

# The Birdcage



## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Exodus 14, 15:22–27, 17:1–7, Proverbs 3, Luke 4:1–13, 1 Pet. 1:6–9.*

**Memory Text:** “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials” (1 Peter 1:6, NKJV).

In the full light of day, and in hearing of the music of other voices, the caged bird will not sing the song that his master seeks to teach him. He learns a snatch of this, a trill of that, but never a separate and entire melody. But the master covers the cage, and places it where the bird will listen to the one song he is to sing. In the dark, he tries and tries again to sing that song until it is learned, and he breaks forth in perfect melody. Then the bird is brought forth, and ever after he can sing that song in the light. Thus God deals with His children. He has a song to teach us, and when we have learned it amid the shadows of affliction we can sing it ever afterward.”—Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 472.

Notice that the one who carries the bird into the darkness is the master himself.

It is easy to understand that Satan causes pain, but would God Himself actively take a part in guiding us into crucibles where we experience confusion or hurt?

**The Week at a Glance:** What examples can you think of in the Bible in which God Himself leads people into experiences that He knows will include suffering? What do you think were the new songs He wanted them to sing?

\*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 20.

## To the Promised Land Via a Dead End

**“And when Pharaoh drew near, the children of Israel lifted their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians marched after them. So they were very afraid, and the children of Israel cried out to the Lord”** (*Exod. 14:10, NKJV*).

Have you ever been set up, led into a trap or to a dead end? Sometimes it can be nice, like walking unexpectedly into a room of waiting friends who all shout “Surprise! Happy birthday!” At other times it can be quite a shock, even a very unpleasant one. It may have been bullies when you were at school or a work colleague who unexpectedly tried to make you look bad.

From the day the Israelites left Egypt until they reached the Promised Land, “the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night” (*Exod. 13:21, NIV*). Every part of their journey was led by God Himself. But look at where He led them first: to a place where the sea was before them, mountains were on either side, and Pharaoh’s army was within eyesight right behind!

**Read** Exodus 14. Why did God bring the Israelites to a place where He knew they would be terrified?

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Following “the pillar” doesn’t assure us of being happy all the time. It also can be a hard experience, because training in righteousness takes us to places that test our hearts, which are so naturally deceitful (*Jer. 17:9*). During these difficulties, the key to knowing when we are truly following God is not necessarily the absence of trials or pain but, rather, an openness to God’s instruction and a continual submission of our minds and hearts to His leading.

**What** lesson did the Israelites learn from this experience? *Exod. 14:31*.

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**Why is trusting God sometimes so hard, even though we may know many of the wonderful promises He has for us? Recount some difficult situation you believe the Lord led you into in order to teach you to “believe” in and to “fear” Him.**

## *I Have to Teach Tomorrow . . .*

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► **Key Text:** *1 Peter 1:6*

► **Teach the Class to:**

**Know:** That God often leads us through trials that are meant to make us stronger as we follow His will in our lives.

**Feel:** Assurance that God is guiding our paths even when we are beset by obstacles and seemingly pointless adversity.

**Do:** Resolve to actively pray and struggle to learn the lessons God wants to teach us through our circumstances.

► **Lesson Outline:**

### I. Dead Ends (*1 Pet. 1:6*)

**A** It is easy to assume that if we follow God's will our path will be relatively free of difficulties. Conversely, the opposite must also be true. Such thinking is, undeniably, intuitive. Is it biblical?

**B** If we encounter unexpected, seemingly insurmountable difficulties, does it mean that we're on the wrong path?

**C** If we are mature Christians, indeed, if we are mature adults, we may think we have a good grasp of the difference between wants and needs. How might our own conception of our needs differ from God's?

### II. Not Losing Faith (*Jer. 29:13, 14*)

**A** Society views Christianity as one of many competing paths to *happiness*. What is this happiness that people seek? Does Christianity lead to it?

**B** What lessons can we draw from Christ's life, as we face seemingly insurmountable disappointment, adversity, or temptation?

### III. Strangers in the World (*Heb. 11:13, 14*)

**A** Most of the figures in the Bible suffered from disappointment and despair that dwarfs our experience, but we see the purpose in retrospect. How might your problems on your walk appear in hindsight?

**B** We all face temptation; sometimes we give in to it. When we do succumb, does God give up on us? How can we recover our focus?

► **Summary:** Following God does not guarantee an easy—or even a clear—path. It is important to realize that detours may be what God intends for us.

## Bitter Waters

**“The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink”** (*Exod. 17:1, NIV*).

We might surely not get from God everything we want, but can't we expect to get all that we need? Not what we think we need but what we truly need?

There was one thing the Israelites certainly needed, and that was water. Just after God led the Israelites through the Red Sea in the cloud, they followed Him through the hot, waterless desert for three days. Particularly in the desert, where finding water is so critical, their desperation is understandable. When would they get the water they needed?

So, where does God lead them? The pillar goes to Marah, where, at last, there is water. They must have been excited. But when they tasted the water, they immediately spat it out because it was bitter. “So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, ‘What are we to drink?’ ” (*Exod. 15:24, NIV*).

Then, a few days later, God does it again. This time, however, the pillar actually stops where there is no water at all (*Exod. 17:1*).

**Read** Exodus 15:22–27 and 17:1–7. What did God reveal to Israel about Himself at Marah and at Rephidim? What lessons should they have learned?

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**In Rephidim, what question did the children of Israel ask? (*Exod. 17:7*). Have you ever asked the same question? If so, why? How did you feel, and what lessons did you learn after you had it answered? How many times do we need to get it answered before we stop asking it altogether?**

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## Learning Cycle

### ► **STEP 1—Motivate!**

**Just for Teachers:** Step 1 of the Natural Learning Cycle links the learners' experiences to the lesson. Help your class members answer the question, *Why is this lesson important to me?*

**Consider this:** We might surely not get from God everything we want, but couldn't we expect to get all that we need?

The week's lessons provide two illustrations that suggest an answer:

**1** If, in the illustration from *The Ministry of Healing* about the bird in the cage, the master had not covered the cage and left the bird in the dark, would it ever have learned the tune? This is no easy thought to grasp. We would much prefer to be in the light at all times.

**2** Does the *bitter water* of your particular situation mean that God has removed Himself from the picture? If *bitter water* is intolerable, how might you react if the next thing that arises is comparable to no water at all?


**Is it possible to accept a faith-based answer? Do you feel that you truly can depend on God, even if you seem to be in a darkened bird cage or in a no water situation?**

### ► **STEP 2—Explore!**

**Just for Teachers:** This step of the Natural Learning Cycle presents information learners can use to help them better understand the lesson. Help your class members answer this question, *What do I need to know from God's Word?*

## Bible Commentary

A statement by Ellen G. White may come up in the class discussion of this week's lesson: "God never leads His children otherwise than they would choose to be led, if they could see the end from the beginning, and discern

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## The Great Controversy in the Desert

“And Jesus, being full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, being tempted for forty days by the devil” (*Luke 4:1, 2, NKJV*).

**Read** Luke 4:1–13. What lessons can you learn from this account about how to overcome temptation and not give in to sin?

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Temptations can be so difficult because they appeal to things we really desire, and they always seem to come at our weakest moments.

Luke 4 is the beginning of the story of Jesus’ temptation by Satan, and it brings some difficult issues to our attention. At first glance, it appears that the Holy Spirit is leading Jesus into temptation. However, God never tempts us (*James 1:13*). Rather, as we have been seeing, God does lead us to crucibles of testing. What is striking in Luke 4 is that the Holy Spirit can lead us to times of testing that involve our being exposed to Satan’s fierce temptations. At such times when we feel these temptations so strongly, we may misunderstand and think we have not been following God correctly. But this is not necessarily true. “Often when placed in a trying situation we doubt that the Spirit of God has been leading us. But it was the Spirit’s leading that brought Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. When God brings us into trial, He has a purpose to accomplish for our good. Jesus did not presume on God’s promises by going unbidden into temptation, neither did He give up to despondency when temptation came upon Him. Nor should we.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 126, 127.

Sometimes when in the crucible we get burned rather than purified. It is therefore very comforting to know that when we crumble under temptation, we can hope again because Jesus stood firm. The good news is that because Jesus is our Sin Bearer, because He paid the penalty for our failure to endure that temptation (whatever it was), because He went through a crucible worse than any of us will ever face, we are not cast off or forsaken by God. There is hope, even for the “chief” of sinners (*1 Tim. 1:15*).

**What temptations are you facing now? Spend some time in prayer, asking the Lord to teach you how to apply the lessons from Jesus’ example in your own life. Remember, you don’t have to succumb to temptation, ever! Remember, too, that you have a Savior if you do.**

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

the glory of the purpose which they are fulfilling as co-workers with Him.”—*The Desire of Ages*, pp. 224, 225.

**I. A Puzzling Proposition**

This statement is bewildering to many people. Why would God apparently hide His purpose from us, yet expect us to take in stride some really serious trials and tribulations?

The answer is a matter of faith, as illustrated in the spiritual lesson of the bitter waters of Marah. It has to do with the fact that God ultimately is in control of events. No one knows what kind of tree branch Moses threw into the water. The point is that it worked a miracle. What looks like a dead end to us, God often turns into a miracle.

**II. Moving Through the Cycle**


From bitter water the Israelites moved on to no water! Cowper certainly has a point when he wrote, “God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.”—*The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 1985), no. 107. Nevertheless, in spite of the bewildering nature of what happens, the Bible tells us that God has a plan and a purpose. It’s not always distinguishable, but it’s still true!

**III. The Key Point**

The key point of this week’s study is that in spite of what we see and experience, God knows what He is doing and why. This fact can be grasped only through faith.

**Something Your Students Should Know:**

*Marah*, a Hebrew word meaning “bitter,” applied to the acrid waters of the spring where Israel camped. No one knows exactly where *Marah* was. The most common site is thought to be modern Hawarah, where the water is still bitter. Others look to an oasis some nine miles (14 kilometers) south-east of Suez called Ayun Musa. The soil in these areas contains potassium nitrate, also known as saltpeter. It’s used as fertilizer, in the manufacture of glass, as a food preservative, and in some medicines as a diuretic. It once was used in gunpowder and still is used in explosives, fireworks, and

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## An Enduring Legacy

**Read** 1 Peter 1:6, 7. What is Peter saying?

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Peter is writing to people who were battling through difficulties and often felt very alone. He was writing “to God’s elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia” (1 Pet. 1:1, NIV). This is the area we know today as western Turkey. A few texts later, Peter says that he knows that they are experiencing “grief in all kinds of trials” (vs. 6, NIV).

**What** does he mean by saying that they are “strangers” and “scattered”? How might that add to their trials?

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Being a Christian during these times was a new thing; believers were small in number and in various places where they were a decided minority that was often misunderstood at best, persecuted at worst. Peter assures them, however, that these trials are not random or chaotic (vss. 6, 7). Genuine faith is the goal of those who persevere through “all kinds of trials.”

**Read** 1 Peter 1:6–9. What ultimate assurance does Peter seek to give these people amid their trials? What does that hope mean for us too?

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Whatever their trials, whatever they suffer, how can it be compared to the eternity that awaits them when Christ returns? Peter’s words to them are God’s words to us, regardless of whatever we are facing. However difficult or painful our trials, we must never lose sight of the ultimate end, eternal life in a new heaven and new earth, without pain, suffering, or death. With such a promise before us, a promise guaranteed us through the death of Jesus, how important that we not lose faith but, instead, amid our trials ask the Lord to purge us of everything and anything that stands in the way of our faith.



Learning Cycle CONTINUED

matches. No wonder they couldn't drink it!

### ► STEP 3—Practice!

**Just for Teachers:** This step of the Natural Learning Cycle will assist you in helping your class members find the answer to the following question: **How can I practice the information I just learned?**

**Consider This:** Those who study the inner workings of religious belief tell us that people and churches tend to place themselves in one of three categories. Where would you place yourself?

- 1 We Christians are “in the world and of the world.” That means there is little difference between a Christian and anyone else except that we try to be as caring as possible in our treatment of other people.
- 2 We Christians are “in the world but not of the world.” That means that while we live in this world, our citizenship is elsewhere, and our thoughts and actions are governed by the “other world.”
- 3 We Christians are “neither in the world nor of the world.” That means we should do everything we can to separate ourselves from the world and live as if we were already in the “other world,” maybe by separating ourselves from society and living in separate colonies where we can protect our way of life.

#### Application Questions:

- 1 Why did you select the category you chose?
- 2 What difference does that category make in your understanding of why you may find yourself in a crucible?
- 3 Why would Peter say, “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials” (*1 Pet. 1:6, NIV*)? What is there to rejoice about in trial and tribulations? Why did he say “for a little while”? From the time he said this until Christianity formally was recognized as a legal religion was almost three hundred years. Is that “a little while”?
- 4 What do the promises of God have to do with the solutions to trials and tribulations in our lives?

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## Trial by Fire

There was a young man. We'll call him Alex. He had come out of a very troubled youth: drugs, violence, even some time in jail. But then, through the kindness of a local church member (whom Alex had stolen from), Alex learned about God and gave his heart to Jesus. Though he still had his problems and struggles, and though elements of his past still lingered, Alex was a new person in Jesus. He loved God and sought to express that love by obeying His commandments (*1 John 5:1, 2*). At one point Alex felt impressed that he should be a minister. Everything pointed to it. He was answering God's call, no doubt about it.

At college things went well at first. Then one thing after another went awry, and his life began coming apart. His source of money started to dry up; a close friend turned against him, making accusations about him that were false but that damaged his reputation. Next, he kept on getting sick; no one knew what it was, but it impacted his studies to the point where he was afraid that he was going to have to drop out of school completely. On top of it all, he was fighting fierce temptations with drugs, which were readily available in the local community. At one point he even fell in that area. Alex couldn't understand why all this was happening, especially because he was sure that the Lord had led him to this school to begin with. Was Alex *wrong* about that? If so, was *his whole experience* with God a *huge mistake*? Even the most basic elements of his faith were coming under doubt.

**Imagine** that, amid this crisis, Alex came to you and asked for advice. What would you say? What experiences have you had that could help someone like him? What Bible texts would you use? How helpful might the following texts be in such a situation?  
*Proverbs 3, Jer. 29:13, Rom. 8:28, 2 Cor. 12:9, Heb. 13:5.*

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**Almost all who follow the Lord have had crises during which they've been tempted to doubt the Lord's leading. The important thing in such situations is to cling to the promises, recount God's leading in the past, and pray for faith and endurance. The Lord will never give up on us; it's we who have to fight the temptation to give up on Him.**

Learning Cycle CONTINUED► **STEP 4—Apply!**

**Just for Teachers:** In this fourth and final step of the Natural Learning Cycle, you will want to encourage class members to make a life response to the lesson. Help them answer this question, With God’s help, what can I do with what I have learned from this lesson?

**Personal Case Study**

Thursday’s lesson tells the story of Alex and his trials and tribulations. However, it does not say how the story ended. It simply asks the question, Was Alex wrong about his faith and commitment? Then the lesson asks you what advice you would give Alex.

It’s fine to give Alex some advice, and the lesson mentions five texts that are helpful. However, what if you have a personal equivalent to Alex’s story?

**Consider These Questions:**

- ❶ What’s your personal case that’s equivalent to Alex’s?
- ❷ How did you handle (or are you handling) it?
- ❸ Can you truly say that your inner *caged bird* is willing to sing instead of complain bitterly about whatever issue is troubling you?

**Some Personal Thoughts to Contemplate**

Tuesday’s lesson makes a significant statement: “At such times when we feel these temptations so strongly, we may misunderstand and think we have not been following God correctly. But this is not necessarily true.” Here are two questions to contemplate:

- ❶ What is that statement saying to you personally?
- ❷ Can you honestly say that you are willing to recognize that God may have a critical lesson for you in there someplace?

**Further Study:** Read Ellen G. White, “The Exodus,” pp. 281–290; “From the Red Sea to Sinai,” pp. 291–302, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; “The Temptation,” pp. 114–123, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“But of old the Lord led his people to Rephidim, and he may choose to lead us there also, to test our loyalty. He does not always bring us to pleasant places. If he did, in our self-sufficiency we should forget that he is our helper. He longs to manifest himself to us, and to reveal the abundant supplies at our disposal, and he permits trial and disappointment to come to us that we may realize our helplessness, and learn to call upon him for aid. He can cause cooling streams to flow from the flinty rock. We shall never know, until we are face to face with God, when we shall see as we are seen, and know as we are known, how many burdens he has borne for us, and how many burdens he would have been glad to bear, if, with childlike faith, we had brought them to him.”—Ellen G. White, “Rephidim,” *Review and Herald*, April 7, 1903.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 We often talk of temptation as an individual thing, which, of course, it is. At the same time, are there any corporate temptations, things that we as a church or a local church family might have to guard against as a group? If so, what?
- 2 Have those who are willing talk about any of the “unpleasant places” that they have been brought to. Why have they been unpleasant? If they had to revisit them today, would they view them differently?
- 3 We all understand the principle behind God’s allowing us to be purified and refined by trials. How, though, do we understand the situation in which trials appear to have no value (for instance, someone is killed instantly in a car wreck)? As a class, seek to work through possible answers.
- 4 As a class, take time together to pray for each other, that each might be strengthened to endure trials and stay faithful.
- 5 Does your class know of anyone who, having faced trials, lost their way? If so, as a class what could you do in a very tangible way to help lead that person back?