

THE JOURNEY TOWARD WISDOM: A BIBLE STUDY METHOD FOR ADULTS

PURPOSE

This workshop provides an example of using Bible stories and personal experiences to gain insight into personal faith journeys. Participants will be invited to relate their journeys to Moses' journey toward *wisdom*, from the perspective of the typical stresses of early, middle, and mature adult life.

TIME FRAME: 2.5 hours with a 15-minute break

WORKSHOP OUTLINE

- I Introduction (20 minutes)
 - II *Wisdom* as a Biblical Goal for the Adult Journey (20 minutes)
 - III *Wisdom* in the Early Adult Stage (25 minutes)
- Break (15 minutes)
- IV *Wisdom* in the Middle Adult Stage (25 minutes)
 - V *Wisdom* in the Mature Adult Stage (25 minutes)
 - VI Closing (15 minutes)

PREPARATION AND MATERIALS

** indicates item that could go on a Power Point slide*

- Read through the workshop.
- Print out and post the workshop outline.*
- Make copies of handouts.
- Arrange chairs in a circle or around tables.
- Print out and post Proverbs 3:13-18.
- Prepare drinks/snacks for the break.
- Gather the following materials:
 - pens or pencils
 - paper
 - Bibles

CONDUCTING THE WORKSHOP

I. Introduction (20 minutes)

Welcome participants and introduce yourself then review the purpose and outline of the workshop.

Distribute Handout A, “Questionnaire,” and ask participants to answer the questions. When they are done, ask for voluntary sharing of responses to questions 1, 2 and 3.

Point out that the Bible offers many suggestions of worthy goals for our lives and invite participants to name some.

Mention that *wisdom* is also a very important biblical goal. Point out that several Old Testament books are called “Wisdom Literature,” including Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. Also mention that *wisdom* is identified as an important goal for life in many other parts of the Bible.

Ask participants to look at their response to questions 4 and 5 and ask them to offer synonyms for wisdom. Allow for differences of opinion.

II. *Wisdom* as a Biblical Goal for the Adult Journey (20 minutes)

Read together Proverbs 3:13–18 and discuss what it says about wisdom.

Ask what makes *wisdom* a complex and difficult goal to achieve in life.

Emphasize that wisdom is a life-long quest and ask for discussion about what might make wisdom an attractive goal.

III. *Wisdom* in the Early Adult Stage (25 minutes)

Explain that, if life is considered a journey and the adult years are the longest period of that journey, the goals of the journey may change. Ask the participants to think about their lives in the twenties and early thirties. Record their responses to the question: *What are some of the major stresses we experience and questions we have about ourselves during our 20s and 30s age range?*

Explain that psychologist Erik Erikson framed the stages of life in fundamental conflicts that we must positively resolve at each stage of development to become healthy people. For example, for an infant, the polarities are trust and mistrust, a conflict which is resolved when consistent, affectionate caregivers teach the child that they can trust. For adolescence and young adulthood, the poles are, respectively, identity

confusion and identity, and isolation and intimacy.

Set the stage by introducing the story of Moses' young adulthood as follows:

Moses was born a Jew but raised in the Egyptian court. When he saw an Egyptian attacking an Israelite slave he killed the Egyptian and had fled Egypt to the land of Midian after discovering he was a Jew by birth. Perhaps Moses felt lost and wondered about his potential to achieve a meaningful adult life. Yet God called Moses to the vital role of leading the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery.

Divide the participants into three groups. Distribute Handout B and assign each group one set of text and questions. After they have completed answering their assigned questions, reconvene and discuss the following questions as a group:

- What experiences, similar to those of Moses, have you had in your life?
- How can the church be a place where young adults can face their fears and begin the journey toward wisdom?

BREAK: Direct participants to facilities and drinks/snacks, and note when to reconvene.

IV *Wisdom* in the Middle Adult Stage (25 minutes)

Invite participants to identify the major stresses that we face between our mid-thirties and the late fifties.

Explain Erikson's view of middle adulthood as struggling between the polarities of stagnation, defined as self-absorption and preoccupation with one's own future, and generativity, the desire to parent, teach, and help others.

Introduce the story in Exodus 32:7–14 by explaining that as this passage opens, Moses is on Mt. Sinai with God, while the Israelites were at the bottom of the mountain and, in their fears, had built a visual image of God to worship—the golden calf.

Ask a volunteer to read Exodus 32:7–14 and then lead a discussion of the following:

- What option did God give to Moses?
- Was there a risk that Moses could have become absorbed with himself and his own future?
- How did Moses respond to the invitation?
- What lesson in wisdom does Moses offer us here?
- When have you been the receiving end of generativity? How did that experience help you?
- When have you practiced generativity?

V *Wisdom* in the Mature Adult Stage (25 minutes)

Invite participants to identify the major stresses that are common in the sixties and later.

Explain Erikson's view of later adulthood being a time characterized by the conflict between despair and integrity. As persons look back on their lives, they may despair at what might have been or perceive an order and meaningfulness to their life journeys, and can celebrate their lives with integrity. You may also wish to share with the group that another way of describing the positive potential of this period of adult life is with the term *legacy*—we are able to somewhat shape how we wish to be remembered.

Introduce Deuteronomy 33 by explaining that, according to Deuteronomy 31:1–3, Moses already knew that he would not enter the Promised Land with the people.

Ask participants to scan Deuteronomy 33 and identify what final gift Moses gave the Israelites as they anticipated entering the Promised Land without him.

Discuss together what this story suggests about integrity and wisdom in the mature adult stage.

Invite participants to read Deuteronomy 34:5–9 with this question in mind: *What two responses are recorded in this passage to the death of Moses?* (The Israelites mourned Moses' death and Joshua felt himself filled with the spirit of *wisdom*.) You may choose to discuss the sadness that accompanies the death of someone who has exhibited wisdom and leadership and the celebration that comes when leadership is handed on to a new generation.

VI CLOSING (15 minutes)

Distribute Handout C, Reflections on Wisdom, and invite the participants to complete it. Ask those who wish to do so, to share one of their responses.

Close in prayer or use Proverbs 3:13–18 as a responsive closing litany.

Questionnaire

1. Think of a traditional place of employment. What does the organization consider the most important goals for employees to reach? Note which you consider positive goals (+) and which you consider negative (-).

2. Each week, millions of Americans will participate in, attend, or watch professional sports. What values and goals do you believe are revealed in the professional sports world?

3. How do these organizations reward goal achievement?

4. When you hear the word *wisdom*, what comes to mind?

5. Is *wisdom* the same as "intelligence?"

Group one: Exodus 3:11–12

1. What was Moses' sense of his own abilities? What was he afraid would happen if he said "yes?"
2. What was God's understanding of Moses? What was this knowledge based on?
3. If Moses was to become wise, what did he first need to admit?

Group 2: Exodus 3:13–16

1. What was Moses afraid of?
2. What was God's response?

Group 3: Exodus 4:10–17

1. Why did Moses fall into despair? What was his hopelessness based on?
2. What was God's response and what was God's knowledge based on?
3. What does it mean that God was not as concerned about Moses' past failures as Moses was?

Reflections on Wisdom

1. One new understanding of *wisdom* which I have gained through this study is:

2. How can the Church become a place where persons can grow toward wisdom:
 - a. in early adulthood?

 - b. in middle adulthood?

 - c. in mature adulthood?

3. What has this study prompted you to think more seriously about in your own life?

4. Bible studies should lead us from reflection to action. What do you intend to do with what you learned through this study?