

WHY? A Resource Kit for Talking to Teens about Disaster, Relief, & Restoration

Who am I Supposed to Count On?

By Dr. Bernerd Tonjes

Core Text: Matthew 11:1-15

Core Visual/Illustration: Read these vignettes and ask your students to tell you what really happened in each of these Bible stories.

1 Samuel 17: A giant and a young shepherd boy are going to go at it out in the valley. Whoever wins this battle gets it all. The giant has a huge sword and spear, and massive armor shielding his huge, nine foot tall body. The shepherd boy has a sling and some smooth stones. The battle begins, and ends, when the giant cuts off the boy's head with one swipe of the sword.

Judges 7: The feared Midianite Army is camped near the hills and Gideon, reluctant leader of the Israelites, sends messengers to all of the tribes and comes up with an army of several thousand volunteers. The Lord tells Gideon this is too many soldiers and cuts the army to a mere 300 by having Gideon watch how they drink from a stream. Gideon "arms" his soldiers with horns, torches and pots in which to hide the torches. No swords, no spears, no bows, no arrows! When they attack in the middle of the night, they break the pots, show their torches, yell and blow their horns. The Midianites, especially angry at being awakened in the middle of the night, quickly dispose of the unarmed Israelite soldiers and execute Gideon as the sun rises.

Matthew 3, 11, and 14: A young man named John grows up knowing, just knowing, that there is something special about his cousin. He begins a special ministry warning people to repent for "one who is mightier" is coming. John baptizes his cousin, Jesus, and sees a dove come down as a voice from heaven declares "This is my beloved son." Cousin Jesus becomes famous for healing the sick and the lame, feeding thousands and later, walking on water and calming the weather. Some time later, John is thrown in prison on the whim of the evil King Herod. After a night of drinking and lewd behavior, Herod's daughter asks for the head of John on a platter. Just as the execution is about to occur, Jesus kicks down the doors of the prison and rescues John the Baptist at the last minute. John goes on to build a business empire based on health foods and, after retiring to a little beach house by the Dead Sea, dies at the ripe old age of 90.

Major Teaching Points:

Teaching Point #1

We like happy, triumphant Bible stories! Most of our favorites are stories of miraculous triumph. And we have become so familiar with them that we tend to take their miraculous endings for granted. David, while seemingly fearless himself, was definitely NOT expected to be the winner of that battle. We lose sight of what our reaction would be if we were to see an event like this for ourselves, for the first time. As for Gideon, he asked to see several miracles before taking on his task. He, like Moses, tried to beg off the job. "I'm just a little guy from an unimportant family!" And going into "battle" unarmed against the big, bad Midianites was not a good idea.

Teaching Point #2

Study in detail the story of John's messengers coming to visit Jesus. (Matthew 11).

Verse 2: John has a few questions for Jesus.

Verse 3 "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" John is respectful and obedient, but might be expecting some different actions from his Messiah. Read Matthew 3: 11-12. Can this be the same Messiah he was talking about?

Verse 4 and 5: Jesus answer to John carries a great deal of Old Testament imagery. (Isaiah 29: 18-19, 35:5-6) This is Jesus' way of telling John that yes, He (Jesus) is the Messiah.

Verse 6: "Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." Jesus is telling John that it is not our human expectations that determine what God is going to do.

Verses 7-15: Jesus then goes on to explain to the crowds and to John's disciples that John was one of the greatest prophets, not because of who he was, but because of his message. And for John, the Kingdom of God was still very much at hand, even though he might be viewing it from a jail cell. Matthew 14. Ultimately, John's life ends with his wanton execution at the hand of Herod. Even Jesus (14:13) felt sorrow at the death of His friend.

Teaching Point #3

Matthew 6: 25-34. If Gideon or David had been concentrating on their own well-being, they would not have taken on the task given them by God. But was John being a chump? If you can't trust Jesus to save your life, who can you trust? The answer is in Matthew 6: 25-34. Pay special attention to verse 25: "Do not worry about your life... or about your body" and verse 33: "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness...."

Questions/Discussion Starters for Youth:

1. What are some of your favorite miracle stories? If they had played out according to our usual expectations, how might they have ended?
2. Does it ever worry you that you might be called to be a "John the Baptist" (Jail and execution!) instead of a Gideon (smashing jars and military triumph!) It's nice to think I might be called to be a wealthy doctor who helps people, but what if I am called to bring the good news to the homeless, the ill? How do I know if I am called at all?
3. See Romans 13. Was it God's will for John to be in jail? Are there other dangerous or unpleasant situations that God uses to bring His word and His presence to people?
3. Who are modern day "John the Baptists" (people called to difficult and dangerous ministries). What temptations might they be subject to? Why might they be tempted to "fall away on account of [Jesus]" (Matt 11:6).
4. What are the ways that we can serve each other as John's disciples helped him?
5. Read Psalm 118 responsively as a wrap up to this challenging discussion.