to read and study it. Buy the copy that has the companion Bible study included. Go into it with a teachable heart and be ready to hear something new and fresh from a familiar story. Let the lessons learned affect your prayer life. Approach God with openhanded prayers instead of telling Him how He should answer.

G.K. Chesterton states "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult, and left untried."

Stepping out in prayer and Bible Study can be a rote exercise to keep these disciplines simple. They are not simple; they are difficult. But, God is calling us there to seek Him anew in order to reach out to others who are hurting and have no hope.

Prayer:

Lord, Open our eyes to see where the Martha in us can be overbearing not only to others, but also to you. Instead of turning to our own solutions and ideas, help us to hear you and your direction as we pray and study. Give us boldness to take what we hear from you to those around us who are in need. Help us to say "YES!" when you ask us to step out. Amen

Step Out
Called to Tell – Sent to Share
John 13:1-17



The greatest example we have of servant leadership is when Jesus washed the disciples' feet on the night of the first Lord's Supper. *Read the scripture and talk about how the disciples must have felt to have their Master get down on their level to wash and dry their feet.* How do you think you would have felt? Would you have felt like Peter, not wanting Jesus to wash your feet? Notice particularly the 17th verse: "If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them."

Think of at least one recent thing that you have done to share God's compassion – stories of hope and encouragement, acts of kindness, literally getting your feet dirty by cleaning a sick person's house, or taking someone to get a chemo treatment. *Share these in the group.* And we don't stop there. We look for many ways we can share God's love and concern.

Give the following scriptures to individuals to read and share with the group or form groups of 2 or 3 persons in a small group to discuss ways the scripture says we need to be "telling and sharing." You may want to read some adjoining verses to understand the context.

- ***I Samuel 3:09** – "Speak Lord for your servant is listening." We have to be willing to listen to God before we can tell or share. How is listening best done? (Today's English Version)
- ***Psalms 86:04** – "Make your servant glad, O Lord, because my prayers go up to you." How is prayer an important element in our lives if we are going to be glad and able to share? (Today's English Version)
- ***Psalms 116:16a** – "I am your servant, Lord." How can we best have commitment and willingness to be able to share? (Today's English Version)
- ***Isaiah 41:09b** – "You are my servant. I did not reject you, but chose you." To have the knowledge that we have been chosen by God to be a servant is an amazing and humbling idea. (Today's English Version)
- ***Matthew 10:24-25a** – "No pupil is greater than his teacher; no slave is greater than his master." So a pupil should be satisfied to become like his teacher, and a slave like his master." What was Jesus' purpose in washing and drying the feet of the disciples? How were they better prepared to share the Gospel with others just as we show our willingness to serve others? (Today's English Version)
- ***Matthew 6:24** – "No one can be a slave of two masters; he will hate one and love the other; he will be loyal to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." This verse is often used to help persons understand and respond to God's love and salvation. (Today's English Version)
- ***Matthew 20: 26a-28** – "If one of you wants to be great, he must be the servant of the rest; and if one of you wants to be first, he must be your slave—like the Son of Man who did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life to redeem many people." How can we best follow Jesus' example? (Today's English Version)

***Romans 12:11** – “Work hard and do not be lazy. Serve the Lord with a heart full of devotion.” How can we serve God unless our motives meet God’s standards?
(Today’s English Version)

These scriptures have a story to tell, and they (we) can’t stop sharing it. Think of something you learned recently and you just couldn’t wait to share that with the appropriate people. *Were they surprised, pleased, or did they question your motives?*

How do you feel about sharing your faith? Maybe you could talk with a person you are sitting by in the doctor’s office or on a bus or plane. *Has it improved your prayer life so you will have the grace and peace you need to share Christ’s message and influence on your life?* Several years ago, in a course on evangelism, we were told to share that which we know from experience rather than trying to tell someone else how the Christian faith will affect their lives.

What are those groups within your community that need you to share your story – a children’s home, a shelter for men, women or families, or other service agencies? Children need tutors in school to help them better learn. Girls’ Clubs need mentors to help guide them on better paths. It is only as we grow in our experience with the Christian faith that we are able to be better leaders for others.

Have you been considering recently some ways that you can live out your Christian faith more faithfully? Maybe this theme, “Called to Tell – Sent to Share,” is the spark you need to get you going in a more extensive way of sharing your sense of compassion and the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Some questions we need to ask ourselves are found in Romans 10: 14-15.

- “But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed?
- And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?
- And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?
- And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.’” (NRSV)

What is the major thing you need to do to be willing and able to tell the Good News and share God’s love and compassion with others? As Jesus served, so let us serve.

Prayer:

Gracious God, we thank you for Jesus’ example of serving by washing the disciples’ feet. Let us be diligent in finding ways that we can share your story with those who have not heard and have not had a good example to follow. In the name of the greatest servant who ever lived, Jesus Christ, Amen.

**Today’s English Version +New Revised Standard Version*

Getting Connected

“For whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God”

Ruth 1:16



Sometimes we have to make very difficult choices. Sometimes, because of circumstances, our options seem limited, and we feel that we have no choice but to move away from the comfortable and familiar. Whether it's changing jobs, relocating to another part of the country (or the world for that matter), it means adjusting to a new place, new surroundings, new people, new culture (in some cases), and a new faith community.

To briefly recap the story of Ruth, Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, had to return to Bethlehem. Her husband and sons had died, and she had no relatives in Moab, a foreign country where they had been living because of famine in Israel. She faced severe poverty and hardship as a widow, so Naomi knew in her heart that now that the famine was over, she had to go back to the place where God was providing for His people. Bethlehem was her home, her people, and the place where she could worship her God. Naomi had faith that her God would provide all she needed. At some point in their journey back to Bethlehem, Naomi told her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, who were accompanying her, to return to their mothers' homes. Naomi wanted the very best for them in the future and wanted them to find security and a good life through new husbands. Naomi knew that the probability of finding that in her homeland was small. So she was willing to go on alone and leave them behind to find new love without her. They wept and kissed. Orpah returned to her home, but Ruth clung to Naomi, indicating that she was going to stay with her.

Ruth had to make a very difficult choice, but she chose life with Naomi over her own family, her national identity, and her religious idolatry. In a beautiful expression of commitment, she tied her future to that of Naomi's and confessed allegiance to the people of Israel (your people) and to the God of Israel (your God). Ruth, in effect, made a complete break with her past and took a leap of faith, despite the attempts of Naomi to urge her to go back home. Ruth showed the kind of faith that is a prime example for anyone who wants to have a relationship with God, and eventually Ruth's faith was rewarded.

Ruth made a significant choice. It involved the choosing of an entirely new community along with an entirely new lifestyle. All that she had known previously was now set aside in her pursuit of Naomi's God. God's love for everyone in the world is so great that He sent his only Son to die on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. Everybody is faced with a choice that can lead either to unhappiness and eventual eternal separation from God or to an eternal existence in heaven. Each of us needs to make a choice and get connected with Jesus Christ!

Questions for Discussion:

1. How do we choose which communities to belong to?
2. What racial, cultural and religious barriers would Ruth have to deal with in Israel? How does Ruth's experience compare with today's racial, cultural and religious climate?

3. Why do you think Orpah and Ruth, who were facing the same reality, made different decisions? Was one right and the other wrong? Why or why not?
4. Why do you think Ruth choose to go back with Naomi to her mother-in-law's land and people and to commit herself to Naomi's God?
5. What indicators are there that Ruth's commitments were genuine and well thought out? What help does she give us in regard to making our own decisions?

Reflections:

Even in sorrow and pain the believer can be kind and thoughtful. Considering the facts, instead of one's alterable feelings, makes good decisions. In our sorrow we can fail to understand what God is doing in our lives. That said, the right decision for one person is not necessarily the right decision for another. True commitment to God and His people is life impacting and determination to do the right thing is a good and godly characteristic.

Prayer:

Lord, help me to remember and understand that you love me, and you care for me and that you are always with me, even when I feel all alone. You have provided your Spirit and a community of faith to encourage me and for this I thank you. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

What God wants me to do:

Special insights I have learned:

How Awesome Is All That!

Come and see the works of God: he is terrible in his doing toward the children of men” Psalm 66:5



I was listening to a news report recently and reflected on the statement the newscaster made that the country was recovering from the recession of 2008. I guess for some that's true. But for others it seems like we're still solidly in the midst of recession and, among some of the people I know, it feels more like we're in the midst of a depression. There's still a lot of unemployment and underemployment in the African American community. Many small businesses, including mine, just couldn't recover from the loss of accounts both large and small. People are losing their homes and in some cases, folks who were doing pretty well just a few years ago, have had to move in with relatives or in some cases are simply homeless.

I'm reminded of the story of a songwriter named Horatio Spafford. He was a successful Chicago lawyer. He had a wife and five children (four daughters and a son). Then tragedy struck. First, his only son died suddenly. That same year he lost all of his vast real estate holdings and his life savings. Then a couple of years later, he planned a cruise to Europe with his wife and daughters, but because a business matter came up at the last minute, he arranged for his wife and daughters to sail on ahead and promised to join them in a few days. But then tragedy struck again. The ship his family was on was struck by another ship and it sank. Spafford's four daughters died along with 240 others, but his wife survived. When he made the trip to meet his grieving wife, he sailed near the place where his four daughters had drowned. And there, in the midst of his sorrow, he wrote the words to "It Is Well With My Soul."

Psalm 66 is a song of praise and thanksgiving. It speaks of the LORD's great works, His gracious benefits, His faithful deliverances, and all His dealings with his people. Verse 5 starts with "Come and see." The psalmist is inviting us in and serves as our tour guide pointing out items of significance to us and helping us to understand them. We see first a characterization of God as "terrible" in His works, which literally means "fearsome" or "awe-inspiring." Verse 3 called us to confess the awesome, fear-inspiring nature of God's works. Now we are to consider them by examining them closely in our mind's eye. The phrase "toward the children of men" can be understood to mean "on behalf of" or "for." It emphasizes that God's greatness overwhelms anything that human beings can do or comprehend, expressing a thought similar to that of Romans 11:34 "For who hath known the mind of the Lord?"

Just as Horatio Spafford found out, we can sing to the LORD because God's great power holds our lives in God's hands and keeps our feet from slipping. God, and God alone is powerful enough to ease our every pain, heartache and burden.

The Psalm opens with a call for Universal Praise - "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands;" That call is to glorify God and is not limited to the psalmist or even to the people of God - Israel. All the nations of the earth are to join in a collective calling out to God.

At our church, we sing a song called, "I Call You Faithful." It speaks of how God is Holy, Righteous, Awesome, Faithful, Healer, Savior and All That! We serve a dependable God, and we can feel confident in God's ability to save and deliver despite our circumstances. Our God is Awesome! Praise God for His dependability!

Questions for Discussion:

1. We sometimes communicate more with God during times of emotional turmoil and during periods of intense joy. How has God used these times to strengthen our relationship with him?
2. When have you felt you were being tested by God or overwhelmed by hardship?
3. How do God's creations testify to His awesomeness and power?

Reflections:

Examine your commitment to wholly depending on God by asking yourself the following questions at the end of each day: How often did I thank God today? How many people did I tell about my thankfulness? Did the things I said and did today reflect that God is in control of my life?

Prayer:

Lord, I thank you for the opportunity to get it right today. Lord, help me trust in you. Father, give me a mind like Jesus Christ so that I can let you reign and rule in my life. Amen.

What God wants me to do:

Special insights I have learned:

Whew! Glad We Made It!

Acts 10:19, 20 NIV

“While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Simon, these men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.”

I was recently listening to NPR (National Public Radio) and heard an interview with a Nigerian novelist who had come to the U. S. to attend college. Growing up in Nigeria, she was not used to being identified by the color of her skin. As a black African in America, she was suddenly confronted with what it meant to be a person of color in the United States. Race as an idea became something that she had to navigate and learn.

The learning process took some time and was episodic. She recalled, for example, an undergraduate class in which the subject of watermelon came up. A student had said something about watermelon to an African-American classmate, who was offended by the comment. She remembered sitting there thinking, ‘But what’s so bad about watermelons? Because I quite like watermelons.’ She felt that her African-American classmate was annoyed with her because she didn’t share her anger – but she didn’t have the context to understand why. The history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade was not taught to students in Nigeria. So she had yet to learn fully about the history of slavery and its continuing reverberations in the U.S.

“Race is such a strange construct,” she said, “because you have to *learn* what it means to be black in America. So you have to *learn* that watermelon is supposed to be offensive.” (taken from an interview with NPR *Fresh Air*’s Terry Gross).

Aren’t we all “foreigners” in a very real sense? We need to remind ourselves that Christians are aliens here since we are citizens, not of this world, but of a world not yet visible to us. Despite the many nations and territories of this world, there are only two kinds of people – those who have received God’s grace through Christ and those who still need to. God wants us to see every person from every nation as someone He loves. That makes our response clear. We are to view every person as someone who needs to hear God’s word personally. Cultural and racial barriers may seem daunting, but the love of God is stronger. Jesus commissioned his apostles to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Jews and Gentiles in the Roman world looked at each other with much suspension. Gentiles found Jewish beliefs and customs to be confusing and narrow minded, while Jews thought of Gentiles as pagan and immoral.

Cornelius was a Gentle centurion. He is described in scripture as being ‘devout and God-fearing’ which suggests that he lived in a way that was consistent with the Law of Moses, even though he was not initially a full convert. Then Cornelius experiences a vision from the Lord. An angel tells him that his sincere acts and prayers are not ignored in heaven. But even with all of Cornelius’ devotion, he still needs the salvation that only Christ can bring. He’s instructed to send for Peter in Joppa.

In the meantime, Peter falls into a trance. He sees heaven open up and ‘something like a large sheet being let down’ with all kinds of four footed animals, reptiles and birds in it that the Jews



consider unclean. Peter then hears a voice that tells him “Get up, Peter, Kill and eat”. Peter is horrified at the thought of making himself unclean before the Lord. The voice speaks to him a second and third time, with God admonishing him that he is to call nothing unclean that God has made clean. God’s statement relates to food, but also applied directly to Peter’s views about Gentiles. Peter later, in the home of Cornelius, said that he learned from a vision that he should not avoid contact with Gentiles because God does not show favoritism.

Peter’s trip to see Cornelius was not without controversy. Peter was called to answer to the charge of entering into the house of a Gentile. “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them” (Acts 11:2, 3).

For too long believers have permitted the “Gentiles” of modern culture to remain those who are untouched with the gospel. Peter’s vision tells us that God disapproves when we pick and choose those members of our society whom we think deserve the kingdom of God. All races and ethnic groups should hear the gospel and feel God’s love through us. Remember, we’re Gentiles too, but I’m glad we made it into the family of God by the mercy and grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Questions for Discussion:

1. Why is prejudice so prevalent? What are some forms of prejudice that we need to be aware of?
2. Even today there is a tendency to hold to legalistic righteousness. Why is there often a preference to hold to legalistic requirements instead of the freedom found in Christ?
3. As God called on Peter to lay aside his prejudices and biases, He calls upon all of us to do so as well. In what ways might God be calling on you to overcome your prejudices and biases?

Reflections:

Peter and Cornelius were neither insane nor “hearing voices.” God sent a messenger to each of them so both sight and sound could confirm the message. Each of them saw, heard, and responded positively. We may never get a message in the same way, but God still speaks to us through His Holy Word, the Bible. When we open its pages and read, our response should be as positive and immediate as theirs.

Prayer:

Lord, you are a God of love and mercy. Help us to reach those of every nation who need your saving grace. Encourage us to be ready for them with the gospel of Christ. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

What God wants me to do:

Special insights I have learned:

Work It Out!

“All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose”

Romans 8:28



I've said it, and I'm sure you have too -“Don't worry; everything will work out just fine.” Don't kid yourself. Things don't always work out and all things are not good. Look at everything that's going on in the world – sickness, death, wars, poverty, addiction, and natural catastrophes – none of that is good. There is so much “name it and claim it” prosperity preaching and beliefs around these days. So much so that many church people believe that this scripture means that you won't lose your job or home, but if you do, God will immediately give you better ones, as long as you love Him. Your loved ones will always be safe and healthy and God will always make sure you'll prosper as long as you love God.

But we have to look at the context of this scripture. Paul was living by the power of the Spirit, in the midst of suffering and pain and Paul was definitely no stranger to suffering. He was often beaten, imprisoned, and persecuted. So you couldn't really accuse him of being a Pollyanna type. Paul was expressing the prerequisites for the good to take place. He is not giving this promise to all people but only to those *“who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”*

But what does this mean? Those who love God are, in this context, Christians, because they are called according to God's purpose. The ‘called’ are also the ‘justified’ who will be ‘glorified.’ Verses 29 and 30 speak of our conformity to Christ, our glorification, as the *inevitable* outcome of those who love God. And that's not dependent on how *much* we love God but on the finished work of Christ on the cross. Paul ends the chapter by making it very clear that *nothing* can separate us from the love of God (verses 38-39). By implication, that would include even our temporary lapses in our love for the Savior.

What, then, is the good? It is defined for us, initially at least, in verse 29, *“because those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters”* (NET). The good is not our comfort, wealth, or health. It is conformity to Christ! This good is then fully defined in the next verse: *“And those He predestined, He also called; and those He called, He also justified; and those He justified, He also glorified”* (NET). Ultimately, all things work together to bring each Christian into conformity to Christ, to bring each Christian to glory. Paul is so certain that this will take place that He speaks of our glorification in the past tense! Basically He's saying, “It's a done deal.” Not only this, but no one is lost between predestination and glorification. Paul does not say “some of those” or even “most of those” when He speaks of the steps in the salvation journey. From predestination to glorification, He uses the simple “those.” *No one* misses the boat along the way.

When we read Romans 8:28 in its context we can give a positive answer to the questions of pain and suffering in the world. We may see nothing good come of misery and disaster in this world,

but this world is not all of reality. There is an ‘until’ - there is a place beyond the realm of what our senses can apprehend, and it is more real and more lasting than what we experience in this mortal body. God is using the present, even the miserable present, to conform us to the image of his Son. If we define the good as only what we can see in this life, then we have missed the whole point of this text. Because, as Paul said earlier in the same chapter, “*For I consider that our present sufferings cannot even be compared to the glory that will be revealed to us*” (Romans 8:18, NET). We Christians sometimes tend to pervert texts such as this one. If our lives are comfortable, if we have wealth, good health, that is fine and well. But that is not the good that Paul had in mind, and it is not the goal of the Christian life.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Why does a merciful and gracious God allow so much pain and suffering in this life?
2. How would you have turned out if the Lord had not chastised you? Think about your children or children you know. Imagine how they would grow up without someone to discipline them.
3. Why is it hard for Christians to adjust to suffering? Have you been told that once you give your life to Christ, everything will be all right? How have we been fooled into believing that children of God are exempt from suffering?

Reflections:

The Christian must always remember that the Lord allows suffering as a means of refining human character. The wounds of life are “working together” to educate us and to bring us closer to God. The day will come eventually when the redeemed saint will look back upon the “bruises” received in the “school of hard knocks,” and thank God our Creator for the discipline we received, realizing that without it, heaven might never have been gained.

Prayer:

Lord, may we always trust that even in the midst of pain, suffering and disappointment, you are working on us to get us ready to be with you in your kingdom. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

What God wants me to do:

Special insights I have learned:
