



BIBLE STUDY

RENEW

The cloud of witnesses surrounding us can teach us much about what it means to bring your best self to the life you've been given. This Bible study will invite us into the dynamic web of life anchored by "renew, respond, and rejoice." This is vocation in the richest sense of that term—who are you and how are you called to service in a world full of surprises? There is so much to do. How do we stay spiritually healthy in the face of overwhelming need?

Getting Unstuck: Renewing Hardness of Heart

by Catherine Malotky
and David Engelstad

Key verse

Psalm 51:10–12

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

Materials you will need

- Journal
- Bible
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW, the red book) or *Lutheran Book of Worship* (LBW, the green book)
- Leader Guide on page 34

Beginning

READ PSALM 51:10–12 ALOUD.

1. In your journal, recall at least one time in your life when you could or did offer this

prayer on your own behalf. What was at stake for you? What did you hope your own renewal would accomplish?

2. Where have you heard these words before? Where do you remember using them in the liturgy? (See ELW 185–188. Note that in LBW, this psalm was used as the offertory in services without communion.)

Set the stage

The words of Psalm 51 are ascribed to King David, remembering a time when his spirit was deeply troubled and he felt ashamed. He had experienced renewal—painful yet powerful, and made his story-psalm public so that others might learn from it. The church has been using David's words in its worship and confessions ever since. Maybe you have uttered them too...at a time when you felt guilty, indifferent, defiant, or empty. Calling out these words of Psalm 51 does not immediately accomplish our renewal,

but it does announce our desire for and intention to pursue it. And it signals our awareness that renewal is what we need.

In this session, we will explore the creative tension between renewal and challenge.

Critical questions to keep in mind as you study:

- How do I know when and what kind of renewal I need?
- How can I renew myself when so many others depend on me?
- Who benefits from my renewal?

Learning from the saints

King David's witness

In the story of King David in 2 Samuel (11:1–12:15), David was filled with desire for another man's wife (Bathsheba). If you don't remember the story, read it to acquaint yourself.

3. What do you think David's behavior reveals about his spirit? Was he spiritually full, satisfied, and content? If not, what words would you use to describe his spirit, given his behavior?
4. To what lengths does David go to achieve his desire? What values seem to be driving his behavior?
5. Given other biblical stories about King David, it seems he usually operated from other core values, like compassion, responsibility, faithfulness, and justice. Think about a time when you observed a leader betray long-held values. What did this do to your sense of confidence in his or her leadership?

Renewal was not on the king's mind as he *procured* Bathsheba. Not until Nathan the prophet confronted him. Nathan was not the only subject of the king who witnessed David's shameful behavior. Rather, he was the one we hear about because of the clever and potent

way he helped David to see the shameful of his behavior.

READ 2 SAMUEL 12:1–13.

6. What does David realize?
7. Do you think David would have heard Nathan's accusation if he had been more direct? Why or why not?

We could read this story of adultery simply as an example of what is (in our time) common tabloid news. For our purposes in thinking about renewal, however, we can learn something about how God works. Through Nathan, God imaginatively and lovingly sought a way to get around David's defenses in order to help him see, embrace, and own his need for renewal—for his own benefit and also for the well-being of others. (See "A Hard Truth," p. 26.)

8. Think of a time(s) when someone you know has imaginatively, lovingly and/or cleverly helped you see/embrace/own your need for renewal. Give thanks for them and for the God who put them up to it.

Hagar's witness

In Genesis 16:1–6 we meet Hagar, the Egyptian slave-girl of Sarai, Abram's barren wife (In chapter 16, their names have not yet been changed to Sarah and Abraham). In a practice that was not uncommon at that time, Sarai gives Hagar to Abram so that he might have a child through her.

Not unlike Mary, the mother of Jesus, Hagar is used by God to bring a new life into the world for the purpose of blessing. And like Mary, Hagar is willing to be part of God's purposefulness. However, once Hagar has conceived, trouble began brewing between

Hagar and Sarah. Sarah interprets Hagar's delight at the birth of her son Ishmael as also being a sign of contemptuousness at Sarah's barrenness. We don't know with certainty if Sarah is projecting her own insecurity on Hagar here or not. What we do know is that jealousy infects Sarah's relationship with Hagar, and the graciousness of Hagar in giving birth to Abraham's child for Abraham *and* Sarah's sake is not in any way returned by Sarah.

Sarah, in fact, treats Hagar so harshly (Genesis 16:6) that Hagar flees from Sarah into the wilderness. Even in our day we would know that it is an act of great desperation for a pregnant woman to flee into the wilderness alone. An angel of the Lord meets Hagar there, offers reassurance and blessing, and urges her to return to Sarah. Hagar responds: "Have I really seen God and remained alive?" Clearly renewed by this visit from God, Hagar returns and eventually bears a son—Ishmael. Peaceful coexistence ensues...for awhile.

In time, God's promise of a son to Abram/Abraham and Sarai/Sarah comes to pass and Isaac is born. The story of Hagar and Ishmael continues after the birth of Isaac in Genesis 21:8–21. Read it again to acquaint yourself.

9. What is Sarah worried about? What does she want for Isaac (verse 10)?
10. What values seem to be driving Sarah's behavior? Have they changed from before Isaac was born?
11. Sarah's fixation on her desire is much like King David's. Sarah's spirit was closed, reactive, vengeful, and blinded by her own desires. What does she do?

We can easily see that Sarah's spirit is in need of renewal. In this story, Sarah is not the one who is renewed. Hagar this time is our focus of attention, and she is now wandering for a second time in the wilderness.

No longer pregnant, now Hagar has a young child to care for and protect. The first time, Hagar fled on her own volition, and maybe thus was empowered by it. But this time, Hagar has been unfairly and unjustly sent off. Hagar reacts to this circumstance with feelings of despair. She cannot imagine a happy ending; only a tragic one. Hagar imagines that neither she nor her child will survive; and she is devastated by this thought.

12. How does God intervene (verses 17–19)?

Hagar does not need a Nathan to cleverly and skillfully reveal the cost of blindly acting on her desires. Hagar here is more like Job, a victim of misfortune so immense that there seems no escape. With God's intervention, she recovered the courage and fierceness she had lost. She is renewed.

13. Think of a time(s) when renewal for you has meant recovering your sense of hope, courage, fierceness or purpose. How did you learn that this was possible? What words or presence helped to empower you?

Trying it out

Renewal can take many shapes and have many meanings. In its simplest form, it could be like a trip to a spa—a treat whose nurture helps us recover a welcome zest for living. Renewal can also take on more serious and profound forms—intended to transform our lives when they are severely blinded or filled with despair. But no matter what form the renewal might take, we often have an initial resistance to it. (See "Breaking and Remaking," p. 14.)

Self-talk

When God talks to us about renewal it is always in a form that invites, inspires, and nurtures it. However, our own self-talk is frequently neither inviting

nor affirming. When balancing our need for renewal against the responsibilities of our daily lives, our inner voice may tell us: “You don’t have time for this now.” Like Martha (Luke 10:38–42) or the elder son (Luke 15:11–32) we often seek to be responsible first and renewed afterward—if there is time for it.

14. How do you talk to yourself about renewal? What do you say to yourself about its importance, place and priority in your life?

Self-care

Renewal can range from repentance to daring co-creation. Renewal might be a leap of faith. It could be learning a new skill. Or it might be quiet solitude. The reason it changes shape and strategy is that its aim is transformation. For example, if your spirit is stagnant, renewal is the counter-action (movement of some kind) that restores balance and alignment with God’s will. The opposite would also be true. If your spirit is inappropriately active, stillness might be what’s called for. When King David and Hagar learned what kind of renewal they needed and saw God at work promoting it, their lives were transformed. (See “Time for a Tune-Up,” p. 22.)

15. Think about what kind of renewal you need right now. What state of being are you yearning for? Examples include: contentment, empowerment, patience, courage, and so forth.
16. What might you do to move yourself closer to that state of being?
17. How do you imagine or see God at work promoting this renewal in you and for you?

Closing

Light a candle and spend a few minutes in prayer looking over the answers to the questions in this study, particularly those that have invited you to reflect on your own life.

Close by reading or singing Psalm 51:10–12. 🌿

The Rev. Catherine Malotky and the Rev. David Engelstad have spent two and a half decades as ELCA pastors, serving congregations together in the early years, and then following separate ministerial paths into communications and chaplaincy. Their interests in spiritual direction, coaching, and faith formation inspired this Bible study. They are honored to be the parents of two 20-something daughters and two aging canines. They have just begun empty nesting and are enjoying hiking, biking, writing, and photography.



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RENEW

Getting Unstuck: Renewing Hardness of Heart

Overview of session concepts

In our culture, renewal is offered to us through all kinds of media, promising calm and ease. In fact, renewal can be quite trying, since to be truly renewed, something fundamental has to change in order for life to be different on the other side.

The idea of *hardness of heart* can so easily apply to any of us when we find ourselves out of hope and joy. Albert Einstein once said that a problem cannot be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it. Another similar point says that continuing to do things the way you've always done them but expecting a different outcome is not going to solve the problem.

Renewal requires new perspectives, new ideas, new behaviors, and then we can be set on a new, better course. So renewal is not all about sipping iced tea on the beach! It's often hard work, disruptive, and even painful to get to the other side of a hard heart or a narrow perspective. But that's where renewal lies.

Our challenge as Christians is to trust God's redeeming power to bring new life into even the darkest of situations. The risen Christ is the best model of God's work among us: new life out of every death (of any kind).

Beginning

Reflection

Gather the group's attention and invite them to center their energy for the session ahead. You could light

a candle in silence as a way of creating a worshipful atmosphere. Ask a volunteer to read Psalm 51:10-12 slowly and meaningfully. Then invite participants to write in their journals. If you have time, you could create small groups to share their ideas with each other.

Learning from the saints

For these sections of Bible study, work your way through the stories together. If your group has not been exposed to these stories, take the time to read them aloud. If they know the stories, it would be good for you to brush up on them, since sometimes the stories we remember from Sunday school are a little sanitized.

King David's witness

3. He was not at his best. His spirit was preoccupied with his desire and power rather than living in balance and honoring his responsibility as king to honor his subjects.
4. He schemed to have Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, killed. He seemed to value his own wants over others: self satisfaction, power, etc.
5. You could note that for a while, King David had what he desired. For a while, it did not occur to him that pursuing Bathsheba and having Uriah killed had caused damage to not only his own spirit, but to the lives of Bathsheba's and Uriah's families. In fact, it threatened the integrity of his whole kingdom accord-

ing to Nathan's explanation (2 Samuel: 12:11–12).

Most participants will report that their confidence about the leader's capacity was diminished, and they may even have a strong sense of betrayal.

6. Nathan sought to clear David's eyes from the distortion of his desire (for Bathsheba) until David could see that taking Bathsheba from Uriah as he did, was utterly wrong. So wrong that the king confesses to Nathan: "I have sinned against the Lord."
7. Nathan told David a story. David listened. And David was moved. Moved to anger at the cruelty, injustice, and lack of compassion he heard in the story. Nathan did not say "This is a story about YOU" until David could see the story from Nathan's perspective. Or we might equally say, from God's perspective. If Nathan had not been patient and clever, David might have told him to go away, might have said "I'm the king and I get to have what I want."

Hagar's witness

9. She wants her son, Isaac, to be Abraham's sole heir.
10. Putting the best construction on everything, Sarah was trying to manipulate circumstances so Abraham could have a son. That same value seems to be at work here, too, but Sarah's jealousy, insecurity, and cruelty have emerged more clearly. She plainly doesn't want any competitors for Isaac, or herself, as his mother.
11. She demands that Abraham banish Hagar and Ishmael to the wilderness, which he does.
12. God hears the boy's voice and calls to Hagar, saying that she should not be afraid and promising her that God will make of her son a great nation, which implies that he will live.

Trying it out

This section is intentionally self-reflective. You will know your group best. If they do well sharing personal reflections, create small groups so they can do so. If they do not like sharing, affirm and invite them to do this privately. Any sharing will enhance the learning, as long as the point of view is non-judgmental and encouraging.

Closing

Do take the time to create a worshipful atmosphere at the end. This is an opportunity to draw everything together. You could close by reading the prayer for "Those seeking a deeper knowledge of God," *ELW*, p. 76.

Light a candle and ask the group to spend a few minutes in prayer looking over the answers to the questions in this study. Close by reading or singing Psalm 51:10–12. 🌸

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