

GET INTO THE STUDY



5 minutes

SAY: “Today we will look specifically at how victory comes through faith.”

DISCUSS: Draw attention to the picture on **PSG page 46** and ask **Question #1: What are some things you can’t see but you know are there?**

GUIDE: Direct attention to **The Bible Meets Life, PSG page 47**. Highlight the author’s observation of marketing on the internet urging people to believe something as true.

Reinforce the importance of faith in giving us victory by reading **The Point (PSG, p. 47): My faith in God makes me victorious**.

PRAY: Begin the Bible study with prayer. Ask for God’s wisdom in understanding His Word in this study. Thank Him for the faith that gives us victory in life.

SESSION 4

VICTORIOUS FAITH



The Point

My faith in God makes me victorious.

The Bible Meets Life

Many people treat faith as a hopeful wish. We have faith our sports team will do well this year. We feel confident about certain people and we say we have faith in them—and

then they let us down. Even when those individuals have the best intentions, they can still let us down. Faith is only as good as what—or who—it is based on. We can experience a victorious faith when it is grounded in Jesus Christ.

The Passage

Hebrews 11:1-6

The Setting

Hebrews 11 has encouraged many believers in times of persecution and suffering. The word “faith” occurs 27 times, while the expression “by faith” occurs 22 times in the chapter. Chapter 10 concluded with exhortations that the righteous “will live by faith” (Heb. 10:38) and believers are “those who have faith and are saved” (v. 39). Figures of the past who by faith pleased God and were approved by God are used to motivate believers and to encourage them to persevere.

Hebrews 11:1-3

- 1 Now faith is the reality of what is hoped for, the proof of what is not seen.
- 2 For by it our ancestors won God's approval.
- 3 By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

KEY WORD: **Our ancestors** (v. 2)—Literally “our elders,” in Hebrews 11 the Greek term refers to people who lived a long time ago.

Faith leads us to trust and rely on God.

1 ▶ Verse 1. The word *is* in **now faith is** has led many Bible students to identify Hebrews 11:1 as a definition of faith. Other Bible students prefer to view this verse as an affirmation of faith, a characterization of some aspects of faith, an introduction to some important features of faith, or some distinguishing outcomes of faith. In other words, the emphasis is more on what faith *does* rather than what faith *is*. What faith does is give reality to **what is hoped for** and provide the proof of **what is not seen**. That is, faith, in the here and now, at the present time, gives the believer a reality to build his or her life on, on the basis of the unseen—of those things hoped for but which God has not yet brought about.

The Greek word rendered **proof** is used only here in the New Testament. It was used of demonstrating or proving something that was in dispute. Faith provides to the believer the proof or evidence for the existence or reality of things that cannot be demonstrated through sense perception or which God has promised will occur but have not yet happened.

Christians often are asked—and sometimes ridiculed for—how they can build their lives on the basis of the Bible when they have no proof of its truth. But that's just what faith does for believers: it provides proof of **what is not seen**. In verse 7, using the same language, the writer told of Noah: “By faith Noah, after he was warned about what was not yet seen ... built an ark to deliver his family.” Verses 8-10 tell of Abraham, who lived his whole life on the basis of his faith in God and His promises of things as yet unseen. Verses 13-16 summarize how these ancestors of the faith lived their lives based on the unseen reality they laid hold of by faith and how it provided such a certain conviction

STUDY THE BIBLE Hebrews 11:1-3



10 minutes

SUMMARIZE: Before reading the passage, set the context by summarizing the information in **The Setting** on page 52.

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Hebrews 11:1-3.

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 1** on this page and page 54 to describe the relationship between *faith* and *proof* or evidence.

GUIDE: Refer group members to **PSG page 48**, to the opening sentence of the study: Since the Christian life is a life of faith, let's be really clear on what faith is. Verse 1 describes how faith works and what it does:

1. Faith gives us confidence.
2. Faith is an inward conviction.

GUIDE: Ask a volunteer to read the quote by J. Oswald Chambers (**PSG, p. 48**):

“Faith enables the believing soul to treat the future as present and the invisible as seen.”

SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 2** to explain *creatio ex nihilo* and the wonder of God’s creation.

OPTION: Encourage members to reflect on and share about times when they were overwhelmed with the beauty and awesomeness of God’s creation. Ask a volunteer to read the second stanza of the hymn, “How Great Thou Art”

*“When thro’ the woods and forest glades I wander,
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur,
And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze.”*

Ask: “What do you find most amazing about God’s creation? How does this wonder contribute to your faith?”

and assurance of the truth. Believers know that faith is founded on objective reality, for faith grabs hold of the immutable promises of the God who cannot and does not lie (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29; Ps. 89:35; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18). Because believers are so convinced that the unseen realities grasped by faith are permanent and real, they walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 4:18; 5:7). ◀

Verse 2. Our ancestors, literally, “our elders,” refers to “the fathers” mentioned in Hebrews 1:1 and to “all these” in 11:39. In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), Abraham was the first person called an “elder,” not because of his age but because of his life of righteousness before God (Gen. 24:1). All the Old Testament “heroes of the faith” mentioned in Hebrews 11:4-38 had one thing in common—a faith God commended. **Won God’s approval** literally is “witness” or “getting a good report.” It is also used in verses 4,5, and 39. God approved of them and witnessed, or testified, to their true faith, as detailed in the Old Testament record. As such, they stand as examples worthy of imitation and emulation by all believers—with the implication that if we live our lives based on this kind of faith we too will receive divine commendation. Before we accepted Christ by faith, we could not have a good report. But now, we have become victors by receiving that good report through faith in Christ. **By it** refers to the kind of faith explained in verse 1.

Verse 3. Just as faith lays hold of what has not yet happened and convinces the believer of the reality of it (Heb. 11:7,8,20), so faith accepts the reality of the unseen and otherwise unprovable past. **The word of God** is powerfully creative. The formula “Then God said, ‘Let there be ...’ and it was so” occurs eight times (in various forms) in Genesis 1 (Gen. 1:3,6-7,9,11,14-15,20,24,26). The psalmist emphasized the same truth in Psalm 33:6,9. The apostle John expressed this thought as well in John 1:3.

2 ▶ What is seen was made from things that are not visible is said by some to refer to what is called *creatio ex nihilo*, or creation out of nothing. Many Bible students hold that these words negate the Greek philosophical idea common in first-century hellenistic Judaism that God used chaotic preexistent material to form the world as we know it (as some even have tried to argue based on Gen. 1:2). All creation came into being by God’s Word (John 1:1-3). ◀

Do we Christians believe God created the physical universe? Yes! Do we Christians believe God created the physical universe from nothing? Yes! Can we prove it? Since we were not there, how can we know for sure? The proof comes by faith. **Faith** gives reality to what we have not seen—whether those things of the future or of the past. This is a supremely important matter. Believers' knowledge (**we understand**) is a matter of spiritual perception gained through faith—a faith based on the written Word of God (Gen. 1:1–2:1). Faith does not stand by itself—this is not a blind faith—it is inseparable from God's revelation. In fact, this is the faith that responds to revelation.

The writer's use of *we* in **by faith we** calls attention to the readers' faith before he wrote of the faith of our ancestors. As believers, we too stand in a long line of continuity with those who have built their lives on unseen truth and reality. Faith leads us to trust and rely on God. Here we accept by faith creation out of nothing but God's spoken word. The writer obviously was referring to Genesis 1:1–2:1. God, who created everything by His spoken word, also has redeemed believers through Jesus Christ, God's ultimate promise fulfilled in the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4; Heb. 11:39–12:2). True faith acknowledges that God is both Creator and Redeemer.

Hebrews 11:4

4 By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was approved as a righteous man, because God approved his gifts, and even though he is dead, he still speaks through his faith.

Faith responds in worship to God.

Verse 4. Following the general statement in verse 2 that people in Old Testament times received God's approval based on their faith, the writer began in verse 4 a specific list of individuals. Each person is introduced with the words **by faith**.

3 ▶ **Abel** was the first person the writer mentioned. This verse recalls Genesis 4:3–5 when two brothers—Cain and Abel (the sons of Adam and Eve)—brought offerings to the Lord. Abel's offering was from his flocks; Cain's was produce from the land. That Abel's offering was a **better sacrifice** probably does not refer to what was presented or to the

DISCUSS: Question #2
(PSG, p. 49): **How can the creation around us fuel our faith in the unseen God?**

(Alternate: What compels you to have faith in God even though you've never seen Him?)

TRANSITION: "Having laid a foundation for what faith is, the writer of Hebrews then gave some specific examples from Scripture."

STUDY THE BIBLE

Hebrews 11:4



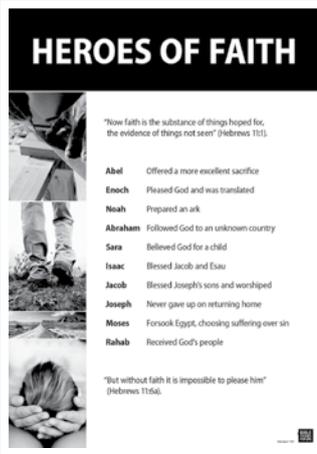
10 minutes

READ: Ask a volunteer to read Hebrews 11:4.

GUIDE: Refer group members to **PSG page 50**, to the examples of those who demonstrated faith.

These heroes of faith were people just like us who saw God working in their world and found ways—sometimes dramatic and courageous ways—to join God in His work.

LEADER PACK: Point to **Item 4: Heroes of Faith.** Read the elements of the poster aloud. Discuss the people listed on the poster and how their actions demonstrated their faith.



SUMMARIZE: Use **Bible Commentary 3** on pages 55-57 and information on **PSG page 50** to remind group members of the story of Cain and Abel.

The first example of faith comes from the life of Abel. Abel's story, recorded in Genesis 4:1-10, includes the unfortunate event when Cain killed his brother Abel. Why did Cain kill his brother in a jealous rage? God accepted Abel's offering, "But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect" (v. 5).

amount presented but to the worshiper's heart attitude, that is, not to the gift but to the giver. Three times in this verse it is stated that Abel acted **by faith** or **through his faith**. In verse 6, the writer made it clear that "without faith it is impossible to please God." In the account in Genesis, God told Cain, "If you do what is right, won't you be accepted?" God also warned Cain that "sin [was] crouching at the door" (Gen. 4:7).

But the focus in Hebrews 11 is not on Cain. It is on Abel, who by his faith **was approved as a righteous man**. How God showed His approval is not stated either in Genesis or here in Hebrews. However, many have assumed based on other customary biblical accounts that God sent fire down from heaven and consumed Abel's offering (compare Lev. 9:24; 1 Kings 18:38; 2 Chron. 7:1). Neither do the accounts indicate Abel's offering was by death and blood, as were the later Old Testament sacrificial offerings.

This verse brings together righteousness and faith. One cannot have the former without the latter—a truth emphasized in Habakkuk 2:4 (an Old Testament text the writer of Hebrews quoted in 10:38). Jesus Himself called Abel a righteous person (Matt. 23:35) and the apostle John also identified him as righteous (1 John 3:12). But be clear on this—Abel was not righteous in his own self. No, he was righteous because God declared him righteous because Abel had faith in God and obeyed Him.

Being a righteous man, being approved by God, and offering God a better sacrifice did not prevent Abel from being a victim of violence—in fact, it led to his being murdered by his jealous and unrighteous brother, Cain. That "my righteous one will live by faith" (Heb. 10:38) does not guarantee one will live! Jesus is the preeminent example of this as the supremely Righteous One who was put to death by the unrighteous (Acts 3:14-15). But that Abel was murdered by his brother does not change the fact that God **approved [Abel] as a righteous man** and God **approved his gifts**. This is what truly mattered. Such should be a lesson for us—as it has been for God's suffering righteous people through all time.

Although Abel is **dead, he still speaks through his faith**. The writer of Hebrews did not mean that Abel speaks from heaven, the abode of the righteous, or that he still speaks because his blood cried out from the ground to God (Gen. 4:10), or that like the blood of the martyrs under the altar in heaven it is crying out for God to act (Rev. 6:9-10). Rather, Abel still speaks to us through the pages of Scripture.

It is Abel's example that still speaks. His example shows us what it means to trust God and live with righteous integrity even in the face of hatred, violence, and death. Dead people are not silent. They do tell tales. Abel still witnesses to us: he calls us to emulate him and persevere. That Abel still speaks also reminds us that, while Abel is dead to life on earth, he is alive through God. Abel is the first example of those who focused their lives on the better country (Heb. 11:16). Abel's faith didn't end in disappointment. While Abel's life was cut short, how he expressed his faith in God in his life still teaches the whole world what faith is and does.

Abel's life of faith teaches us—right at the start of the list—that faith leads one to worship God. Abel's faith led him to bring a sacrifice that God approved. It pleased God. Abel's faith led him to be truly righteous, and Abel's faith offers us a true witness or testimony to the life that pleases God. Abel not only shows us that true faith leads us to worship God, it shows us there is a right way to worship the Lord that involves a proper heart attitude. Cain's actions show us what happens when one approaches God in the wrong way and the tragic consequences that this can have in one's life and the lives of those around that person. ◀

Hebrews 11:5-6

5 By faith Enoch was taken away, and so he did not experience death. He was not to be found because God took him away. For before he was taken away, he was approved as one who pleased God.

6 Now without faith it is impossible to please God, since the one who draws near to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

Faith responds with obedience that is pleasing to God.

4 ▶ Verse 5. Enoch is the second example of true faith. The account of his life is found in Genesis 5 (vv. 18-24), a chapter in which verse after verse ends with “then he died.” Except Enoch! Of him it says that after his 365 years, “Enoch walked with God; then he was not there because God took him” (v. 24). Walking with God implies fellowship, relationship, and obedience. Walking with God is said of Noah (6:9), of

DISCUSS: Question #3
(PSG, p. 51): **What's the difference between Cain's and Abel's sacrifices?**

(Alternate: What is the relationship between faith and genuine worship?)

TRANSITION: “The writer of Hebrews continued his list of heroes of faith in the next verses.”

STUDY THE BIBLE

Hebrews 11:5-6



15 minutes

READ: Read or ask a volunteer to read Hebrews 11:5-6.

GUIDE: Use **Bible Commentary 4** on this page and page 58 to describe Enoch and the remarkable way his earthly life ended.

GUIDE: Ask a volunteer to read the following paragraph from **PSG pages 51-52.**

But then there was Enoch (Gen. 5:21-24). Enoch was the father of Methuselah—the oldest person recorded in Scripture—and when Enoch was 365 years old, “then he was not there because God took him” (Gen. 5:24). He never died. He simply went from walking with God in this life to walking with God in eternity. That’s all we’re told. The writer of Hebrews wrote that Enoch’s faith was the key to this new reality. Enoch’s faith—his confidence in God’s future—opened the moment for God to simply bring Enoch into a new future without experiencing death because “he pleased God.”

DISCUSS: Question #4
(PSG, p. 52): **What characteristics describe a person who walks with God?**

Abraham (24:40), of Abraham and Isaac (48:15), and of Levi (Mal. 2:6). While the Hebrew text of Genesis 5:24 is translated as “Enoch walked with God,” the Greek text of the Septuagint is translated as “Enoch pleased God.”

Was taken away means Enoch did not experience death; he was directly translated, or transported, to heaven into the presence of God. This is emphasized three times in verse 5. The fact that Enoch **was not to be found**, a reference to Genesis 5:24, means people searched for him. In being taken up into heaven while still alive, Enoch—and later Elijah—provides us with a foreshadowing of what will happen to all living believers when Christ returns (1 Thess. 4:15-17).

But it was not only at the end of his 365 years that Enoch pleased God. No, **before he was taken away, he was approved.** How did Enoch please God throughout his life and thus gain God’s approval? It was by faith. Genesis 5 does not mention Enoch’s faith, but it does state two times that he “walked with God” (Gen. 5:22,24), implying his intimacy with God and his steadfast commitment to Him.

Enoch is mentioned only two other times in the New Testament—in the genealogy of Luke 3:37 and in Jude 14-15 as a prophet of judgment. However, he became prominent in later Jewish and rabbinic literature. ◀

Verse 6. From Enoch’s example, the writer of Hebrews drew a general principle and universal biblical truth: **without faith it is impossible to please God.** The term **impossible** recalls the author’s words in Hebrews 6:4. In both verses 5 and 6 of this account of Enoch, pleasing God is mentioned. To **please God** we must be persons of faith. Both Abel (Heb.11:4) and Enoch (v. 5) were approved by God because of their lives of faith (as different as they were from each other as individuals). If we are to please God and be approved by Him, we must be characterized by this kind of faith—which the writer described in Hebrews 11:1. This should be the goal of every believer’s life—to please God.

Notice that here in verse 6 the writer offered both the negative and positive sides to his declaration. Negatively, **without faith** pleasing God is impossible. Positively, one **must believe.** Belief is necessary, but not just belief in and of itself or mere wishful thinking. Faith must have an object—it is the object of faith that is important. The word **must** indicates a moral and logical necessity. Such belief includes the firm conviction that God **exists** and that He **rewards those who seek him.**

Verse 6 shows true faith has both a present and a future orientation: God **exists** and He **rewards**. Those who have true faith affirm God is personal and active on behalf of the faithful in the present, and they live in confidence that He will reward them in the future. True faith affirms the existence of the God who has spoken and acted throughout history (1:1-2). This is the invisible God. But that is not a problem; for remember, true faith believes in the existence of what cannot be seen (11:1)! Thus the writer does not offer proofs of God's existence.

True faith also believes this unseen God rewards those who seek Him. To **seek** God is not an expression about those who do not yet know God, as the term is sometimes used today in the expression about churches needing to be "seeker friendly." Rather, the expression was used in the Old Testament to describe those who rely on and trust God and His promises. The term emphasizes the singular determination to devote oneself to God and His service.¹ The **rewards** are not earthly and material but heavenly and eternal (10:34-36). God not only rewards, He is both the Rewarder and the reward itself! (See Gen. 15:1.) This is borne out in the text, which emphasizes not the reward but God Himself—God rewards those who seek Him.

The one who draws near to him, which is parallel to "those who seek him," is used in Hebrews to refer to believers who have a direct approach to God and an on-going relationship with Him (4:16; 7:25; 10:22; 12:22).² The expression was used of worship, but it is not limited only to those times of worship. It is comprehensive, referring to all times—a God-centered lifestyle, like that which Enoch had with God. **The one** means "anyone." For anyone to draw near to God, faith (belief)—the kind of faith Hebrews 11 describes—is the key. And this faith—the faith that responds with obedience—is pleasing to God. This is victorious faith! This type of faith in God makes believers victorious.

1. William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, vol. 47B in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 338.

2. Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 405.

GUIDE: Refer group members to this statement on **PSG**

page 53: Faith—confidence in who God is and what His coming kingdom has in store for His people—causes us to live our lives now the way we will live one day in heaven. A life of victory

- *A faith that pleases God makes us victorious.*
- *A faith that is confident God exists makes us victorious.*
- *A faith that knows God will reward our pursuit of Him makes us victorious.*

DISCUSS: Question #5

(PSG, p. 54): Why is faith necessary for pleasing God?

(Alternate: What kinds of "rewards" do we experience when we exercise faith?)

DO: Invite volunteers to share their responses to the activity on **PSG page 54: "Heroes of Faith."**

LIVE IT OUT

5 minutes

GUIDE: Emphasize **The Point:**
My faith in God makes me victorious.

REVIEW: Review **Live It Out** (PSG, p. 55; see text to the right). Encourage each group member to follow through this week with at least one of the applications.

WRAP IT UP

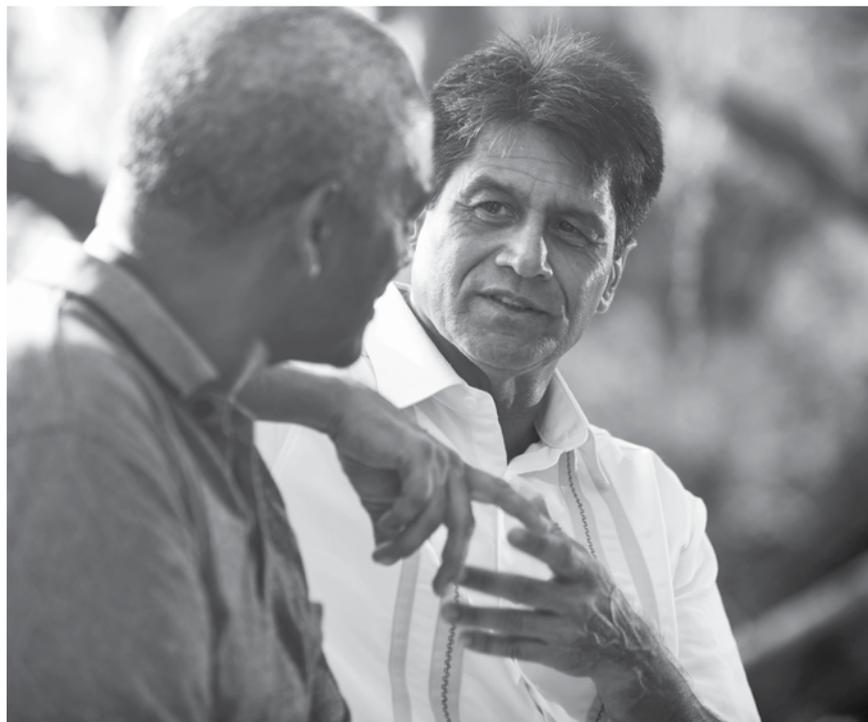
GUIDE: Emphasize that faith isn't just believing something without evidence; faith is confidence and trust in God.

PRAY: "Father, help us to display the kind of faith these heroes of faith did, knowing that You have already given us the victory."

LIVE IT OUT

How will you express faith this week?

- ▶ **Trust.** Trust Christ with your problems and your life. The One who created the entire universe can handle whatever you hand Him.
- ▶ **Read.** Read the Old Testament stories of the men and women mentioned in Hebrews 11. Read about their lives and find out how they expressed confident trust and faith in God. With each of their lives, ask yourself what you can personally learn from them.
- ▶ **Encourage.** Even as God uses the lives in Hebrews 11 to encourage us, be an encouragement to someone else. Encourage their faith and trust in Christ by telling them how you trusted Christ in a similar experience.



BIBLICAL
ILLUSTRATOR



Goats grazing in the ruins at Appaloosa. Abel offered a sacrifice from the flocks. Cain offered a sacrifice from his produce of the field.

Cain's trouble began when God accepted Abel's sacrifice from among his livestock, but He did not accept Cain's sacrifice from the fruit of his fields. Obviously something was wrong with Cain's motives in offering his sacrifice to God. Rather than make his heart right, Cain killed his brother. Because of his sin, God cursed the ground and condemned Cain to wander the earth.

The writer of Genesis left unspoken the precise reason for God's refusal of Cain's sacrifice.

The writer of Hebrews proposed that Abel's faith caused his sacrifice to please God, making his sacrifice more acceptable than Cain's. Cain's unrighteousness probably exposed his lack of faith.

Though Cain's contribution to modern society is small, he influenced Jewish and Christian literature by serving as a symbol for evil. New Testament writers mentioned Cain directly in three places. In the first, Hebrews 11:4, Cain appears only in contrast to Abel, the man of faith. In 1 John 3:12, the writer clearly used Cain as a symbol of evil or unrighteousness. Finally, in Jude 11, the writer also used Cain as a direct symbol of evil, charging those who moved away from faith with going "the way of Cain."

The excerpt above is from the article "Cain in the New Testament" (Winter 2001-02), which relates to this session. More *Biblical Illustrator* articles are available that relate to this session. See page 7 about *Biblical Illustrator*.

SHARING THE GOOD NEWS

Jesus has done everything needed to secure our salvation and eternal life in heaven. All that remains is for us to place our faith in Him.

Each week, make yourself available either before or after the session to speak privately with anyone in your group who wants to know more about becoming a Christian. See the article, "Leading Someone to the Greatest Decision of All," on page 2 for guidance in leading a person to Christ.

Remind group members that **page 2** in the **PSG** offers guidance in how to become a Christian. Encourage believers to consider using this article as they have opportunities to lead others to Christ.