

FROM VAINGLORY

CHECKLIST: WHAT YOU NEED

- Paper and pens
- Copies of the downloadable “Litany” and “Prayers & Thanksgivings” booklets
- Copies of the lesson handout
- Copy of the leader’s notes - *Note that there are five pages*
- OPTIONAL: Bibles (ESV or similar recommended)
- OPTIONAL: A white board, easel pad, or chalk board with markers/chalk
- OPTIONAL: Have notebooks on hand for teens to take home and use as prayer journals if they wish

ICE BREAKER: THE MAKING OF A VILLAIN

Have your teens come up with a list of villains (fictional, historical, etc.), along with their defining characteristics. Then, in small groups (of about three to five) have the teens create their own villain stick person, complete with name, character traits, and a story (if time permits).

IF YOUR NUMBERS CALLED FOR MULTIPLE GROUPS, ALLOW TIME FOR THEM TO PRESENT THEIR CREATIONS TO EACH OTHER WHEN FINISHED.

THE LITANY: BEGINNING WITH PRAYER

Begin the formal part of the lesson by saying together the Litany, leaving off the Grace (which can be said at the close of the lesson).

AT THIS POINT IN THE LESSON, ASK IF THE TEENS SUCCEEDED IN DOING LAST WEEK’S CHALLENGE, HOW IT WENT, AND WHETHER THEY HAVE ANYTHING TO SHARE.

DISCUSSION: REAL LIFE VILLAINS

As an introduction to the lesson ask the teens to discuss the following questions.

DEPENDING ON THE COMFORT LEVEL FOR SHARING IN YOUR GROUP, IT MAY BE EASIER TO HAVE THEM VOLUNTEER ANSWERS WITH ALL RESPONSES WRITTEN TOGETHER ON A BOARD.

- Imagine that you are a villain (perhaps one of those mentioned in the opening activity). What do you think it would take for you to change your ways? What would prevent you from changing your ways, even if you did get a second chance?
- Are there people in your own life that you think of as villains?
- Do you think villains deserve a second chance?

A few things worth pointing out (if they don’t otherwise arise during the discussion):

- “Villains”, especially those we encounter in scripture, are often people who have made a god of themselves. When they are confronted by God himself, they cling stubbornly to their own agenda, rather than acknowledging the truth. The petition that we’re exploring today actually comprises a fantastic list of the things that flow from us when we try to be a god unto ourselves, refusing to acknowledge the real God and properly honour our fellow human beings: pride, vainglory (excessive vanity), hypocrisy, envy, hatred, malice, uncharitableness.
- Most of us have people in our lives that we think of as villains, even if we wouldn’t use that word. These are people who seem to be out to make life difficult for us. They could be siblings, teachers or “frenemies”. Maybe there are others out there who think of us as villains. That’s a sobering thought!
- When we think of others as our enemies we also tend to think that they do not deserve a second chance. We may feel entitled to treat them contemptuously. But we have a God who is known for giving people – including us –

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second chances. Remember the response of Jesus when he was asked if seven times would be a reasonable limit for forgiving an enemy? He said, "Seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:22). Though it's difficult, we shouldn't put a cap on forgiveness or on a willingness to believe that God can still redeem someone.

THE LESSON: DANIEL 4

The first part of the lesson (below) can be read aloud. Then the teens are asked to read the Bible text (either silently to themselves or aloud together), followed by some additional questions for discussion.

From all blindness of heart; from pride, vainglory, and hypocrisy; from envy, hatred, and malice, and all uncharitableness... Good Lord, deliver us.

Nebuchadnezzar was a Babylonian king who conquered Israel, looted the temple, and took Israelite captives back to Babylon as slaves in 605 BC. Among these captives were four young friends: Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. You've probably heard of these guys, and they are amazing examples of faith and devotion, but today we're going to focus our attention not on the heroes but on the villain.

Nebuchadnezzar was a despotic ruler. He demanded the impossible from his dream-interpreters and then ordered them all killed when they could not do what he wanted. Daniel intervened, making it clear to the king that God was the one who gave the interpretation. The king was pleased with Daniel, but this didn't change his heart.

Next thing we know, Nebuchadnezzar builds a gigantic gold statue and orders everyone to worship it on threat of being burned to death in a fiery furnace. So of course our heroes refused. Nebuchadnezzar was furious, saying, "What god is there who can deliver you out of *my* hands?" (3:15) Well, if you know the story, you know that God *did* intervene and miraculously deliver them out of the king's hands! After that, Nebuchadnezzar made a fine speech, but he still didn't change his ways.

Nebuchadnezzar had been shown the truth, but in his vanity and pride, he rejected God's claim on him. This "vainglory" is *so* common in our world! There are many examples of it in scripture and perhaps we have seen it in our own experience of life. But God keeps working, sometimes in very creative ways, to bring about repentance and restoration even where we least expect to see it.

Refer to Daniel 4:4-8, 19, 24-37.

(VERSES HAVE BEEN CLIPPED FROM THE READING FOR THE SAKE OF BREVITY AND FOCUS, BUT IF YOU HAVE TIME TO EXPLORE THE PASSAGE FULLY, FEEL FREE TO READ IT IN ITS ENTIRETY: DANIEL 4:1-37.)

(THE TEXT IS PROVIDED ON THE BACK OF THE HANDOUTS AND IN THESE LEADERS' NOTES SO THAT EVERYONE CAN MARK IT UP AND MAKE NOTES ON IT IF DESIRED. ALTERNATIVELY, YOU CAN READ OUT OF A BIBLE).

Read through the text. Then ask the teens to respond to what they've just read. Here are some questions to help guide the discussion.

- Did anything in this passage surprise you?
- What evidence do we have that Nebuchadnezzar has not really learned from his previous encounters with God?
- What are the stated goals of Nebuchadnezzar's punishment?
- What can this passage teach us about humiliation?

A few notes and reflections for reference:

- *This is an unusual passage, even shocking. We don't typically think of God employing these sorts of methods to get through to people! What is also surprising is the tone of praise and gratitude that characterizes Nebuchadnezzar upon his restoration.*

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- *Even after all he has seen Nebuchadnezzar's first recourse is still to go to the pagan and occult experts in his court for help (v7). He has still not recognized the uniqueness or exclusivity of the God of Israel, even attributing Daniel's gifts to "gods" (v8). When the judgement falls (after a patient lapse of a year), we find he is strolling along in his palace contemplating his own power, glory, and majesty (v30).*
- *God wants him to "know that heaven rules" (v26, 32), to acknowledge the sovereignty of God, rather than to continue as though he were unaccountable. Daniel knows what the issues are that flow from the king's proud and vain heart. He identifies them clearly in his advice: "break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed" (v27)*
- *The passage ends by pointing out that God is able to humble the proud (v37). We don't usually think of humiliation as a restorative measure! But learning humility can teach us to look up and acknowledge that we are not our own gods, but that God alone is King. When we are going through a humbling circumstance, we can pray that God will open our hearts to teach us through it. And we can pray for those who seem like villains to us, that God would open their hearts, through whatever means he deems necessary! "We ought to show to others God's dealings with us, both the rebukes we have been under and the favours we have received; and though the account hereof may reflect disgrace upon ourselves, as this did upon Nebuchadnezzar, yet we must not conceal it, as long as it may redound to the glory of God". – Matthew Henry*
- *Note #1 re Daniel's names: "Daniel" is the Hebrew name for our hero, but when the captives were taken to Babylon they were all given new names, likely with the intention of blotting out their previous identities. This is where the name "Belteshazzar" comes in.*
- *Note #2 re illness and punishment: Depending on how your discussion evolves, you may want to point out that Jesus contradicted the idea that illness is always a direct punishment from God. ("Neither this man nor his parents sinned", said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him". - John 9:3). What happened to Nebuchadnezzar was unique, but even in this case, God's goal was restorative rather than merely punitive.*

DURING EACH LESSON, IF THE TEENS RAISE THEOLOGICAL OR BIBLICAL QUESTIONS THAT YOU DON'T FEEL CONFIDENT ABOUT ANSWERING, SAY SO, BUT LET THEM KNOW THAT YOU'LL FIND THE ANSWER AND RESPOND AT THE NEXT MEETING.

PREVIEW: AT-HOME CHALLENGE

Take a brief moment to look at the at-home challenge together.

THE WEEKLY "AT-HOME CHALLENGE" IS TYPICALLY A SIMPLE ASSIGNMENT TO SPEND SOME QUIET TIME IN PRIVATE PRAYER. ENCOURAGE THE TEENS TO GET NOTEBOOKS THAT CAN BE USED AS PRAYER JOURNALS. ASSURE THEM THAT THEY WILL NOT BE REQUIRED TO SHOW THEIR JOURNAL OR THEIR PRIVATE PRAYERS TO ANYONE.

Each morning and evening, follow your own rule of prayer.

(IF YOU DON'T HAVE ONE, TRY SAYING THE MORNING AND EVENING PRAYERS FROM THE "FORMS OF PRAYER TO BE USED IN FAMILIES", WHICH BEGINS ON PAGE 728 OF THE BCP. IF YOU DON'T HAVE A COPY, YOU CAN LOOK IT UP HERE: [HTTP://PRAYERBOOK.CA/RESOURCES/BCPONLINE/FAMILY-PRAYER.](http://prayerbook.ca/resources/bcponline/family-prayer))

Psalm 119:11 says, "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you". The At-Home Challenge during this unit is to commit a short passage of scripture to memory each week. If the suggested passage is too long, try picking out one verse or phrase that speaks to you particularly and commit it to memory. You will be amazed at how the words of scripture, stored in the heart, will return to you in the moments when you most need them.

JOEL 2:12-13: ¹²"Yet even now," declares the Lord, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; ¹³and rend your hearts and not your garments." Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.

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- AND/OR -

Take some time to pray through this collect.

O God, whose nature and property is ever to have mercy and to forgive: Receive our humble petitions; and though we be tied and bound with the chain of our sins, yet let the pitifulness of thy great mercy loose us; for the honour of Jesus Christ, our Mediator and Advocate. Amen. (FROM PRAYERS & THANKSGIVINGS, BCP PAGE 58)

CLOSING PRAYERS

Close with any prayers that might be appropriate in the context of the discussion of the day.

AT THE END OF EACH LESSON, IF YOU FIND THAT YOU STILL HAVE LOTS OF TIME REMAINING, YOU MIGHT CHOOSE TO TAKE SOME TIME TO EXPLORE THE "PRAYERS AND THANKSGIVINGS" SECTION IN THE BCP (PAGES 39-62, OR YOU CAN USE THE DOWNLOADABLE BOOKLET). AS YOUR GROUP MEMBERS COME ACROSS PRAYERS THAT THEY FIND RELEVANT, PAUSE AND PRAY THEM TOGETHER. IF YOU'RE PRESSED FOR TIME, YOU MIGHT CLOSE WITH THE THEMED PRAYER FROM THE AT-HOME CHALLENGE.

Then finish with the "Grace", printed at the end of the Litany booklet.

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DANIEL 4: **DELIVERED—THE HARD WAY**

⁴ I, Nebuchadnezzar, was at ease in my house and prospering in my palace. ⁵I saw a dream that made me afraid. As I lay in bed the fancies and the visions of my head alarmed me. ⁶So I made a decree that all the wise men of Babylon should be brought before me, that they might make known to me the interpretation of the dream. ⁷Then the magicians, the enchanters, the Chaldeans, and the astrologers came in, and I told them the dream, but they could not make known to me its interpretation. ⁸At last Daniel came in before me—he who was named Belteshazzar after the name of my god, and in whom is the spirit of the holy gods—and I told him the dream...

¹⁹Then Daniel, whose name was Belteshazzar, was dismayed for a while, and his thoughts alarmed him. The king answered and said, “Belteshazzar, let not the dream or the interpretation alarm you.” Belteshazzar answered and said, “My lord, may the dream be for those who hate you and its interpretation for your enemies! ²⁴...this is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, ²⁵that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will. ²⁶...your kingdom shall be confirmed for you from the time that you know that Heaven rules. ²⁷Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you: break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your prosperity.”

²⁸All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. ²⁹At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, ³⁰and the king answered and said, “Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?” ³¹While the words were still in the king’s mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, “O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, ³²and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.” ³³Immediately the word was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven from among men and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles’ feathers, and his nails were like birds’ claws.

³⁴At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honoured him who lives for ever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; ³⁵all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done?”

³⁶At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and splendour returned to me. My counsellors and my lords sought me, and I was established in my kingdom, and still more greatness was added to me. ³⁷Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.