

# Discipleship Under Pressure



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *1 Kings 18, Matt. 26:56, Luke 9:51–56, John 6:1–15, 12:1–6, 18:1–11, 21:15–19.*

**Memory Text:** “If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you, then how can you contend with horses? And if in the land of peace, in which you trusted, they wearied you, then how will you do in the flooding of the Jordan?” (*Jeremiah 12:5, NKJV*).

Ever hear of Murphy's law? It is considered by some to be one of the fundamental laws of nature, as pervasive as gravity and electromagnetism. Stated briefly, it reads, “Whatever can go wrong will go wrong.”

We have all had moments, even days (or longer), that seem to follow Murphy's law. Sometimes our experiences as disciples seem to follow it, as well. No doubt, we have the promises of God that should help us not to get discouraged, but how easy it is sometimes, even with the promises, to be tempted to give up in despair. Of course, no matter what, we never should.

This week we will look at some disciples and see what we can learn from their bad days.

**The Week at a Glance:** What warning should we take away from the disciples' bid for political power? What lessons does Judas have for us? What was behind James's and John's willingness to destroy those who rejected Jesus? What can we take away from Peter's rashness and repentance? Why, after having seen so much, did all the disciples forsake Jesus in the hour of His great need?

*\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 8.*

## The Power Model

Religious faith can be a very powerful tool, either for good or for evil. The same kind of drive that motivates someone to “lose his life” (*Matt. 16:25*) for Christ’s sake can, in other circumstances, drive others to blow themselves up in the name of God. After all, if you believe that God is calling you to do something, who is going to let any kind of earthly or worldly considerations stand in your way? That is why, for instance, some governments seek to quell religion among the people, because they do not want people having allegiance to a higher authority, and you cannot get any higher than the Divine. On the other hand, governments are not immune from seeking to co-opt the incredible power of religion and using it to their own advantage. The disciple of Christ has to be aware of the various dangers involved with abusing the power of religion.

**Read John 6:1–15.** What lesson can we learn from this about how the disciple of Christ should view political power?

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Though, of course, Jesus’ purpose on earth was not to become an earthly king, it is clear that garnering earthly political power should not be equated with doing the work of discipleship. That God can put people in power, or that He can use people in power, is one thing; it is another to somehow view the amassing of political power in the name of God as the work of God, the work of discipleship. Nothing in the New Testament presents this *power model* of the gospel. Unfortunately, even His closest disciples missed this important point: “The disciples unite with the multitude in declaring the throne of David the rightful inheritance of their Master. It is the modesty of Christ, they say, that causes Him to refuse such honor. . . . They eagerly arrange to carry out their purpose.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 378. Building on the eager expectation and enthusiasm of the multitude, they forcefully attempted to take Jesus and make Him King over the nation (*John 6:14, 15*). This was discipleship their way. In reaction to this move, Jesus dismissed the multitude, sent the disciples to cross the lake, and went into the mountains alone to pray.

**What are ways, even on a more personal level, that we can abuse religion and co-opt it for our own selfish ends?**

## *The Lesson in Brief*

▶ **Key Text:** *Luke 9:51–56*

▶ **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Understand that religious power is not to be misused.

**Feel:** Cultivate mercy toward wrongdoers without condoning their beliefs.

**Do:** Determine to purge judgmental attitudes.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: The Sons of Thunder**

**A** James and John generously offered to call fire down from heaven Elijah style on the Samaritans. No wonder Jesus called them the “sons of thunder.” What else might this nickname indicate about their temperaments? What does this suggest about Jesus’ willingness to work with us, despite our flaws?

**B** What does the disciples’ offer say about their harsh and judgmental attitude toward sinners?

**II. Feel: Mercy for Wrongdoers**

**A** Discuss how misdirected zeal, even in a good cause, can produce more harm than good.

**B** How can we show mercy and grace to people without condoning their beliefs?

**C** Discipleship is not just a call to something new but a call *from* something old. The Bible says Jesus calls us *out* of darkness *into* His marvelous light. With this in mind, how does Jesus transform us from “sons of thunder” into “sons of God”?

**III. Do: Blessed Are the Merciful**

**A** The disciples misused the story of Elijah to justify their vengeance. How are we guilty of willfully ignoring or distorting God’s Word?

**B** How should we treat those who offend us? What does Jesus’ response to James and John teach us?

▶ **Summary:** Our first work as disciples is to bring people to the mercy of Jesus and leave the judging of hearts to Him.

## The Greed Model

Someone once said, “If you want to get rich, start a religion.” How unfortunate, but there is a lot of truth to that cynical statement. After all, when dealing with religious faith, we are dealing with some of the most important aspects of human existence. We are dealing with the meaning of life, with the hope of eternity, with the belief that we are forgiven by God for our sins. However much Jesus Himself, by model and example, lived a life of self-denial and poverty, however much He warned us against getting caught up in the things of this world, church history is replete with examples of those who have used the power of religion and religious ideas to gain wealth for themselves, often at the expense of the poor.

**Read** John 12:1–6 and then answer the following questions:

1. What symbolism is found in the act of Mary? In other words, in what ways does it represent the attitudes of the true disciples of Christ? *See also Matt. 13:46, Phil. 3:8.*

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2. What does this story tell us about the importance of the motives of our actions?

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3. The texts say that Lazarus, the resurrected Lazarus, was at the table with them. Why does that fact make Judas’s actions even more repugnant, more indicative of how blinded he was by his own sin?

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It is with good reason that Paul made the famous statement he did in 1 Timothy 6:10. Judas eventually lost his soul over his love of money. From the start, it seems, he was looking out only for number one; he himself, and the desire to gain things for himself, was woven all through his own discipleship. Of course, the other disciples were not totally selfless either, but with Judas it got the best of him.

**How can you be sure that greedy motives are not poisoning your role as a disciple of Christ? More so, if you detect some impure motives, how can you be purged of them?**

## *Learning Cycle*

### ► **STEP 1—Motivate!**

No one lives a pressure-free life. Everyone is faced with decisions and responsibilities that weigh him or her down. Do any of these scenarios sound familiar?

- Your job is hard, and you wonder if you have the strength to keep it up.
- Your income is limited, and you worry about how secure your employment future is.
- You're troubled about your children and the choices they make.
- Your health isn't as good as you wish it would be.
- It seems as if there's more cooking and cleaning and bills to pay than you have resources for.
- You're faced with a decision that has enormous life consequences.

The question isn't whether you experience pressure or not. The question is what kind of disciple you are when you're feeling the weight of life on your shoulders.

### ► **STEP 2—Explore!**


## **Bible Commentary**

### **I. The Power Model**

Read John 6:1–15. This is one more example of Christianity's ongoing temptation with power. Jesus avoided amassing political power (*see also Matthew 4:8–11*); the early Christian church didn't. It quickly formed a wealthy and powerful hierarchy that still exists today in parts of Christendom. The poet James Russell Lowell warned, "Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne." Wherever Christianity has allied itself with political power, whether in the early church, in the church of the Middle Ages, or in some types of Christian Americanism today, it runs the risk of trespassing on religious freedom.

### **II. The Greed Model**

Read John 12:5, 6. Judas's comment might be considered a wise and prac-

C O N T I N U E D 

## The Thunder Model

There were at least two pairs of brothers among Jesus' twelve disciples. At their call, Jesus surnamed the pair of James and John *boanerges*, or "sons of thunder" (*Mark 3:17*). Some commentators believe that Jesus gave them this name because of their vehement temperaments and fiery tempers. Therefore, we have chosen to call their approach to discipleship the thunder model.

**Read** Luke 9:51–56. Look at the reaction of the disciples to the rejection of Jesus. As you read this, try to put yourself in the place of these disciples. What reasons would they have for reacting as they did? In other words, what things did they hear Jesus say, or what other Old Testament examples might they have drawn from, that could have caused them to react as they did? See, for example, *Genesis 6, 7, Matt. 8:12, 13:42, Mark 6:11*.

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A number of problems exist with the reaction of the disciples. There is zeal for the Lord, which is good, which all disciples should have. But misdirected zeal, even in a good cause, can produce more harm than good. For instance, James and John used the story of Elijah as their model. The only problem is that they misused it. Elijah brought fire down from heaven to consume sacrifices (*1 Kings 18*), not recalcitrant people (he had them slain another way).

Even worse, of course, was their harsh and judgmental attitude toward sinners. The work of every disciple of Christ should be that of seeking ways to bring sinners to the foot of the Cross, to show them the incredible mercy and grace of God, who in Himself bore the punishment of their sins. Thus, no matter how sinful their lives have been, through Jesus they can have full pardon, full forgiveness, and a new life in Him. That is our work as disciples; we can leave the judging to the Lord.

**How judgmental are you toward those whom you deem wayward and wrong? How do we show these people the grace and mercy of God, while at the same time not giving the impression that we condone or approve of their lives and/or beliefs?**

*Learning Cycle* CONTINUED

tical consideration in many church situations. Do we not appreciate the treasurer who helps us to spend our money wisely? Without John's editorial comment about Judas's motives, we may think Judas's suggestion a good one. What may have bothered Judas the most was that he didn't get to decide where the money went; Mary "invested" it in Jesus without asking Judas's practical advice.

**Consider This:** In a church, how do we decide whether money is wasted or well spent?

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### III. The Thunder Model

Read Luke 9:54. If there is any justification for the disciples' vengeful suggestion, it can be found in the belief that Jesus was the returned Elijah (*Mark 8:27, 28*), a prophet who during his ministry called down fire from heaven upon his opponents (*2 Kings 1:10–12*). This is a good example of why we must make a distinction between God's methods in the Old Testament and the New.

### IV. The Repentant-Peter Model

Perhaps you've met someone like Peter, who is completely on fire for the Lord one moment and uninterested the next. These people are moved quickly and even violently by emotional situations, but their interest and support lack staying power when under pressure.

**Consider This:** Emotion is often invoked in our methods of evangelism and religious instruction. Is there a danger of creating believers who respond to emotion but lack reliability? How do we raise our children to be consistent and steady Christians?

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**The Message:** The Crucifixion talks to us, not just about God but about humanity, as well. And the message is not pleasant. Of course, if we haven't gotten that message by now, we never will. The fact is that

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## The Repentant-Peter Model

Peter is known as that impetuous disciple who always had something to say on everything. Luke 22:33, 34 says he was so sure of himself and his discipleship that he promised to go with Jesus even to prison and death. Of course, not long after, he had to retract those words (*Matt. 26:69–75*).

**Read John 18:1–11. What does this tell us about the personality and character of Peter, especially in light of Matthew 26:69–75?**

We all know about Peter’s failure. It exists as a powerful lesson to all disciples of Christ. We cannot work for the Lord in our own power. How crucial it is that we day by day surrender ourselves to Jesus. He is the Vine, we are the branches; without Him we can do nothing, especially not be faithful disciples. Again, zeal for the Lord and His cause is wonderful, but it must be done under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

**Read John 21:15–19. What does this teach us about what Jesus can do for those of His disciples who, repenting of their mistakes, do not give up on Christ?**

“Here is given a lesson for all Christ’s followers. The gospel makes no compromise with evil. It cannot excuse sin. Secret sins are to be confessed in secret to God; but, for open sin, open confession is required. . . . By giving proof of repentance, the disciple, so far as lies in His power, is to remove this reproach. . . . Three times Peter had openly denied his Lord, and three times Jesus drew from him the assurance of his love and loyalty, pressing home that pointed question, like a barbed arrow to his wounded heart. Before the assembled disciples Jesus revealed the depth of Peter’s repentance, and showed how thoroughly humbled was the once boasting disciple.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 811, 812.

Notice what Jesus said to Peter in John 21:18, 19. Jesus, basically, was telling Peter that in the end, Peter would end up dying for the Lord he so fervently loved. Peter’s words, in the end, came true, but only after he had learned some hard lessons about discipleship.

**Have you made boastful promises, only to fail time and again, from fulfilling them? What can you take away from the story of Peter that can help you not to give up?**



*Learning Cycle* CONTINUED

Jesus has been crucified and rejected, not just by the rabble but by the highest forms of religion and power together. The “best” of the nation had worked against Him. The lesson should be clear. Status, education, power, prestige, even knowledge is no guarantee of piety, holiness, or right action. What makes the key difference are hearts humbled, surrendered, and open to the leading of the Lord.

### ► **STEP 3—Practice!**

#### **Class Activities and Discussion:**


##### **1. Pressure Points**

Ask your class to share what sorts of things place them under the most pressure. (Note: This kind of discussion can be helpful and healing, but the teacher must moderate carefully to be sure people don’t tell embarrassing confidences, or that you get off the track of the lesson in listening to someone’s troubles. Set a limit to the discussion and follow it with a prayer for mentioned needs.)

##### **2. Comforting Texts for High-Pressure Times**

Many people have favorite Scripture texts that reassure them during difficult passages of life. Ask your class to share favorite passages that comfort them in the following situations. (Note: It may be well for the teacher to make a list of his or her own before class to stimulate discussion.)

- When facing a health problem
- When experiencing marriage problems
- When concerned about children
- When under pressure at work or seeking employment
- When depressed or discouraged
- When uncertain about the future
- When making a major decision

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## The Flight Model

**“Then all the disciples forsook him, and fled”** (*Matt. 26:56*).

The disciples spent three and a half years with Jesus. They had privileges that very few in the world ever had. They saw things few humans ever did. After all, among the world’s billions, how many ever saw Jesus in the flesh? More so, how many ever interacted day after day with Him while He was here in the flesh? These disciples were among the most privileged humans ever to have lived.

Of course, that was part of the problem—they were humans, fallen humans, and thus, no matter what the Lord did for them, the lessons were not easily learned.

**Skim** through a Gospel, any Gospel. What were the amazing things that Jesus said and did in the sight of His disciples? How much incredible proof did He give them concerning who He was? After going over those incidents, look at the text for today. What fearful message, even warning, can we draw from this for ourselves?

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Knowing He would be leaving them, Jesus prepared the disciples for His departure, but they did not listen. Knowing what would happen in Jerusalem, He prepared them for His passion, but they did not listen. They arrived in Jerusalem totally unprepared.

During Jesus’ ministry, the disciples seemed to look at what He did rather than to listen to what He said. His deeds confirmed their Messianic hopes, and that pleased them very much. At the Transfiguration the heavenly Voice called them to listen to Jesus, yet they did not benefit from His instructions about the Passion.

Following the Passover meal, Jesus tried to show His followers what lay ahead, but they would not listen. In the Garden, He tried to get them to pray to gain strength, but they slept.

**Meditate on all that Jesus has done for you: the promises, the hope, the gifts given you, the changes made in your life, the evidences for your faith, all through Christ. How can we, by clinging to these things, avoid the mistakes of the disciples?**

*Learning Cycle* CONTINUED

- When you've lost a loved one in death
- When God feels distant

**3. A Follower of Jesus**

Where in the gospel story do we see Jesus under pressure? (Examples: being challenged by Pharisees and religious leaders, with the money-changers at the temple, in Gethsemane, when feeding the people, with the demoniac among the tombs). Discuss and evaluate His responses, with emphasis on how we who follow Him can emulate His example.

**► STEP 4—Apply!**

Peter Marshall, former chaplain of the United States Senate and a beloved preacher, was known for his thoughtful prayers. He once prayed this: “When we long for life without difficulties, remind us that oaks grow strong in contrary winds and diamonds are made under pressure.”

Note that in most of this week's lessons, pressure caused an initial failure of discipleship, but those who failed (with the exception of Judas) came back with new understanding and strength. This is the vital lesson that you must send your class home with: Though pressure can initially cause us to falter in our walk with Jesus, it can also be a breakthrough to a more faithful, more consistent, kind of discipleship.

**Consider This:** Have you had experiences in your life that have seemed unnecessarily hard but that strengthened you in the end? What lessons did you learn from those experiences that could be a blessing to others who might be struggling right now and yet have no idea why or how they are going to get through it?

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**Further Study:** Read *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, pp. 208–211, 465, 466, 524–529, 595–597, 635, 636, 775, 776, 962, 963, 2020, 2021; Ellen G. White, “Give Ye Them to Eat,” pp. 364–380; “Who Is the Greatest,” pp. 437–438; “The Law of the New Kingdom,” pp. 547–551; “A Feast at Simon’s House,” pp. 559–565; “By the Sea Once More,” pp. 809–817, in *The Desire of Ages*; “John the Beloved,” pp. 539–543, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“The love of money in the heart of Judas was growing with the exercise of his shrewd abilities. His practical financiering ability, if exercised and enlightened and moulded by the Holy Spirit, would have been of great service to the little church, and by the sanctification of his spirit he would have had a clear insight, a correct discernment to appreciate heavenly things. But worldly policy plans were constantly cherished by Judas. There was no outbreking sin on his part, but his sharp scheming, the selfish, parsimonious spirit that took possession of him, finally led him to sell his Lord for a small sum of money.”—Ellen G. White, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 1101.

“Judas was with Christ through the entire period of the Saviour’s public ministry. He had all that Christ could give him. . . . Had he sought to be a blessing, instead of a questioning, criticizing, selfish man, the Lord would have used him to advance His kingdom. But Judas was a speculator. He thought that he could manage the finances of the church, and by his sharpness in business get gain. He was divided in heart. He loved the praise of the world. He refused to give up the world for Christ. He never committed his eternal interests to Christ. . . . Judas was a religious fraud.”—Ellen G. White, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, pp. 1101, 1102.

### Discussion Questions:

- ❶ If disciples are followers, are those who follow their own ideas and programs still disciples? Dwell on that question and your answer.
- ❷ What other models of discipleship under pressure can you think of, and what lessons can we learn from them?
- ❸ While we can find in Peter someone who jumped ahead too fast, only to stumble and fall, what are the dangers of being too cautious? In what ways can we go too far the other way? Think about this and bring some thoughts to class. As you do, think about your local church as a whole. Is your church too ready to jump ahead of the Lord, or does it tend to be too timid to follow the leading of the Lord? What can you do, as a class, to help your church strike the right balance?