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**PRODUCTION AND
MINISTRY TEAM**
**VICE PRESIDENT, LIFEWAY
RESOURCES:** Eric Geiger
GENERAL EDITOR: Ed Stetzer
MANAGING EDITOR: Trevin Wax
CONTENT EDITOR: Andy McLean
**MANAGER, STUDENT MINISTRY
PUBLISHING:** John Paul Basham
DIRECTOR, STUDENT MINISTRY:
Ben Trueblood

Send questions/comments to:
Content Editor, *The Gospel Project for
Students Leader Guide*,
One LifeWay Plaza
Nashville, TN 37234-0144;
or make comments on the Web at
www.lifeway.com.

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Editor's Note: The Special Session suggested for December 25 is a session with a Christmas focus. Depending on your schedule, you can consider this an optional session for your group. Some groups are not using this material by our suggested dates, and other groups may choose another option for the special session of Christmas. Whatever you choose to do with this session, communicate accordingly with your group members so they can be prepared for the correct session when you next meet.

FROM THE EDITOR



Andy McLean

Editor

*The Gospel Project
for Students*

Our journey through the Old Testament comes to an end with a look into Israel's exile to Babylon and their eventual return home. By picking up where we left off in the previous study with the fall of Jerusalem, we will retrace the steps of Israel's exile and the challenges and obstacles they faced even into the time of their journey home.

When we travel through the familiar stories that took place during this time period—stories like Daniel and the lions' den, or the furnace that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced, or even the risk-taking courage of Esther—we are quickly reminded that God is forever at work in His story of redemption. Even when things seem to be at their worst and God appears to be absent, these events and the lives of these characters remind us that He is there. He is always directing, orchestrating, and subtly working things out for His glory and the good of His people.

As we complete our time in the Old Testament, I encourage you to also consider this as you walk through the accounts from the people mentioned above: God has always been in the process of using young people in significant ways. Whether in the Bible itself or in the life of the church, history is filled with people who didn't wait until they were older to try to make much of God with their lives. And as we take a glimpse into how their lives were used within God's Story, I hope that you would be encouraged to make much of Christ in your own lives today (Heb. 13:7).

AUTHORS

UNIT 1



DANIEL AKIN (sessions 1-4) is the President of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and also a professor of preaching and theology. He received a PhD from the University of Texas at Arlington. He and his wife, Charlotte, have four grown children.



WALTER R. STRICKLAND II (sessions 5-6) serves as Special Advisor to the President for Diversity and Instructor of Theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is pursuing a PhD from the University of Aberdeen. He and his wife, Stephanie, have three daughters, Hope, Kendra, and Kaiya.

UNIT 2



JIMMY SCROGGINS (session 7) is the Lead Pastor of Family Church in West Palm Beach, Florida. He earned his MDiv and PhD from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Kristin, have eight children, James, Daniel, Jeremiah, Isaac, Stephen, Anna Kate, Mary Claire, and Caleb.



MATT CAPPS (sessions 8-10) is Senior Pastor of Fairview Baptist Church in Apex, North Carolina. He is working toward a DMin in pastoral ministry at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Matt and his wife, Laura, have three children, Solomon, Ruby, and Abby.



D. A. HORTON (session 11) currently serves as a pastor at Reach Fellowship, a church plant in Los Angeles, California. He is also working toward his PhD in Applied Theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Elicia, have three children, Izabelle, Lola, and D. A. Jr.



ROBBY GALLATY (session 12) serves as the Senior Pastor of Long Hollow Baptist Church and President of Replicate Ministries. Robby holds a PhD, has written several books, and provides discipleship resources through Replicate Ministries. He and his wife, Kandi, have two young sons, Rig and Ryder.



REY DE ARMAS (Special Session—Christmas) serves as one of the campus pastors at Christ Fellowship in Miami, leading the Coral Gables campus. He received an MDiv from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is married to Lauren, and they have two daughters, Zoe and Lexi.

THIS STUDY

- **Essential Doctrines:** Each session will also contain an essential doctrine that directly relates to the Bible study material. The essential doctrine is also located in the student's personal study guide, though in an abbreviated format.
- **Christ Connection:** Each session will end with a direct look at how the content studied connects with Christ, emphasizing to students how all of Scripture is pointing to Him. The material in the Christ Connection will also be provided in the student's personal study guide.

▶ YOUR STORY

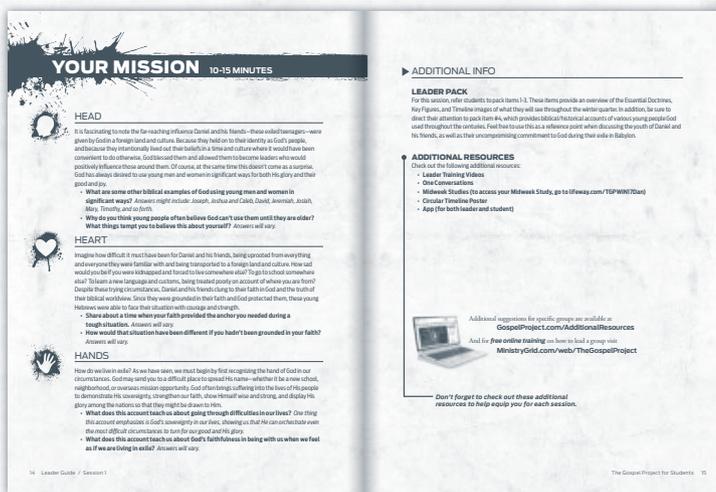
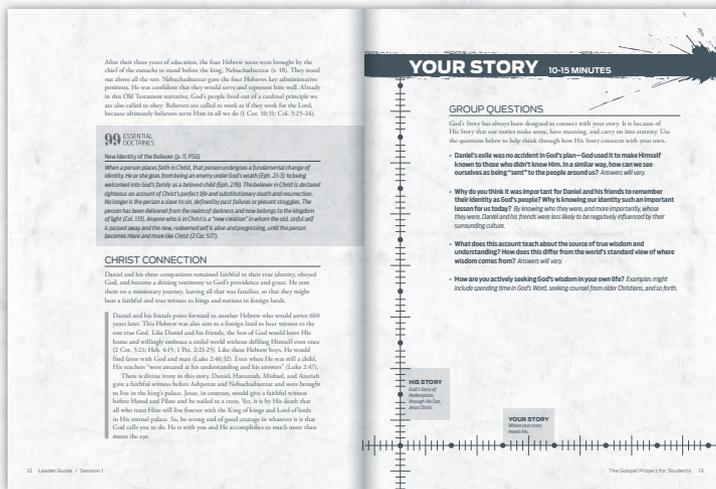
The Your Story section is designed to connect what God has done in the past to students' lives today by introducing group discussion questions that highlight how God's Story connects with their story. There are lead-ins with each question in the Leader Guide to help the leader walk students through each question.

▶ YOUR MISSION

The Your Mission section is designed to show how God's Story is capable of creating lasting transformation into how we think, feel, and live from day to day. By doing so, we emphasize to students that every session goes beyond mere Bible study to a calling to be on mission with God.

▶ ADDITIONAL INFO

The final page of each session points leaders to additional resources that can be used in conjunction with each study. The resources listed, such as teaching tips videos and One Conversations, are designed to help leaders prepare for each session. There is also information about the leader pack posters that can be used with each session.





01

SESSION ONE

In a Foreign Land

SESSION SUMMARY

In this session, we are inspired by the courage and faithfulness of Daniel and his friends. Since these young men remained true to their identity as God's chosen people and were willing to demonstrate their trust in God through their actions, they provided a testimony to God's power and goodness while in exile. Similarly, believers are sojourners and exiles in this world, redeemed by the blood of Jesus and called to be a testimony to His grace by remaining true to our identity in Christ.

SCRIPTURE

Daniel 1:1-21

THE POINT

Even in a hostile culture, Christians are called to remain true to their identity as God's chosen people.

INTRO/STARTER 5-10 MINUTES

Option 1

On a poster-board, write the word *integrity*, and then place the board at the front of the room where all the students can see it. Draw students' attention to the word *integrity*. Ask them what they think integrity means. After a few minutes of discussion, explain to students that *integrity* means *an unbroken, undefiled honesty or devotion to moral soundness*. There is always a cost associated with integrity, whether we lose something because we want to keep our integrity or we compromise and lose our integrity itself.

Place students into groups of two to four and ask them to discuss how integrity applies to the following: actions, words, and relationships (family, friends, dating, etc.). Ask students to identify negative consequences that might arise from not living with integrity in each of these areas. Then, ask them to explore what it would look like for them to maintain integrity in their actions, words, and relationships. Give a little time for this activity, then draw the group back together to discuss what students came up with.

- **How does your commitment to God affect your actions, words, and relationships?**
- **In what ways do you think God can help you stand firm in your beliefs?**
- **Daniel and his friends stood together in obedience to the Lord. Who do you know that would stand alongside you as you seek to obey God with your life?**

Option 2

Paul instructed believers to obey the government because all authority comes from God (Rom. 13:1), and Daniel also confirmed that only God can choose who will be in charge of the kingdoms of the earth (5:21). However, Daniel disobeyed the king's wishes by not eating the food the king provided (1:8). Some might point an accusing finger at Daniel for this action, but Daniel's obedience to God came before his obedience to the king, and the king was not walking in obedience to God. When leaders disobey God, believers are accountable to God first and our obedience to Him is most important. When leaders God has placed in authority over us ask us to do something illegal, immoral, or harmful to ourselves or others, we *should* disobey. Still, we are responsible for our actions and must remain respectful to those authorities as Daniel and his friends did.

- **What are some instances in which disobedience to governing authorities would be acceptable or even encouraged?**
- **Discuss some honorable ways and dishonorable ways to disobey in those situations.**

HIS STORY

15-20 MINUTES

THE POINT

Even in a hostile culture, Christians are called to remain true to their identity as God's chosen people.

CHARACTERS

- **The Triune God** - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- **Daniel** - was taken captive to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem; remained faithful to God during his time in exile
- **Hananiah, Mishael, Azariah** - Daniel's Hebrew friends who were also taken captive; renamed Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego

PLOT

At the end of the last volume we witnessed the fall of Jerusalem by an outside invader—Babylon. Because of their hardness of heart and continual idolatry, God disciplined His people by giving them over to their enemies. At this point in the story, one might think all was lost. The city had been captured, the temple ransacked, and the people destroyed. However, as William Cowper once said, “Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.” Despite the doom and gloom of these events, God was still at work. He had not abandoned His people. In fact, He is ever-present with those whose hearts remain loyal to Him.

Remember, every time you see this bar in the leader guide, it indicates the same material is also found in the personal study guide as well.

DANIEL AND HIS FRIENDS WERE TAKEN CAPTIVE

The hero of the story we are about to read is not one of the Hebrew teenagers, but the all-powerful God of grace who keeps His promises. At the beginning of the Book of Daniel, we were introduced to four remarkable young men who were uprooted and replanted in the harsh and wicked soil of the Babylonian Empire. Though they were away from home, they were not outside the sovereign plan of God.

In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. And the Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, with some of the vessels of the house of God. And he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and placed the vessels in the treasury of his god. Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah. And the chief of the eunuchs gave them names: Daniel he called Belteshazzar, Hananiah he called Shadrach, Mishael he called Meshach, and Azariah he called Abednego. (Dan. 1:1-7)

GOING FURTHER WITH THE STORY

As we saw in previous sessions, the southern kingdom of Judah had been in political and spiritual decline for a long time. King Nebuchadnezzar had attacked Jerusalem and taken many Jewish people captive. (In time, there would be three deportations to Babylon—605, 597, and 586 B. C.) Nebuchadnezzar ordered a man named Ashpenaz to deport the royals and the nobles (Dan. 1:3). This was intended to strip the nation of its best and brightest (v. 4) for the benefit of Babylon.

On the surface of these verses, it looks as if God's people were simply invaded and taken captive. From a different perspective, we see that God's people were able to take God's light into enemy territory. Shinar, Babylon, and the land of Ziggurats (remember the tower of Babel in Genesis 10?)—all these places teeming with idols were suddenly infiltrated by the Lord's army. Israel would be oppressed and her people scattered, but the nations would gain a witness among them to the one true and living God.

TIMELINE

FAITHFUL IN EXILE

When God's people pursue holiness, others take notice.

TESTED BY FIRE

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego trust God for protection.

WALL OF HANDWRITING

Warning of God's judgment and the need to repent.

Remember, these sections are optional and can be skipped if preferred.

In order for God's people to be salt and light in the evil empire of Babylon, they would need to be prepared for the challenges such a culture would throw at them—challenges designed to lead them away from God. Look at the pressures Daniel and his three friends had to face and notice how these pressures are similar to the ones we face in our own culture today.

Whenever you see PSG page numbers listed, it indicates that there is a section in the personal study guide for students to interact with.

- **What challenges do Christians face today that might lead them away from God?** (p. 10, PSG)

1. Isolation. The first step in making Babylonians out of the four Hebrew teenagers was isolation from their homeland, family, and friends (v. 3). The Babylonian strategy was to seize upon their vulnerability once they were separated from all that was familiar. Over time, it was assumed they would be more likely to abandon their faith and become like the Babylonians.
2. Indoctrination. The second step was to take these sharp and impressive young men (v. 4) and enroll them in an educational school for three years (v. 5). They needed to be indoctrinated in the ways of the Babylonians—to become experts in the Babylonian language, philosophy, literature, science, history, and astrology.
3. Assimilation. The third step was to totally immerse these followers of God into the world of Babylon (vv. 4-5). They would need to change their minds and their lifestyle—to eat and drink like the Babylonians. The strategy was to entice them with the delicacies and privileges of their new life. Such an immersion would wear them down and eventually win them over to the Babylonian way of life.
4. Confusion. The final step was to give them new names (v. 7). Their Hebrew names honored the one true God. Daniel meant *God is my Judge*. Hananiah meant *the Lord is gracious*. Mishael meant *who is like God?* Azariah meant *the Lord helps*. In the ancient world, changing one's name was a big deal because the name was at the core of their identity. Giving the Hebrews new names in Babylon was a way of confusing them, reorienting their lives away from their past and toward the pagan gods of Babylonian culture. Daniel and his three friends would have to fight to remember their identity and remain faithful.

- **In what ways would it be easy for Christians to fall prey to these four strategies of making us like the world? How can we strengthen our identity in Christ when facing the pressures of the culture?** (p. 10, PSG)

DANIEL LIVED ACCORDING TO HIS BELIEFS

Despite the Babylonian strategy to convert Daniel and his friends, the young Hebrews were determined not to abandon their convictions or their commitment to God. Watch how they responded when faced with the temptation to compromise:

But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs, and the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, "I fear my lord the king, who assigned your food and your drink; for why should he see that you

were in worse condition than the youths who are of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king.” Then Daniel said to the steward whom the chief of the eunuchs had assigned over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, “Test your servants for ten days; let us be given vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then let our appearance and the appearance of the youths who eat the king's food be observed by you, and deal with your servants according to what you see.” So he listened to them in this matter, and tested them for ten days. At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and fatter in flesh than all the youths who ate the king's food. So the steward took away their food and the wine they were to drink, and gave them vegetables. (Dan. 1:8-16)

Notice how Daniel resisted the temptation to defile himself (v. 8). The immersion into the world of pagan Babylon did not win over his heart or mind. The text does not explain why the food was problematic for Daniel. It may have been that the food was unclean for a Hebrew (Lev. 11:1-23); it may have been that the food was offered to idols (Deut. 6:3-15); or it may have communicated an absolute allegiance to the king that Daniel reserved for God alone.

Daniel not only had conviction, but he also had wisdom. He walked in holiness and humility. God caused the officials overseeing Daniel and his friends to look upon Daniel favorably. Daniel shared his faith and convictions with Ashpenaz, winning favor with his superior. Above all, Daniel believed and trusted God to honor his commitment to obedience.

GOD GIVES GRACE TO THOSE WHO SEEK TO LIVE HOLY LIVES BEFORE HIM

Daniel and his friends had faith that God would honor the risk they were taking in seeking to be holy. It was already settled in their hearts that they would remain faithful to their God, no matter what. Daniel and his friends testified to God's grace and power through their service, their wisdom, and their understanding.

As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams. At the end of the time, when the king had commanded that they should be brought in, the chief of the eunuchs brought them in before Nebuchadnezzar. And the king spoke with them, and among all of them none was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Therefore they stood before the king. And in every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king inquired of them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters that were in all his kingdom. And Daniel was there until the first year of King Cyrus. (Dan. 1:17-21)

TIMELINE

A FUTURE KING

Isaiah tells of a future king coming from the line of David.

DANIEL IS DELIVERED

God protects Daniel in the lions' den.

THE JOURNEY HOME

God keeps His promise to bring His people home.

After their three years of education, the four Hebrew teens were brought by the chief of the eunuchs to stand before the king, Nebuchadnezzar (v. 18). They stood out above all the rest. Nebuchadnezzar gave the four Hebrews key administrative positions. He was confident that they would serve and represent him well. Already in this Old Testament narrative, God's people lived out of a cardinal principle we are also called to obey: Believers are called to work as if they work for the Lord, because ultimately believers serve Him in all we do (1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:23-24).

99 ESSENTIAL DOCTRINES

New Identity of the Believer (p. 11, PSG)

When a person places faith in Christ, that person undergoes a fundamental change of identity. He or she goes from being an enemy under God's wrath (Eph. 2:1-3) to being welcomed into God's family as a beloved child (Eph. 2:19). The believer in Christ is declared righteous on account of Christ's perfect life and substitutionary death and resurrection. No longer is the person a slave to sin, defined by past failures or present struggles. The person has been delivered from the realm of darkness and now belongs to the kingdom of light (Col. 1:13). Anyone who is in Christ is a "new creation" in whom the old, sinful self is passed away and the new, redeemed self is alive and progressing, until the person becomes more and more like Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

CHRIST CONNECTION

Daniel and his three companions remained faithful to their true identity, obeyed God, and became a shining testimony to God's providence and grace. He sent them on a missionary journey, leaving all that was familiar, so that they might bear a faithful and true witness to kings and nations in foreign lands.

Daniel and his friends point forward to another Hebrew who would arrive 600 years later. This Hebrew was also sent to a foreign land to bear witness to the one true God. Like Daniel and his friends, the Son of God would leave His home and willingly embrace a sinful world without defiling Himself even once (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:21-25). Like these Hebrew boys, He would find favor with God and man (Luke 2:40,52). Even when He was still a child, His teachers "were amazed at his understanding and his answers" (Luke 2:47).

There is divine irony in this story. Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah gave a faithful witness before Ashpenaz and Nebuchadnezzar and were brought to live in the king's palace. Jesus, in contrast, would give a faithful witness before Herod and Pilate and be nailed to a cross. Yet, it is by His death that all who trust Him will live forever with the King of kings and Lord of lords in His eternal palace. So, be strong and of good courage in whatever it is that God calls you to do. He is with you and He accomplishes so much more than meets the eye.

YOUR STORY

10-15 MINUTES

GROUP QUESTIONS

God's Story has always been designed to connect with your story. It is because of His Story that our stories make sense, have meaning, and carry on into eternity. Use the questions below to help think through how His Story connects with your own.

- **Daniel's exile was no accident in God's plan—God used it to make Himself known to those who didn't know Him. In a similar way, how can we see ourselves as being "sent" to the people around us?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Why do you think it was important for Daniel and his friends to remember their identity as God's people? Why is knowing our identity such an important lesson for us today?** *By knowing who they were, and more importantly, whose they were, Daniel and his friends were less likely to be negatively influenced by their surrounding culture.*
- **What does this account teach about the source of true wisdom and understanding? How does this differ from the world's standard view of where wisdom comes from?** *Answers will vary.*
- **How are you actively seeking God's wisdom in your own life?** *Examples might include spending time in God's Word, seeking counsel from older Christians, and so forth.*

HIS STORY

God's Story of Redemption, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

YOUR STORY

Where your story meets His.

YOUR MISSION 10-15 MINUTES



HEAD

It is fascinating to note the far-reaching influence Daniel and his friends—these exiled teenagers—were given by God in a foreign land and culture. Because they held on to their identity as God’s people, and because they intentionally lived out their beliefs in a time and culture where it would have been convenient to do otherwise, God blessed them and allowed them to become leaders who would positively influence those around them. Of course, at the same time this doesn’t come as a surprise. God has always desired to use young men and women in significant ways for both His glory and their good and joy.

- **What are some other biblical examples of God using young men and women in significant ways?** *Answers might include: Joseph, Joshua and Caleb, David, Jeremiah, Josiah, Mary, Timothy, and so forth.*
- **Why do you think young people often believe God can’t use them until they are older? What things tempt you to believe this about yourself?** *Answers will vary.*



HEART

Imagine how difficult it must have been for Daniel and his friends, being uprooted from everything and everyone they were familiar with and being transported to a foreign land and culture. How sad would you be if you were kidnapped and forced to live somewhere else? To go to school somewhere else? To learn a new language and customs, being treated poorly on account of where you are from? Despite these trying circumstances, Daniel and his friends clung to their faith in God and the truth of their biblical worldview. Since they were grounded in their faith and God protected them, these young Hebrews were able to face their situation with courage and strength.

- **Share about a time when your faith provided the anchor you needed during a tough situation.** *Answers will vary.*
- **How would that situation have been different if you hadn’t been grounded in your faith?** *Answers will vary.*



HANDS

How do we live in exile? As we have seen, we must begin by first recognizing the hand of God in our circumstances. God may send you to a difficult place to spread His name—whether it be a new school, neighborhood, or overseas mission opportunity. God often brings suffering into the lives of His people to demonstrate His sovereignty, strengthen our faith, show Himself wise and strong, and display His glory among the nations so that they might be drawn to Him.

- **What does this account teach us about going through difficulties in our lives?** *One thing this account emphasizes is God’s sovereignty in our lives, showing us that He can orchestrate even the most difficult circumstances to turn for our good and His glory.*
- **What does this account teach us about God’s faithfulness in being with us when we feel as if we are living in exile?** *Answers will vary.*

► ADDITIONAL INFO

LEADER PACK

For this session, refer students to pack items 1-3. These items provide an overview of the Essential Doctrines, Key Figures, and Timeline images of what they will see throughout the winter quarter. In addition, be sure to direct their attention to pack item #4, which provides biblical/historical accounts of various young people God used throughout the centuries. Feel free to use this as a reference point when discussing the youth of Daniel and his friends, as well as their uncompromising commitment to God during their exile in Babylon.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Check out the following additional resources:

- **Leader Training Videos**
- **One Conversations**
- **Midweek Studies (to access your Midweek Study, go to lifeway.com/TGPWIN17Dan)**
- **Circular Timeline Poster**
- **App (for both leader and student)**



Additional suggestions for specific groups are available at
GospelProject.com/AdditionalResources

And for **free online training** on how to lead a group visit
MinistryGrid.com/web/TheGospelProject

Don't forget to check out these additional resources to help equip you for each session.