

**STAND OUT**



**God Didn't Create  
You To Just Fit In!**

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# **“STAND OUT”**

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# STAND OUT

## Week 1: When Others Give In

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Have you ever wanted to do something that no one else wanted to do? Have you ever gone against the crowd when you were in the minority? Maybe it was a time when everyone else wanted to do one thing but you wanted to do another. Perhaps it involved what movie to see or what place to go eat. What it was does not really matter because that awkward feeling of going against the crowd is always the same.

During my sophomore year of high school I had one of these moments. You know, the moment when you stand out front and center from everyone else. It was going to be the party of all parties. Only those who were considered cool and popular were invited to this party (Yes, I was invited to this party☺). Just getting an invitation to attend was considered a big deal. Everyone was super excited about the big night.

I remember that uneasy feeling of telling my buddies that I would not be attending what everyone knew was going to be the party of the year. Needless to say, they were shocked. They couldn't understand why someone who was invited would purposely decide not to go. This was something everyone, including some of my "Christian" friends, was looking forward to. It was going to be an epic night.

I'll never forget the days leading up to the party. Person after person would stop me and ask why I wasn't going to be there. When I told them a few of my

reasons (alcohol, drugs, the unusually close dancing and grinding and even some of the other people who were going to attend) they were stunned. Why would anyone want to miss such a “cool” party? There were plenty of people who were not invited who would gladly change places with me.

Well, even though I experienced a great deal of pressure to attend, I didn’t go and yet the world continued on. My life did not end because I chose not to attend some party. No one tried to physically harm me for my convictions. My life simply went on as usual, although I was viewed a little differently for the remainder of my high school career (I was known as the football player who didn’t like to party). I woke up the next day having no regrets (unlike some of my friends who attended the party). To this day, I do not regret going against the crowd on that Saturday night during my sophomore year of high school. My decision to stand out is still one I am very proud of today.

## **Do We Have To Go Against the Crowd?**

I have found, even from my own experiences, most people do not like going against the crowd. It just something that makes most people uncomfortable. Consider inmates who are doing time. How many of those inmates are paying a heavy price because they didn’t want to go against the crowd and ended up involving themselves in bad situations? What about your own life? How many of you have been punished for something that wasn’t your idea, you just went along with it because you could not go against the crowd. Had you only chosen to stand out from the crowd, you would not have had any consequences to bear.

*Paul said, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be*

*conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*

*- Romans 12:1-2*

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Paul told the Christians in Rome not to blend in (to conform) but to stand out (be transformed). It will never be easy, but it is what you and I are called to do. Do you remember the story of the twelve spies in Numbers 13? Herein is an example of what it means to stand out from the crowd.

### **The Recruits are Chosen (Num. 13:1-3; 17-21)**

The people of Israel wanted Moses to send some of their own people ahead to spy out the land of Canaan so they could see what they were up against (Deut. 1:21-23). Although not the originator of the idea, God instructs Moses to move forward with the plan by selecting a leader from each tribe.

**QUESTION:** Have you ever been chosen to do something that was of great importance but only a select few were chosen for the task? How did it make you feel?

Consider what an honor it would have been to be chosen for such a mission. Moses chose these men over all others to go as spies into the land of Canaan and find out everything they could about the inhabitants and their cities. These men must have been physically, mentally and spiritually strong.

## **The Report of the Spies (Num. 13:25-29; 31-33)**

The spies return after being gone 40 days with both good and bad news. The good news for Israel is that the land is fruitful and “certainly does flow with milk and honey” (v. 27). However, the bad news is “the people who dwell in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there” (v. 28).

These spies (at least the 10) had no faith in the conquest of Canaan from the beginning. They went to spy out the land with the intentions of finding reasons not to go. Thus, they bring back a report that was purposely meant to discourage the people so they would not want to go into the land (Num. 32:8-9).

**QUESTION:** Have you ever had someone try to persuade you not to do something? When they were trying to persuade you did they seem dramatic and overly negative?

Generally, when people do not want us to do something, they will try to persuade us using dramatic and overly negative tactics. A little over a year ago, I was offered a part time teaching position that I had previously held a few years earlier. While I was taking a couple of days to think about whether or not to take the job, I received a phone call from someone who wanted to “fill me in on a few things about the school.” For the next 20 minutes I listened as this person used dramatic and negative tactics to try and persuade me not to take the job. It was obvious to me what this person was trying to do. When people try to persuade us to not do something, they are always overly negative. This is exactly what the spies were doing with the people of Israel.

## **The Reaction of the People (Num. 14:1-4)**

The people of Israel were so disheartened over the bad report that they wept that night over all the things they had been told about the land of Canaan.

**QUESTION:** Have you ever received disheartening news? Was it easy for you to get over or did it take some time?

This disheartening report eventually caused the people to think that dying in Egypt or even in the wilderness would have been better. Thus, they decided to select a leader and return to Egypt because life couldn't get much worse for them. After all, this was all God's fault anyway (Num. 14: 3).

There was however, a big problem. In the midst of receiving the bad news about the land of Canaan, the children of Israel had forgotten everything God had already done in their lives and all that He had promised to do in the future. Because of their forgetfulness and lack of faith in God to provide what He had promised, the people of Israel would be plagued to die in the wilderness (Num. 14:26-35; Heb. 3:17-19).

## **The Refusal to Back Down (Num. 13:30; 14:6-10)**

In spite of what all the other people were now feeling about this mission to take the land of Canaan, Caleb and Joshua were in favor of Israel going up immediately and taking the land.

***“But Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, ‘Let us go up at once and occupy it, for we are well able to overcome it.’”***

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The faith of these two brave men stands in stark contrast to the faith of the other spies. These men were ready to go and take the land no matter what obstacles laid head. They trusted God enough to know that He would be with them every step of the way. Little did they know one of their biggest obstacles would come in the form of their own people (Num. 14:10).

**QUESTION:** Have you ever found yourself in a situation similar to that of Joshua and Caleb? What did you choose to do: stand out or blend in?

## **Standing Out When It Means Going Against the Crowd**

It's easy to appreciate what Caleb and Joshua did but much harder when it comes to actually doing the same thing in our own lives isn't it? Unfortunately, there is going to come times in our lives, especially as Christians who are trying to live according to the standards and Law of God, when we will have to choose whether or not we are willing to stand out and go against the crowd.

These times can come at any moment and in any form. Consider just a few examples of times when you might have to choose to stand out and go against the crowd.

1. When it comes to speaking out in favor of and defending the truth of God's Word (**Matt. 5:10-12**).

2. When it comes to saying no to a group of your friends who want you to participate in something you know violates the Law of God (**I Thess. 5:22**).
3. When it comes to saying no to the boy or girl you have been dating for a while who wants you to go too far (**Heb. 13:4**).
4. When it comes to making Jesus the top priority in your life (**Matt. 6:33**).
5. When it comes to submitting to Jesus as your Lord (**Rev. 19:16**).

We must all come to understand that there will be moments in our lives where we will need to choose to stand out and be different from the crowd around us. When the time comes for us to choose, will we choose to stand?

Sure, the way of the crowd may be easy, but that doesn't make it right (Matt. 7:13-14). Choose to follow the way of Jesus and not the crowd.

## **Discussion Questions:**

1. Have you ever chosen to stand out and go against the crowd? What was it that made you decide to go against the crowd?
2. Have you ever had a time when you struggled with your faith and the promises God has made to you? What were you going through that caused you to have a struggle with your faith?
3. Why do you think the people of Israel believed the report of the 10 spies as opposed to Caleb and Joshua?
4. What do you consider to be the hardest part of standing out and going against the crowd?
5. What can one do in order to make choosing to go against the crowd easier?

# STAND OUT

## Week 2: When Asked to Disobey

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**QUESTION:** Have you ever disobeyed your parents or teachers at school just because someone else encouraged or convinced you to do it? Is anyone willing to share a time?

Most of the time we don't intentionally set out to disobey we just allow ourselves to be talked into it by other people because we don't want to stand out and be different.

I had a boy in my youth group once who any time we would talk about some of the poor decisions he was making, he would always use the excuse that he never meant to do it, it just happened because he couldn't say no.

*“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by  
the renewing of your mind...” - Romans 12:2*

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Paul was encouraging the Christians in Rome to stand out and not to just blend in! As disciples of Jesus, this should be our quest as well.

### **The Request of Naboth (I Kings 21:1-3)**

Ahab could not just come in and take the land for himself. It was against the law even for the King (I Kgs. 17:14-20; I Sam. 10:25).

Samuel prophesied that the king of Israel would take the best of their fields and vineyards when they demanded a king like all the other nations (I Sam. 8:14). Israel was slowly learning that an earthly king was not better than a heavenly king.

**QUESTION:** Have you ever had someone offer you something of value in order to get you to do something that you knew would be disobedient? What were you offered?

Naboth refused to give his inheritance to Ahab even though he was made a pretty good offer. Imagine how much better a vineyard belonging to the king must have been.

**QUESTION:** What would you have to be offered in order to get you to do something you knew you weren't supposed to do? *money, fame, position, pleasure, etc.*

## **The Reaction of Ahab (I Kings 21:4-6)**

Naboth knew that the selling of one's inheritance was forbidden in the law (Deut. 25:23). Not only could the inheritance not be sold, but it could not be transferred from one tribe to another (Num. 36:7).

Ahab reacted like a lot of people act when they don't get their way, he pouted. He went to his palace, walked to his room and laid on his bed, all the while refusing to eat.

**QUESTION:** Have you ever acted like Ahab when you didn't get your way? What's the worst thing you did while you were pouting?

**QUESTION:** What's the worst thing you have ever seen someone else do during one of their pouting sessions? *Young toddlers will kick and screen when they don't get their way.*

## **The Response of Jezebel (I Kings 21:5-10)**

Jezebel was a little shocked at the reaction of Ahab. She reminded him that he was the king and thus should not worry about getting the vineyard. She even told Ahab she would take care of getting the vineyard for him.

Jezebel's means of obtaining the vineyard were both deceitful and disgusting.

She proclaimed a fast. Fasts were generally only commanded when the public was affected by something (2 Chron. 20:3). This fast was used to give the impression that someone in the city had committed a major capital crime that threatened everyone in the city unless the guilty party was punished.

She had Naboth set before the people. This was not a place of honor as it might sound. This was a means of placing Naboth in front of a court assembly, where he would be seen, tried and eventually condemned.

She bribed the men. The law required two witnesses for any capital offenses (Deut. 17:6; 19:15). Thus, Jezebel had two “worthless men” (men who wouldn’t care to bring about false charges against an innocent man) planted to be witnesses to the so called crimes of Naboth.

She had Naboth stoned. Cursing God was punishable by stoning (Lev. 24:14-16). Cursing one’s ruler was also a violation of the law (Ex. 22:28). Naboth was being accused of doing both.

**QUESTION:** Why was Naboth put in this position? What could he have done in order to keep from being put in such a position?

**QUESTION:** What’s the worst position you have seen someone put in simply because they refused to disobey the law of God?

### **The Report from the Men (I Kings 21:11-16)**

The leaders of the city took Naboth out and stoned him as they were instructed. Notice how quickly some of Naboth’s own people, and maybe even some of his friends, turned on him and followed the wicked queen Jezebel’s orders.

Jezebel wanted to be sure that she had nothing to worry about when it came to getting Ahab that vineyard. Thus, Jezebel had Naboth's entire family stoned just so there would not be any heirs (2 Kgs. 9:26).

Naboth and his family lost their lives because he chose to stand out when he was asked to disobey the law of God.

## How Do We Stand Against Disobeying?

1. *Remember God and His Word.* Naboth remember that he was not to sell or transfer his inheritance to anyone else. You and I need to remember what God has told us in His word about the situations we find ourselves in.

*“Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.”*

*- Ephesians 5:6*

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The phrase “empty words” means, “Arguments of those opposing the truth by defending the immorality of the pagan culture surrounding the church in those days.”

Don't allow anyone who is trying to defend something immoral deceive you into thinking that it is okay for you to be disobedient to the law of God. The wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience. Don't disobey God!

2. *Speak Out Against Disobedience.* Naboth spoke out and told Ahab that God had forbidden him from selling his inheritance. When we are faced with opportunities to be disobedient, don't blend in. Rather stand out and

Speak out about the disobedience and why you won't be participating in such an action.

Remember John the Baptist? He was beheaded because he spoke out against Herod for his disobedience in taking his brother's wife (Matt. 14:1-10). Although John the Baptist paid a heavy price (his life), he spoke out against disobeying God's law.

3. *Stand Strong No Matter What You Are Offered.* Naboth was offered a better vineyard, one that belonged to the king himself, and yet he didn't give in and disobey the law of God.

*"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."*

*- I Corinthians 10:13*

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Although temptation is hard, there will always be a way out. Look for those opportunities and take them no matter what is being offered to you.

Joseph was offered pleasure by Potiphar's wife, but he still refused (Gen. 39). Don't allow anyone to offer you anything that will cause you to be disobedient to the law of God.

## Discussion Questions

- 1) What do you think was the hardest part of Naboth standing out against disobeying the law of God?
- 2) What are some things today young people are willing to disobey the laws of God for?
- 3) Why do you think it is such a struggle for us to obey God?
- 4) What does the fact that the elders and leaders of the city were willing to go along with falsely accusing an innocent man of a crime tell you about the people of Israel during this time period?
- 5) What is something we can do to help prevent us from disobeying the laws of God?

# STAND OUT

## Week 3: “When Your Family Is Against You”

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Decisions, decisions, decisions...oh, how I love making decisions. Ok, not really. I don't like making decisions because too often I'm afraid I will make the wrong decision. It is that fear that many times keeps me from wanting to make a decision at all.

Do you ever get that feeling when it comes to making some of the decisions you have to make? Do you ever allow fear to get in the way and keep you from making a decision, or at least the decision you know to be right?

**Group Activity: What would you do?** Stand up if you would be willing to go against the crowd in the following situations. If you wouldn't be willing to go against the crowd in one of the situations mentioned, then sit back down. What would you do:

- If everyone else wanted to go eat at Zaxby's but you wanted to go to MacDonald's: Stand up if you would go eat alone at MacDonald's instead of going to eat with the group at Zaxby's.
- If everyone was making fun of someone in your class at school: Stand up if you would go over and befriend the kid being make fun and try to get the others to leave him or her alone.
- If you had to choose between being accepted by others for joining in on something you knew was wrong or being physically assaulted because you chose not to participate: Stand up if you would be willing to be assaulted for not doing what everyone else was doing.
- If you had to choose publicly stating your belief in God or denying Him in order to save your life: Stand up if you would be willing to profess your love, devotion and belief in God even if that meant dying for it.

- If you had to choose between your family and obeying God: Stand up if you would knowingly choose God over your family even under the worst of circumstances.

It's easy for us to sit here and say we would do the noble and right thing in each of these cases, but it's a lot harder when everything is on the line and you have to choose whether or not to stand out and be different.

## The Heartache of Jeremiah

Jeremiah was called by God to be a prophet to the nation of Judah (Jer. 1:4-10). He was from Anathoth, which was one of the four Levitical towns from the tribe of Benjamin (Jos. 21:17-18). This shouldn't have been a difficult task; after all, these were God's chosen people. One would expect them to want to listen and obey the Word of the Lord. Sadly, the nation of Judah had become very corrupt. They were involved in idol worship (Jer 7:30; 11:17; 32:35) and even the offering of their children as a sacrifice to false gods (Jer. 7:31-32; 19:4-5), both of which were forbidden in the Law of Moses.

Can you imagine how difficult this must have been for Jeremiah? God had called him to go and basically tell the people of Judah to repent and turn from their sins, otherwise destruction would come. For 40 years (626-586 B.C.) Jeremiah went around preaching a very unpopular message of repentance and destruction to the nation of Judah, which most likely included his friends and family. The sad reality of this is that his message did not have an effect on the people he was preaching to.

*"So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you."*

*- Jeremiah 7:27*

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**QUESTION:** Have you ever tried to tell someone something over and over again only to have them ignore your plea every time?

This was what Jeremiah's life was like? He would preach and deliver a message from God, only to have people ignore the words he was speaking over and over again. This would prove to be heartbreaking for Jeremiah on numerous occasions.

*"My soul, my soul! I am in anguish! Oh, my heart! My heart is pounding in me; I cannot be silent, because you have heard, O my soul, the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war."*

*- Jeremiah 4:19*

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*"Oh, that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people."*

*- Jeremiah 9:1*

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## **The Harassment of Jeremiah**

As if preaching a message people would reject for almost a half century wasn't enough, Jeremiah experienced a lot of harassment along the way.

1. People wanted to kill him (Jer. 11:18-23).

2. False prophets were speaking a different message than him (Jer. 14:13-14).
3. People plotted against him (Jer. 18:18).
4. He was beaten and put in stocks (Jer. 20:2). He was probably beaten according to the Law of Moses (Deut. 25:3). Stocks were an instrument used for intense torture and pain.
5. He was mocked and ridiculed (Jer. 20:7-10) – “a laughingstock all day long...”  
The people chose to believe the false prophets over Jeremiah and his warnings.
6. He was placed in a muddy cistern (Jer. 38:1-10).
7. His own relatives betrayed him and wanted to kill him (Jer. 12:6).
8. Tradition says Jeremiah was stoned to death in Egypt.

**QUESTION:** What do you consider to be the worst or hardest thing Jeremiah had to endure in order to stand out and be faithful to God?

## **The Heart of Jeremiah**

Jeremiah’s willingness to stand out and be different from the nation around him, powerfully demonstrates the kind of heart he had. He had a heart that was totally dedicated

to God. He had a heart that was going to choose to do right no matter the cost. Jeremiah was a powerful living example of what Jesus called the greatest command.

*“Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might.”*

*- Deuteronomy 6:4-5*

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This is something we must consider ourselves. What kind of heart do we have? Do we have a heart totally committed to following after God and His will no matter the cost, or do we have a heart that is only willing to follow after God when it is convenient and doesn't require us to stand out?

## Standing Out When Your Family Is Against You

1. *Remember Who Your Allegiance Should Be With* (Jer. 1:5). God told Jeremiah from the beginning that it was He who formed Him in the womb. It was God who appointed Him a prophet to the nations. God was the one responsible for Jeremiah's life.

*"For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me."*

*- Matthew 10:35-38*

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For some people, the cross they must bear is the family pressure to oppose Jesus and His teachings. We must remember our first allegiance is to God and God alone. Even when we are faced with opposition from our own family, we are always to choose to serve God and obey Him.

2. **Remember Who is With You** (Jer. 1:17-19). Jeremiah didn't quite know what to expect from the people around him, but he knew God would be with him and deliver him no matter what he faced. Even when we find ourselves in difficult situations with our own family, situations where we may not be sure what to do, remember... God is always with us.

*“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”*

- Joshua 1:9

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*“Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

- Matthew 28:20

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3. **Remember it Won't be Easy** (Jer. 7:23-27). God told Jeremiah the people wouldn't listen, and yet, he was still to continue preaching to them. Imagine how difficult that must have been. Any time we have to deal with our family about a subject as sensitive as religion, we must remember it won't be easy. BUT...God still expects us to stand out and stand up for Him and His word.

*“Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”*

- I Corinthians 15:58

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4. *Remember to Pray Often* (Jer. 7:16-20; 11:14; 14:11). It is apparent Jeremiah was willing to pray for the nation of Judah often, even though they refused to listen to the message he was proclaiming. When we find ourselves facing difficult religious circumstances with our family, we would be wise to remember to pray and pray often.

*“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”*

- *Philippians 4:6*

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## Discussion Questions

1. How do you handle situations when you and your family disagree about something? How would you handle the situation if you and your family disagreed about your love, devotion and belief in God?
2. Have you ever tried talking to someone about God and His Word only to have them reject your message? Have you tried multiple times? How did they react each time you approached them?
3. What’s the most difficult circumstance you have ever found yourself in because you are a Christian?
4. What do you appreciate and admire most about the prophet Jeremiah? Is it something you think you could make a part of your life?
5. What the biggest lesson you will take away from Jeremiah and his willingness to stand out for the cause of Christ?

# STAND OUT

## Week 4: “When Others Are Hurting”

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When I was in high school, one of my good friends went through what was one of the hardest times in his life. It was during our 10<sup>th</sup> grade year when his mother was killed in an automobile accident. He was devastated and rightfully so.

Being one of his closest friends I really wanted to help him. There was only one problem, I was unsure of what to do. I had never had a friend experience something like this before. I didn't know what to say or where to start. I just knew I wanted to help my friend.

Have you ever found yourself in some type of similar situation? Maybe one of your friends was going through a tough time and really struggling and you wanted to do something to help alleviate their pain. The problem was you didn't know what to do.

Nehemiah is a man who can teach us a lot about what to do when we hear about the heartaches and struggles of others.

### **Nehemiah's Concern (Neh. 1:1-2)**

Not much is known about Nehemiah and how he came to work in the court of the king of Persia. With so little biblical evidence to go on, not much can be said other than Nehemiah served in the royal court as a cupbearer to the king (Neh. 1:11). Now, this may not sound like an important job, but it was actually an

extremely high office in the king's court. Nehemiah's responsibility was to taste the king's wine in his presence in order to make sure the drink was not poisoned. To be placed in such a position one must have been considered trustworthy.

Isn't it interesting how God can use people's positions in life in order to accomplish His purposes? Just think back to the likes of Joseph, Esther and Daniel. When a person is usable, God will use them no matter what circumstance they may find themselves in. God was definitely working in the background of Nehemiah's life, even if Nehemiah was yet to see the hand of God at work.

**QUESTION:** Looking back on your life, in what ways has God been silently working in your life to accomplish His purpose and glory?

One day, while Nehemiah was still serving in the king's court, his brother Hanani (Neh. 7:2) and some friends showed up after having returned from Jerusalem. Nehemiah inquired how things were going for those Jews who had survived the captivity.

Isn't it interesting to note how Nehemiah hadn't become so important in his own mind that he no longer cared about his people who had returned back to Jerusalem after years of captivity? In the midst of what was a probably a nice, comfortable and luxurious life, Nehemiah was genuinely concerned about his homeland and its people. Nehemiah truly cared.

## **Nehemiah's Cry (Neh. 1:3-11)**

It was because of his concern for the Jewish people that Nehemiah learned things were not going to well back in Jerusalem. In fact, the city's wall was broken down and its gates had been burned with fire.

**QUESTION:** Why were walls and gates so important for ancient cities?

Without a wall, the city laid unprotected, just waiting for an enemy to come in and have their way with the people and their belongings. It was almost like the city was just inviting their enemies to come in and do whatever they wanted to with them.

When Nehemiah learned of the distress of the Jewish people in Jerusalem, he was devastated. We could even go so far as to say he was heartbroken. And it was his devastation and heartache that drove him to mourn for several days.

**QUESTION:** Have you ever received what you thought to be devastating news? How did you react when you received such news?

Nehemiah did not just mourn though. During this difficult time he also prayed and fasted. Throughout the Bible we see praying and fasting often done together (Ezra 8:21-23; Psalm 35:13; Luke 2:37; Acts 14:23).

When Nehemiah was overwhelmed with the news he had received, he didn't just weep, he chose to do something by crying out to God through prayer. Notice what he included in his prayer:

- 1) He pleaded with God to be attentive to the prayer he was offering (vs. 6, 11).
- 2) He spoke of God's covenant and asked him to remember His people (v. 5, 8-10).
- 3) He confessed the sins of the people and even his own sins (vs. 6-7).
- 4) He asked God to grant him success before the king (v. 11).

## **Nehemiah's Courage (Neh. 2:1-9)**

The month of Nisan corresponds to our March-April. If one looks back to Nehemiah 1:1, the book opens in the month of Chislev, which corresponds to our November-December. Thus, when chapter two begins, about four months has passed since Nehemiah first learned about the disheartening situation in Jerusalem. Scripture doesn't record for us why Nehemiah waited those four months to approach the king and it really doesn't matter. Whatever the reason, if we have learned anything about Nehemiah at all, it was that he would have probably used those four months of silence to solicit help and courage from the Almighty.

When the time was right and Nehemiah was in the presence of the king serving as his cupbearer, he allowed his countenance to provide the door of opportunity he had been waiting for. The king could tell something was wrong with Nehemiah and he wanted to know what was going on since Nehemiah wasn't sick. Here was Nehemiah's chance to inform the king of his plans to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city's wall.

Although things worked out nicely for Nehemiah when he made his request known to the king, it still took him an immeasurable amount of courage to even

approach the king in such a manner in the first place. Consider a few of the reasons such actions were deemed courageous on the part of Nehemiah:

- 1) In the book of Esther we find no one was allowed to enter the king's gate while they were wearing clothes of mourning (Est. 4:2). According to some scholars, to do so would have resulted in death. The king wanted "happy" people in his court. By allowing his countenance to show his demoralizing feelings, Nehemiah was putting his life at risk.
- 2) Not only does Nehemiah appear before the king sorrowfully, but then he requested for the king to allow him a leave of absence from the king's court. Note that Nehemiah was standing in a position most people would love to have and here he is requesting a leave of absence.
- 3) Nehemiah is requesting a leave of absence in order to go to Jerusalem and rebuild it. It was King Artaxerxes who had previously ordered the work on the wall to be stopped (Ezra 4:21-23). Perhaps this is why Nehemiah stops and says a quick prayer before making his request to the king. He wants to petition the Almighty to bless him as he makes this request before the king.
- 4) Nehemiah asked the king for letters to ensure his safety as he traveled to Jerusalem and also to give him timber so he could build beams for the gates of the fortress near the temple, the city wall itself and for a personal house to dwell in.

**QUESTION:** Which of the reasons listed above would have caused you to hesitate approaching the king and making such a request of him?

The king granted Nehemiah everything he asked and then some (vs. 8-9), although Nehemiah knew ultimately the provisions made for him were all

because the hand of God. God was going to use Nehemiah and his position for His own purpose and glory.

## **Nehemiah's Confidence (2:10; 16-20)**

Although Nehemiah has the approval of the king and God working in the background, he is still faced with a considerable amount of opposition. Sanballat, the governor of Samaria, was against Nehemiah going in and fortifying Jerusalem; to do so would threaten Sanballat politically.

Even though he faced heavy opposition, Nehemiah rallied the people and convinced them to join in the rebuilding of the wall because he had confidence in God to take care of them and grant them success (Neh. 2:20). It's interesting to note the word Nehemiah means, "Jehovah comforts." That is certainly what God did in the heart of Nehemiah. God comforted Nehemiah and gave him the confidence to act in the wake of such heartache.

Nehemiah allowed God to work in his life in order to do something about what had happened in Jerusalem. After almost a century and a half, God worked in the life of Nehemiah to restore the city of Jerusalem and its walls.

**QUESTION:** Do you recall a time when you were faced with a difficult situation but had the confidence that God would be with you and bring you through successfully? Is anyone willing to share such a time?

## Standing Out When We Receive Bad News

When Nehemiah received the disheartening news about his ancestral homeland, he refused to just sit back and cry over it. He decided to take action and make something happen. Consider just how different of an approach that is from most people today. When most people hear of some kind of “bad news” that others are dealing with, the easy thing to do is to just sit back and watch. Instead, Nehemiah chose to get involved.

What about us? How will we choose to react when we learn about the hurts of others? Nehemiah teaches us how we can stand out and be different and make a difference in the lives of others when they are hurting.

- 1) ***Show your concern.*** Nehemiah was grieved when he learned of the wall still being in ruins. When we learn of some of the devastation that others are dealing with, we should be moved to be concerned about them (Phil. 2:4; Jn. 13:34-35).
- 2) ***Take it to God.*** Right after Nehemiah learned of the situation in Jerusalem, he took time to pray and he did so for several days. One of the best things we can ever do for ourselves or for others during difficult times is to pray (Phil. 4:6-7; Mk. 11:24; I Pet. 5:7).
- 3) ***Have the courage to take the appropriate action.*** One of the best things Nehemiah teaches us is to not allow “bad news” or difficulties to paralyze us. We should always be looking for opportunities to take action and demonstrate our faith in God (Jam. 2:18).
- 4) ***Demonstrate your confidence in God.*** Nehemiah believed and trusted that God would be with him and make him successful in his endeavor (Phil. 4:13; Prov. 37:23). Knowing God is on our side should give us the confidence to face head on whatever circumstance we find ourselves, or others, presented with.
- 5) ***Offer encouragement.*** It was because of Nehemiah’s confidence in God and his encouragement of the people, that the people were willing to step up and rebuild the wall of Jerusalem in spite of the opposition they faced. When friends and

acquaintances are dealing with difficult times, they need all the encouragement they can get. Let's remember to always be quick to offer words of encouragement to others (I Thess. 5:11; Prov. 27:17).

## **Discussion Questions**

- 1) What do you consider to be the worst news you have ever received?
- 2) What do you find most intriguing about Nehemiah's reaction to the walls of Jerusalem still being in ruins?
- 3) Why is it hard for us to sometimes see God working in our lives?
- 4) Why is it important for Christians to stand out when it comes to helping others who are hurting?
- 5) In what ways can we encourage others when they are hurting?

# STAND OUT

## Week 5: When Others Are At Risk

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What would you do?

- If you and your friends were still hungry but there was only one piece of pizza left?
- If you were waiting in line to check out with a cart full of items, but the person behind you was a mom with three young kids who had very few items?
- If your best friend forgot to do their homework and asked to see your homework before class started?
- If you were walking down the road and saw a small child playing in the middle of a busy street?

It's funny for us to joke about eating the last piece of pizza when we and our friends are still hungry because there is no serious risk involved. We can eat the pizza and yet, nobody gets hurt. However, it's quite another thing when we see something that causes other people to be at risk.

I have no doubts that if any one of us saw a small child playing in the middle of a busy street we would be so concerned about their safety that we would do something because of the great risks involved. None of us would want to see someone risk being hurt if there was something we could do to help prevent it, right?

Ezra was no different. When he learned of the behavior of the Israelites and the risk they were taking engaging in such behavior, he had to do something to try to prevent further damage.

## **The Problem Ezra Faced (Ezra 9:1-2)**

Ezra was a scribe who was well versed in the Law of Moses. He had set his heart to study the Law, practice the Law and to teach the Law (Ezra 7:6, 10). He was sent by King Artaxerxes of Persia back to Jerusalem with the second wave of Israelites who were returning to their homeland. After spending 70 years in Babylonian captivity, the first wave of Israelites returned to Jerusalem around 536 B.C. (Ezra 2). By 515 B.C. the temple had been rebuilt and things were starting to look up for Jerusalem.

Unfortunately, by the time Ezra returned to Jerusalem almost 80 years later in 458 B.C. (Ezra 7), things had taken a turn for the worse.

The people of Israel who had returned back home to Jerusalem had begun to fall in the same old trap of disobedience as before the captivity. When Ezra returned home he found some of the Israelites had intermarried with the pagan people of the land. Back when Israel was preparing to go in and take the land of promise, God had forbidden them to intermarry with the nations around them (Deut. 7:1-6).

To make matters worse, not only were the people being disobedient to the Law of God, but so were the priest and Levites as well. The very people who should have been providing leadership for the rest of the people to model, were themselves involved in dishonoring God and His Law.

**QUESTION:** Have you ever encountered someone who was doing something you knew was wrong and so did they, but that person was a person in a leadership position? What did you do?

## **The Reaction Ezra Demonstrated (Ezra 9:3-5)**

When Ezra learned about what was happening in the Holy City with the very people God had protected and brought out of captivity, he was disgusted.

- 1) Ezra was so disgusted he tore his garment and cloak and pulled hair from his head and beard (v. 3). The tearing of garments was not an uncommon practice when people were mourning (Gen. 37:28-29; 34; Job 1:20). Even shaving one's head as a sign of grief was common. When Job was grieving over the loss of his children, we read about him shaving his head (Job 1:20). However, the pulling out of one's own hair was not common. In fact, this act is mentioned nowhere else in all of scripture (Nehemiah did pull off some of the hair of some offenders who were giving their daughters in marriage to pagans – Nehemiah 13).
- 2) Ezra sat appalled (shocked or disgusted) until the time of the evening sacrifice which was around 3:00 p.m. (v. 4). The officials most likely approached Ezra sometime in the early morning hours. Thus, Ezra sat in shock and silence for several hours.
- 3) Ezra arose from his fasting (v. 5). This was often associated with praying.
- 4) Ezra fell on his knees and lifted his hand up to the Lord (v. 5). Ezra realized this sin was serious and not something to just be ignored.

**QUESTION:** When you see or hear about someone disobeying the Law of God, how do you react?

## **The Prayer Ezra Prayed (Ezra 9:6-15)**

When Ezra fell down upon his knees and lifted his hands up to the Lord, he couldn't even look toward the heavens. He was too ashamed at the actions and

sins of the people saying, “I blush” (blush can mean ashamed, embarrassed or humiliated).

**QUESTION:** What causes you to blush? Do you blush at the thought of the sin in your life?

*“Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown, says the Lord.”*

*- Jeremiah 6:15 (also in Jer. 8:12)*

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Ezra is ashamed by the behavior of God’s people so much so that he includes himself as being guilty even though he hasn’t committed the sin of intermarrying pagans. He feels as if Israel has no excuse for what they have done (v. 10).

**QUESTION:** How often do people try to offer an excuse in order to justify sinful behavior? Can sinful behavior ever be justified or excused?

Because Ezra felt Israel was without excuse, he felt they deserved all the bad they received. Fortunately, for Israel, God punished them far less than their sins deserved (v. 13).

*“He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. <sup>11</sup>For as high as the heavens are*

*above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; <sup>12</sup> as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."*

*- Psalm 103:10-12*

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I don't know about you, but I'm glad God doesn't punish me to the extent that I deserve. Otherwise, I would be bound to spend an eternity away from the presence of God.

## **The Response Ezra Brought (Ezra 10:1-5)**

Ezra's response to the sin of Israel caused quite a stir. People began to gather around and perhaps realizing the seriousness of the sin, they began to weep bitterly. Not everyone in Jerusalem was evil and involved in such a violation of the Law of God.

Shecaniah was so moved by what he had witnessed from Ezra, he called the people out for breaking faith with God by marrying those who God had forbidden. He immediately proposed the people make a covenant with God to put away their forbidden wives (Deut. 24:1).

Please understand God hates divorce (Mal. 2:16). He always has and He always will. However, when a marriage relationship is unauthorized and not in accordance with the will of God, it must be terminated. Too often, when people find themselves in an adulterous relationship (divorced for an unscriptural

reason – see Matthew 19:1-9), they tend to think all they need to do is repent and ask God for forgiveness. This passage teaches that repentance is not enough, even when children are involved (v. 44). A relationship not in accordance with God's Law has to be terminated.

## **The Message Ezra Spoke (Ezra 10:6-17)**

When all the people had gathered together, Ezra stood up and spoke the truth without hesitation (vs. 10-11). He told the people they were wrong and had broken faith by marrying foreign women. They needed to confess their sins and start doing God's will. Imagine how difficult delivering such a message must have been.

**QUESTION:** What's the hardest thing you have ever had to tell someone? How did they respond?

The people responded by wanting to do that which Ezra had said. Even though it was probably a difficult message to deliver, Ezra didn't back down and the people responded favorably. He told the people what they did not want to hear because they were putting themselves and all of Israel at risk. Within three months, all the unauthorized relationships were terminated.

What about us? Are we willing to stand out from the crowd and speak the truth of God's Word even when people might not want to hear our message and allow themselves to be put at great risk?

## Why Stand Out When Others Are At Risk?

- 1) *Sin is a Problem and Every One is Guilty.* The bible teaches all sin and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Most of the time our sins are not a matter of ignorance but a matter of arrogance on our part. In this account from Ezra, not only are the people guilty of sin, but so are the priests and Levites, men who knew the Law of God. You and I probably know plenty of people who are leading sinful lives even though they know better. Friends, they're at risk!
- 2) *Sin is Serious and Must be Dealt with.* Ezra acted swiftly when he learned of Israel intermarrying with pagans. Although this was during the Israel's raining season and not the best of conditions (Ezra 10:9), Ezra proceeded because this was too important to put off. The soul that sins shall die (Eze. 18:20).
- 3) *Sin has Consequences and Brings about Shame.* The names of those guilty of intermarriage are listed at the end of chapter 10. Why, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, would these names be listed? Perhaps it is to demonstrate to us how sin can bring about grave shame and consequences even though forgiveness has been obtained. Although the men had righted their wrongs so to speak, they still had consequences and shame to bear.

## Discussion Questions:

- 1) What impresses you the most about Ezra and his response to the sin of the people around him?
- 2) What do you make of Ezra including himself as being guilty of sin when he prayed to God after learning the news of the Israelites intermarrying?
- 3) What trait or characteristic of Ezra would you most like to have? Why?

- 4) Why is standing out when others are at risk spiritually so difficult for most people today?
- 5) Besides the ones listed, what other reasons would you give for standing out when others are at risk spiritually?

# STAND OUT

## Week 6: When it's Costly

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What are you willing to give up for your religious beliefs? I dare say most of us would be willing to give up almost anything for our religious beliefs, especially those things that have no attraction for us. For some of us, giving up alcohol and drugs isn't hard because we have no desire for either. However, others would choose the alcohol and drugs perhaps for very different reasons.

Joel Northup was willing to give up a state championship for his religious beliefs. Northup, a sophomore in high school, refused to wrestle his first round opponent in the Iowa high school state tournament back in 2011. His reason for forfeiting the match was because his first round opponent was a girl. Joel Northup felt wrestling with a girl would conflict with his religious beliefs, because he would most likely have to touch her in inappropriate places.

I don't know about you, but I have a lot of respect for this young man. He was willing to forfeit a match he was favored to win, because of his religious beliefs. By refusing to wrestle, Joel single handedly sacrificed his shot at a state title, something for which all athletes on the high school level strive. A lot of people probably thought he was crazy. Why sacrifice something so big like a state title for something so little as a religious belief? I mean, it's not like he was going to intentionally touch and grope this girl. He was just going to compete against her as he would any other opponent on the mat.

When you read through scripture you find others who were willing to stand out when it was costly because of the convictions they held. Take Joseph for example. While in Egypt his master's wife pleaded with him to sleep with her. I

have no doubts that Potiphar's wife was very attractive. After all, Potiphar was an Egyptian officer in Pharaoh's army. He was an important person in Egypt. However, instead of giving in to her advances, Joseph refused her day after day. Listen to what Joseph said, "*How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?*" (Gen. 39:9) Joseph was willing to stand out and give up sexual pleasure in order to remain true to His God.

Daniel is another example who was willing to sacrifice something most would consider important because of his convictions. Daniel was taken captive by the Babylonians, when they invaded Judah around 605 BC, for the purpose of serving in the king's court. In time Daniel became an important figure in the Babylonian empire. Each time a new king took the throne Daniel always found favor in his eyes. At one point Daniel refused to obey a royal decree to only pray to the king and not any other god or man for thirty days. Daniel was sentenced to the lion's den. However, we tend to overlook that before this situation occurred, the king was planning to appoint Daniel over the entire kingdom (Dan. 6:3). Daniel was willing to stand out and go against the royal law even though it would most likely cost him prominence in the kingdom.

This list could go on and on. Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego were willing to give up their lives for their convictions (Dan. 3). All the apostles were willing to give up the pleasures of life for their convictions. Many of the early Christians were willing to sacrifice all they had for their convictions. Standing out when it's costly is nothing new.

## **The Forgotten Queen (Esther 1:9)**

**QUESTION:** What are some of the benefits you think come from being royalty?

Imagine what it would be like to live as royalty and to have everything you have ever dreamed of having and then some? Can you fathom how incredibly different your life would be? Now imagine what it might be like to go from living as royalty to just living more of a normal kind of life. How big of a change would that be for an individual?

Meet Queen Vashti. She's what we might call the forgotten queen. She was the beautiful queen of Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes, the king of Persia (486-465 B.C.). He reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces. Although we do not read about Queen Vashti anywhere else in scripture, it is important to note her place of royalty in the history books.

## **The Fragile King (Esther 1:3-8)**

You would think being a rich king with a beautiful wife and plenty to show for your royal glory would be enough to make any king happy. Unfortunately for Ahasuerus, it wasn't enough. He needed something more. He had an overwhelming sense of pride and needed to have others marvel at his riches and success as king. He needed to know he had what others wanted. It is apparent he needed to have his ego stroked.

**QUESTION:** Do you consider pride as something that should be avoided? Why? What one reason makes you feel this way?

Over the course of 180 days, Ahasuerus had all his princes and attendants and the nobles of Persia present for a banquet. For six months the king was able to showcase his riches and glory. When they were done, the king decided to give a week long banquet for all the people who were present in Susa, from the greatest to the least. Again, this is all about his ego and pride.

Ahasuerus put his best foot forward and showcased only the best. The palace was decorated with fine and expensive linens, and all the drinking vessels were made of gold and came in all different shapes and sizes. This feast was all about celebrating, drinking and marveling at the king's riches. The king even gave orders which allowed the people to drink as much or as little as they pleased over the course of the seven day feast.

**QUESTION:** Based on the king's orders for drinking, what do you think probably happened?

**QUESTION:** What happens when a person becomes drunk?

## **The Foolish Request (Esther 1:10-11)**

On the last day of the banquet, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he made a bold request. Now, just imagine for a moment what kind of shape the

king might be in. He has been feasting for six months and having a drinking fest for the last seven days. If he is not three shades to the wind, he is still probably in no shape to make good decisions.

**QUESTION:** Have you ever seen a drunken person in real life? What was your perception of them?

The chances are you probably witnessed them do something or say something stupid, right? I have known a lot of people who openly admit they made a number of mistakes they regretted because they were intoxicated. This king would be no different.

Not thinking clearly and very much hung up on himself, the king orders the queen to come before his guest and parade around wearing her royal crown. After spending months showing off his great wealth, he would now show off perhaps his greatest possession of all, his beautiful queen.

Stop and think for just a moment what the king is asking his wife to do? He is asking her to come into the presence of men, parade around unveiled before what was a heavy intoxicated group, and show off her beauty in hopes of having the drunken men become jealous of what he had to enjoy. This went against Persian custom on so many different levels.

Do you see how foolish such a request was, even coming from the mouth of the king? Had the king only been sober and clearly thinking, he would have never

asked his queen to go against all the different Persian customs as he did. Instead, he was drunk and not thinking clearly, which in the end cost him and his bride dearly.

## **The Fateful Refusal (Esther 1:12-22)**

When queen Vashti learned of the king's orders she didn't respond in the manner he must have anticipated, otherwise he would have probably never made such a command.

*“But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs.”*

- *Esther 1:12a*

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Instead of giving in and coming and doing something that went against her values and the Persian customs of the day, she refused her husband. Need I remind you that her husband was the king? No one refuses the king and walks away unpunished and we can be fairly certain the queen understood such. By refusing the king's command, she was putting herself and her position in grave danger.

How would the king respond? Would he simply overlook such behavior simply because it was his wife, the queen, who refused him? Notice what the text says about the king's response.

*“At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.”*

*- Esther 1:12b*

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Did you catch what it said? The king became so enraged that his anger burned within him. I kind of imagine it being one of those things the king just couldn't get over. How could she do that? How could she refuse him in front of his friends?

**QUESTION:** Has someone ever embarrassed you in front of a group of your friends? How did it make you feel? How did you respond?

The king was outraged. Here he was trying to impress his drunken friends with his most prized possession and she refused his orders. How embarrassing this must have been for the king. He was publicly humiliated by the queen. Something had to be done and it had to be done quickly.

The king was advised to banish Vashti from his presence and make an edict that would forever ban her from returning into his presence. Essentially, Vashti would be divorced and no longer serve as queen. Consider for just a moment what standing out cost Vashti:

- 1) She was forever banned from the presence of the king.
- 2) She lost all her royal rights as the queen.
- 3) She was replaced by someone more worthy to serve in her royal position as queen.

- 4) She was used as an example for other women throughout the provinces to take note of.

Even though she most likely knew how costly it would be, Queen Vashti chose to stand out against her husband's orders and paid a great price because of her choice. She paid a price most people would probably not be willing to pay. She was willing to give up her royal place of honor just so she wouldn't disgrace herself. What a wonderful example Vashti is when it comes to standing out even when's its costly.

## **Why Stand Out if it Could be Costly?**

- 1) *So we don't have to live with regret.* One of the things I hear most often in my line of work centers around the theme of regret. It seems to be that more and more people find themselves in situations where they choose to give in instead of standing out and being different and this more times than not leads to major regrets. If we will make the decision now to stand out and be different from the crowd around us, we will go through life with far less regret.
- 2) *So we don't violate God's Law.* Even more costly than losing a place of honor in this life is losing a place with God in the next life. We should always choose to do God's will no matter what it may cost us in the end. Jesus said, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28).
- 3) *So we don't cause other people to stumble.* What we must realize is that people are always watching us. They are watching to see what we do and what we don't do. When we choose to stand out even when it's costly, we set an example that people will remember. Even though Vashti lost her

royal position of honor, she is remembered today for her willingness to stand out in spite of what it cost her.

So the question comes to you? What are you willing to give up for your convictions? Joel Northup was willing to sacrifice the Iowa high school state wrestling championship because of his religious beliefs. Jesus said, "If any man will come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me" (Matt. 16:24). I hope and pray each one of you is willing to give up and sacrifice anything that gets in the way of your relationship with God. In the end, that's all that truly matters in life.

*"For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?"*

*- Matthew 16:26*

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## **Discussion Questions:**

1. Would choosing to stand out the way Vashti did be a hard choice for you to make? Why?
2. Why do you think Queen Vashti made the choice to stand out and refuse the king's command?
3. Have you ever chosen to stand out and it proved to be costly? What did it cost you?
4. Besides the three mentioned above, what other reasons would you give for choosing to stand out even when it's costly?
5. What one lesson will you take away from Vashti and her refusal of the king's command?

# STAND OUT

## Week 7: When God's Call is Difficult

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**QUESTION:** Have you ever been asked, or perhaps even told, to do something you really did not want to do?

When I was in college, I was blessed to be a part of my first mission trip. I was going to be experiencing this with some of my closest friends so I just knew this was going to be a fun and exciting experience for all of us.

This mission trip provided many opportunities for us to serve others in the name of Jesus; things like Bible studies, maintenance work, visiting, encouraging the members of the small congregation we were working with and yes, door knocking. I was excited about every part of this trip with the exception of door knocking. The reason I was hesitant about door knocking was because of the warning we received when we first arrived for work. We were told the area we would be knocking in was somewhat unsafe, especially at night. That's all I needed to hear.

Although they assured us we would be safe during daylight hours, I didn't want to do anything that was going to put anyone in our group in a dangerous situation. I went on this mission trip to help spread the message of Christ, although I really did not think it would be all that unsafe. I was worried about what I had gotten myself into.

When I was told we would be knocking doors in an area that was known to be unsafe at night, I'll admit, I was pretty worried at first. I was unsure of what to expect, but I could not back out of knocking doors. After all, this was one of the reasons I went on the mission trip in the first place. I wanted to help share the Gospel, even if that was difficult for me because I was out of my comfort zone.

What about with God? Do you ever find some of the things God commands of you to be difficult?

**QUESTION:** What are some of the commands of God you find to be difficult to live out?

## Friend of God

In the book of James we read about a man who had a unique relationship with God.

*“And the Scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness;’ and he was called a friend of God.”*

- James 2:23

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Did you catch what James said about Abraham? He was called a friend of God. I don't know of a better compliment than the one attributed to Abraham. What's

interesting about this though is that there were times when God called Abraham to do something that was difficult.

## **LEAVE (Gen. 12:1-4)**

Most of you probably have a roof over your head with plenty of food to eat and a family who loves and cares for you on a daily basis. Now imagine, what if you were asked to walk away from such comfort and security? Would you be able to just up and walk away?

Abraham (Abram at this point in his life) was called by God to leave his homeland and family behind and to go wherever God led him. It should be noted that this is not the first time God called Abraham to leave his family and home behind. According to Luke, when Abraham lived in Mesopotamia God called him and told him to do the very thing we read about in Genesis chapter twelve (Acts 7:2-4; Gen. 11:31-32). For whatever reason though, Abraham stopped in Haran and dwelt there with his family instead of fully heeding to the call of God.

It's interesting to note once Abram's father Terah died, God called Abram again and told him to leave his homeland and go to the land He would show him. Perhaps his father, Terah, was the reason they stopped to dwell in Haran and the reason God told Abram to leave his family behind. Whatever the reason, God calls Abram and tells him to go.

Consider what God was asking Abram to leave behind:

- 1) Abram is being asked to leave behind family and friends he probably holds near and dear to his heart.
- 2) Abram is being asked to leave his father's household, which meant leaving behind his family inheritance and rightful claims to property.

- 3) Abram is being asked to leave behind the family religion. Abram's father, Terah, was an idolater (Jos. 24:2).
- 4) Abram is being asked to leave behind independence to travel to an unknown land of God's choosing. God was going to show Abram where he was to go.

When you consider all that Abram was leaving behind, this was no easy task. He is leaving behind the known for a life of unknown. He was leaving behind what would be important for most (security) to live the life of a pilgrim.

There are times in our own lives when God calls us to leave behind certain things and to follow Him into the unknown. For some of you it may be your friends or even your family (I Corinthians 15:33; Matthew 10:37-39). For others, it might be some type of activity you are involved with (I John 2:15-17). Ultimately, God calls us to leave anything behind that may hinder our relationship with Him.

***"But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."***

***- Matthew 6:33***

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## **TRUST (Genesis 21:8-14)**

God had promised Abraham he and Sarah would have an offspring come from his own body (Genesis 15:4). When that promise did not happen as quickly as Sarah thought it should, she gave her maid, Hagar, to Abraham so she could bare them a child. This act led to the birth of Ishmael.

In time, God told Abraham that Ishmael was not the son of promise and that he and Sarah would have another child. Eventually Isaac is born (Genesis 21:2-3). One day, during a celebration for Isaac, Sarah saw Ishmael mocking Isaac. This made Sarah so angry she wanted Abraham to banish Hagar and her son (Genesis 21:9-10). This seemed to be the perfect opportunity for Sarah to rid her life of Hagar once and for all. There was just one problem; such actions by Abraham would cause Ishmael to lose any inheritance due him.

Sarah's request caused Abraham to be upset or displeased. However, once again God entered the picture and called Abraham to heed the words of Sarah. God promised Abraham he would make a nation of Ishmael because he was his seed.

What was Abraham to do? If he heeded the call of God, Hagar and his son Ishmael would be sent away where he could no longer look after his son and care for him. If he didn't listen to Sarah's request, he would be disobeying the call of God and demonstrating his lack of faith and trust.

Abraham did the only thing he knew to do, he listen and obeyed God. Even though he wasn't happy about the idea, Abraham trusted God and acted on his trust by sending Hagar and Ishmael away.

There are times in our own lives when God calls us to trust him. Maybe it's when our family is having problems, when we break up with our boyfriend/girlfriend, when a loved one dies, when we feel alone, when something didn't work out quite like we expected it do or when our life seems to crumble into 1,000 little pieces.

**QUESTION:** What about you? Have you ever found it difficult to follow God's call to trust Him? In what area of your life is it difficult to trust God?

One of my favorite verses in all of the Bible is about trust. I read it on a regular basis in order to remind myself the importance of placing my trust in God no matter what circumstances I find myself in.

*"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."*

*- Proverbs 3:5-6*

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Abraham learned through sending Hagar and Ishmael away, that sometimes God simply calls us to trust Him to be faithful.

## **SACRIFICE (Genesis 22:1-19)**

Of all the things most people know about Abraham, perhaps God's call for him to sacrifice his son Isaac is the most well known of all. One might think Abraham had been through enough by having to move from his homeland and banish his own son from his home. However, all that was just the beginning.

*"After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, 'Abraham!' And he said, 'Here I am.'<sup>2</sup> He said, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of*

*Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”*

*- Genesis 22:1-2*

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As if Abraham had not done enough to prove his faith in God, Moses records for us that God wanted to “Test Abraham.” I am sure you have taken plenty of tests in your life. Perhaps on occasion, there comes a test you dread taking. Maybe you anticipate this being the hardest test of your life. Welcome to how Abraham was probably feeling when he learned of the test God had set before him. After waiting all those years to finally have a son and then to have God tell Abraham that He wanted him to sacrifice his only son must have been difficult. How was Abraham supposed to respond to such a call? He could not pretend the call from God hadn’t happened. He had to either accept this difficult call or ultimately tell God no. Abraham had a tough decision before him. Notice what he did.

*“So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.”*

*- Genesis 22:3*

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Early the next morning Abraham took Isaac and headed for the land of Moriah just as God had told him. He didn’t hesitate, nor did he look for any excuses he could find. Instead, Abraham packed up everything he would need, including his only son Isaac, and set out in obedience to God.

*“And Isaac said to his father Abraham, ‘My father!’ And he said, ‘Here I am, my son.’ He said, ‘Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?’<sup>8</sup> Abraham said, ‘God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.’ So they went both of them together.<sup>9</sup> When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built the altar there and laid the wood in order and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.<sup>10</sup> Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to slaughter his son.”*

**- Genesis 22:7-10**

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At this point Isaac is starting to become curious as to what they are really doing. He had noticed they were missing the one key element they would need in order to offer a sacrifice to God, the lamb. You have to admit, it would be incredibly hard to offer a sacrifice without something to sacrifice, right?

That’s when it happened. Abraham reached out and grabbed Isaac and tied him upon the altar. At this point, the young Isaac is probably asking his father a hundred questions. Abraham, following the call of God completely, reached out and took his knife to offer up his only son. And then, that’s when it happened. Just when Abraham was about to offer his son as an offering in complete obedience to God, an angel from heaven called out and stopped him.

*“But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, ‘Abraham, Abraham!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’<sup>12</sup> He said, ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I*

*know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.'"*

*- Genesis 22:11-12*

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Seeing Abraham had enough faith to carry out this difficult call from God, he was stopped. Abraham had proven his complete trust and obedience to God. He had passed the test set before him.

Just as God called Abraham to sacrifice something of great value to him, God might be calling you to offer up something as a sacrifice. Is there anything in your life right now that by giving it up you would be demonstrating the importance of the Lord in your life? If there are things in our lives we aren't willing to sacrifice for the Lord and His cause, then perhaps our unwillingness to sacrifice shows the lack of importance the Lord has in our life.

**QUESTION:** What are some of the things teens may find important, but they are things that need to be sacrificed because they have the potential to come between them and God?

## **Standing Out When God's Call Is Difficult**

Abraham was a man who faced several difficult calls from God. Yet, each time God called, Abraham acted in obedience. What a great example from one of the greatest men the world has ever known.

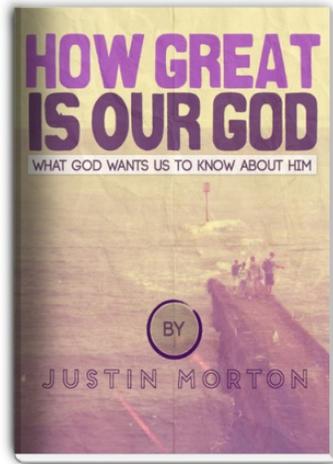
If you and I are going to stand out even when God calls us to do something difficult, there are a few things we should keep in mind.

- 1) **God's call may not always be easy.** When we look at the life of Abraham, we see three different calls from God. The interesting thing is that each of those three calls, although different, were all difficult to answer (leave, trust, sacrifice). God calls us to a life that is different from the world around us (Romans 12:1-2). Being different is never easy. What we have to remember is that although God's call is not always easy, obeying God's call is always best.
- 2) **God's call may cause us to have to give up certain things.** For Abraham, God called him to give up his home, friends and family. You and I must remember that there will be times when we have to give up and walk away from certain people, places and things in order to be obedient to God. Walking in obedience to God should always be our main priority in life (John 14:15; Matthew 22:37-39).
- 3) **God's call will require us to trust Him.** Giving up all that Abraham was asked to give up would not be easy for anyone. And yet, Abraham did it anyway. Why would he do such a thing? Why would he be willing to make such personal sacrifices? The answer lies in his faith. Abraham had enough faith in God to know that he could trust Him no matter what God was calling him to do (Hebrew 11:8-10, 17-19). If you and I want to be faithful to any and every call of God, it's going to take a special amount of faith and trust in Him (Psalm 9:10). Let's pray daily for God to increase our faith (Luke 17:5).

## Discussion Questions:

- 1) Why was Abraham able to stand out when God's call for him was difficult?
- 2) What is the hardest part when it comes to trusting God and His call for your life?
- 3) Do you have any people or places in your life that interfere with your walk with God? Please share if you are willing. What can you do to keep from allowing those people and places to interfere?
- 4) Have you had to make any sacrifices in order to be faithful to God's call for your life? What sacrifices have you had to make?
- 5) What personal characteristic of Abraham would you most like to develop more fully in your own life?

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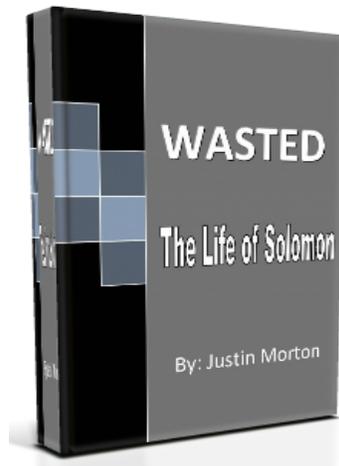
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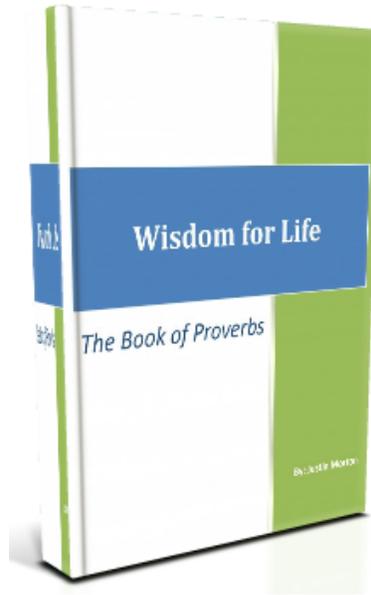
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