

Let My People Go! What is the Central Plot of the Bible?



Session 1



**Exodus 3:1-17; 15:19-21;
Isaiah 43:1-3; Luke 2:10-11;
9:29-31; 19:1-10;
John 3:16-17**

Session Objective

Participants will discover that God's salvation is the central plot of the Bible. The story does not begin with the creation but with the Exodus; God delivered the Israelites, the descendants of the covenant, from slavery in Egypt and revealed his holy name. The Exodus interpreted their past and defined their future. The plot of the Bible—God's salvation—is interpreted and revealed in many ways.

Faith Statement

In everlasting love, the God of Abraham and Sarah chose a covenant people to bless all families of the earth. Hearing their cry, God delivered the children of Israel from the house of bondage. Loving us still, God makes us heirs with Christ of the covenant. . . . In a broken and fearful world the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace. In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

—A Brief Statement of Faith (*Book of Confessions*, 10:3, 41-48, 65-76)

Session Overview

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Enhancements

Family Connections
Another Story of Deliverance
Listen to the Story in a Contemporary Paraphrase



For instructions to download Web Resources and the coffeehouse version, see page 1.

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

Where does your story begin? Prepare for introducing the primary plot of the Bible by considering the plot line of your own life. If you keep a journal, would it be possible to find a thread linking the days and years together? Or think about the "Pictures" folder on your computer. Do you recognize a theme among the images: family, people, discoveries, travels, and so on?

Just as you will ask of the youth, reflect on your life and draw a personal timeline. As you are well aware, our lives do not progress in a straight line without ups and downs. In fact, the line is often curved, distorted, and frequently leads to dead ends. Add markers along the line to signify crucial, even life-changing, experiences: beginnings, accomplishments, holy moments, turning points, challenging decisions, changes, losses, joyous experiences, and important occasions. Is it possible that one of those markers indicates the true beginning of your story? Where would you start?



Understanding the Scripture

Where do we find answers to our questions about salvation? An obvious place to begin is with the word *salvation*. Where does the word appear? How is the word used? What does it mean in the story? Computer searches make this information easy to find. If you have a translation of the Bible on your computer, simply search the document for "salvation." Depending upon the translation, you will discover that "salvation" is found eighty-one times in the Old Testament (notice Isaiah!) and forty times in the New Testament. "Salvation" appears only five times in the four gospels and thirty-five times in the rest of the New Testament. In addition, the word *savior* is found twenty-five times in the New Testament. Such a pursuit, while interesting, reveals just a small part of the answer, especially since the entire Bible, all sixty-six books, proclaims the good news of God's salvation. Thus, our study of salvation will center on four significant themes: deliverance, healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

"Deliverance" not only responds to the question, "What is the central plot of the Bible?" but also helps to answer the question, "What is salvation?" In his classic book, *Understanding the Old Testament*, Bernhard W. Anderson directs us to the central plot:

"When we seek to understand the meaning of our individual life stories, we do not actually begin with birth or infancy, even though a written autobiography might start there. Rather, we view or review our early childhood in the light of later experiences that are impressed deeply in memory. Analogously, Israel's life story did not begin with the time of Abraham or even the Creation, although the Old Testament in its present form starts there. Rather, Israel's history had its true beginning in a crucial

historical experience that created a self-conscious historical community—an event so decisive that earlier happenings and subsequent experiences were seen in its light.

“This decisive event—the great watershed of Israel’s history—was the Exodus from Egypt. Even today, the Jewish people understand their vocation and destiny in the light of this revealing event. Jews recall and make contemporary the Exodus as they celebrate the Passover. This act of worship is not just a form of archaism—a retreat from the present into the unrecoverable once-upon-a-time. Rather, observant Jews see themselves as participants in that experience. The event of the past enters into the present with deep meaning.”¹

At the heart of the deliverance story is salvation in Jesus Christ. Notice that Luke interprets Jesus’ death and resurrection as his “exodus” (Luke 9:31, *The Message*).



Understanding the Faith Statement

The challenge in writing A Brief Statement of Faith was to pare down the mighty acts of God to the essentials. Created to state Reformed beliefs for the newly reunited church—the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—it is both educational and liturgical. It was given a format that would lend itself to use during worship: shorter sections wrapped within its Trinitarian structure.

The salvation story is expressed in eighty lines and wrapped around a beginning that affirms “in life and in death we belong to God,” and a conclusion that reminds us that “nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

With brevity, God’s covenant relationship with the people of Israel is expressed in six lines; the call of Abraham and Sarah and the deliverance from bondage in Egypt are the two points in the story. The scriptural testimonies of thirty-nine books are reduced to six verses! God reaches out to deliver the people he had earlier called. In our consideration of a plot line for the Bible, we are reminded in the brief statement that the plot can be told in various ways; it is not always linear and certainly never neat and tidy.

Nevertheless, the heart of the plot is always propelled by God’s gracious and tenacious love.



Teaching Today’s Question

The question, “What is the central plot of the Bible?” may not be put in those precise words, but you may hear it being asked in such questions as: What is the Bible all about? What’s so important about reading the Bible? Why do

1. Bernhard W. Anderson, Steven Bishop, Judith Newman, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 5th Ed. (New York: Pearson Education, Inc., 2007), p. 9. Used with permission.

we even need to read the Old Testament? However the question is addressed, discovering the answer will change the way you read and understand the Bible. Jesus Christ delivers, heals, forgives, and reconciles; but the story really begins, of course, at the beginning!

In this session, you will guide the youth in discovering that the plot of the Bible does not necessarily begin with the first verse, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1a). The plot, from beginning to end, is the story of God's salvation; it is the thread woven throughout the sixty-six books of the Bible. At absolutely every point in the Scriptures we can benefit from considering how a narrative, story, prophecy, or psalm relates to the primary story.

Often our teaching and preaching focus on segments of Scripture and leave out the overarching plot; the stories may seem disconnected from each other, especially between the two testaments. Our goal is to emphasize the common plot from Genesis to Revelation by listening closely to the word of God.



Enter

Rules and Grace



Newsprint, markers, blue mounting tape

As the youth arrive, invite them to create a personal timeline of their lives. Read these directions:

- On a sheet of newsprint, draw a line. This line, representing your timeline, can be straight, curving, circular, or a combination.
- Along the line, place markers for significant experiences in your life: beginnings, accomplishments, holy moments, turning points, challenging decisions, changes, losses, joyous experiences, and important occasions.
- Where does the plot line of your life begin? Place a marker and write your name where you would begin telling the story of your life.
- Think about your hopes for how your plot line will unfold. What comes next? Post the timelines around the room.



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

Read and discuss the Buechner quote.

"I think it is possible to say that in spite of all its extraordinary variety, the Bible is held together by having a single plot. It is one that can be simply stated: God creates the world; *the world gets lost*; God seeks to restore the world to the glory for which God created it."²

Explore the following questions:



- What comes to mind when you hear the word *salvation*?
- When have you recently been aware of the words *save, saved, or salvation*? How were the words used?
- How would you define salvation to someone who is not a Christian?
- In what ways has God restored/saved the world?
- How do you see God at work restoring the world?
- What are some other ways to begin telling the biblical story?

Pray the opening prayer.

Opening Prayer

Liberating God, in love you rescued your people and parted the sea. In love, you lead us through many obstacles in our own lives. Your deliverance may be less obvious and your gift of daily bread taken for granted, yet we know that you continue to deliver your people. In Jesus Christ, we have been set free! Receive our thanks and praise in our Savior's name. Amen.

Option B: The Voice in the Fire



Bibles, copies of "The Voice in the Fire" (Web Resource 1a), prepared index cards (optional)

Invite the youth to consider the question, "What is the central plot of the Bible?" Distribute copies of "The Voice in the Fire" (Web Resource 1a) and select readers for the dramatic reading.

Reflect upon the dramatic reading with the following questions, along with those the youth raise. Consider writing the questions on individual index cards and have each youth select one. They may either respond or pass to let the group answer.

2. Frederick Buechner, "The Good Book as a Good Book," in *The Clown in the Belfry: Writings on Faith and Fiction* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1992), p. 44.



- What has led God to this encounter with Moses?
- What do we learn about the compassion of God?
- How is God identified at the beginning and end of the story?
- Why does Moses seek to know God's name? How will knowing God's name help?
- Just imagine: What if Moses had not decided to stop and look?
- What led Moses to say "yes" to God's work?
- Christians often talk of having a burning bush experience in their life. What do you imagine the description of such experiences refers to?
- What does this story tell us about salvation?
- Where else in the Bible is fire a sign of the powerful presence of God? (*Pillar of fire guiding the wilderness journey, tongues of fire at Pentecost, and so on.*)

Pray the opening prayer.



Explore

Option A: Putting Salvation into Words



Bibles, copies of "Putting Salvation into Words" (Web Resource 1b)

Inform the youth that even though God's salvation is the central plot of the Bible, the word *salvation* is used only five times in the Gospels. The word is found eighty-one times in the Old Testament and thirty-five times in the remaining books of the New Testament. As we will discover, a variety of words and themes are used to express salvation.

Distribute copies of "Putting Salvation into Words" (Web Resource 1b). Invite youth to work in pairs or small groups on the Scripture passages. When the pairs or groups are complete, ask:



- What is one discovery you have made about salvation?
- What is one question you have about salvation?

Option B: Where is Your Jericho?



Bibles, copies of "Where is Your Jericho?" (Web Resource 1c)

Explain that one of the five times the word *salvation* is used in the Gospels is in a story about the persistence of Zacchaeus. He thought that he would merely catch a glimpse of Jesus but ended up receiving so much more—salvation!

Distribute copies of "Where is Your Jericho?" (Web Resource 1c). Invite youth to work in pairs or small groups on Luke's story of Jesus and Zacchaeus. When the pairs or groups are complete, ask:



- What can we learn about salvation from this story?
- Salvation for Zaccheaus happened in an encounter with Jesus in Jericho. Where is your Jericho?
- Where have you encountered the welcoming love of Christ?

Option C: Look for Stories of Deliverance in Other Places



Les Misérables (2012, PG13) DVD, TV, DVD player

Challenge the youth to look for ways that salvation is expressed outside the church in other settings and contexts. One powerful story of deliverance is found in the film, *Les Misérables*. View the scene of the priest's encounter with Jean Valjean. The priest welcomes him in for a meal and a bed for the night but while he and the household are sleeping, Valjean steals the silver. Within the priest's heartfelt forgiveness, notice his moving words: "God has raised you out of darkness. I have saved your soul for God."

Start: 7:22 minutes
End: 14:30 minutes

Ask such questions as:



- What brought about the change in Jean Valjean's life?
- How did he feel about being forgiven and trusted?
- In what ways is God involved in the plot line of *Les Misérables*?
- Can you think of other movies, books, or current songs that tell stories of being delivered from bondage?



Express

Option A: Liberation Now!



Bibles, paper plates, newspapers, magazine, glue, staples, stapler, beans

Return to the story of the Exodus by focusing on Miriam's joyous song following the Israelites crossing through the sea. Read her song in Exodus 15:19–21. Many scholars believe that these words are among the oldest parts of the biblical story.

Ask the youth to picture themselves standing before an overwhelming obstacle:



- Where in our world are people seeking deliverance?
- What are the situations that call us to work and pray for their rescue and freedom?

Create tambourines by stapling two paper plates together. Add some items to make noise before stapling. Decorate the plates with words and images of liberation. Provide newspapers and magazines for pictures. Once they are completed, make some noise!

Option B: The Water of Salvation

Bowl, pitcher of water

Set out an empty bowl and a pitcher of water. Ask a volunteer to read Isaiah 43:1–3.

Explain how Isaiah spoke of God’s salvation to those living in exile in Babylon. In words recalling the exodus from Egypt, Isaiah promised that God’s deliverance would come!

Suggest that when we hear Isaiah 43:1–3 today we may be reminded of passing through the waters in baptism, a sign of salvation. Direct one of the youth to slowly pour the pitcher of water into the bowl while you or other youth read the following words from the baptism liturgy of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

“We give you thanks, Eternal God, for you nourish and sustain all living things by the gift of water.

In the beginning of time, your Spirit moved over the watery chaos, calling forth order and life.

In the time of Noah, you destroyed evil by the waters of the flood, giving righteousness a new beginning.

You led Israel out of slavery, through the waters of the sea, into the freedom of the promised land.

In the waters of Jordan Jesus was baptized by John and anointed with your Spirit.

By the baptism of his own death and resurrection, Christ set us free from sin and death, and opened the way to eternal life.

We thank you, O God, for the water of baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. From it we are raised to share in his resurrection, through it we are reborn by the power of the Holy Spirit.”³

Immerse your hand(s) in the water and sprinkle or douse the youth while saying with enthusiasm, “Remember your baptism!”

3. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), p. 410. Used with permission.



Freedom

- Strips of paper, tape, prayer of confession posted on newsprint, poster, or chalkboard

Give each person two strips of paper to be made into paper handcuffs. Invite them to name things that keep people in bondage on the strips. Wrap one strip around a wrist and tape. Loop the other one through it and tape.

Briefly summarize today's session. The central plot of the Bible is God's salvation. The story began when God reached out to deliver the people of Israel from captivity in Egypt. The story continued in the gift of Jesus Christ whose life, death, and resurrection liberated people from sin and broke the bondage of death. The story continues in the work of the Holy Spirit in fulfilling God's intention to make all of creation new.

Lead the group in offering a prayer of confession. Either use one that is familiar from the worship of your community or consider the following:

"Merciful God, we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart and have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy upon us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us so that we may delight in your will and glorify your Holy Name, through Jesus Christ, our Lord."⁴

Proclaim words of God's forgiveness. Direct the youth to break free of their handcuffs with joy once they hear the word *forgiven!*

The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.
I declare to you, in the name of Jesus Christ,
you are forgiven.
May the God of mercy, who forgives you all your sins,
strengthen you in all goodness,
and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life.
Let all the people of God say: Amen.⁵

Conclude by praying the closing prayer.

4. *Lutheran Book of Worship*, (Augsburg Publishing House, 1978), p. 77. Used with permission.

5. *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), p. 56.

Closing Prayer

Redeeming God, deliver us from all that keeps us in bondage. Grant us the guidance and strength of Jesus Christ, who in his dying and rising has wondrously set us free. Help us cooperate with you and do what we can to help others be free from fear and despair, and set free to experience your love. In Jesus' name. Amen.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

"Family Connections" (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for each of the four sessions in this course that families can talk about after class. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

Another Story of Deliverance

Another powerful story of deliverance occurred on August 28, 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., when Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to over 250,000 people who had joined the "March for Jobs and Freedom." The draft of the speech that King had prepared for the occasion bears the title, "Normalcy, Never Again!" Yet, in giving the speech he departed from the written words in response to his friend, Mahalia Jackson. From the crowd she shouted out, "Tell them about the dream, Martin." Thus, due to King's repetitive use of the evocative phrase, the speech became known as "I Have a Dream," and it galvanized the civil rights movement in the United States.

Play a recording, view a video, or read the text of the "I Have a Dream" speech, beginning with, "From every mountainside, let freedom ring." Ask such questions as:



- In what ways do King's words define what it means to be saved?
- What biblical stories of God's deliverance supported his call for freedom and spoke to his dream?
- How does the dream speak to you today?

Listen to the Story in a Contemporary Paraphrase

Reading a different translation and listening to a different voice adds to our understanding of Scripture, often with surprising results. For instance, Clarence Jordan, in *The Cotton Patch Version*, set the ancient story within the contemporary world of the American South. The Message, translated by Eugene Peterson, and the J. B. Philips New Testament Translation offer wonderful insights.