

Surprise!

God's Grace Is Surprising

Note to the Hostess:

Bible study doesn't have to be code for "stuffy and boring." As the hostess, create an atmosphere that is both welcoming and worshipful. Select a few of your favorite worship CDs and let them play softly in the background as your friends arrive. Put a simple welcome sign or banner on the door (it doesn't have to be fancy), for a special touch.

Chocolate-flavored coffee or hot chocolate would be a nice welcome for women to help themselves to when they arrive. Snacks are part of the Experience, so there is no need to set any out at the beginning. Read the Experience section to find out how to prepare for it.

The important thing to remember is that these women are just like you...women who are looking for a little spiritual and physical refreshment. Everybody needs to get away from the distractions of the world for a while. Today, you are providing that haven!



Get It...Got It?...Good.

- ☉ CD player, worship CDs, and door sign
- ☉ coffee and hot chocolate
- ☉ Cracker Jacks boxes or bags, wrapped chocolates, and bowls for the Experience
- ☉ small chocolates for Girlfriend Time (optional)

Mingling

As women arrive, make sure you introduce yourselves to one another. If you need a little help getting started, try this icebreaker:

Hi, my name's [your name]

Let me ask you something. What was the last really nice surprise you received?

Before you begin the Experience, pray something like this:

God, thank you for all of us here who have come to learn more about you. Help us live in a sense of anticipation for the surprises your grace always brings. As we study your Word, draw us closer together and closer to you. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

Experience

(Note: The hostess will prepare this experience.) Treat your women to a surprise. No, not the kind where your son put the cat in the toilet, or you walk out of the store to find two flat tires. This activity combines a nice surprise with a subtle reminder that God's grace isn't just a one-time surprise but surrounds us every day.

Buy a small bag or box of Cracker Jacks for each woman. (If budget is an issue, buy one or several larger boxes, but it's best if each woman can discover the surprise.) Before women arrive, very carefully cut off the bottom flap of each Cracker Jacks box, fish out the prize, and replace it with a wrapped chocolate for each woman. Then, reattach the bottom of the box with a little glue, and let it dry. If using bags, slit the top of the bag on one side (don't cut it completely off), and replace the prize with a chocolate. When your guests arrive, cut the top off of the bag with a pair of scissors for each woman as you hand out the bags. (If you can't find Cracker Jacks, use other small bags of salty snacks.)



Have small bowls handy so each woman can empty the Cracker Jacks to find the “prize” easier. (The bowls also make it easier to munch on the Cracker Jacks during the study). As they discover the *real prize* in their bowls, remind them that God blesses us with surprises in the most unexpected places.

That’s the kind of surprise we can all use more of. If you’re in a larger group, break into groups of four or five to discuss these questions:

Q: What was your first reaction to the surprise in your snack?

Q: How is this little chocolate surprise like God’s grace? How is it unlike it?

Q: When was the last time you were surprised by God’s grace in an unexpected place?

the Word



*Have one or more women read Luke 15:11-24 and
Ephesians 2:1, 4-10, 13 aloud for your group:*

Luke 15:11-24

To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons. The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now before you die.’ So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

“A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything. When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.”’

“So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.’

“But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ So the party began.”

Ephesians 2:1, 4-10, 13

Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins.

...But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all he has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus.

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

...But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.

a closer look

Luke 15:11-24, Ephesians 2:1, 4-10, 13

Read this box anytime to take a deeper look at the verses for this session.

Don't you love surprise endings? These two passages may seem different at first, but they actually have the same heart and the same surprise ending.

The passage in Luke tells the story of a son who takes his inheritance, leaves home, and squanders all his wealth. When he returns home after falling so low he has to live with pigs, what do you think happens? The father reluctantly accepts his homecoming after a stern lecture? No. His father rushes out, hugs him, and throws a big ol' party! The father forgives him unconditionally, breaking every Middle Eastern protocol of that time. The father's grace is the surprise ending.

And God's grace is the surprise ending in the Ephesians passage, too. Our story is what Paul is retelling. We were "dead because of our sins" and were "without God and without hope." Just like the prodigal son, we "were far away from God." But listen to the rest of that sentence: "But now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ." God's surprise response to us is grace: "God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much...he gave us life."

In our own lives it's God's grace that causes Jesus to *come looking for us*, regardless of who we are, who we have been, or who we have become.

chocolate tip

The parable of the prodigal son is the story of a father's love. When he sees the son he thought was lost to him finally coming home, the father puts aside his dignity, his status, and even his place in society, and rushes to meet his son. Then he embraces the bewildered boy, clothes him, and throws a party.

It's a story of grace in action.

In the Ephesians passage, Paul uses rich imagery to describe the great spiritual wealth that belongs to those who believe in Christ. He describes us as "God's masterpiece" and emphasizes that God reaches down to us, not because we have done anything to *deserve* it, but because he *loves* us.

scripture discussion questions

In groups of four or five, discuss these questions:

- Q:** How is the father's reaction to his son before he left home similar to God's grace toward us? How about his attitude when the son returned?
- Q:** Why is it significant that the father saw his son coming "while he was still a long way off"? When have you felt God cared for you, even if you had moved far from your relationship with him?
- Q:** Is there a place in your life right now where you need to experience the same grace the lost son received?
- Q:** In the Ephesians passage, Paul says, "Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done." If salvation isn't a reward, what is it? How do we receive it?
- Q:** "But God is **so rich in mercy**, and **he loved us so very much**, that even though we were dead because of our sins, **he gave us life** when he raised Christ from the dead." When you hear about God's great love and mercy for you, how do you feel?
- Q:** Close your eyes. Picture yourself at one of the lowest times of your life. Now picture God. "Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his [daughter], embraced [her], and kissed [her]." Take a moment to reflect on this image. How does God's response to you make you feel toward him?

Take Action

Let's not just *talk* about looking for God's grace in our lives, *let's do it!* Write below how you're going to be more aware of God's surprises of grace in your daily life. If you're having a hard time thinking of something, choose one of the ideas below. Next week, you'll share with one another how you did.

this week

I'm going to look for God's grace by:

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I'm going to sit down and make a list of the ways I have experienced God's grace in my life.

I commit to being more open to the grace of God. I'll read Luke 15:11-24 and try to put myself in the place of the younger son. I'll also take an honest look at myself and see how I have been like the older brother.

I'll make a concerted effort each day to be more aware of God's grace in my life. Every time I notice God's grace I'll put a smiley face on my calendar. At the end of a week I'll count my smiley faces and thank God for his grace.

Prayer

End your time together in prayer to your Father. Read Psalm 84:11 together.

For the Lord God is our sun and our shield. He gives us grace and glory. The Lord will withhold no good thing from those who do what is right.

God wants nothing more than to bless us and give us a portion of his grace. Don't be afraid to reach out and accept the gracious gift he offers. It's not a matter of being worthy or being ready. It's simply a matter of being open and willing to believe and receive God's gift of grace.

Don't be afraid to open your heart and let God in. He has a lot of wonderful surprises in store for you.

Girlfriend Time

Ready for one more surprise before you go? Find a partner, and give each other a one-minute hand massage. If you're the one receiving the massage, take one small chocolate (that the Hostess has provided) and let it melt slowly in your mouth as you receive the massage. Close your eyes, and tell your partner where you need to experience grace in your life. Be specific. If you have a problem or are struggling with a spiritual issue, ask for prayer. Then switch! Go on with your daily routine knowing that someone out there is thinking about you.



Still Thirsty?

If you're still thirsty to know more about experiencing God's surprising grace, check out these Scriptures:

2 Timothy 1:9

“For God saved us and called us to live a holy life. He did this, not because we deserved it, but because that was his plan from before the beginning of time—to show us his grace through Christ Jesus.”

Q: Since the beginning of time, God has been planning his surprise of grace. We know how excited we get when we have a really great gift to give to someone and we know they're just going to love it. How do you think God feels about giving you his surprise of grace?

John 4:6-10

“Jacob’s well was there; and Jesus, tired from the long walk, sat wearily beside the well about noontime. Soon a Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, ‘Please give me a drink.’ ... The woman was surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. She said to Jesus, ‘You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?’ Jesus replied, ‘If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water.’ ”

Q: Have you ever been surprised that Jesus would want to associate with you? How did you respond to him?

Mark 5:25-34

“A woman in the crowd had suffered for twelve years with constant bleeding...She had heard about Jesus, so she came up behind him through the crowd and touched his robe. For she thought to herself, ‘If I can just touch his robe, I will be healed.’ Immediately the bleeding stopped, and she could feel in her body that she had been healed of her terrible condition. Jesus realized at once that healing power had gone out from him, so he turned around in the crowd and asked, ‘Who touched my robe?’ ...Then the frightened woman, trembling at the realization of what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and told him what she had done. And he said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace. Your suffering is over.’ ”

Q: This woman trembled in fear at how Jesus would respond to her bold act, but was surprised by his kindness and grace. How can you be bold in your faith in order to receive God's grace?



Romans 6:14

“Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God’s grace.”

Q: Have you ever been in a confined space for a long time (imagine being in the center of a crowded airplane row) and finally been given the opportunity to move? Remember the relief? How does that feeling of relief relate to God’s grace?

Ruth 2:8-10

“Boaz went over and said to Ruth, ‘Listen my daughter. Stay right here with us when you gather grain; don’t go to any other fields. Stay right behind the young women working in my field...I have warned the young men not to treat you roughly. And when you are thirsty, help yourself to the water they have drawn from the well.’ Ruth fell at his feet and thanked him warmly. ‘What have I done to deserve such kindness?’ she asked. ‘I am only a foreigner.’ ”

Q: Ruth’s response to the surprise of undeserved kindness from a stranger was to fall at his feet. How do you respond to the undeserved surprise of God’s grace?