

Flourishing in Graduate School *An Introduction for InterVarsity Staff*

flour-ish [flur-ish, fluhr-]

–verb (used without object)

1. to be in a vigorous state; thrive.
2. to be in one's prime; be at the height of excellence, influence.
3. to be successful; prosper.
4. to grow luxuriantly, or thrive in growth.

“And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ — to the glory and praise of God.” Philippians 1:9, 10

A BRIEF WORD OF OVERALL INTRODUCTION

It is often assumed that the primary way to serve graduate students in a small group setting is by providing the meatiest Bible study available, complete with Greek and Hebrew word studies and deep theological discussions around topics like infralapsarianism, vicarious atonement, and inaugurated eschatology. But don't be fooled. While thoughtful discourse may be the hook that draws them in, graduate students return for very different reasons.

Consider Paul's prayer for the Christians in Philippi (Philippians 1:9, 10). He wanted their knowledge and depth of insight to enhance their love, not the other way around. Make no mistake, biblical understanding is vital and indeed central to a mature Christian life, but it must never be permitted to be an end in itself. At times, graduate students are prone to read the Scriptures to get smarter. You must help them become more like Jesus. Paul suggests that our goal should be to cultivate the ability to “discern what is best” while becoming pure and blameless. He prayed that his readers would be “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ — to the glory and praise of God.” This will be more likely if we will hold out love instead of knowledge as our starting point and our goal.

I hope this comes as a great encouragement to you. While graduate students may be able to talk circles around you with regard to their various areas of expertise, you will bring something quite different to the table. You are there to help them see beyond the daily rigors of the academy. If you will provide an eternal perspective in the context of a loving community, they will be more likely to flourish during their time of graduate study and beyond.

This curriculum has been crafted in an effort to help you as you help graduate students flourish. With each text, you will find a brief introduction for you followed by several discussion questions you might use with your students. If graduate students hope to flourish, they will need to make several decisions along the way — decisions to obey, risk, rest, and serve. These decisions are far less daunting when the journey is shared. Flourishing calls for clarity with regard to culture, calling, work, and power. Such clarity is more accessible in the context of community. In-depth Bible study may be the initial attraction, but it is a loving community that keeps people coming back. I pray with Paul that as your graduate students grow in love that abounds in knowledge, they will grow into discerning, fruitful followers of Jesus Christ — to the glory and praise of God. For that is what flourishing in graduate school is all about.

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1. Introduction to “Consider the Soil”

In the first several weeks of a graduate student small group, it is particularly important to be mindful of ways to increase the comfort level for students. Otherwise it may be challenging to get the conversation to flow. Jesus’ parable of the four soils is a nice first text for a small group because it is so straightforward. Since Jesus does the exegesis for us, we are left with little room for error or more creative interpretations. As a result, students will likely feel more comfortable contributing to the discussion, which is crucial if you want them to return next week. The goal this week is to get them to come back!

In addition, this text provides space for personal reflection and serves as a helpful charge. Only one of the soils ever produces fruit. The other soils, though initially promising, get burned or choked out by the concerns of the world. There will be plenty of distraction along the way, and the increased workload may already seem overwhelming to some. It will be essential for the students to consider the various challenges they will almost certainly face. Matthew 13 provides an opportunity to begin talking through these concerns. It sets a helpful tone and calls the students to take their spiritual lives seriously.

2. Introduction to “Hold on for the Ridel”

John 15:1-8 serves as an important follow-up to Matthew 13. Whereas the parable of the soils suggests that growth is related to the quality of the soil, Jesus now rights the ship and reminds us that the Father is the real gardener. It is he who enables us to bear fruit. Our task is simply to hold fast to our Lord — to abide or remain. The fruit will come if we will not let go of the Lord. It is difficult to trust this truth in the face of so

many new and intimidating responsibilities, but in doing so the students will have the opportunity to show that they are his disciples.

There is, of course, a flip side to this, for the fruit on each branch brings glory to the gardener, not the branch itself. After all, it is his fruit to use as he sees fit. This is a powerful image and worthy of some reflection. There will be several opportunities in the coming weeks to consider how God might be glorified through the life and work of those in graduate school. For now, it's worth noting that the branch can take very little responsibility for its fruit. Some students will be feeling unworthy to be in their current position, as though they have somehow snuck in to their programs. Others, however, while not saying so, may be feeling rather smug for being so smart and capable. Both groups will need to adjust their thinking to some degree, and John 15 provides healthy doses of both encouragement and exhortation.

3. Introduction to "Choose to Be Here!"

While most students won't feel like exiles in the first month of grad school, it's safe to say that at some point in their program they will. (This is actually true for many of the lessons in this curriculum. The hope is that when the trials come, the foundation will have been laid effectively.) What is readily transferable from this text is the temptation to believe this phase of life will end more quickly than it will. The people of Israel thought their exile would be cut short, but Jeremiah assured them this was not so. Students, unless pressed, are unlikely to think of the university setting as home. After all, they just left a similar circumstance and they can see that they will eventually leave again. So why commit? This text charges all of us to settle in — fully present wherever we are.

4. Introduction to "Clarity Takes Time"

About a month into the semester, students may begin to feel overwhelmed by all that is on their plates. It isn't simply the workload. There is a higher degree of responsibility in every area of life. They are expected to make more of their own decisions: housing, insurance, finances, teaching as well as studying, research, relationships, food preparation... the list goes on. There is a sense in which rest has become impossible because there is always someone or something that requires their attention. As a result, the next several texts will address issues related to balance, rest, and setting priorities on time and energy.

In Mark 1, we see that even Jesus needed to take some "alone time." Was it to refuel or perhaps to refocus? What was he praying about? What motivated his departure from the larger community? These are all difficult questions to answer, but they will likely generate some helpful discussion. What we do know is that as a result of this time alone

with the Father, he gained some clarity about his own ministry, for he says he was there to preach. Of course, saying "yes" to preaching meant saying "no" to other aspects of his ministry. A difficult decision, no doubt, particularly when healing the crowds brought so much joy and gratitude. Nonetheless, it was his time in prayer and solitude that helped him know where to go and how to spend his time.

5. Introduction to "Trust & Obey (i.e Rest)!"

While last week's discussion centered around the importance of making space in one's schedule for periodic times of solitude, prayer, and rest with the Lord, this week's discussion is focused on God's invitation for us to take a more intentional day of weekly rest: a Sabbath. Sabbath-keeping, like tithing, will come naturally for some, particularly if they've been raised to do so. Others, however, will chafe at the idea. They will say they cannot afford "a day off." But the aphorism bears repeating, "You can get more accomplished in six days than in seven."

For the people of Israel, the daily provision of manna represented God's faithfulness and called them to trusting obedience. They could only collect what they needed for that day; any more would rot away. And yet, once a week this was not the case. On the day before the Sabbath, they were to collect a double portion and miraculously it remained edible the following day. God's provision and his desire for their rest were both undeniable. Indeed, he commanded them to rest. Somehow, many of us have set this commandment to the side. But the fact remains, even grad students have been called to rest for the glory of God. In the same way that God provided seven days of food in six servings, he will also make six days of work sufficient for the week. Students who practice the spiritual discipline of Sabbath-keeping will find nourishment through this act of faithfulness. They will experience more balance as they learn to trust God more deeply and their fruitfulness will serve as a testament to the faithfulness of God. They will soon discover that Sabbath-keeping will make their example inescapably evangelistic.

6. Introduction to "Trust & Obey (i.e. Risk)"

Last week, we considered how God uses our willingness to rest as a means of increasing our trust in him. Now we will begin to ask how our work might be used in the same way. After a long, unproductive night of work, Peter was likely tired and frustrated. Then a carpenter tells this fisherman how to do his job. Because Peter chose to obey Jesus, he learned two life-changing lessons: 1) Peter discovered that Jesus knows more about fishing than Peter does, and 2) he came to see that Jesus is able to transform an occupation into a vocation by making a fisherman a "fisher of men."

Once again, we see that when someone decides to trust and obey, their life is forever changed. Change frequently requires some degree of risk and therefore calls for a willingness to face various fears. Graduate students tend not to fail very often. They have chosen a path where success has been the norm. As a result, fears of failure, rejection, and embarrassment are often just under the surface for most grad students. These fears will hinder discipleship if left unattended. But a willingness to face them with the bold trust of Peter will result in a freedom seldom experienced — a quality that will not go unnoticed by classmates. Like Sabbath-keeping, it will be inevitably evangelistic.

7. Introduction to “Pick Your Battles”

The book of Daniel has long served as the go-to text for graduate student small groups because of the many obvious similarities between Babylon and the academy. Daniel and his friends were the cream of the crop, and Babylon was determined to teach them how to think, eat, and act like Babylonians. Although most of Israel’s young men were content to go along with the three-year enculturation process, Daniel resisted. Doing so came with obvious risks, but his wisdom and tact, in combination with God’s faithful provision, ultimately provided Daniel with an opportunity to serve faithfully at the highest level.

Daniel 1 stands as a helpful primer for graduate students. Because they will face many of the same obstacles, Daniel’s commitment in the face of adversity provides an important example. At times, students will be tempted to conform to the academy in unhealthy ways. They may think they have to “defile themselves with the royal food” in order to make a name for themselves. But Daniel’s faithful presence and humble commitment to God provides an alternative. He recognized that his ability to understand Babylonian culture was a gift from God, so when he was placed in a position of power, he used his influence to the glory of God. If we hope to “renew campuses,” students will have to learn to navigate the challenging waters of the academy. Some will want to get out of the water, while others will let the current take them wherever it goes; but we must teach them to swim like Daniel.

8. Introduction to: “Made for Community”

Background: Psalm 133 is part of a collection known as the Psalms of Ascent. It is likely these were sung as the Hebrew people made their way to Jerusalem for the various festivals each year. For some this journey would be long, arduous, and potentially dangerous. The travelers sang these songs together reminding one another of who God was, who they were, and what they believed to be true about God and his ways.

Though the Psalm is very short (it is only 3 verses), it has a lot to say about being the people of God. The NIV takes liberty with the Hebrew in verse one and uses the term

“God’s people.” The word is familial, a masculine plural noun found 628 times in the Hebrew Bible and most often translated “brother(s)”. Other versions have used the word “brethren”. The use of familial language in a Psalm sung by the Hebrews as they made their way to the festivals in Jerusalem suggests they saw their life together through the lens of family.

This quote from Eugene Peterson at the beginning of the study is from his book *Long Obedience in the Same Direction* which is his own study/commentary on the Psalms of Ascent.

“...God never makes private, secret salvation deals with people.
His relationships with us are personal, true: intimate yes; but private, no.”

The following is included toward the end of the study.

So the question is not, “Am I going to be a part of a community of faith?” but, “How am I going to live in this community of faith?”...The Bible knows nothing of a religion that is defined by what a person does inwardly in the privacy of thought or feeling, or apart from others on a lonely retreat. When Jesus was asked what the great commandment was, he said, “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all our soul, and with all your mind, ” and then immediately, before anyone could go off and make a private religion out of it, riveted it to another: “A second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Matthew 22:34-40).”

Graduate school, and academic life in general, can be very isolating and individualistic. Many graduate students are introverts and do not mind spending long days by themselves in the lab, cubical, or library. Add to this inclination toward being alone the demands on their time and the result is that most will need to be challenged to be intentional about being in relationship with others.

Reading the chapter in *Long Obedience in the Same Direction* would be excellent prep for leading this conversation.

9. Introduction to “Made for Work”

It’s easy to think of work in pejorative terms — as something we must do in order to make a living or pay the bills. Understood this way, it is difficult to conceive of work in Paradise. So it can come as quite a surprise to see that work was part of the Eden experience before the Fall. Work was not the result of sin, though it was certainly impacted by it. On the contrary, we see from Genesis 1:26-28 that work is part of what it means to be human, part of being made in the image of God.

In Ancient Near East cultures, when a king would conquer a land, he would leave a statue of himself in that land. It served to remind the people who was now in charge.

The statue was called the king's "image." God created humanity to be like himself. He placed us on earth to represent him, to reflect his character, and to honor him in how we care for his creation. Of course, most of our examples of power throughout history fail to measure up to the call, but this does not change the call. It only increases the need for godly representation in every area of life. Such is the responsibility placed on each of us: to do our part, to glorify God through our work, regardless of the field.

10. Introduction to: "See the Invisible"

The study of Mark 1 showed that through times of reflective prayer, Jesus was able to understand his calling and all that it entailed. Now, five chapters later, we see the ramifications of such clarity. Jesus is never in a hurry. He knows where he's going and when he needs to arrive. Even when others have differing agendas, Jesus is able to stay on track — his track.

Mark 5 is a text within a text, and Mark's decision to present the material in this fashion is instructive. There are many similarities to explore. Consider this: the woman has been bleeding for twelve years. For as long as the little girl has been alive, this woman has been restricted from worship, untouchable, and outcast because she has been unclean according to Jewish law. She reaches out to Jesus as a last resort, and to her great surprise, he reaches back to her. He heals her, hears her story, restores her to the community and even calls her daughter.

The graduate world is full of invisible people with profound needs. It is all too common to find that those with the greatest needs are unable or unwilling to ask for help. Some students in the group will be in need. Others will have classmates, lab mates, even neighbors who are longing to be noticed. It is far too easy to rush through our days, attending to our own issues or to the needs of the "important" people in our lives. However, in doing so we will likely overlook the invisible ones who need a friend or even a community. Pace and peace will uncover countless opportunities to offer care to people in need. Dallas Willard asks, "Didn't God give you quite enough time to do what he expects you to do?" and of course, he anticipates that we will answer "yes." Doing so will come far more easily when our expectations are aligned with God's.

11. Introduction to "Stay the Course"

There is something beautifully monotonous about Numbers 9:15-23. Over and over, we read the repeated phrase: "At the LORD's command they encamped, and at the Lord's command they set out." Depending on how you count, the author writes this line seven different ways. We all hope that God will lead us. We pray for direction. We pray for clarity of call. We pray for open doors. It is a wonderful feeling when God begins to move us. But what is interesting here is that staying is just as weighty as moving. Any

movement from the people of Israel was dependent upon an action from God. If God was not moving, the people stayed where they were. This, of course, is increasingly difficult for us today.

We have become a transient people. Many of us grow bored with our surroundings far too easily. We are quick to look for a change. How would our lives be different if we assumed we were to stay unless otherwise directed? This is not only relevant to geography. It is a lesson we would do well to apply to vocation and calling as well. As students proceed down the long road of their research and dissertations, they will be tempted to quit or change directions. They will grow tired, even bored of it all. They will start asking themselves why they ever entered their degree programs and will wonder if beginning was a mistake. It will be crucial in these times to encourage them to consider the "cloud." Is God moving now? Was he moving back in the beginning? When was there a sense of clarity to the call? Has anything changed? If so, they may need to move in some way. If not, as tempting as it may be to move on, they must stay instead. They must press on. May it be said of your students that "at the LORD's command they encamped, and at the LORD's command they set out."

12. Introduction to "Called to a Compelling Task "

Over the course of the past two months, we've considered a number of topics, all of which can contribute to a life of flourishing while in graduate school. Most of the discussions have been focused on the ways in which we can flourish. However, we will now direct our attention outward and consider how our flourishing can contribute to the flourishing of others.

At the end of the day, Christians will have to agree that the gospel is central to a life of true flourishing. Humans were designed for God but so many have no connection to him. As a result, their lives will always be less than complete. And yet, far too often, the gospel is kept quiet. We believe the message and we can attest to its impact on our lives, but still, many struggle to share it with others. Paul's life, of course, offers quite a different story. He struggled to keep the message to himself. He consistently placed himself in harm's way because the message had changed him so dramatically. He felt he had no recourse but to speak. Paul's faith was anything but private or personal, and this should be no different for us. If the death and resurrection of Jesus means anything, it means everything. If it's true, it has eternal consequences for all people.

As followers of Jesus, we have all been called to witness to the ways in which the gospel has impacted our lives, even during graduate school. This can be a tricky business. But Paul's model is instructive here, for he is wise to consider how he delivers the gospel to others. He is motivated by both the fear of God and the love of Christ and he speaks thoughtfully, as one in his "right mind." We are ambassadors,

messengers of reconciliation, “the ones through whom God is making his appeal to humanity.” Our flourishing will mean very little if in the end it does not lead to the flourishing of others.

Let us not forget that we are here because we want to see the lives of students and faculty transformed, campuses renewed, and world changers developed. If we hope for this to be a reality, we must teach our students to see the impact of the gospel and share it with others.

13. Introduction to “Empowered to Serve”

“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men,” writes 19th century English historian, writer, and politician Lord Acton. We all have stories to tell of abuses of power. Sometimes we’ve served as the perpetrator; at other times we have been the victim. Regardless, we are all too familiar with the ways in which power corrupts people. It is for this reason that the “so” of John 13:4 is so startling.

“Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet” (John 13:3-5).

With all the power in the universe and a full understanding of his own identity, Jesus submitted himself to the most humble of responsibilities. There was no one lower than the foot washer in that day. With no way to dispose of sewage but to throw it to the gutter, the streets of the first century were disgusting. You can imagine the state of one’s feet after a day of walking in those streets. The implications are clear. If Jesus was willing to serve in the most humble way, we can do no less. Indeed, he tells his disciples to follow his example. If he used all the power of God to serve in this fashion, we must use our power to serve as well. There is nothing too demeaning. Nothing below us. There can be nothing we won’t do. We have been called to serve as our Lord served.

14. Introduction to “Imagine the Possibilities”

Barry Moser’s [Valley of Dry Bones](#) is a dark and haunting image, a gruesome, hopeless portrayal of Ezekiel’s Valley. This approach is common in Moser’s work. He often draws from familiar Bible stories, but then directs our attention to aspects we might otherwise overlook. In this case, timing is everything. He could have drawn a valley of refreshed souls, at least with tendons reconnecting or skeletons beginning to stand. Instead, he chose the moment before life was restored. The sky is gray, there is no vegetation to speak of, bones are piled high, and even Ezekiel has not yet entered the scene.

Sometimes, Christians are tempted to jump over the cross to the empty tomb and in so doing, fail to grapple sufficiently with the magnitude of the miracle of the resurrection. In sin and death, we were in Ezekiel's Valley. In Christ, we have been brought from death to life. We can be grateful to Moser for drawing our attention to the desperation that makes salvation so powerful.

Like so much Old Testament prophecy, Ezekiel's words are rightly understood on a number of levels. Certainly, he was speaking to the exiles in Babylon, giving them hope that one day they would be restored. But no less appropriate is an application to the new life offered in Christ — the eternal restoration beyond the temporal, the eternal hope beyond the hope for freedom from physical captivity. What's more, it should draw our attention to the death that surrounds us today. It raises the question, "Can God cause the dry bones of the academy, of our friendships, of our families, to live?"

This text calls us to have a more robust vision of the power and desires of God. It calls us to see the dire need that surrounds us while also trusting that God works through his people to make things different. It calls our students to consider the legacy they would like to leave and the role they must play in its achievement. Perhaps, as in Moser's drawing, we are at the moment just prior to the in-breaking of life on campus. But first, like Ezekiel, someone must show up and believe that things can change. Just imagine the possibilities.