

youthESource Bible Study

Facing the Unknown: Terrifying Transitions

by Kristin Schmidt

Bible Focus: How can we best work through life transitions and changes? Through character profiles, discussion and key verses, this lesson seeks to provide comfort and security for students who are preparing to transition into new levels of school or home life. The lesson is particularly relevant to students moving from elementary into middle school, but can be adapted to suit other age groups as well.

Student application: Although change can be daunting, considering the elements that worry us and recognizing God's control and constancy can bring great peace amidst the turbulence of life's struggles.

Lesson Opener: Change one thing game...start out with this old favorite...select one person to leave the room and change something subtle about their appearance. Invite the rest of the group to guess as to what changed...alternatively, while the student is gone, change one aspect of the room environment, and see if the student guesses what it was. With small groups, the whole group can leave while the leader alters something in the room. After a few rounds of play, gather students together and explain that we will be talking about transitions. Change can be challenging, but we know it is necessary. After all, it gives life variety and keeps things fresh. But it also presents trepidation of the unknown. Invite discussion about upcoming transitions students face, and how they might be feeling and reacting.

Lesson and Verses: Kick off the Bible focus with a brief video clip: show students a scene from a movie that shows preparation for battle. Options include *Gladiator*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Braveheart*, or more... (consider your group and appropriateness, of course). Ask students to evaluate the characters...do they ever feel like they can relate, at the outset of something new?

Ask again what students find scary about transitions. What kinds of things can comfort us? Explain that we will be looking at a few Biblical heroes who faced tough situations, and overcame through following God's direction and relying on His omnipresent power. The main focus will be on a Biblical warrior who was really quite the weakling wimp, but was used by God in amazing and remarkable ways. Invite students to examine the character of Gideon, in the book of Judges (beginning in chapter 6). Explain that in this time, the Israelites had made some poor choices and been overtaken by the power of the Midianite army. They had to hide away and do things in secret to keep them from the Midianites. Gideon was preparing wheat one day when God came to him:

The angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. 12 When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior."

13 "Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, 'Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian." - Judges 6:11-13

We first meet Gideon while he is literally hiding away, trying to keep from being discovered. He seems rather confused at the whole "mighty warrior" title and tries to argue with God's messenger, asking why all of these bad things are happening if God is with them. Well, arguing with God is never a very good idea. And of course God comes back with a rebuttal:

The Lord turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?"

15 "Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family."

16 The Lord answered, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive."

17 Gideon replied, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me. 18 Please do not go away until I come back and bring my offering and set it before you."

And the Lord said, "I will wait until you return." Judges 6:14-18

God is tremendously patient with Gideon here. Excuse after excuse is brought forward, and the Lord could easily have shut down Gideon's requests and struggles. Notice what He emphasizes, though: the strength is from God. This is a huge theme in the story of Gideon, and in our lives as well. Succeed or fail, nothing is done on our own power but on His. God assures Gideon that He will deliver Israel on GOD's power. But Gideon is still reluctant and doubtful, and begs for signs. God still humors Him. But it does not excuse Gideon from carrying out God's work...

That same night the Lord said to him, "Take the second bull from your father's herd, the one seven years old. [b] Tear down your father's altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole [c] beside it. 26 Then build a proper kind of [d] altar to the Lord your God on the top of this height. Using the wood of the Asherah pole that you cut down, offer the second [e] bull as a burnt offering."

27 So Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the Lord told him. But because he was afraid of his family and the townspeople, he did it at night rather than in the daytime. -Judges 6:25-27

Do we ever try to hide away, or wish that we could just disappear from things? Gideon obeys, but only in secret. We tend to be so afraid when we are not sure what's coming or what people will think of our actions. How do we hide our deeds? Explain that after this, Gideon was still not convinced of God's providence, so he made a test by putting out a fleece...

Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece, but this time make the fleece dry and let the ground be covered with dew." 40 That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew. - Judges 6:39-40

Twice in a row Gideon begged for the fleece to be one way or another. And again, we see God patient enough to show Him. Have we ever tested God? Ever doubted He will do what He says? Gideon keeps trying to emphasize his own weakness and hesitation, only to be met with God's great strength and ability. But God needed to make sure that the army (and its commander) did not develop a swollen ego. So there was some paring down to be done...

The Lord said to Gideon, "You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me, 'My own strength has saved me.' ³ Now announce to the army, 'Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.'" So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained.

⁴ But the Lord said to Gideon, "There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will thin them out for you there. If I say, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go; but if I say, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go."

⁵ So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the Lord told him, "Separate those who lap the water with their tongues as a dog laps from those who kneel down to drink." ⁶ Three hundred of them drank from cupped hands, lapping like dogs. All the rest got down on their knees to drink.

⁷ The Lord said to Gideon, "With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the others go home." ⁸ So Gideon sent the rest of the Israelites home but kept the three hundred, who took over the provisions and trumpets of the others. -Judges 7:2-8

When things are going well, it's easy to be confident. When we have success, it is tempting to rely on our own power or boast of our own accomplishments. But God is the one doing the work. We don't have to go it alone, and we don't succeed on our own! God always proves HE is the powerful one. Here He shaves down the army, while the enemy has countless forces. But watch what happens...

The Midianites, the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore. -Judges 7:12

Gideon and the hundred men with him reached the edge of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just after they had changed the guard. They blew their trumpets and broke the jars that were in their hands. ²⁰ The three companies blew the trumpets and smashed the jars. Grasping the torches in their left hands and holding in their right hands the trumpets they were to blow, they shouted, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!" ²¹ While each man held his position around the camp, all the Midianites ran, crying out as they fled. -Judges 7:19-21

After all of that worry and fear and doubt, all that Gideon and his men had to do was blow their horns and break their pitchers, and the army fled. There are so many times that we worry ourselves sick, only to find things were not nearly as tough as we anticipated. So why waste our time on that?

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. -Philippians 4:6-7

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. -Matthew 6:33-34

If time allows, invite students to come up with some other characters who did the seemingly impossible with God's help. Consider those like Esther, David, and Ruth...all of them had to undergo drastic changes and transitions. But their faithfulness (to God and others) was richly rewarded. And take a look at the disciples. They left all that they had to come and follow Christ. Their changes were career changes, physical movement...everything. But God used them as well. Or perhaps the greatest transition template of all: Jesus Himself. God became man, walked the earth, and was killed. For us, so that change might not be so painful.

Follow-up Questions:

- What do you need to surrender in order to completely follow Jesus? Answers may vary...it could be harmful habits or even thought patterns that go against faith. Perhaps certain relationships should be examined for potential distractions. Maybe through sin of volition or omission we have neglected full dedication to Christ. Through prayerful devotion we can ask that He work in and through us.
- Why do we worry over change? What is frightening about it? Often our fears are based on the unknown...all of the potential things that could possibly happen. We can pray that God will grant peace to face those things we know we cannot change.

- What can we do to prepare without anxiety? *When times of transition come, we can research to know as much as we can, but then rest in God's grace and providence. We can look at the joy in transitions, rather than fear.*
- Are there people in your life who can provide help and advice during difficult times? Who are they and how can you turn to them?
- Our lives are constantly changing...but what one thing does not change? *(God! He is our constant and source of refuge.)*

This Week's Challenge: Destroy the idols. What do you follow and worship? We normally think of idols in terms of images or statues that we might worship or bow to. Yet ultimately worship is whatever takes up the bulk of our mental space. We might not worship stone idols or demons, but we make the mistake of straying from God when we focus on anything other than Him. We follow cliques and peer pressure. We look to media and popularity for significance. We worry and fret and spend time on ourselves or pleasures rather than God. This week, think hard about what gets in the way of following God. Just like Gideon burned the idols of Baal, submit to God those things that might be interrupting worship. Take time away from a favorite activity and spend it in prayer instead. Pray that your strength and focus would rest in God and not on yourself, in spite of any potential fears that might come your way.