



**GEAR UP!
GET READY!
GAME ON!**

LEADER DEVOTIONS

DAY 1: JESUS CARES ABOUT ME

Yep, I'm one of those: last to be picked for any playground or P.E. game; prefers books to balls; doesn't know a tight end from a split end. You, too? Don't walk off the field just yet-you are the one God chose for your position on the VBS team! He recruited you to help kids discover how precious they are to Jesus!

In Day 1's story, some people needed a sharply pointed reminder that everyone is precious to Jesus. At that time, the religious leaders recognized only two teams in the league: Winners (themselves) and Sinners (just about everyone else). The Sinners' lineup included tax collectors, people who did not follow Old Testament rules closely enough, and people deemed to be under God's judgment because of a physical ailment.

"This man welcomes sinners!" the Pharisees groused. Can you see their sneers and hear their contempt? Jesus surely did, and told them the story that will be shared with kids on Day 1. It's about a shepherd who did not rest until his entire flock-every last one-was safely home.

Artists' renderings of this parable often show the Good Shepherd tenderly carrying a small, shivering, bewildered lamb on His shoulders. Perhaps that is what Jesus had in mind. But did you ever consider that lost sheep could have been the muleheaded, perpetually cantankerous one that ran from the Shepherd rather than to Him? (I'm praying for someone like this. Perhaps you are, too.) Jesus passionately loves the lost little ones, but He pursues the stubborn big ones, too!

No one is too lost to receive Jesus' love. No "sheep" is so far gone that He refuses to go after it. Our prayer is that you will see each of the kids you serve through the Shepherd's eyes!

PERSONAL TRAINING

VBS isn't just for young kids-it's for you, too! Do a little spiritual stretching of your own as you prepare for VBS:

- How does Isaiah 53:6 describe us?
- Glance at Matthew 9:10-13 and Luke 19:10. How did Jesus describe His mission on earth? What can you do this week to help continue that mission?
- Continue reading Jesus' follow-up stories in Luke 15. What was the end result of each incident?

DAY 2: JESUS GIVES ME HOPE

Can you imagine being a fan of a sport where your team hasn't won a championship in more than a century? Baseball buff or not, it was difficult to duck the hoopla surrounding the 2016 World Series between the Chicago Cubs and the Cleveland Indians. Media covered every inning of every game from every angle. Fanatics cheerfully shelled out thousands of dollars for prime box seats at Game 7. For both teams (perhaps especially for the Cubs, vying for their first Series win in 108 years), the air crackled with *this could be it!* For people who believe in Jesus' power over life and death, the mindset is not *this could be*; it's *this will be*-period!

Martha and Mary were losing hope rapidly. Their brother Lazarus was so ill, they determined only Jesus could provide a cure. In the absence of modern messaging, they sent word to Jesus on foot-a painstakingly slow process, considering Jesus was last known to be "across the Jordan," approximately 20 miles from Bethany (John 10:40). The two additional days Jesus chose to wait had to be excruciating for the grieving sisters.

Although Jesus clearly laid out His plans to His disciples (see John 11:4,11-15), Mary and Martha did not fully grasp the purpose in Jesus' procrastination. That was clear in the way they greeted Jesus. They basically asked, "What took You so long?" Bystanders expressed similar thoughts in John 11:37.

Jesus grieved along with the sisters, and He continued to assure them He was in control-both in this life and after this life. Praying for the sake of the people who watched Him (John 11:41-42), Jesus called Lazarus out of the cave.

The logic in today's story is as straight as a line drive: Jesus said He would raise Lazarus. He kept His word to His friends. Jesus said He gives eternal life to people who believe in Him. He will keep His word to us!

PERSONAL TRAINING

VBS isn't just for young kids-it's for you too! Do a little spiritual stretching of your own as you prepare for VBS:

- Luke 7:11-17 describes another man raised to life by Jesus. Compare the reaction of the citizens of Nain to the Pharisees' discussion of the Lazarus incident in John 11:45-48. What were the Pharisees afraid of? Why?
- I Peter 1:3-9 describes the "living hope" given to those who faith in Jesus. What does Peter say you can look forward to?

DAY 3: JESUS HELPS ME BELIEVE

Football officials used instant replay to review a call for the first time in regular season play in 1986, at a Chicago Bears versus Cleveland Browns game. Instant replay guides decisions at almost all NFL games now, but it continues to be controversial-a ref can still get it wrong, even after seeing a play the second time. Day 3's Bible story is an encouraging reminder that it's possible to believe in Jesus without seeing Him!

The observer we're looking at is Jesus' disciple, Thomas. We don't know much about him, but a couple of glimpses lead us to believe he was a pragmatist, not a theory guy (see John 11:16 and 14:5). So when Thomas missed Jesus' phenomenal door-penetrating comeback (John 20:19-20), he was skeptical.

Although video technology was centuries away, Thomas was granted a second chance with Jesus' entrance a week later. Again, even though the door was locked, Jesus appeared, extended His hands, and displayed His scarred side for Thomas' examination. He did not scold Thomas for his initial unbelief. After all, Jesus ate an evening snack convincing the other disciples He wasn't a ghost! (See Luke 24:36-43.)

Contemporary Bibles use the phrase *Thomas responded* to Jesus or *Thomas answered and said*. The Greek word used in John 20:28 literally means *Thomas concluded for himself*. Based on the evidence Jesus presented, Thomas believed that Jesus was indeed his Lord and Master. Thomas professed his belief based on what he could see. Jesus pronounced a blessing on those who would believe without seeing.

It's tempting to score VBS success by numbers: How many kids attended each day? Prayed with a leader? Before God's salvation plan is shared with the kids, take your eyes off the scoreboard. Remember that what matters most is helping kids, with the Holy Spirit's prompting, to trust Jesus as their Savior and Lord.

PERSONAL TRAINING

VBS isn't just for kids-it's for you, too! Do a little spiritual stretching of your own as you prepare for VBS.

- Being blessed is a kind of joy that isn't dictated by circumstance or experience but is a result of trusting in Jesus. Read John 20:29. How has believing in Jesus blessed you?
- Jesus didn't belittle Thomas because of his doubts. What doubts or difficulties in belief do you have right now? Express them honestly to Jesus in prayer and ask Him to patch up the punctures in your faith.
- Reflect on the moment in your life when you concluded that Jesus is indeed Lord. How has your life changed since that moment?

DAY 4: JESUS LOVES ME

OK, sports buffs: What are the nicknames for Boston Celtics legend John Haylicek, former Chicago Bears defensive tackle William Perry and the mascot for the Colorado Rockies? (We'll share the answers shortly.) Jesus had a nickname for his friend John: Son of Thunder (Mark 3:17). But as time passed, John often referred to himself as the disciple Jesus loved. In Day 4's VBS story, we've lifted John's career highlights and grouped them together to show kids how John witnessed and experienced Jesus' unfailing love.

Though he is a hero of faith, John's career included plenty of bloopers! He complained about unauthorized miracles (Luke 9:49-50). He threatened to call down fire-bombs on an unwelcoming village (Luke 9:54). He allowed his mama to lobby Jesus for an executive position for her boys (Matthew 20:20-21). He fell asleep on the job (Matthew 26:36-40).

Despite these fouls and errors, John was still a member of Jesus' inner circle. He shared Jesus' last supper and heard Jesus command the disciples to love one another. He was charged with the care of Jesus' mother when Jesus was on the cross. He was the first disciple to see Jesus' discarded grave clothes. He ate breakfast with the risen Jesus after a long night of fishing. As you read about these events in your Bible, ask yourself the same question that kids will be asked-What did this event teach John about Jesus' love?

What John learned is evident in everything he wrote. Jesus is love personified. He loves Hondo (Haylicek), the Refrigerator (Perry), the guy wearing Dinger the Triceratops' (Colorado Rockies mascot) suit, and you! And those who receive Jesus' love and trust Him as Savior can share it with others-look for an opportunity to do that today!

PERSONAL TRAINING

VBS isn't just for young kids-it's for you too! Do a little spiritual stretching of your own as you prepare for VBS:

- Do you have a nickname? How did you get it? How does it make you feel?
- If you gave yourself a nickname to describe your relationship with Jesus now, what would it be?
- Hang out in I John for a while, How many mentions did John give to Jesus' love for us or our challenge to love others?

DAY 5: JESUS GIVES ME JOY

The classic baseball poem, *Casey at the Bat* ends like this, "Somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout, but there is no joy in Mudville-mighty Casey has struck out." (That's what you get for letting your outlook be outdone by the outcome of a strike-out.)

The dejected fans in the Mudville stadium could stand to learn a thing or two from Paul and Silas. Their joy could not be squelched, even in the squalor of the Philippian jail.

Roman prisons were not known for their luxurious amenities. Many were underground or in stone quarries. They were dark, crowded, and stinkier than a junior high locker room. The stocks that confined Paul and Silas likely stretched them into uncomfortable positions-with their backs raw from a beating. (Read Acts 16:16-24 for the arrest details.) They sang anyway. In the same circumstances, would you? The unexpected dungeon duet captured the attention of their fellow captives. Suddenly, Paul and Silas were accompanied by the pounding rhythm of an earthquake! The jailer expected to be held responsible for prisoners who fled from their loosened chains. He incorrectly judged that suicide would be the easy out. Paul and Silas quickly exclaimed that not a single prisoner had left! The jailer rushed in, fell before Paul and Silas and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Because of the witness of Paul and Silas, the jailer was not only saved from Roman retaliation, but from the eternal penalty of sin.

The jailer gladly sheathed his sword and showed Paul and Silas into his own home. Their message of grace and joy was contagious (see Acts 16:34) and changed the lives of everyone in the jailer's household!

On Day 5, the kids will learn that joy doesn't depend on the team, the pep squad, or the scoreboard. It is the result of trusting, serving, and sharing Jesus. May joy overflow in your life and the lives of the kids you serve during VBS!

PERSONAL TRAINING

VBS isn't just for young kids-it's for you, too! Do a little spiritual stretching of your own as you prepare for VBS:

- What can you do to refuel when your "joy tank" is tanking? (Hint #1 How did Paul and Silas handle it? Hint #2: Psalm 32 contains several practical tips.)
- Review what you have learned from each day's Bible story. Why are the "big ideas" in each Bible story a source of joy?