

Scriptures

Psalm 96

Matthew 22:15-21

Trusting in God Alone**God rules over all creation—including us.**

- ◆ Jesus cleverly answers a trick question with another question, teaching his listeners that God is the One to whom we owe thanks and praise.
- ◆ Older children are ready to understand more fully Jesus' strategy in responding to his questioners.
- ◆ In today's session we consider God's gifts in creation and, as Jesus taught us, give praise to our Creator.

Core Session

- ◆ Getting Started
- ◆ Today's Gospel
- ◆ God Coins (*cardboard, foil, knitting needles*)
- ◆ Praying Together

Enrichment

- ◆ Explore the Good News
- ◆ Music Talk
- ◆ Express Yourself...in Murals (*giant colored chalk*)
- ◆ Bible Skills
- ◆ Bible Book Cards
- ◆ Info: Where You'll Find Everything Else

Helps for Leaders

- ◆ More about Today's Scriptures
- ◆ Reflection
- ◆ New Psalms
- ◆ The World of the Bible: King Cyrus the Great

✓ Getting Started (5-15 minutes)

Members choose and sing favorite songs.

At the top of a board or newsprint write the title *Greatest Hits*. Divide the group into small teams. Each team chooses a favorite song they know and like to sing to the group. List the titles of songs. Encourage members to tell why they like the songs.

When teams are ready, ask each to sing its song (or just a portion, for example the first line or one verse).

After all teams have sung, invite participants to explore one of the “greatest hits” of the Bible. Explain that the Bible contains an entire book of “greatest hits”—songs that people loved hundreds of years before Jesus lived.

Help participants find **Psalm 96**. Read the psalm aloud and invite them to read in unison with you. Ask:

- ◆ Which lines of the psalm do you like best?
- ◆ What does the psalm say about God?
- ◆ Why is God great?
- ◆ Why should we praise God?

Point out that verse one invites us to “sing a new song” to God. Invite participants to use the songs listed as the basis of new “psalms.” Ask:

- ◆ How can we change the lyrics and turn the songs into songs that could be sung to God?

Allow members to brainstorm aloud. They may write down the new lyrics and even sing the new songs.

✓ Today’s Gospel (10-15 minutes)

Help group members find **Matthew 22:15-21**. Begin with a shared meditation: Ask them to listen for words or phrases that catch their attention as you or a volunteer read aloud the passage slowly. Ask:

- ◆ What words or phrases stood out in today’s gospel?

Explain:

- ◆ The people who talked to Jesus in today’s story were trying to trick him. They thought he would say *either* “Don’t pay taxes,” in which case he could have been arrested for treason, or “Pay taxes,” in which case most people would’ve been angry, because taxes took an unfair amount of money.
- ◆ Jesus didn’t say either of these things. Instead he said, “Show me a coin.” In those days, coins showed the head of the Emperor—and also had the motto “The Divine Caesar.” In other words, coins named

the Emperor as God. Both Jesus *and* the people who were trying to trick him thought this was wrong, because they believed there’s only one God.

- ◆ Devout Jews were forbidden to even touch these coins. This may be why Jesus says, “Show me the coin”; he may not have wanted to touch it, either.
- ◆ When Jesus says, “Give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor and to God what belongs to God,” he may have meant that giving money to the emperor was fine—but not calling him God. Or he may have meant something different: that *everything* belongs to God. We at least know that Jesus taught us to give thanks and praise to God always.

Discuss:

- ◆ What do you think belongs to God?
- ◆ Does anything not belong to God? If so, what?

✓ God Coins (10-20 minutes)

Members make foil “coins” that show what God has given to us and what we can give back to God. Ask:

- ◆ What does God give to us?
- ◆ What can we give to God?

Invite participants to make giant coins by covering circles of cardboard in aluminum foil. Have them use knitting needles to gently etch designs in the coin. Designs can show what God gives to us, what we can give to God or both.

✓ Praying Together (5 minutes)

Gather in a circle. Ask participants to read together **Psalm 96:1**.

- ◆ Sing a new song to the Lord! Sing to the Lord, all the world!

Repeat the verse several times. Ask:

- ◆ Think of some words you could say as a short, song-like prayer. Say these words aloud or silently.

You may wish to go around the circle and allow members to speak their song-prayer, if desired.

Close by praying:

- ◆ God, thank you for each singer here. (*Name each participant.*) Amen.

Note: If you use *At Home with the Good News*, distribute this week’s paper to the children before they leave, or e-mail it to their parents after the session.

□ Explore the Good News

(5-15 minutes)

Distribute copies of today's *Explore the Good News*. On page 1, members will find today's Explore God's Word, with information and questions about the book of Psalms. Invite them to work together on this scripture skills activity, which also allows them to consider and discuss their favorite music.

On page 2, members will find another installment in the Bookworms activity.

□ Music Talk (10-15 minutes)

Angelic Gospel Singers'

"I'm Depending on Jesus"

Activity Soundtrack: Play the Angelic Gospel Singers' "I'm Depending on Jesus." (Open your Fall-A *Seasonal Resources* folder, then click on *Companion Music* for options on obtaining this music.) If time is limited, after listening to about the first 2 minutes of the song, reduce the volume and explain:

- ◆ We're listening to the Angelic Gospel Singers.
- ◆ They first started singing in 1944 and performed this bluesy gospel music for more than 50 years.
- ◆ Listen to the words so we can talk about them.

Turn the volume up and listen to the rest of the song. The lyrics, without all the variations, are printed here:

*Jesus, Jesus, I'm depending on you.
Jesus, Jesus, no other one will do.
You know I'm down on bended knees,
Begging you to come on, see about me.
Oh, Jesus, Jesus, I'm depending on you*

*Said I could call you when I need you:
I'm depending on you...*

*Sometimes I wake up at midnight,
Pillow wet with tears,
Thinking about the burdens
I bore down through the years...*

*Said you'd be a mother for the motherless
And I'm still depending on you...*

*Standing with folded arms
and I'm depending on you...
When I'm growing old and feeble
I'm depending on you...*

Discuss:

- ◆ What does it mean to depend on someone?
- ◆ Who are some of the people we depend on?
- ◆ Who are some of the people who depend on us?
- ◆ The singers say they are depending on Jesus.
 - In what ways do we depend on Jesus?
 - In what ways could we depend on Jesus more?
- ◆ Can we depend on Jesus to love us? to teach us? to pray for us? Why or why not?
- ◆ Why do you think God wants humans—you and me—to depend on Jesus?

If incorporating the Express Yourself...in Murals activity, you may wish to continue playing this song.

"I'm Depending on Jesus" by Margaret Allison. Performed by the Angelic Gospel Singers.
Recorded on "Touch Me Lord Jesus" (p) © 1982 The Malaco Music Group.
Licensed from Malaco Records, Jackson Mississippi, USA

Note: Learn more about the Angelic Gospel Singers at <http://www.malaco.com/Catalog/Gospel/The-Angelic-Gospel-Singers/list.php>.

□ Express Yourself...in Murals

(10-20 minutes)

Before the session review the contents of the Express Yourself...in Murals poster attached to this document. We suggest that you use the activity titled "Murals can be...art in PUBLIC." You'll need giant colored chalk, such as that sold for use in sidewalk art.

If your congregation leadership agrees, members can use the building sidewalks for this activity. If not, tape a large sheet of brown or black mural paper to a public area of the building. (If using paper, encourage members to use giant markers instead of chalk, for more vibrancy.)

Help participants plan their art: Will it be based on today's gospel or another theme? Are there boundaries the group wants to establish for what words or drawings will or won't work? Will they invite other congregation members to join in the creation?

Activity Soundtrack: Play the Angelic Gospel Singers' "I'm Depending on Jesus" as members work. (Open your Fall-A *Seasonal Resources* folder, then click on *Companion Music* for options on obtaining this music.)

After the project is completed, discuss:

- ◆ What was it like to make art in public?
- ◆ What's challenging about performing in public?
- ◆ When Jesus taught in public, he made some people angry. Why do you think he kept on speaking up?
- ◆ When might we want to speak up or take action, regardless of how others react?

□ Bible Skills (10-25 minutes)

Participants continue learning the order of New Testament books. Today's activity is the fourth in a series, begun in the session for Proper 21.

Ask members to review the first eight books of the New Testament. Volunteers can list these, in order, on the board or newsprint: *Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians*.

Help participants find the next four books in the New Testament: *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*. Ask volunteers to add these books to the list. Explain:

- ◆ These books are all letters, too.
- ◆ The names of the letters tell us which church the letter was written to.

Help participants pronounce the names correctly. These four books, with similar endings, make a naturally rhythmic chant. Divide participants into pairs. Invite each pair to invent a rhythmic clapping or stomping game to accompany the chant. Encourage participants to share patterns.

Examples:

- ◆ Galatians (*Facing each other, and in quick succession: participants clap hands alone, slap right hands together, and then clap hands alone again.*)
- ◆ Ephesians (*Facing each other, and in quick succession: participants clap hands alone, slap left hands together, and then clap hands alone again.*)
- ◆ Philippians (*Facing each other, and in quick succession: participants stomp right foot, stomp left foot, and then jump up simultaneously and stomp both feet on landing.*)
- ◆ Colossians (*Facing each other, and in quick succession: participants stomp left foot, stomp right foot, and then jump up simultaneously and stomp both feet on landing.*)

If desired, members can then review the order of the New Testament books learned to date by playing a round of Bible Book Buzz. Sit in a circle. Pick one

book—for example, Galatians—to replace with the word *buzz*. Take turns around the circle saying the books in order: *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, etc. But instead of saying “Galatians,” for example, participants must say “buzz” when they get to the place in the order of books where Galatians belongs. Make it more challenging by increasing speed as they play.

You may additionally invite members to make Bible Book Cards for the new books.

□ Bible Book Cards (15-20 minutes)

Members make oversized mock “baseball cards” based on newly learned names of New Testament books.

Distribute 4 sheets of poster board (for *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*), together with colored markers. You may wish to assign pairs or small groups of members to each card.

See page 4 in the session for Proper 23 for complete directions.

Save the finished cards and display alongside previous cards, if applicable, for the remaining sessions.

INFO Where You'll Find Everything Else

- ◆ Attached to this Session Plan you will find:
 - Backgrounds and reflections for today's readings, titled *More about Today's Scriptures*.
 - An optional information piece titled *Older Children and the Gospel* that focuses on gratitude and giving.
 - An optional activity titled *Faith Skills*, which invites intermediates to consider God's will for their lives.
 - An optional activity titled *With Your Family*, which lets members discover family song favorites.
 - Today's *At Home with the Good News*, to distribute or e-mail to families after the session.
- ◆ Open your Fall-A *Seasonal Resources* folder, then click on *Seasonal Articles* to find:
 - Information on Fall-A's *Models of the Faith*.
 - A reproducible handout for parents titled *Nurturing Your Child's Spirituality*.
 - Further information on *The Gospel of Matthew*.

More about Today's Scriptures

Today's readings assert the sovereignty of God over all human endeavor. In Exodus (Track 1), God promises to be present as Moses continues to lead God's people. Isaiah (Track 2) proclaims that God directs the affairs even of Israel's adversaries, causing them to act on God's behalf. Paul greets the Thessalonians with the assurance that God has chosen them for great works of faith. In the gospel, Jesus deflects the Pharisees' malice by redirecting their thoughts to God's sovereignty.

Exodus 33:12-23 (Track 1)

This reading demonstrates Moses' close relationship with God. Exhausted from the burden of leading the people through the wilderness, Moses complains that he does not have enough help to accomplish his

"Let us recognize our weakness, knowing we cannot stand for the twinkling of an eye except with the protection of grace, and let us reverently cling to and trust only in God."

—*Julian of Norwich*

task. God responds by promising to be present in person to make sure that Moses and the people will go in safety.

But Moses is not satisfied with God's general presence and asks for a personal experience of God's "glory" (a visible

manifestation of God's invisible being). God consents but indicates that this experience will have to be very limited because no human can confront God directly and survive. Moses' experience is twofold. First God utters the personal divine name YHWH ("the Lord"), revealing God's overflowing graciousness and mercy. Then after God's glory has passed, Moses is allowed to see only God's back.

Isaiah 45:1-7 (Track 2)

Today's reading tells of the Lord's choice of Cyrus as God's agent. Cyrus, king of Persia (559–530 BC), overthrew the Babylonian empire and ushered in a more humane era in the treatment of subject peoples. The prophet asserts that Cyrus unknowingly acts at the will of the Lord, even identifying Cyrus as God's "anointed" (v. 1), *messiah*. This term had not yet acquired the special meaning given it in intertestamental Judaism or in Christianity, but it was a title reserved for the Davidic king. Here in the Old Testament it is used for someone outside the covenant people.

The prophet uses language from the Babylonian enthronement ceremony to emphasize that it is Yahweh, not the Babylonian god, who grasps Cyrus's "right hand" (v. 1) to make him king. It is for the sake of both Israel and of all people that the Lord has acted. As the Creator of all, God rules over all nations.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

Paul's stay in Thessalonika was relatively brief, and he left the new congregation exposed to the attacks of local Jews and Gentiles. His concern for their welfare led him to send Timothy back to visit. His joy at Timothy's encouraging report is the occasion for this letter.

Paul adapts the ordinary Greek letter form to his own purposes. After saluting the recipients, he proceeds to a thanksgiving that he expands to express his sense of God's activity among them. He knows that God has chosen the Thessalonian Christians. The evidence of their election lay in the power wrought by the proclamation of the good news.

Matthew 22:15-22

Posing a question on the payment of the Roman tax was meant to force Jesus to declare himself in a way offensive to some group, for the Jewish people were bitterly divided on the issue. To advocate payment of the tax as legal, as did the Herodians (the supporters of the ruling family) whose policy was complete loyalty to Rome, would alienate the general populace.

At the other extreme, to advocate nonpayment, as did the Zealots, would signal treason and reinforce all the nationalist hopes and fears aroused by the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. (Resistance to taxes and the necessary census that preceded them was often the catalyst of insurrection). The Pharisees also hated the tax, which implied their submission to a pagan sovereign rather than to God.

Jesus asks his questioners to produce the coin, the Roman *denarius*, used to pay the tax. This coin, bearing the head of the emperor and an inscription declaring him divine, was itself offensive to the Pharisees as an example of an idolatrous image prohibited by the first commandment.

Jesus ironically counsels them to "give" (v. 21; literally, to "give back") to the emperor what is his and to give back to God what is God's. Jesus refuses to take sides on the political issue, but uses the situation to address

their failure to repay God with what belongs to God, as delineated in 22:34-40.

Reflection

The question put to Jesus in today’s gospel sounds oddly contemporary. Some faithful Christians question whether to pay taxes that will be spent on war and destruction. Aren’t we called to use our resources for what is life-giving, not life-threatening?

Jesus would probably continue to skirt the question as cleverly now as he did then. He knew that if he supported the Roman tax, his own people would find him traitorous. If he appeared to undermine Rome, the occupiers would whisk him off to a dungeon. His response is pure, mysterious genius. Thoreau commented on this passage that Jesus left hearers “no wiser than before as to which was which; for they did not wish to know.”

Their concern is limited to this world; Jesus, as always, tries to stretch his hearers beyond temporal concerns. What inscription is marked on the coinage of your life? he asks. Do you belong to God, in whose image you were made? Or have you sold out to lesser deities like the state or corporation?

The poet Rumi raises a similar concern, using a different metaphor:

*you set out to find God
but then you keep stopping for long periods
at mean-spirited roadhouses.*

New Psalms

by **Mary Lee Wile**

During the 11th century, St. Romuald wrote in his “Brief Rule” for monks: “The path you must follow is in the Psalms; never leave it.” The psalms, the poetry of our Hebrew forebearers, have long been at the heart of monastic prayer. Encouraging those in faith formation to emulate this daily encounter with the psalms is to offer them light for their journey.

Inviting the group members to compose their own psalms can help them see their private journey as part of salvation history. An exercise that works well with both teens and adults is to write a single line from a psalm on a piece of paper, pass it to one person who adds a single line in response to the original, folds the paper so only the new line is visible, and passes it on.

The psalm gets built line by line, each line written in response to the one before.

In a class of more than four or five people, start the original line in several places. This means that the original line from the psalm gets repeated when all of the lines join together; such repetition is actually in keeping with traditional Hebrew poetry.

Once it’s done, read the new psalm aloud. Ask what participants hear as a collective response, and what themes or ideas they hear woven through it. I’m continually astonished by the loveliness of the psalms these groups create through their woven words. Take their lines home, type them and begin each class with “their” psalm. Here are a few suggestions for the opening line:

- ◆ For God alone my soul in silence waits (Psalm 62:1a).
- ◆ As the deer longs for the waterbrooks, so longs my soul for you, O God (Psalm 42:1).
- ◆ You speak in my heart, Lord, and say ‘Seek my face’ (Psalm 27:11).

The World of the Bible

King Cyrus the Great

Cyrus the Great was king of Persia from approximately 559–530 BC. After conquering Babylon, he ushered

“You cannot be buried in obscurity: you are exposed upon a grand theater to the view of the world. If your actions are upright and benevolent, be assured they will augment your power and happiness.”

—*King Cyrus the Great*

in a more humane era in the treatment of subject peoples that contrasted with the cruel domination of the Babylonians.

In 539 BC Cyrus released the exiled Jews, who had been exiled by the Babylonian

conquest in 587, and encouraged them to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. (See the Book of Ezra 1:1-4. You may want to read this passage out loud for the group.)

From historical inscriptions, scholars have surmised that Cyrus worshiped Marduk, a Babylonian god. Thus it is very strange for Cyrus to be identified as the “anointed” of the God of the Jews.