

TEACHER PREPARATION

KEY CONCEPTS

A voluntary spiritual decision can have a profound influence on a young person's resolve and ability to avoid dream breakers.

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

1. Grasp that preconceived ideas, as Yelena the grandmother had, can hinder us from important personal growth.
2. Explain the Christian concept of forgiveness.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

One of the benefits of Christianity is that it appeals to the individual heart and conscience. When people freely choose to follow Christ, they are transformed from within in a way that surpasses the effects of any imposed ethical system.

One of the dangers of teaching ethics is that people may see it as imposed morality or enforced belief. The desire of the writers is for the curriculum to result in neither. When Christianity and Christian morality have been studied in an atmosphere where belief is optional and voluntary, many individual lives are transformed and those individuals go on to constructively influence their society.

There are several steps the teacher of this curriculum can implement to help safeguard the free choice of students and allow this curriculum to have the maximum possible benefit. These steps include the following:

1. Many of the lessons include a survey of one or more non-Christian viewpoints. As you cover these, be sure that the students understand that intelligent, respectable people hold these other views. Whatever your own opinion, seek to be fair to various viewpoints. This will help the student grasp that accepting Christianity or Christian morality is his or her own free choice.
2. Encourage students to ask questions and even challenge (privately or during appropriate times in class) the Christian perspective presented in this unit. Often the best thoughts are forged in the midst of controversy and debate.

3. Feel free to express your own opinion when you think it fits in the lesson or when a student asks you what you believe. Although the writers of this curriculum invite you to personally consider Christ and His claims for yourself, you do not have to be a Christian to successfully teach this curriculum. Whatever your beliefs about morality or Christianity, be careful to label them as “my viewpoint” or “my opinion”. Respect and encourage students who disagree.

You may want to refer to the curriculum *Foundations of Christian Ethics, Part 1* (for elementary students) and *Part 2* (for secondary students) for a more complete overview of the principles taught in this unit.

MATERIALS / PREPARATION

In the Box: The Grandmothers’ Letter.

For GOING DEEPER section: an opaque bag with small items to eat, enough for each student to have one (e.g., candy, dried fruit, cookies, etc.)

LESSON

BEGINNING THE LESSON



THE STORY BEGINS

ABOUT 3 MINUTES

Remove the letter from the box and begin reading it to your students.

Last time, we looked at several ideas people have about what kind of a father God is like. In today's story, the grandmothers are going to write more about the spiritual dimension of life and about their own questions and discoveries.

The three friends were practicing their “don't say anything if you don't know the answer” strategy with Tatyana Alexandrovna. She had just asked them a puzzling question: “What do you suppose your grandmothers would say was the most important lesson they've tried to teach you this year?”

“No ideas?” said the teacher. “Well, maybe we'd better just begin their letter for today. It's longer than some of the others have been.”

Dear Ones,

Do you remember our first letter to you? In it, we said that we were to be the exceptions to the rule. Nothing would ever stand between us and our “happily-ever-after” lives. But you know by now that we let many of the dream breakers into our lives. Fortunately, we also discovered some of the dream makers as well. The most important one came from a source none of us would have guessed when we were your age.

When Olga first got her Bible, we thought it was just a jumbled bunch of fairy tales mixed with some ancient history and a bit of poetry. My, we were so wrong! It turned out not only to be true, but also to be a wonderful guide to the most important of our dreams.

In our last letter, we compared God with the father of the Runaway Boy. That is called a metaphor. It means that God is like a human father in certain ways. We discovered that, in other places in the Bible, God is compared to a shepherd – and with many other things.



STORY LISTENING ASSIGNMENT

ABOUT 3 MINUTES

Let's pause in the story for a moment and let me give you an assignment to work on while I read the next section of the story. As I read the story, I want you to open your notebooks to a clean page.

[Pause while your students comply.]

In this part of the story, the teacher and the three students are going to discuss comparisons or metaphors of what we are like in our relationship with God. To help us understand what the story is saying, I'd like you to see whether you can find at least three metaphors and jot them down in your notebooks as I read.

[Pick up again with the story:]

The teacher paused and looked at her three students for a moment.

“As you know, I have been teaching for quite a few years,” said Tatyana Alexandrovna.

Dima thought, “*Yeah, about a million!*” But he didn’t say it.

“For most of that time,” she continued, “we teachers were required to be atheists – or at least we had to say we didn’t believe in God. So I had been a teacher for quite a few years before I even saw a Bible, and years more before I actually began to read it.

“But like your grandmother, Olga,” Tatyana Alexandrovna looked at Dima, “once I began to read the Bible, I found it to be quite different from what I supposed. Because your grandmothers have brought up the subject of metaphors in the Bible, I’d like to tell you about a few of them I’ve found.”

The three friends nodded their agreement.

“The Bible contains a number of metaphors that bring out some aspect of our relationship to the Creator. Your grandmothers just mentioned that sometimes we’re portrayed as sheep with Him as the Shepherd. Other times, He is the Potter and we are the clay. And still other times, God is the Vine and we are the branches.

Tatyana Alexandrovna paused a moment and looked at the three friends.

“What do you think? Can any of you think of other metaphors, other comparisons that might describe what we are like in relation to God?”

All three were silent. “This is hard,” said Sasha.

EXPLORING THE LESSON



CLASS DISCUSSION

5 MINUTES

[Stop reading the story and have your class do the same exercise.]

Let’s try what the teacher in the story is doing with the three friends. I know that not everyone believes there is a God, but for the sake of this exercise, let’s assume God exists. Let’s see whether we can think of some other metaphors – comparisons – of what our relationship to God might be like. Anyone have any ideas?

[Write down all their ideas, generalizing the comparison, as the teacher in the story did, without any other comment or evaluation.]



STORY RESUMES

ABOUT 6 MINUTES

[When it appears that most of the students have run out of new ideas, ask your students to listen for an answer to the question:]

“Why do people keep on doing things that hurt them, even when they understand the dangers?”

[Continue reading the story.]

“I think all your comparisons have merit,” said the teacher, “They all describe, in part, some feature of God or His relationship to us.

“Dima, your grandmother, Olga, has written a little bit more – in fact, it’s more about the story of the Runaway Boy.”

“Boy,” said Natasha, “the grandmothers sure have a lot of letter for us today!”

“Shhh,” said Dima, “I want to hear what my grandmother wrote!”

My dears, I’m afraid that the Runaway Boy is an accurate picture of what all three of us were like when we were young. The young man almost destroyed his life with the dream breakers we have been studying, and so did we.

Like the three of us, when young people make a mistake and nothing bad results immediately, they think they’ve gotten away with it. A young man gets drunk a few times and feels fine the next day. He may even proudly boast to his friends that he can “hold his liquor”. He cannot look 20 years ahead and see how alcohol will destroy his marriage, his job, his children, and his own life dreams.

A young couple decides to have premarital sex. “How can it hurt,” they ask, “if we both want it?” But they don’t know about or they ignore the likelihood of STDs, pregnancy, poverty, and the emotional and spiritual damage they are storing up for themselves.

Frankly, one of the hardest things for all three of us to understand was why so many people – not just young people – but people of all ages . . . would keep on doing things that hurt them, even when they understood the dangers.

Tatyana Alexandrovna looked up from the letter. “How would you answer this question now, after learning about Lister and the unseen world?”



= 17 minutes



WHY HURT BRAINSTORM

10 MINUTES

Stop reading the story and begin the activity.

I’m going to arrange you into groups of four or five each and ask you to write a one paragraph answer to the question, “Why do people keep on doing things that hurt themselves, even when they understand the dangers?” Take five or ten minutes and have one person ready to report your group’s conclusion.

[Have each group briefly report. If the reporters start listing a series of causes, ask whether his or her group came up with one most basic or root cause. If a group does, ask them to tell you what it is and then go on to another group. If they don’t, go on to another group.]

Do you remember from the lesson two weeks ago about the conclusion that the grandmothers came to concerning destructive behaviors? They concluded that the reason people keep on doing things that hurt themselves and others, even when they understand the dangers, is the human condition the Bible calls “sin”.

Christianity teaches, and the grandmothers in the story believe, that none of us is sinless.

 = 27 minutes



STORY RESUMES

3 MINUTES

As I go on reading, please listen for the answer to the question, “According to Tatyana Alexandrovna, how could a God embrace us humans in our sinful condition?”

Let’s get back to today’s letter.

[Continue reading the story.]

As we discussed it, and as we studied more of what the Bible actually said, the more we realized we had some rather skewed ideas about “sin”.

It turns out that this is what the Bible says: Even the best of us have failed to be all that God hoped and planned for us.

We were particularly intrigued by the biblical statement that all people have sinned and fall short of what God intended them to be. By then, we had all seen enough trouble – much that we had brought on ourselves. We were certainly not living the way God wanted us to live. Finally, all three of us were ready to admit that we had sinned against God, much like the Runaway Boy had sinned against his kind and loving father. We realized we’d been running away from Him all our lives.

But that led us to a very serious problem. We read in many places in the Bible that the long-range consequences of sin are separation and death. Sin creates barriers between people (we were vividly aware of that!), but it also creates a barrier between people and God. We had spent all of our lives separated from God and hadn’t even realized it!

We also read that God was perfect, perfectly fair, perfectly just, perfectly moral, and perfectly righteous. The problem was, how could a perfectly fair and moral God simply take us back? How could One so perfect and holy embrace us in our sinful condition?

The answer surprised and bewildered us. The Bible said that God Himself had come to Earth as a Man, Jesus Christ. And this Man who was also God had allowed Himself to be brutally murdered on a cross. After He had died and been laid in a tomb, He came back to life three days later.

“Wait a minute,” Natasha interrupted. “Can I ask a question?”

Tatyana Alexandrovna looked up from the letter with a little smile turning up the corners of her mouth.

“Certainly you may ask a question.”

Natasha frowned. “All this talk about a man dying and coming back from the dead – that sounds like a fairy tale. My Grandmother Yelena was a doctor – she was trained in science. I can’t believe she would accept such things.”

There was a twinkle in the teacher's eyes. "Natasha, your grandmother's education was very much like my own. We were taught in the university to be atheists. We were told it was foolish to believe the teachings of any religion. Your grandmother not only came to believe in God, but she also was a great help to me in patiently answering many of my own questions and doubts.

"So your grandmother and I came to have something else in common. Through our own questioning and study – later in our lives – we both came to believe that God really exists, to accept that Jesus Christ was and is exactly the One the Bible says He is – the Man who is also God, who died and rose again from the dead and is still alive today.

"But let me ask all three of you this, 'Why do you think people like Natasha's grandmother and I might come to believe in Christ, even though we've been educated all our lives to believe the opposite? Is there anything in your grandmothers' previous letters or anything we've discussed here in my office that might give you a clue?'"

 = 30 minutes



QUESTIONS FOR THE CLASS

5 MINUTES

[Stop reading the story.]

Before we hear how the friends answer, let's see whether we can answer the teacher's question. There are many educated people in this country who have embraced Christianity, especially in the last several years.

What might be some of the reasons so many have made this surprising change? What clues can you find in the things we've read and discussed in this class so far?

[Let several students respond, but do not give any indication whether you think their answers are right or wrong.]



STORY RESUMES

5 MINUTES

Let's go back and see what sorts of answers are given in the story.

Dima leaned back in his chair. "From what my grandmother has been saying, I think she must have just started reading the Bible and decided that it was true."

"That's fine for your grandmother," said Natasha. "She's always struck me as some sort of mystic anyway!"

"What's so bad about being a mystic?" Dima sat up in his chair and looked sharply at Natasha.

"Nothing, I guess," said Natasha. "I just meant that I can't imagine my Grandmother Yelena being so easily convinced."

"What about you, Sasha?" asked Tatyana Alexandrovna. "Do you have any guesses?"

Sasha was silent and looked as if his thoughts were far away.

“I would guess,” he said slowly, “that my grandmother, and maybe yours, too, was drawn to Christ and the Bible because of the results of the bad choices they’d made in life.”

“What do you mean?” asked Tatyana Alexandrovna.

“Well, all the things we’ve been talking about here in this class – you know, Natasha’s grandmother getting hooked on drugs, my grandmother marrying a drunk, and all of them getting into unwise relationships with men. I guess eventually they all realized they’d made some mistakes. I guess they’d say they were sinners – and that Christ’s death and resurrection were the only way they could be forgiven.”

“Let’s see whether you are right.” The teacher resumed reading.

I guess I (Olga) was the first to embrace the forgiveness Christ offered. Even as a little girl, somehow I’d always known there must be some sort of God or spiritual dimension to life. But it was only later in life that I began to learn about Christ and the Bible.

Ludmilla was next. I don’t think she ever really felt loved before. It was not hard for her to believe with her head, but Sasha, your grandmother had a scarred and hardened heart from her many wounds. It took the love of a patient and tender Heavenly Father to melt the ice that had gathered around her soul.

And our dear Yelena took the longest of all. That wonderful mind of hers had always been such an asset to her in school and in her profession, but it almost kept her from finding the One who had made that brilliant mind. Yelena had so many questions! Ludmilla and I couldn’t begin to answer them all. But Yelena kept reading the Bible and many other books. She knew it was important, and I think she couldn’t dismiss the changes she was seeing in us. Finally, we found an eminent professor. He helped Yelena see that there were compelling evidences for the truth of Christianity and the Bible.

Then, after several years, one night in my little flat, Yelena opened her mind and heart to her loving Heavenly Father. She accepted Christ’s death as payment for her sin and joined our little group at an entirely new level.

The teacher looked up at the three students. “There’s about a half a page more. Shall I read it, or have you had enough for today?”

“No, no! You can’t stop now,” said Dima.

Tatyana Alexandrovna smiled to herself and looked back at the paper.

So Dima, Natasha, and Sasha – our dear grandchildren – we’ve come to the most important moment in all of our letters to you.

If there were one gift we could give you – if there were one legacy we could leave behind for you, it would be this.

We long for you to return home to your Heavenly Father at an early age. Please don’t make the mistake of waiting as long as we did. We know that your lives have not been perfect, and you now know how far ours were from what they should have been. But we hope and pray that you will choose to learn from our mistakes, instead of having to repeat them.

How we yearn for you, if you haven’t done it already, to say “I do” to Christ. He wants to come and live inside you by His Spirit. He wants to be your Forgiver, your Lord, your Companion, your Conscience, your Friend, your Guide, and your truest and deepest Love. He has become this and more to each of us, and we ache for each of you until you find this relationship for yourselves.

And as much as we want you to find God, He longs for you to come home to Him more than we ever could.

Ludmilla has just reminded me that for many years part of our problem (though certainly not all of it) was that no one told us how to step into an intimate relationship with God. It may surprise you how very simple a step it really is. All you have to do is believe.

“Wait a minute,” said Natasha, “believe what?”

Tatyana Alexandrovna shook her head and smiled. “You definitely are Yelena’s granddaughter.” The teacher resumed reading.

Now you may be asking, “Exactly what am I supposed to believe?”

The two boys burst out laughing. Natasha’s face reddened, but she was also laughing and shaking her head.

You begin a relationship with God by believing that Jesus’ death and resurrection paid the penalty for your sin and opened the way for you to come back to God. You do not have to earn this relationship. It is a free gift, paid for by Christ’s death.

But when I say you must believe this, I’m not talking about believing just with your head. This kind of believing you do with your head and your heart, in fact with everything you are.

We once heard someone say that coming to Christ means giving all of yourself that you know to all of God that you know. As the three of us have discovered, as soon as we began believing in Christ, we immediately began learning more about God and more about ourselves. But it began by giving ourselves to God. Accepting Christ’s death and inviting Him to come in and change us from the inside were the steps we took.

You don’t have to pray a prayer to believe. But often prayer is a good way of expressing and cementing your belief. So Ludmilla, Yelena, and I have written a little prayer for you. In fact, it’s very similar to the one Ludmilla prayed when she first believed. The prayer is this:

“Dear Heavenly Father,

I need you. Thank you for sending Jesus Christ to die on the cross for me.

Thank you for taking me back and forgiving me. Please come in and change me into all you intend me to be. Amen.”

This is what believing really means. And it is our greatest hope for you.

*With all our love,
Your Grandmothers*

Tatyana Alexandrovna looked up from the letter. Natasha had a smile on her face, and the teacher saw tears rimming her eyes.

“I never knew Granny was a believer,” Natasha whispered, with wonder in her voice. “She never told me.”

“She has now,” the teacher said gently.

Natasha’s smile grew broader. “It’s wonderful! I’m going to see Grandmother this summer. I can’t wait to tell her I also believe! Now we have even more in common than I knew!”

“Tatyana Alexandrovna,” said Dima, “can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“I . . . I want to have a friendship with God, like our grandmothers are talking about, but” Dima seemed unsure how to express what he was thinking.

“I want it, but I’m still not sure how to get it,” he said finally.

“Well,” the teacher responded, “the prayer that Olga put in her letter is a good place to start. It’s short. Why don’t you write it on the board, so we all can look at it and think about it.”

Tatyana Alexandrovna handed the letter to Dima and showed him the place. He took the letter over to the board and began to write.

“While Dima’s doing that, let me tell you about the last thing the grandmothers have suggested for today.”

“There’s more?” inquired Natasha.

“Just something very brief and then we’re done. Here is some paper. On it, I’d like you to write the words, ‘I do accept God’s forgiveness.’ After you’ve written it, you’ll have a personal decision to make. If it is true for you and if you do accept God’s forgiveness, your grandmothers and I want you to sign your name to the paper.”

Dima was finished writing on the board and returned to his seat, and with the others wrote on their papers. When he finished writing, he looked up at the teacher with a smile beginning to spread across his face.

Sasha spoke up, “Tatyana Alexandrovna, I’m not sure whether I should sign my name. I still have so many questions.”

He looked down at his lap. “I wish I could ask my grandmother, but . . . ?”

The teacher waited a moment, and then said, “I wish you could talk to her about this, too. But I would be glad to try to answer any questions I can.”

Sasha shook his head. “I guess I just need some time to think first.”

“Take all the time you need,” said Tatyana Alexandrovna.

“I’m sure your grandmothers would want you to sign your name only when you are truly ready to genuinely accept the forgiveness the Father offers through Christ — not before.”

[This is the end of the story for this lesson.]



= 40 minutes

ENDING THE LESSON



PERSONAL JOURNAL ACTIVITY

5 MINUTES

Ask a student to write the following prayer on the board or a large piece of paper.

Dear Heavenly Father,

Thank you for sending Jesus Christ to die on the cross to forgive my sins. I am ready to say, "I do". Please come in and change me into all you intend me to be.

Amen.

Before dismissing your students, remember to dictate the Parent-Teacher questions to them.



= 45 minutes

Our last activity for today is to write in our Personal Journals the same phrase as the students in the story did.

Some of you may be like Natasha. Maybe you have already believed in Jesus Christ sometime in the past. You may want to write in your personal journals, "I have accepted God's forgiveness."

Or maybe you are where Sasha is. Maybe you are not yet ready to make any kind of spiritual decision. Perhaps you still have questions.

[If you are comfortable doing so, add, "Like Tatyana Alexandrovna in the story, I would be glad to meet with any of you, privately if you want, and try to answer any questions or concerns you might have."]

And finally, maybe some of you are like Dima. Maybe you are ready to come home to the Father. Like Dima, you can use the grandmothers' prayer, if you wish. If today is the first time you have truly believed in Jesus Christ, you'll want to write in your Personal Journal, "I do accept God's forgiveness."

Wherever you are, it is okay. Write honestly in your Personal Journal – whatever you write is between you, your own conscience, and God.

One of the important themes of this course has been for you to learn to make your own decisions. So please do not sign this page (or any of the others) just because the class material has suggested it or because you think your friends are doing so. You should sign it only if you genuinely want to make this life decision. Whatever you write (or don't write) should be your own decision, based on what you want your life to be.

Today, the grandmothers led us through an exploration of the possibility of a spiritual decision that can be a crucial dream maker. Next time, we'll look at another possible dream breaker – the hurts we experience from other people. We will also examine how we can turn this dream breaker into a dream maker.

RESOURCES

GOING DEEPER

ACCEPTING GIFT ACTIVITY

[For this learning activity you will need to bring an opaque bag with small items to eat, enough for each student to have one. These could be candy, dried fruit, cookies, etc. They do not all need to be of the same kind or the same size. The point of the demonstration is to expand and clarify what the story in the lesson taught about what it means to “believe”.

Read this verse from your Bible, or read the following paraphrase, or both:]

Our verse for today is Ephesians 2:8-9, NLT.

“God saved you by His grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.”

Notice that the verse says that God’s salvation is not something we can earn, but is a gift.

[Hold up the bag.]

I brought some gifts today. In here, I have some things to eat. There is only one condition on my gift: If you take one, you have to eat it right away. Is there anyone who would like to take one and eat it? Please raise your hand.

[If some of the students hesitate or do not raise their hands, ask them why. If some students did raise their hands, ask them why they raised their hands. Ask how they can be sure they will want to eat it once they see what it is. Maybe it’s a dead insect or something else unpleasant. Maybe it’s a food they dislike.

Ask again who wants to have one and tell the students they can change their minds. Then, give one of the students who raised his or her hand a piece of the candy or fruit and wait while the student eats it. Then, ask again whether anyone wants to change his or her mind now that the gift has been revealed. Continue the discussion until everyone who wants to has received and eaten his or her gift.]

NOTE TO THE TEACHER:

In the following statements, you will draw an analogy between the activity you’ve just completed in which you gave free gifts of food and what Christians believe is God’s free gift to us of salvation through Christ’s death. There is a danger that the students could misunderstand and think you are trivializing the importance and seriousness of Christ’s suffering and death as portrayed in the Bible. This comparison is only meant to clarify that our response to a free gift is similar, not that the gifts themselves are similar in any way, except that both are freely offered.

**COMPARISON OF
ACCEPTING GIFTS
ACTIVITY**

The Bible teaches that believing in Christ is like our little gift demonstration in several ways:

[On the board, make a simple chart with two columns. In the left column, write the following as you say:]

GIFT BAG DEMONSTRATION	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There was nothing you could do to earn the gift. 2. Your only choice was to receive or reject the gift. 3. In the end, your reasons for accepting or rejecting were not the most important aspect, but whether or not you finally took the food and ate it. 4. This kind of “believing” is not just some kind of opinion or intellectual belief about the food or the bag. To “believe”, you had to accept the gift and take it into yourself. 	

[Now ask the students to help you fill in the right-hand side of the chart with ways showing how accepting God’s gift of forgiveness through Christ is similar. You will probably end up with items similar to these:]

GIFT BAG DEMONSTRATION	GOD’S GIFT
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There was nothing you could do to earn the gift. 2. Your only choice was to receive or reject the gift. 3. In the end, your reasons for accepting or rejecting were not the most important aspect, but whether or not you finally took the food and ate it. 4. This kind of “believing” is not just some kind of opinion or intellectual belief about the food or the bag. To “believe”, you had to accept the gift and take it into yourself. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. There is nothing we can do to earn forgiveness. 2. Our only choice is to receive or reject God’s gift. 3. In the end, reasons for accepting or rejecting are not the important aspect, but whether or not we finally accept Christ’s forgiveness and allow it to change us. 4. This kind of “believing” is not just some kind of opinion or intellectual belief about Christ or salvation. To “believe”, we have to accept God’s gift and take it into ourselves.

FOCUS POINT

Be sure to leave time for discussion at the end of the learning activity so your students can discuss the connection between the learning activity and the lesson. Listen to see whether they seemed to understand the key points listed. If you sense that one or more of these points may have been lost, be sure to guide the discussion to make sure they get these main ideas.

1. **The Bible says salvation and knowing God are gifts, not something we earn.**
2. **To benefit from what Christ has done, we have to actively accept His gift.**

PARENT-TEACHER CONNECTION

For Family Discussion:

1. Share with your adolescent about any relatives, extended family, or close friends who are dedicated Christian believers.
2. Offer your opinion to your child why so many in your country have turned back to Christianity in recent years.

