

Temptation in the Desert

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Meet the Writer

Nancy Ferguson is a retired Presbyterian minister and a certified Christian educator. She lives on the eastern shore of Virginia near Chincoteague Island where she writes and develops resources for camps and congregations. Her professional ministry focused on camps and retreats and for eight years she was the editor of *New Earth* camp curriculum. Nancy is the author of eight books including *The Retreat Leader's Manual* with Kevin Witt, *Christian Educator's Guide to Evaluating and Developing Curriculum*, and *S'more Time with God*, a devotional guide for families who go camping.



Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

The Familiar Voice of Judgment

Scripture

Matthew 3:1–12; Isaiah 49:16a

Main Idea

John the Baptist warned people of the judgment that was coming and called them to repentance. This session focuses on God's call for repentance as participants explore their understanding of Christ's forgiveness.

Teaching Points

This session invites learners to consider:

1. The meanings of judgment, sin, and confession.
2. Their own experiences of judgment, sin, and grace.
3. The responsibilities of living with grace.

Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant's books

Newsprint and markers

Recent worship bulletins or orders of worship

Paper

Scissors

Leader Prep

In the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, we read of the arrival of John the Baptist along the shores of the Jordan. An unconventional figure, John the Baptist called the Jews who came to the river to respond to the coming judgment by confessing their sins through baptism. Mincing no words, he called the people *vipers* and warned them of the wrath to come. His words echoed those of the prophet Isaiah, declaring the need to prepare for the coming of God's Messiah. John declared that another was coming who would baptize them with fire and with the Holy Spirit. The Messiah's judgment, John said, would result in unquenchable fire.

The baptism we receive as believers in Jesus Christ is a sign and seal of God's love and grace in Christ. In baptism, we not only recognize God's judgment but also declare our faith in God's grace and unmerited love. As Reformed believers, we acknowledge our nature as sinners who are in need of grace and forgiveness. Our sin takes the form of broken relationships with God and with one another. God's call to repentance requires that we turn and go in a new direction. As humans, we are tempted to believe that we can become like God. We like to believe that we can work out our own salvation through earthly accomplishments and achievements. Like Adam and Eve, we do what God has forbidden and think that somehow it will be OK. Although we are never "good enough," God continues to love us and offer us grace. John's words are a reminder that we can never be God and that we will always remain creatures who need God's grace and forgiveness in Christ. This is the temptation against which we must continue to struggle.

In this session, participants will become familiar with the concepts of judgment, sin, and confession. They will consider both the words of John and their understanding of the Reformed tradition. Before the session begins, write the words *Sin*, *Judgment*, and *Confession* on the top of separate sheets of newsprint that are posted in three different areas of the meeting space. You will also need to obtain a copy of a recent worship bulletin or order of worship for each participant.

Leading the Session Gather

- Give participants an opportunity to introduce themselves by answering this question: *What interests you about this study?*
- Open with prayer, using a prayer of your own or the one printed in the participant's book.

Head

- Give each participant a marker, and call the participants' attention to the prepared sheets of newsprint posted around the meeting space. Invite each person to write his or her own understanding of the word that appears on each sheet.
- Review what is written on each sheet of newsprint. Ask: *How are these definitions similar and different? Which one is most helpful to you? Which words best describe your image or impression of God? What is the appropriate response to this image?*
- Read Matthew 3:1–12. Ask: *How are sin, judgment, and confession evident in this passage?*
- Dr. Barnes writes: “The statistics make it clear that even today judgmental churches often grow. It may seem puzzling that people would want to sit in congregations where the preacher shakes a finger at them and essentially scolds, ‘Bad dog!’”
- Ask: *What is your reaction to Dr. Barnes’s reflection about judgmental churches and the judgment that exists among humans?*
- Dr. Barnes contends: “The judgment we feel always rises from our souls that have become alienated from God by our strategies to become our own creators.” Ask: *Do you agree or disagree with this statement. Why?*
- Ask: *According to Dr. Barnes, what is the definition of sin, and how does sin affect our lives?*
- Dr. Barnes writes: “When John stood in the desert wilderness and called people to repent, he was actually asking more of them than they were capable of giving.” Ask: *What is your reaction to this statement?*

Heart

- Distribute copies of a recent worship bulletin or order of worship and locate the prayer of confession. Ask: *Why does this prayer appear in this location?*
- Read the prayer of confession together. Ask: *How does this confession connect to your own sense of sin?*
- Say, “In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.” Invite the group to talk about how they feel when an assurance of pardon is shared during worship. Ask: *How would you feel if the assurance of pardon was not shared? Why do we confess our sins and receive an assurance of pardon before we hear Scripture read and proclaimed?*

Hands

- Invite the participants to share a time when they felt separated from God or another person because of something they said or did. Ask: *How did you feel? Did reconciliation occur? How do you currently feel about this situation?*
- Read Isaiah 49:16a. Ask: *What words come to mind when you hear this image of God's writing our names onto the palm of God's hand? How does this image help us understand God's grace?*
- Share that John the Baptist was an unconventional character yet was faithful to God's call to him and played an important role in the story of God's Messiah. Ask: *Who in your life is unconventional yet deeply faithful to God's call? What have you learned about God from him or her? In what ways can you be more faithful to God's call?*

Depart

- Have each participant trace the outline of one of his or her hands on a sheet of paper with a marker. Have each person write his or her name inside the outline before cutting out the hand. Encourage the participants to put their cutout hands in their Bibles as a bookmark or in another place that they see frequently. Ask: *What will you think about when you see this hand cutout? How will seeing the hand be a reminder of God's grace?*
- Invite the participants to use the prayer of confession from the worship bulletin or order of worship in their personal devotions during the coming week. Suggest that they stop after each phrase to reflect on how the words apply to their own lives before saying a prayer of thanksgiving for God's grace and forgiveness.
- Close with prayer, thanking God for the time together and for the grace offered to each one.

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The Familiar Voice of Judgment

Scripture

Matthew 3:1–12 John the Baptist is preaching in the wilderness, warning people of the judgment that is coming and calling them to repentance.

Prayer

Merciful God, when we hear John the Baptist’s warning that we need to get our lives cleaned up, we cannot argue. We know that we have sinned. What we do not know is what to do about it. We are our own worst judges. Our sin is ever before us, and every effort to manage it has only resulted in more sin. So we begin by simply telling the truth. There is nothing else left. Only your Son, our Savior, can wash away what we have done and left undone. We are lost without your mercy. Amen.

Introduction

From the days of the prophet Isaiah, the people heard that someone would prepare the way for the coming Messiah. This is why Matthew begins his description of Jesus’ ministry by telling us first about John the Baptist. He identifies John as “the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke” when Isaiah spoke of the “voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

The significance of this passage is that it places the ministry of Jesus Christ in a larger context. As the Son of God, he did not appear as a surprise. Rather, he was the fulfillment of a divine promise. The people had been waiting for a long time for someone who could restore them to right relationships with one another, with God, and with their own souls. This is what we mean when we refer to *righteousness*. According to John the Baptist, the best way to get prepared for righteousness is to confess how far we have fallen from it. So he kept calling people to repent.

To repent simply means to turn around and move in a different direction. When we repent of our sins, we turn and head straight back in the right direction, toward the God from whom we have wandered away.

The people who heard John's preaching would repent by being baptized. This is different from Christian baptism. When the ancient Jews were baptized, it was a liturgical act that was similar to our understanding of a prayer of confession. They were attempting to wash away their sins or, as we would say today, "to clean up their act."

The problem with this endeavor is that we can never get clean enough. No matter how sincere we may be with our repentance, we just keep sinning. We can keep trying new self-improvement programs, but we'll never be able to walk in a new direction only through our own efforts. Perhaps discovering the futility of this resolve is the best preparation for the coming of a savior.

Why Is Judgment Popular?

John was not exactly Presbyterian material. He wore camel-hair clothing with a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild honey, and he kept calling the religious leaders a "brood of vipers." He lived in caves out in the desert where he kept saying things like "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." He apparently had little use for chatting and preferred to tell people to get prepared for the Messiah who was coming. "His winnowing fork is in his hand,"

It may seem puzzling that people would want to sit in congregations where the preacher shakes a finger at them and essentially scolds, "Bad dog!"

John warned, "and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." My guess is that John didn't receive a lot of dinner invitations.

So isn't it fascinating that Matthew tells us the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him? We would think people would want to steer clear of such an extreme preacher. Actually,

judgment has always been popular.

The statistics make it clear that even today judgmental churches often grow. It may seem puzzling that people would want to sit in congregations where the preacher shakes a finger at them and essentially scolds, "Bad dog!" Scholars have developed some

sophisticated theories about this. However, the plain truth of the matter is that judgment has always been what we know best. We are judged by physicians from the moment we leave the womb. We're judged by our parents when we are children, and by our children when we become parents. We're judged by teachers, coaches, employers, and worst of all by the person who keeps showing up in the mirror. And seldom is the judgment good enough.

So we all could have taken our place alongside the people of Jerusalem and all Judea, saying, "Judgment? Amen, you preach it, John."

No one is really all that confused about being a bad dog. What is confusing is how to become good again. Our harshest self-judgments are focused on our failures at improving our lives. We keep trying new strategies, like weight-loss programs, another academic degree, getting a new job or relationship, but none of these plans seem to result in fixing our lives. To the contrary, often our strategies for self-improvement only result in hurting others and ourselves.

For example, a man who is driving home late from work receives a phone call on his cell from his ten-year-old daughter. As soon as the phone rings, he realizes that he forgot about her piano recital. He picks up the phone, and his heart sinks as he hears her lament, "Where are you, Daddy?" He apologizes profusely and promises to make it up to her. But even after he hangs up the phone, he is stuck with her question. He looks at his own eyes in the car's rearview mirror and asks himself, "Where are you? How did you get so lost trying so hard to do well?" The judgment is overwhelming and inescapable. We all know about this.

What Is Sin?

There is nothing inherently wrong with working hard or trying to make a few improvements in life—unless we are trying to take over for the Creator. We will always be creatures who have been called to receive life rather than to achieve the life of our dreams. Thus, the judgment we feel always rises from our souls that have become alienated from God by our strategies to become our own creators.

Nothing we do can ever free us from judgment. But this is why John the Baptist's ministry prepares the way for Jesus. Feelings of judgment draw us to the Savior. Only Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God, can heal the sin-sick soul.

Sin is anything we do that separates us from God. It involves breaking the commandments of God and also breaking ourselves

along the way. Sin distorts the image of God in our lives, which means that we become so much less than we were created to be. Our relationships with God, others, creation, and even our own souls are all hurt and distorted through sin. Sometimes this hurt is caused by the things we do, and sometimes by the things we leave undone. But at all times the legacy of our sin is a trail of hurt for which we have to take responsibility. By the time we discover the hurt, we have already done more damage than we can repair. And we have drifted further from the communion we were created to enjoy with God.

Sin distorts the image of God in our lives, which means that we become so much less than we were created to be.

The Greek Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann has claimed that our sin is rooted in a lack of gratitude. The story of Adam and Eve illustrates this.¹ They were given the fruit of every tree in the garden as a means of enjoying God. But in taking the fruit of the one tree they were not given, they were seeking something for its material benefits and not as a means of giving thanks to God. We too know the temptation of taking work, relationships, or whatever we want as an end in itself. We do that when our yearning for more is greater than our gratitude. As a result we lose the paradise we were created to enjoy.

When we are blinded by our yearning, we don't think the garden of life is good enough because something is missing. It's only after we see the damage we have done by reaching beyond the biblical limitations that we realize the life we were given was actually paradise. Only by then it is paradise lost. Sin has consequences.

It is not hard to see how the flagrant sinner has made a mess of life's garden, but both Jesus and John the Baptist demonstrated how even good people need to repent, because being good is never good enough to get back into the paradise of communion with God. Some of us need to repent of our moral failures, and others need to repent of trying to be our own saviors.

The Futility of Getting Life Cleaned Up

When the people stood on the banks of the Jordan River and heard John's call to repentance, they confessed their sins and were baptized. Confession is simply telling the truth. If repentance means turning

1. Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000), pp. 16–18.

around, then confession is the recognition that we are headed in the wrong direction. So we confess, or tell the truth, as a critical part of the repentance process.

When we confess, we not only list our sins, but we also tell the truth about our addiction to sin. We sin because we are like cars with wheels that are badly out of alignment and easily run into the ditch. It doesn't matter how hard we try to steer away from it, we will always sin. This is what the Reformed tradition means by the doctrine of depravity. The problem isn't that we do not know what is good. The problem is that our wills have become so addicted to sin that we cannot avoid it. This does not, however, absolve us from responsibility. Addicts are always still responsible for their condition. But it does demonstrate that we cannot save ourselves. As the story of King David, Bathsheba, and the murder of her husband illustrates, the only way we can manage sin is with more sin.

We sin because we are like cars with wheels that are badly out of alignment and easily run into the ditch. It doesn't matter how hard we try to steer away from it, we will always sin.

When John stood in the desert wilderness and called people to repent, he was actually asking more of them than they were capable of giving. They, and we, are lost in a desert of failures and good intentions that only lead to more failures. So as important as confession is, something has to come first if we are going to be able to repent and turn back to God.

Thus, unlike the angry judgmental preachers, we in the Reformed tradition do not call people to repent of their sins in order to be forgiven. Who can meet that condition? Instead, we first pronounce the good news that in Jesus Christ we have been forgiven, which frees us to confess our sin and repent of it.

Another way of saying it is that grace precedes faith. We do not muster up enough faith or belief in God's will in order to have forgiving grace bestowed on us. Rather, it is God's grace that brings us to faith.

We therefore baptize even babies, who have no faith. They're brought under the sign of God's grace in baptism so that they can spend the rest of their lives responding with a life of faith. It is analogous to a parent who is filled with love for a newborn child.

The child did nothing to deserve the love and doesn't even know that he or she is receiving it until later in life. But as the love is constantly given, the child learns to love the parent as well.

Our faith and lifelong journey of repentance is only a response to God's forgiving grace. This amazing grace is the only way that we can withstand all of the judgments of life, most of all our own.

Spiritual Practice

Write a prayer of confession, but don't just list your most recent sins. Instead, write a prayer that depicts your addiction to the things that alienate you from God. Is it your pride, your need for control, your fear, or something else that keeps running your spiritual life in the ditch?

Questions for Reflection

Who is the harshest judge of your life?

Is it easier to believe that you are a sinner or that you are forgiven by God?

Why is it so tempting to be our own saviors, and how does that only lead to more judgment?