

THE 
PRESENT
WORD
ADULT BIBLE LESSONS

PARTICIPANT'S BOOK

FALL 2019

RESPONDING TO GOD'S GRACE

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PARTICIPANT’S BOOK

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Introduction

The “grace of God” is a central conviction of Christian faith. Our God of grace loves us in Jesus Christ, forgives us, saves us, and draws us into a life of growth in faith, hope, and love. As members of the body of Christ, we endeavor to share God’s grace with others by word and deed through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The studies this quarter explore what it means to live in the grace of God and perceive God’s grace all around us. As 2 Peter 3:18 counsels,

“grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.”

May this study be a catalyst for you and your fellow *The Present Word* readers to grow in grace and share God’s amazing grace with others, day by day.

Mark D. Hinds,
Editor

The Uniform Series

The Present Word quarterly Bible study is based on the Uniform Series, a plan for reading and studying the Bible. The objectives of the series are to help persons increasingly:

1. to know the content of the Bible,
2. to understand the message of the Bible in light of their experiences and relationships, and
3. to be aware of God's self-disclosure, especially God's redeeming love as revealed in Jesus Christ, that they may respond in faith and love—to the end that they may know who they are and what their human situation means, grow as the children of God rooted in the Christian community, live in the Spirit of God in every relationship, fulfill their common discipleship in the world, and abide in the Christian hope.

The emphasis in these objectives is on the Bible as the record of the revelation of God in Christ as the primary source of understanding the meaning of the Christian faith and as the most effective means of confronting persons with the significant concerns of the gospel. These concerns include personal faith, values, human relationships, social responsibility, Christian hope, and the implications of Christian discipleship under the lordship of Christ and in the fellowship of his Spirit.

One of the distinctive features of the Uniform Series is the collaborative process through which denominational partners engage in the common task of developing the Lesson Guides. The development process begins with a Scope and Sequence subcommittee whose work sets a framework for the biblical themes of each six-year cycle. The Scope and Sequence team for Cycle 23 (2016–2022) chose themes that are creatively expressed in this statement of Christian faith:

The God of the Bible, the source of creation, loves us and calls us in covenant through our faith to worship and to do justice.

The underlined words in the statement compose the eight recurring themes throughout each quarterly segment of *The Present Word*.

Quarter in Brief

The fall quarter focuses on God's gift of faith and how we respond to it both personally and communally. The lessons from the Old and New Testaments illuminate how God's grace affects the lives of all believers, as demonstrated by their obedience, gratitude, and holy living.

Unit I, "God Is Faithful," has five lessons that tell the story of God's faithfulness. In Genesis, God is faithful to Abraham by blessing his nephew Lot, and God is faithful in answering Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel. In Exodus, God is faithful to the people of Israel by providing manna when they complain of hunger. In Numbers, Caleb and Joshua remind the Israelites of God's faithfulness. Later, God hears their cries and forgives, although the people continue to rebel.

Unit II, "Responses to God's Faithfulness," has four lessons that explore reactions to the many benefits accrued to humans because of God's grace. Deuteronomy teaches that faith requires a response of obedience. The story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath in First Kings shows that faithful obedience saves Elijah, the widow, and her son. Luke's Gospel tells about gratitude for God's faithfulness in the anointing of Jesus and the healing of the centurion's servant.

Unit III, "Faith Leads to Holy Living," has four lessons that examine letters to early churches that tell them how to live as faithful followers of Christ. Second Corinthians tells the people to examine themselves to see if they are living in faith. First Thessalonians urges Christians to be positive examples of faith. First and Second Peter teach that faith requires holy living and goodness.

SPARED!

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE

Genesis 18:16–19:29

A VERSE TO REMEMBER

So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had settled. (Gen. 19:29)

Interviews with people who have survived disasters often share a common theme: “It was awful, but, thank God, we survived!” “Our house is gone, but we are all safe, and we can rebuild.” The feelings expressed are understandable. Often left unexpressed, however, is any consideration about the others, about those who did not escape harm.

The verses for this lesson certainly raise this question for the sensitive reader. Genesis 19 deals with a monumental disaster, namely the destruction of Sodom with all its inhabitants. What may seem inherently unfair to many contemporary Christians is explained somewhat (see below). Though a legitimate concern, this was not the primary reason for the preservation of this story.

These verses are part of a longer story about Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 12–25). In Genesis 12:1–3, God made a covenant with Abraham promising to bless and protect Abraham and his family forever. Because of this covenant, God felt it necessary to explain to Abraham what was about to happen to Sodom and why (18:16–21). The total destruction that befell Sodom was interpreted as divine punishment and was thus justified. Nevertheless, Lot’s family was spared. Why? Because Lot was a part of Abraham’s family. In the saving of Lot, God confirmed and sustained the continuing covenant with Abraham and Sarah.

O God of promise, help us learn to trust you and to frame our lives in light of your word as confirmed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Amen.

SCRIPTURE READING

Gen. 19:1, 15–26, 29

19:1 The two angels came to Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of Sodom. When Lot saw them, he rose to meet them, and bowed down with his face to the ground. . . .

¹⁵When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, “Get up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or else you will be consumed in the punishment of the city.” ¹⁶But he lingered; so the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the LORD being merciful to him, and they brought him out and left him outside the city. ¹⁷When they had brought them outside, they said, “Flee for your life; do not look back or stop anywhere in the Plain; flee to the hills, or else you will be consumed.” ¹⁸And Lot said to them, “Oh, no, my lords; ¹⁹your servant has found favor with you, and you have shown me great kindness in saving my life; but I cannot flee to the hills, for fear the disaster will overtake me and I die. ²⁰Look, that city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one. Let me escape there—is it not a little one?—and my life will be saved!” ²¹He said to him, “Very well, I grant you this favor too, and will not overthrow the city of which you have spoken. ²²Hurry, escape there, for I can do nothing until you arrive there.” Therefore the city was called Zoar. ²³The sun had risen on the earth when Lot came to Zoar.

²⁴Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven; ²⁵and he overthrew those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground. ²⁶But Lot’s wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt. . . .

²⁹So it was that, when God destroyed the cities of the Plain, God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had settled.

Scripture Notes

The city gate served as a seat of government for a city in the ancient world. Lot’s presence there may indicate (along with 19:9) that he held a position of authority in Sodom.

Zoar: From the Hebrew *Tso`ar* meaning “insignificant” or “small.”

Lot’s wife looking back indicated that she did not want to leave Sodom. Therefore, it was fitting punishment for Yahweh to allow her to stay—as just another salt pillar that dotted the landscape around the Dead Sea.

Lot was commended as a righteous man living among the unrighteous in 2 Peter 2:7–8.

LOT AND SODOM

Today's story opens with Lot, Abraham's nephew, greeting two "angels" at the city gate of Sodom (Gen. 19:1). Lot and Abraham had separated for the sake of family harmony (13:5–13). Abraham settled in Canaan (v. 12). Lot placed his tent among the five "cities of the Plain," Sodom and Gomorrah being the largest (vv. 10–12). The other three were Admah, Zeboiim, and Zoar (10:19; 14:2; 19:3). Many scholars think that the ruins of the cities of the Plain now lie submerged beneath the waters of the Dead Sea. These cities were not large; we would have considered them as towns or villages ranging from a few thousand to a few hundred inhabitants. The Hebrew term usually translated as "city" merely means a population center of some sort that has a wall.

As the story begins, Lot is sitting at the city gate, the place where all official business was conducted. He may have been functioning as an official, a matter not at all pleasing to longer-tenured citizens (19:9). Lot's neighbors expressed suspicion and negative feelings about the "men/angels" that Lot had received (vv. 1, 4–5). The people of Sodom had a long-standing reputation as "great sinners against the LORD" (13:13; 18:20).

The two strangers that arrived at Sodom's gate are described as "angels" (19:1, 15). In all the other references to them, they are called "men" (see 18:2, 16, 22; 19:5, 10, 12). At points, even the LORD is counted among them (18:10, 13–14, 17). The Hebrew term translated "angels" basically denotes "messengers" (for example, Gen. 32:4, 7; Deut. 2:25). "Angel" sometimes designates a messenger who has a special relationship with God and does God's bidding. In the Old Testament, these messengers or angels look like human beings. The notion of angels having wings or flitting about like Cupid comes from a much later time.

The men had been with the Lord at Mamre (18:1–2). When they left Mamre, they "looked toward Sodom" (v. 16). Then they became angels or messengers and presented themselves before Lot at Sodom's city gate (19:1). They were to destroy the city and to warn Lot to leave before the destruction.

 **What questions are raised by Lot's experience in Sodom? How do those questions relate to us?**

RIGHTEOUSNESS

The Gospel of Luke (17:26–30) likens the destruction of Sodom to the devastating flood during the time of Noah, each being a time of great wickedness (Gen. 6:5; 18:20). Both describe a severe judgment by God. Both Noah (6:8; 7:1) and Lot (2 Pet. 2:7–8) were delivered by God from the judgment because they were deemed righteous.

In Gen. 18, the LORD decided he should tell Abraham what was about to happen to Sodom (v. 17). Abraham challenges the Lord because of the Lord's righteousness to reconsider the decision to destroy Sodom utterly.

Abraham's line of argument has to do with the question of whether God will recognize and honor the presence of some folk who are maintaining their commitment to God, even though they live among a population that does not. Will God destroy everyone or will the few be spared? Abraham moves from fifty down to ten (18:26–32). At each point, the Lord acknowledges that because of the few, all will not be destroyed. The point is made: God will honor the presence of the righteous if any are found within Sodom.

“Righteousness” in the Old Testament is primarily concerned about correct relationships. Righteousness is not about the presence or absence of sin. God's righteousness has to do with the divine commitment to maintain a relationship with God's people.

Please note: The Lord purposely entered into a discussion with Abraham. The Lord willingly engaged in a risky consideration about divine and human responsibilities one to the other. The Lord signals a willingness to engage in the questions with us.

The angels/messengers clearly warned Lot of the coming disaster, but Lot could not convince his sons-in-law to take the warning seriously (19:14). So they refused to leave Sodom and missed deliverance. In fact, force had to be used to bring Lot, his wife, and his daughters out of the city (v. 16). Even then, Lot's wife refused the instructions given by the angels, and she was left behind as a salt pillar at the outskirts of the town she was so reluctant to leave (v. 26).

 **How can sparing a few over the many be justified? What other questions must be asked in determining what is just?**

WHAT IT MEANS FOR US

The basis for this dramatic scene is God's promise to Abraham. Since God intended to make a great nation of Abraham and Sarah, and thereby to bless all the nations of the world (18:17–18), it was essential to explain to Abraham what was about to happen to Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 19). The judgment on Sodom was not a capricious act on God's part. Not at all! It was in response to the "outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah" and their "grave sin" (vv. 20–21). But the Lord chose to inform Abraham of what was to occur to assure Abraham that his nephew, Lot, would be preserved. Or, in other words, the purpose is to affirm once again the divine promise repeatedly given to Abraham and Sarah (12:1–3; 13:14–16; 17:1–9).

The humans in this account are quite prepared to enter a discussion with God about what is going on. They are not portrayed as those who merely accept things without question. Questions of "why" and "how" are not ruled out of bounds by God. Being in a relationship with others requires honesty and openness. God seeks that with Abraham and, through the angels, with Lot as well. Humans do not always receive the responses they desire from God, but nonetheless, they are invited to voice their concerns.

God's promise to Abraham did not mean that Abraham or his family would not face difficulties in their lives. What it did mean was that they should always attempt to interpret their experiences in light of God's commitment. Though the destruction of Sodom was terrible (though not without justification: 18:20–21; 19:13), it was to be understood within the context of God's relationship with Abraham. This story was remembered because it illustrated how—even during great destruction—God preserved those to whom a divine promise had been made.

As we live, move, and have our being in the world, we are assured that the God who makes eternal promises to his people will keep and fulfill those promises. Such is the promise we have in Jesus Christ. Even when we fall, as we all do, God in Christ reaches down to pick us up. Let us live confidently in the grace of God and testify with our words and our deeds to the gracious mercy of God.

 **How does the person and work of Jesus affect the message of today's passage about Lot and Sodom?**

A LOOK AHEAD

DAILY BIBLE READINGS			
M	Sept. 2	The Nazarite Vow	Num. 6:1–5, 13–15
T	Sept. 3	“O LORD, You Answered”	Ps. 99
W	Sept. 4	Hannah Is Childless	1 Sam. 1:1–8
T	Sept. 5	The Yearly Sacrifice	1 Sam. 1:21–23
F	Sept. 6	Dedicated to the Lord	1 Sam. 1:24–28
S	Sept. 7	Hannah Is Rewarded	1 Sam. 2:18–21

DEVOTIONAL READING

Ps. 99

¹The LORD is king; let the peoples tremble!

He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!

²The LORD is great in Zion;

he is exalted over all the peoples.

³Let them praise your great and awesome name.

Holy is he!

⁴Mighty King, lover of justice,
you have established equity;

you have executed justice
and righteousness in Jacob.

⁵Extol the LORD our God;
worship at his footstool.

Holy is he!

⁶Moses and Aaron were among his priests,
Samuel also was among those who called on his name.

They cried to the LORD, and he answered them.

⁷He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud;

they kept his decrees,
and the statutes that he gave them.

⁸O LORD our God, you answered them;
you were a forgiving God to them,
but an avenger of their wrongdoings.

⁹Extol the LORD our God,
and worship at his holy mountain;
for the LORD our God is holy.