

December 27  
Lesson 4 (NIV)

## CALLED TO PREPARE

DEVOTIONAL READING: [John 1:19–34](#)

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: [Matthew 3](#)



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### MATTHEW 3:1–12

<sup>1</sup> In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea <sup>2</sup> and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” <sup>3</sup> This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”

<sup>4</sup> John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup> People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. <sup>6</sup> Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

<sup>7</sup> But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee

from the coming wrath? <sup>8</sup> Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. <sup>9</sup> And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. <sup>10</sup> The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

<sup>11</sup> “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

### KEY VERSE

*This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”*—[Matthew 3:3](#)

## CALL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

### Unit 1: The Beginning of a Call

LESSONS 1–4

### LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List salient points of John the Baptist’s

ministry and message.

2. Compare and contrast the two baptisms of which John spoke.

3. Correct one attitude that puts him or her in danger of being viper-like.

Messiah Meh-sigh-uh.

Pentecost Pent-ih-kost.

Pharisees Fair-ih-seez.

Sadducees Sad-you-seez.

synagogue sin-uh-gog

## LESSON OUTLINE

### Introduction

#### A. The Voice

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##### B. Message (vv. 2–3)

*Voice in the Wilderness*

##### C. Messenger (v. 4)

#### II. Called to Repent (Matthew 3:5–10)

##### A. Receptive Audience (vv. 5–6)

##### B. Unrepentant Adversaries (vv. 7–10)

*Fruits of Repentance*

#### III. Called to Prepare (Matthew 3:11–12)

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##### B. Prophesied Work (vv. 11b–12)

### Conclusion

#### A. Voices in the Wilderness

#### B. Prayer

#### C. Thought to Remember

## HOW TO SAY IT

Herod Antipas Hair-ud An-tih-pus.

Isaiah Eye-zay-uh.

Josephus Jo-see-fus.

Judean Joo-dee-un.

Malachi Mal-uh-kye.

## Introduction

### A. The Voice

In 2010, the reality television show *The Voice* premiered in Holland before arriving in the United States, becoming an international sensation. Similar to the long-running *X Factor* and *American Idol* franchises, contestants compete in weekly singing competitions in hopes of earning a cash prize and a recording contract.

Perhaps the most well-known element of the show is its distinctive selection process. At the beginning of each season, hopeful amateurs perform for a panel of celebrity recording artists. From the pool, each celebrity chooses a “team” of would-be entertainers to coach through the remainder of the season.

To ensure that the panelist-coaches make their initial selections on the basis of vocal talent rather than appearance, the celebrities sit in chairs facing the audience rather than the stage during initial performances. The judges must, in other words, choose prospects solely on the basis of “the voice.” Each season’s winner is appropriately dubbed “The Voice” to emphasize that person’s outstanding singing abilities.

Our passage for today describes the work of a biblical figure who was known in his own time as “a voice,” John the Baptist. But would John be acknowledged as a truly great voice with a great message?

## B. Lesson Context

In Jesus’ day as before, mainstream Jewish religion centered primarily on the Jerusalem temple (which was controlled by wealthy pro-Roman Sadducees) and secondarily on local synagogues (which often were led by Pharisees and scribal experts in the Jewish Scriptures). As Jesus himself pointed out, both had become oppressive, actually hindering people in their relationships to God (example: [Matthew 23:13–39](#)). The religious authorities placed heavy burdens on the average worshipper ([23:4](#)). This implied that God was not readily accessible to common people. Those authorities had developed a complex system of rules and regulations that people could not keep.

Aside from the fact that these approaches made God largely inaccessible, they also were closely tied to the efforts of the Jewish elite to maintain peace with the Roman Empire ([John 11:48](#)). Reacting to this situation, some Jews turned to monastic movements. Others adopted an ascetic lifestyle and sought God through seasons of meditation in the wilderness. Still others were drawn into fringe prophetic movements that promised deliverance from Roman oppression; these sometimes led to rebellion (example: [Acts 5:34–37](#)).

John the Baptist’s work was familiar within this religious landscape. But it was unique in two significant ways that made him a popular figure. The first of those distinctives is evident from the epithet we still use for him today: he was “the Baptist” ([Matthew 3:1](#), today’s text) or “the Baptizer.” While Jews regularly washed their hands, feet, and household items for purposes of religious purification—including full-body washings on many occasions—they washed only themselves, never other people.

Such washing was viewed as a way of removing sin and impurity (compare [Ezekiel 36:25](#)). In standard Jewish thinking it was not possible for one person to remove another person’s impurities. No priest or rabbi would wash someone else, not least because doing so would make the one giving the bath unclean as well! John, however, was different. His hands-on baptism served as a powerful symbol of the content of his message.

That message was the second distinctive of John’s ministry. He did not tell people to withdraw into the wilderness, nor did he promise freedom from Roman rule. Rather, John the Baptist told them to repent in preparation for a great work of God that was looming on the horizon.

John’s focus on second chances and emphasis on the reality of God’s presence made him a popular figure with Jews from a wide range of backgrounds. Both the New Testament and the ancient Jewish historian Josephus (about AD 37–100) attest to John’s

popularity (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.2). His refusal to compromise and his commitment to speaking the truth ultimately led to his death at the hands of Herod Antipas, Rome's client-king (*Matthew* 14:1–12).



Visual for Lesson 4. Use this image to start a discussion about how students can prepare someone's heart for God.

## I. Called to Testify (*MATTHEW* 3:1–4)

### A. Setting (v. 1)

**1. In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea**

The phrase *those days* moves Matthew's story from the events of Jesus' birth and early childhood to a period some two decades later. During this time, Jesus' cousin *John*, the son of a priest from the Judean hill country (*Luke* 1:5, 39–40, 57–66), came to adulthood with a distinct sense of mission and calling of his own.

At some point, probably during his teenage years, John adopted an ascetic life-

style and began to live alone *in the wilderness of Judea* (see also *Luke* 1:80; compare *Numbers* 6:1–21). That location, the large desert area east of Jerusalem around the Jordan River valley, was popular with those who wished to focus on prayer and meditation.

### B. Message (vv. 2–3)

**2. and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”**

John's message can be summarized in a single word: *Repent*. The person who repents becomes truly sorry for past misdeeds, changes the way that he or she thinks and, as a result, starts behaving differently. Exactly how John thought people's minds should change is not specified here (see on *Matthew* 3:6, below).

The immediate need for this change of mind was indicated by the fact that *the kingdom of heaven was near*. Jews would have understood that phrase both temporally (as already present or coming soon) and geographically (as coming to Israel). As sovereign Creator of the universe, God is always king over everything. But his reign was about to become evident in a unique way. Repentance would make the people ready to stand in the king's presence when he arrived.

The Jewish people had not had their own, sovereign nation since the exile of 586 BC, except for brief times of rebellions. The people were looking for God to expel the foreign rulers in preparation to reestablish the throne of David (compare *Acts* 1:6). What God had in mind required different prepara-

tion than ridding the nation of outsiders, however. His spiritual kingdom required not a change of personnel, but a change of heart.

Here as elsewhere, Matthew uses the phrase *kingdom of heaven* (32 times in his Gospel) while Mark and Luke prefer “kingdom of God” (Matthew, 5 times; Mark, 15 times; Luke, 32 times). *Heaven* in this context is most likely a gesture of respect to avoid saying God’s name. Matthew’s preference for this terminology has led to the conclusion that he was writing to an audience that was primarily of Jewish background. They would appreciate this gesture of respect. The phrase also recalls Daniel’s prophecies of “one like a son of man” who is to come “with the clouds of heaven” ([Daniel 7:13](#)).

**3. This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”**

John earned the title *a voice of one calling in the wilderness* from prophecy spoken by *Isaiah* (see [Isaiah 40:3](#)). In its original context, the prophecy envisions God as a great king on a journey, with messengers and servants preceding him to make people ready for his arrival. John the Baptist considered himself one of these messengers ([John 1:23](#)), announcing that the great king, *the Lord*, would soon appear. Repentance would *make* things *straight* in preparing the people for the king’s arrival.

#### *What Do You Think?*

Under what circumstances will your wit-

ness for Christ be better served by dressing in a way that is distinctively different from that of culture customs? How might that hinder?

#### *Digging Deeper*

How do passages such as [Leviticus 19:19, 27](#); [1 Corinthians 9:19–23](#); [11:3–16](#); [1 Timothy 2:9–10](#); and [1 Peter 3:3](#) inform your decision?

### **VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS**

Fred knows all about being a “voice in the wilderness.” He learned the language of an unreached people group in West Africa and lived with them as he labored to bring them God’s Word in their own language. After two decades, however, not a single person had been baptized.

Fred’s son grew up in that village, speaking the local language. After completing college in the United States, he returned with his wife and children to the same people group his father had served. The son discovered that the seeds his father had sown were finally beginning to sprout! A key leader had expressed his faith in Christ. The once-barren fields appeared ripe for harvest.

Do you feel like a “voice in the wilderness” to your family or neighbors? Don’t give up! Keep spreading the word and trust the Lord to change hearts and minds at just the right time.

—D. G.

### **C. Messenger (v. 4)**

**4a. John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist.**

John's attire of rough clothing and sparse diet (see [Matthew 3:4b](#), below) reflected his ascetic lifestyle. More significantly, John's choice of clothing recalls that of the great prophet Elijah (see [2 Kings 1:8](#)). According to [Malachi 4:5–6](#), Elijah would return one day to call the Jews to repentance before the day of judgment. John fulfilled that task in unexpected fashion ([Matthew 17:11–13](#)).

**4b. His food was locusts and wild honey.**

*Locusts* were clean foods according [Leviticus 11:22](#), readily found in the wilderness. *Honey* was a key descriptor regarding the abundance of the promised land (example: [Exodus 3:8](#)). John lived off the land, sustained by the two foods God provided.

## II. Called to Repent ([MATTHEW 3:5–10](#))

### A. Receptive Audience (vv. 5–6)

**5. People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan.**

*Judea* was the Roman province in which the city of *Jerusalem* was located; *the whole region* around the *Jordan River* extended northward into Galilee, Jesus' home territory. Since John performed no miracles ([John 10:41](#)), his fame as a prophet must have been based on the integrity of his lifestyle and the nature of his message.

**6a. Confessing their sins,**

The types of *sins* that concerned John are hinted at in [Luke 3:10–14](#). The very notion of the kingdom of Heaven assumes that God is a sovereign ruler who must be obeyed. *Confessing* that one's life was not completely submitted to God (see [Matthew 3:2](#), above) was essential to the repentance that John called for in preparation.

**6b. they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.**

Jews were aware of the symbolism of the *Jordan River*. Generations before, Joshua had led the Israelites across the Jordan to claim the promised land ([Joshua 3–4](#)). Now John was symbolically preparing Israel for the kingdom of Heaven, whose leader was much greater than any who had come before.

### B. Unrepentant Adversaries (vv. 7–10)

**7. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"**

Some religious leaders of the day doubtless accepted John's message. But appearances of *Pharisees and Sadducees* rarely led to positive encounters with either Jesus or John. Because Jewish thought viewed washing purification as something that happened through rituals of personal cleansing, the leading priests and rabbis challenged John's authority to baptize. He replied with a challenge of his own, publicly identifying them as *vipers*. Like poisonous snakes, they hid

their intentions from the masses so they could harm them (compare [Matthew 12:34; 23:33](#)). Their status as the religious elite would not exempt them from judgment, God's *coming wrath*.

#### *What Do You Think?*

Under what circumstances, if any, are Christians justified in speaking harshly to others as John did? Why do you say that?

#### *Digging Deeper*

In addition to [Acts 8:20; 18:6; Titus 1:13; and 1 Peter 3:15–16](#), what passages help frame your answer?

### **8. Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.**

John uses the common New Testament metaphor of *fruits* to describe behavior based on belief (examples: [John 15:16; Romans 7:4–5](#)). Exactly what such fruit would look like is not specified here. By comparison with a similar account in [Luke 3](#), fruit should take the form of visible changes in behavior. In particular, actions should show that the baptized individual is obedient to divine standards of justice—helping those in need and refusing to take advantage ([Luke 3:10–14](#)).

The characteristic behavior of the religious elite — ignoring John's message and instead challenging his authority to preach and baptize—demonstrated that they themselves were as much in need of *repentance* as the masses they instructed. Rather than being arrogant, the Pharisees needed to

humbly examine themselves to determine whether they were indeed prepared for the coming of God's kingdom.

#### *What Do You Think?*

As new Christians begin to produce the fruit of the Spirit ([Galatians 5:22–23](#)), which of the rotten fruits ([5:19–21](#)) should be first to go? Why?

#### *Digging Deeper*

Which of the lists in [Romans 1:29–31; 2 Corinthians 12:20; Ephesians 4:25–32; 5:3–5; Philippians 4:8–9; and Colossians 3:5, 8, 12](#) convict you most in this regard? Why?

### **FRUITS OF REPENTANCE**

I had never seen anyone stop for the one traffic light in this East African city. I didn't stop either — until two policeman carrying large rifles waved me down, and one climbed into my back seat to escort me to the police station. When I asked how much my fine would be, he said, "200,000." In local currency, that was 10 times the rate of a normal traffic violation. Unsurprisingly, I was being extorted.

Another time, a non-Christian traffic policeman had commandeered a ride. My friend was sharing the gospel with him. The policeman, revealing knowledge of John's words in [Luke 3:14](#), said, "I could never become a Christian. Then I'd have to stop taking bribes."

Even the corrupt policeman knew that repentance requires a change in behavior!

What about you?

—D. G.

**9. And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.**

Many Jews of John’s day believed they would receive the promises made to *Abraham* their *father* simply by virtue of being part of the family ([Genesis 12:1–3](#)). Although following the law became very important after the exile of 586 BC, the emphasis remained on being born into God’s covenant people.

John challenged this line of thinking at a foundational level. Being descended from Abraham was not proof of being in a right relationship with God. One had to seek God earnestly. John’s message anticipates the later New Testament teaching that salvation is based on faith that results in obedience, never on a supposed birthright.

**10. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.**

John used a dramatic analogy to drive his point home: the barren *trees* that should be bearing *good fruit* have been marked for destruction. Without a change of heart, these barren trees would become firewood. God is patient, but his patience has limits (compare [Luke 13:6–9](#)). Those who accepted John’s message would be prepared for what (and who) was coming. Those who did not would not participate in God’s kingdom, regardless of their lineage or religious stand-

ing.

It is important to recall the nature of John’s audience: with the possible exception of those mentioned in [Luke 3:14](#), he was not preaching to pagans. Rather, he was preaching to Jews who already believed in God and were attempting, at some level, to live by the Law of Moses. John’s audience included religious leaders who were experts in the Scriptures; they too needed to prepare.

### III. Called to Prepare

([MATTHEW 3:11–12](#))

#### A. John’s Work (v. 11a)

**11a. “I baptize you with water for repentance.**

John viewed the act of submitting to *water* baptism as evidence of *repentance* (compare [Acts 19:4](#)). Those undergoing this baptism were admitting that they needed to change. They needed to be cleansed of sinfulness. They needed to begin producing the kind of fruit that John called for.

#### B. Prophesied Work (vv. 11b–12)

**11b. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.**

John’s baptism was not an end in and of itself; rather, it looked to the future. John was the Messiah’s forerunner. Greater things were coming. John’s baptism would give way to the baptism Jesus would bring (that is, Christian baptism).



Two (and possibly three) actions by God lay ahead. One was the blessing that came on the Day of Pentecost when Peter preached the first post-resurrection gospel sermon. That message included the directive to “repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38; compare 10:44–48).

*What Do You Think?*

What can you do to recognize and appreciate more fully the work of the Holy Spirit in your life?

*Digging Deeper*

Does your thinking trend more toward things you need to start doing or things you need to stop doing? Why is that?

Second, John predicted a *fire* to come. Some Bible students see this as judgment on the disobedient (compare Jude 7). Others, however, see it as a purifying fire for the repentant (compare 1 Peter 4:12). It could be both, for a total of three things John predicted.

The one to bring about such things is the Messiah. John, as a lowly servant, felt unworthy even to carry Jesus’ sandals (compare Matthew 3:13–15; John 1:29–30). Jesus’ ministry would be greater than John’s. We today can testify to that fact since we are on this side of the cross and the empty tomb.

**12. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gath-**

**ering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”**

*Chaff* is the outer husk that surrounds seeds of *wheat*. In antiquity, the husk was separated from the grain by tossing the wheat into the air; the chaff would drift to the side while the heavier seed fell in a pile on the threshing floor. The worthless chaff was then burned. God’s *unquenchable fire* would be even more thorough in removing those who refused to repent (compare Matthew 13:40–43).

John had begun the work of separation by calling people to repent in preparation for the Lord’s coming. Even today, those who repent and follow the biblical plan of salvation will be gathered up like the good grain. But those who do not will, like the useless chaff, be discarded and destroyed. The message is clear: choose your fate and act accordingly before it is too late.

*What Do You Think?*

What plan can you make to get rid of the chaff in your life?

*Digging Deeper*

What would be the advantages and disadvantages of recruiting an accountability partner for this task?

## Conclusion

### A. Voices in the Wilderness

Whenever a person emerges as the lone advocate for an important cause and is later proven to be right, we may refer to that indi-

vidual as “a voice in the wilderness.” Such people often feel that way themselves, alone in their cries for change and often criticized for their views. They call others to prepare for a future that is obscure to most but that they themselves foresee (or think they foresee) clearly. Like John the Baptist, these individuals are often attacked rather than appreciated.

Today’s lesson reminds us of the need to prepare for Christ’s coming—in our case, his second coming. Part of our preparation involves serving as voices in the wilderness as we speak out against the evil we see both in the world and among God’s people.

### B. Prayer

Father, help us to know our own hearts so that we can be ready for your Son’s return. Help us bear the fruit you have called us to bear and to be strong in telling others that your kingdom is near. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

### C. Thought to Remember

The time to repent is now.

## INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

*Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at [www.standardlesson.com](http://www.standardlesson.com) or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).*

## Into the Lesson

Have this question written on the board as learners arrive:

*Are you a person who likes to be prepared, or more of a person who likes to take things as they come?*

After a few minutes of discussion, divide your class into pairs (or triads), giving each group an index card. Ask learners to work in their pairs to create a list of preparations for a job interview. After a few minutes, reconvene for whole-class comparisons of lists.

*Alternative.* Distribute copies of the “How Would You Prepare?” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated.

After either activity, lead into Bible study by saying, “Today’s lesson has something important to teach us about preparation. Let’s see what it is.”

## Into the Word

Have students take turns reading [Matthew 3:1–12](#) aloud. Then divide the class into three groups, giving each group one of the handouts below (you create). Have Bible dictionaries and other resources available for groups that need them.

**Who He Was Group:** Who was John the Baptist, and what do we know about him?

**What He Said Group:** What significant things did John the Baptist say?

**What He Did Group:** What significant

things did John the Baptist do?

After no more than 15 minutes, allow groups to share findings. Use the lesson commentary to fill in gaps. (*Some responses to anticipate:* Who He Was Group—the son of elderly parents, John was prophesied to be the one to prepare the way for the Messiah. What He Said Group—preached repentance and the nearness of the kingdom of Heaven. What He Did Group—baptized and called out those guilty of hypocrisy)

Then write on the board the phrases *Baptism by John* and *Baptism from Jesus* as the headers to two columns. Follow by writing *Who it's for / What it does / When it happens* as the titles of three rows down the left-hand side of the board. Read verses 11 and 12 again, and ask learners to help you make the proper entries at the intersections of the rows and columns. (*Expected responses* are per the Scripture text for the lesson. Use the commentary to fill in gaps and correct misconceptions.)

*Option.* For an extended study on baptism, distribute copies of the “Baptism in the New Testament” exercise from the activity page for learners to complete in small groups as indicated. If time is short, this can be a take-home.

Make a transition to the Into Life segment by saying, “While John the Baptist had the task of preparing for Jesus’ first coming, we have the important task of preparing for his second coming.”

## Into Life

Write on the board the following:

*hypocrisy / cunning / wicked ways / attention to outward appearances*

Say, “By calling the Pharisees and Sadducees ‘vipers,’ John may have been referring to these attributes.” Give each student a slip of paper. Ask students to think of an attitude they may hold that falls into one or more of the categories listed that puts them in danger of being viper-like. Suggest that students write that attitude on their papers—an attitude that works against preparing for Jesus’ return.

Offer a chance for volunteers to voice what they have written. Encourage them each to put their paper in a place where it will remind them daily to ask God for his help in correcting that attitude. Close by urging students to continue preparing well for Jesus’ second coming.

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To print the reproducible activity page, simply click the highlighted text below to create a pdf file on your hard drive. Then open the pdf file in Acrobat Reader and print.

[Activity Page \(December 27: Called to Prepare\)](#)

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## A. Faith, Not Sight Revisited

With what spiritually mature person can  
and will you discuss your misgivings?

Paul's world was not a safe place. Cities could be impersonal and nasty. Villages could be hostile and dangerous for outsiders. Roadways always harbored the threat of bandits. Ships could be swamped by storms or attacked by pirates. Even in a case of assault or robbery, justice in court was often unavailable or corrupt. People needed to be ever wary and alert for danger. It seemed prudent to live just day by day in a self-protecting manner.

Even today we hear of incidents that scare us: "Widow bilked out of life savings by online dating." "Ten-year-old girl in a cross-walk struck and killed by texting driver." "Super-infection detected that resists any known treatment." It is easy to despair.

For many, life lurches from one crisis to another. To look beyond one's present sufferings seems impossible. But that is what Paul calls us to do. We are not to fear death. We already enjoy the peace and comfort of the Holy Spirit. Rather than our succumbing to despair, Paul challenges us to walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we must endure and manage life's crises as they come. But we do so knowing that God is in control and our future is sure. Take a minute to evaluate. Do you walk primarily by faith or by sight?

### *What Do You Think?*

What concept in today's lesson is most difficult for you to see "faith walk" value in? Why?

### *Digging Deeper*