

# VBS Review 2020

Reviewer comments by Diane in black, by Marian in blue.

## **God's Wonder Lab: Jesus Does the Impossible**

*Concordia Publishing House (starter kit- \$169.99 includes digital content, starter kit digital only- \$149.99)*

\* First Impressions: I think a theme like this has been used by other companies in the last few years, so it will be interesting to see how CPH does with this lab/science setting.

\* Format: site-rotation (Opening and Closing plus sites for Storytelling, Bible Challenge, Games, Snacks, Crafts)

A science lab conducts experiments that explain how things are possible. In Jesus' ministry, He did things that are impossible. His greatest miracle of all was dying on the cross and rising from the dead for our salvation. At God's Wonder Lab, discover that Jesus does the impossible for us.

Key Bible Verse: He has done marvelous things! Psalm 98:1

\* Themes for each day:

1. Bible Story: Jesus First Miracle (John 2:1-12)
  - Take-Home Point: Jesus is God and cares about me!
  - Bible Memory Verse: You are the God who works wonders. (Psalm 77:14)
2. Bible Story: Jesus Walks on Water (Matthew 14:22-33)
  - Take-Home Point: Jesus is with me all the time!
  - Bible Memory Verse: The whole earth is full of His glory. (Isaiah 6:3)
3. Bible Story: Jesus Gives Life (Mark 5:21-43)
  - Take-Home Point: Jesus heals me!
  - Bible Memory Verse: I am fearfully and wonderfully made. (Psalm 139:14)
4. Bible Story: Jesus Appears to His Followers (Luke 24:36-49)
  - Take-Home Point: Jesus saves me and gives me life!
  - Bible Memory Verse: Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome. (Nehemiah 4:14)
5. Bible Story: Jesus Sends Paul (Acts 9:1-19)
  - Take-Home Point: Jesus calls me to tell about Him!
  - Bible Memory Verse: Let the heavens praise Your wonders, O LORD! (Psalm 89:5)

### General:

- This seems like a much more simplified kit than prior years. There seems to be few items included in the kit, but the kit still includes the digital content with all the necessary planning/implementing helps.
- They include a helpful PDF for adapting the VBS for Special Needs- with tips for use in all the rotation sites and in general.
- Overall this wasn't a bad kit, but I wasn't overly impressed with it either. I think they could have done much better in both the lessons and their presentations of science vs. miracles.
- Lessons overall (and lesson to lesson) lack a good rhythm, flow, and continuity; they feel disjointed. Sometimes it seems like the writer/editor thought, "Well, we have to do something here, so let's just drop this in" (without having the full context of the lesson or the lessons altogether).

- Though the lessons and focus overall are intended to be Word-centered and Christ-centered, they generally lack clear presentations of sin and our need of salvation. This is one of CPH's weakest kits in recent years.

### Director Guide

- P.3
  - "At God's Wonder Lab VBS, your children look into the Bible, God's Holy Word, and discover that Jesus does the impossible, giving us eternal life with Him! Jesus shows that He is God with amazing miracles. And He shows us that He loves us by using His power to do marvelous things on our behalf!"
  - "All VBS programs are not alike! So, what makes Concordia's VBS different? CPH's VBS stands out because of our approach to the Word of God. Every VBS lesson clearly distinguishes between God's Law and His Gospel. Children learn God's will for their lives and how the Law has been fulfilled for them in the person and work of Jesus Christ. At the center of every lesson is the Gospel: God's gracious gift of Jesus as their Savior."
- P. 8-10
  - They provide many ways to adjust the VBS to fit whatever kind of schedule they have, days, evenings, weekends, etc. "Feel free to make adjustments to meet your program's needs. Make sure to consider how different schedules might affect attendance."
- P. 18
  - Role of the Pastor: "As VBS Director, talk with your Pastor about your program. Ask your Pastor to share his perspective and how he will serve in VBS. If you have specific needs or concerns about VBS, share those with him. Provide him with information about VBS." I appreciate their encouragement for working with the Pastor during VBS.
- P. 20
  - VBS Mission Project – this would also be a great way of connecting to the AFLC mission fields if churches don't want to do it with Concordia Gospel Outreach.
- P.59-63 Closing Program/Celebration – summaries of daily biblical texts and teachings are helpful and Word-centered (reciting Scripture), but this closing program (which is often a great opportunity for evangelism since many churches use VBS as community outreach to unchurched families) misses a golden opportunity to proclaim a clear Gospel message, teaching about sin and our need of a Savior.

### Opening and Closing

- While this is a normal part of CPH's VBS openings, but I do still appreciate that they have the scripture passage read from an actual Bible instead of as a script or dramatization.
- Continual emphasis that "We're going to listen to the Bible story from God's Holy Word!" each day.
- Day 3 "Jesus heals us from our biggest problem: our sin-sickness. And He gives us eternal life with Him because He died and rose for us!"
- Seemed like there was a strong emphasis throughout that Jesus is God.
- L2, p.2, did mention in the prayer, "Forgive us when we don't trust you." This was one of the rare occurrences encouraging conviction or confession.

### Storytelling Leader Guide (Elementary K-5)

- They tend to over-dramatize the Bible story and I don't think it was really necessary- I think they would have enough for the kids to act out without the added bits.
- The Talk It Over section for each day was good, it had good questions and the ones not included on the leaflets (the last question in each section) would be very good for the kids on each of the days.
- Day 1 – with the 'drinking' culture in the US, leaders may want to be prepared for side comments or jokes from the kids (depending on age and background) regarding wine/alcohol and prepare in advance some positive ways of approaching the topic depending on the age group.
- Day 2 – I had an issue with the story telling on this day. The Bible passages only talk about the wind, there isn't mention of rain, lightning or thunder. It seems like they added elements to make it more dramatic. If it wouldn't have seemed like they put so much emphasis on this 'storm' aspect, it probably would be less of an issue for me.
- Day 1 – good emphasis at the beginning, setting a foundation for the week that we're going to "study stories from Scripture—God's true Word." Some comments make the tone of this lesson seem flippant toward the Bible text (e.g., shown in the words put into the Bible characters' mouths: "This is fun" and "Hey, Mr. Groom!"). Also, "Jesus cared enough about His friends that He did His first miracle to save them from being embarrassed about running out of something at a party" is a shallow application. "He shows His care and glory by doing miracles"—His miracles do show this, but this type of miracle would be very uncommon today. A closer connection to God's general and personal care and provision for His children would be helpful.
- General: The lessons give Law and Gospel Bible Points to Emphasize preceding each lesson. Some of these seem contrived or unclear (especially the Law points). There is not very good teaching overall of our sinful condition and need of God's grace. The word "sin" is used occasionally (e.g. "Thank you for dying and rising to save us from our sin!"), but the teaching on it is weak. The last lesson (L5, p.4) closes with "No one is 'too bad' for the power and grace of God." This is true. But then rather than dealing with confession or salvation, it makes a jump theologically to "We can't see Jesus, but He didn't stop caring for us when He went to heaven. He still calls us and gives us work to do in His name!" Lessons did not seem to aim to bring conviction of sin or invite confession of sin.
- Science lab: Some of the science applications and responses are awkward, unhelpful, or confusing (e.g. L3, p.3 The wonder lab scientists are supposed to put both fists in the air and shout "Jesus Heals Me! Jesus Heals Me! Jesus Does the Impossible!" An application is that "Jesus gives healing and life to all in need." Since the focus of the story is a miraculous physical healing, this is confusing and could be misleading.

### Early Childhood Leader Guide

- P. 15 – "Let's begin in the name of the Father (draw a line from your head to your heart) and of the Son (draw a line from shoulder to shoulder) and of the Holy Spirit (fold hands). Amen." It's interesting that they include the actions for the littles but not the older kids.
- P. 24 – they did a better job with the day two lesson than the older kids, refraining from adding elements beyond the wind and waves.
- Day 3 – p. 32 – in the activity section they say "Jesus loves us and sends people to help and heal us" they may want to be prepared for questions about loss from the children, about parents, grandparents, etc. who haven't gotten better.

- P. 37 – when they are teaching the take home point, I know they have been having the kids do different things each day when they repeat things, and I get that it makes it fun and adds the repetition- however, having them say ‘Jesus saves me and gives me life’ in a silly voice seems inappropriate.
- P. 38 – “sin is when we do something wrong.” They bring up sin, but it could have been done better, more clearly, so that it’s not just wrong actions.
- P.39 continues the sin application, but again only specifically deals with actions and does not mention our sinful nature, that we ARE sinners. This is a missed opportunity to clarify the meaning of sin and why we really need forgiveness.
- P. 40 – “God says that sinners can’t be in heaven. They just do not belong.” This make it sound like some sort of exclusive (and somewhat mean) club. It would benefit from more explanation of why sinners can’t be in heaven.
- Overall the content wasn’t bad- it just seemed like it could’ve been better, there was a lot of focus on Jesus as Savior, helper, healer etc. not a lot about sin and why we need a savior. It felt a little fluffy.
- P.45 - “Saul, don’t hurt and scare My people. You will be blind for three days. Then I will tell you how to change.” I realize that they are simplifying and paraphrasing (which I don’t think is actually necessary here) but I don’t see why it was necessary to also change it to the people Paul was persecuting rather than Jesus himself.

#### Music Leader Guide:

- “The songs of God’s Wonder Lab VBS share the message of Jesus, the Son of God, who does the impossible by dying and rising to save us. That wonderful news is summed up in the theme Bible verse, “He has done marvelous things!” (Psalm 98:1).”
- “Want to use hymns? Some churches choose to use hymns in VBS. In addition to the two hymns on the Music CD, we’ve included a list of hymn suggestions for each day on page 6.” I appreciate that they include traditional hymn suggestion that churches can use.
- Content seems a bit thin on songs like “Let’s Have a Party”, though others like ‘Come What May’ seem great.

#### **Rainforest Explorers: Jesus Leads the Way (2020 used again)**

*Concordia Publishing House (starter kit- \$169.99, starter kit digital only- \$149.99)*

\* First Impressions: seems like it could be fun and engaging based on the theme video.

\* Format: site-rotation (Opening and Closing plus sites for Storytelling, Bible Challenge, Games, Snacks, Crafts)

\* Themes for each day:

1. God Rescues Noah (Genesis 6:17-22; 8)
  - God keeps His promises.
  - How precious is Your steadfast love, O God! Psalm 36:7
2. God Gives the Commandments (Exodus 19:18-20; 20:1-21)
  - My loving God gives direction.
  - You shall be My treasured possession. Exodus 19:5
3. Jesus Calls His Disciples (Matthew 4:18-22; 9:9-13)
  - Jesus is with me.
  - You will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me. Matthew 19:21
4. Jesus Heals Ten Lepers (Matthew 4:18-22; 9:9-19)
  - Jesus is full of healing.

- But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. 2 Corinthians 4:7
5. Jesus Visits His Disciples (John 21:1-14)
- Jesus helps me share His Good News.
  - But lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven. Matthew 6:20

#### General:

- Key Theme: Jesus Leads the Way
- Key Bible Verse: “Oh, the depth of the riches... of God!” Romans 11:33
- Included a Director USB again, which included video files, artwork, PowerPoint Presentations, Site Leader Materials, and Registration and Planning Materials.
- Seems to be a good, strong emphasis on Scripture and using Scripture throughout the various rotation sites.

#### Director Guide

- P. 3- “At Rainforest Explorers VBS, your children look into the Bible, God’s Holy Word, and discover that Jesus leads the way to the treasure of eternal life with Him!”
- P. 3- “All VBS programs are not alike! So, what makes Concordia’s Rainforest Explorers VBS different? CPH’s VBS stands out because of our approach to the Word of God. Every VBS lesson clearly distinguishes between God’s Law and His Gospel. Children learn God’s will for their lives and how the Law has been fulfilled for them in the person and work of Jesus Christ. At the center of every lesson is the Gospel: God’s gracious gift of Jesus as their Savior.”
- P.7-11- include a lot of ways to show the flexibility of how this VBS can be used.
- P. 12-21- Like usual, they have a lot of good planning info here for the director.
- P. 39- “God’s saving Word is the focus of this site. The goals of this site are to learn the Bible Memory Verse through song and to connect that Bible Memory Verse to the Bible story, Take-Home Point, and our lives. The Holy Spirit will have a powerful effect through God’s Word on the children in your VBS!”
- Contains all the normal training, safety, promotion, and planning tools.
- P. 62- “Invite members of your outreach or assimilation committee to attend so they can make important contacts with newcomers and interested families.” This is a good way to encourage/practice hospitality to visitors in church during VBS.
- P.5 Good Law/Gospel connections. Day 2 is especially good, explaining how God’s gift of the Ten Commandments instructed the Israelites (and us) how to live as God’s people (Gospel-motivated) rather than making the Ten Commandments a means of earning favor with God or making God happy with us (law-motivated, as is often portrayed in other curriculum).
- P.6 helpful adaptation for a One-Day VBS or Weekend VBS.
- P.12 creative ideas for and benefits of encouraging youth to serve as VBS volunteers.
- P.14-17 detailed planning calendar for organizing and preparing for VBS.
- P.46-454 extensive ideas and helps for recruiting and training volunteers.
- P.52 in the training section regarding questions to ask as we study the Bible, one phrase could be misunderstood: “How does the Bible story show me how God loves and saves me, now and forever?” Out of context, this could be perceived as a Baptist view of “eternal security” (now and forever), that one cannot fall away from faith, though that is not the intent and is not consistent with Lutheran theology.
- P.60 provides an online registration tool.

- P.67 again good emphasis in Lesson 2 on the Commandments: “God...gives direction for our daily lives as His people! The Ten Commandments are God’s gift to us. They show us how to love God and how to love one another.” (We do not by nature know how to love God.) However, they do miss an excellent opportunity for confession, skipping from “We sin. Jesus loves us so much, He paid for that sin!” to “In Jesus, we are forgiven.” A simple sentence like, “We can confess our sin, and Jesus will forgive us” could be inserted to make it stronger.

#### Pastor’s Overview

- Provides “practical ways you can support, encourage, and equip God’s people as they share the Gospel in VBS ministry.”
- “Lead and encourage your VBS Leaders to choose curriculum with careful consideration of its doctrinal content. In Rainforest Explorers VBS, every lesson clearly distinguishes between God’s Law and His Gospel... At the center of every lesson is the Gospel: God’s gracious gift of Jesus as the Savior from sin, death, and the devil.”
- “Request lists of visiting kids and families, and reach out to them with a **personal** invitation to attend worship, midweek services, and/or seasonal events.” I think the personal aspect of this type of hospitality is vital to any actual success in bringing in new members from VBS, and is important to emphasize!

#### Opening and Closing

“We’re going to listen to the Bible Story from God’s Holy Word!... (Hold up a Bible as you speak). Good way of connecting a visual of an actual Bible and reading the actual text. CPH usually does well in emphasizing the importance of Scripture.

- The opening/closing videos were informative and interesting, and it was refreshing that they didn’t go for all the jokes they usually do, though it would have had a better balance if Nick and Megan switched being the ones explaining things each day. It seemed like Nick was only there for Megan to talk at. If churches have a team or volunteers to act out the video scripts that could be done with better balance.
- Day 2 closing – “We sin. Jesus loves us so much, he paid for that sin! In Jesus, we are forgiven!”
- “Opening and Closing is where the whole group of VBS kids meets to begin and end their VBS adventure by focusing on our God and His Word.”
- The opening Invocation every day, “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen” clearly proclaims belief in the Trinity and is important language for children to hear.
- L2 good confession and thanksgiving focus in opening and closing: “Forgive me when I don’t follow your way. Thank you for forgiving me when I disobey.” And “Forgive us when we don’t love you/or others. Thank You for Jesus, who loves and forgives us.” Also teaches praying in the name of Jesus: “In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.”
- Every day emphasizes that “We’re going to listen to the Bible story from God’s Holy Word!” etc. upholding the authority of God’s Word.

#### Storytelling Leader Guide (Elementary K-5)

- “The kids are actively involved as they read, see, and hear God’s Word as the five Bible accounts are presented at every site.”
- Day 1
  - Each day includes the points to emphasize the Law, Gospel, and how Jesus leads the way.



- “He leads us to His gifts of forgiveness and life in His Word and Sacraments.”
  - “Even when the difficult situations we are in are due to our own sins or bad choices, God is faithful to us. If we ask for His forgiveness and help, God will give it.”
  - “When God saw that only one person and his family were still faithful...” They mentioned this a couple times and it introduces a bit of an assumption as the passage doesn’t say if Noah’s family was righteous and faithful, just that Noah was.
  - I think there could have been a better sin/salvation message for this day.
- Day 2
  - They do better with the sin/salvation message today. “When I sin, does God still love me? Yes! God loves me so much, He sent Jesus, His Son. Jesus never sinned. He never broke the Commandments. Jesus paid for my sin on the cross and rose again. Because of Jesus, I’m forgiven!”
  - I think there’s a lot of room in the Talk It Over section, to add more questions pertaining to the ten commandments, letting the kids come up with questions, using some from the catechism, etc.
- Day 3
  - “Jesus knew them. He knew they weren’t all perfect people. They were sinful and made bad choices sometimes, just like we do. But Jesus wants everyone to follow Him! Jesus taught those men, who become His disciples, about God the Father, His directions for living, and His love.”
- It seems like for most of the days they are careful to talk about both being sinful and making bad choices, I appreciate that that phrasing draws a distinction between the two to avoid sin being regarded merely as wrong actions.
- Overall strong focus on teaching the narrative of the actual Bible story. Students are hearing and learning Scripture. Some of the dominant teachings are: God keeps His promises, if we ask for God’s forgiveness and help He will give it, look to God for help and guidance, “God was giving His people rules so they knew how to live as His loved people,” gratefulness for God’s gifts, contentment, sharing God’s love and Jesus with others.
- L4 Jesus Heals Ten Lepers – good emphasis that God is merciful and offers healing to all people through Jesus’ death and resurrection, no matter what their circumstances. Good emphasis that God is powerful and full of mercy and grace and that we can pray to God for (physical) healing for ourselves and others. But there are a couple of issues with this lesson. 1. The lesson seems to nearly skip over spiritual healing, the need for hearts to be cleansed from sin, and the declaration of Jesus, “Your faith has made you well” [saved you] in v.19. 2. The lesson mostly deals with physical healing and skews biblical teaching on healing (*almost* to the extent of prosperity gospel—if you have enough faith, you will be healed). The lesson misses an important opportunity to acknowledge the reality that God does not always choose to heal us physically, but He can still be glorified through our suffering or disease (theology of the cross). Perhaps they were trying to keep the lesson simpler, but suffering is a difficult reality (it does mention that all people have hurts, etc., because of sin in the world), and we wouldn’t want to give the impression that God always heals us physically when we pray (theology of glory).
- L5 Gospel clarity: “Our sin separates us from God, but, because of His great love and mercy, God sent Jesus to pay the price for our sin. Jesus died on the cross and rose again so that we can be forgiven. If, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we believe Jesus is our Savior, we can one day go to heaven and live with God forever. That is good news worth

more than any treasure.” Clear presentation for believers and unbelievers, Gospel call to believe in Jesus.

- Insert page: Glad they are providing Early Elementary and Elementary leaflets (in addition to Early Childhood leaflets) for children. Good explanation of the value of leaflets: “VBS kids go home with God’s Word in their hearts and in their hands!” Leaflets are important for learning reinforcement and to encourage spiritual life and growth in the home. I firmly believe something of spiritual significance should be sent home with students EVERY day. Some students may only be able to come one or two days, and some kids come from non-Christian homes, but if a leaflet or a tract or activity page with Scripture and biblical truth are sent home, the Word of God has broader opportunity to work! Not sending leaflets or other resources home with students misses a tremendous opportunity for the Gospel.

#### Early Childhood Leader Guide

- Includes daily devos for the leaders like they usually do.
- P. 8 Lessons include 3 learning areas – “Make It provides activities for the children to use small muscles to explore items that relate to Bible story concepts. Try It Out provides activities so the children can better understand the lesson concepts. Act It Out provides activities so the children can interact with one another and role-play.”
- Day 1 opening p. 17- after the prayer “Those special words help us remember our Baptism. They help us remember that God is always with us.” I like that this is included.
- P. 17- they are doing the candle lighting again, which is good, but I still think it would be better to light prior to the actual Bible story after all the song/activities are done.
- Day 1 – like day 1 for the older kids – lacks the Jesus/cross connection that could have been made.
- In general, the material for the younger kids could be more clarifying that sin isn’t just wrong actions, I think the info for the older kids did better, but I think this can still be made clearer for the younger children too.
- P. 40- “Jesus also calls you in Baptism and by His Word.”
- P. 52- For the learning transition activity, I think it would be better to use toy prescription bottles or maybe old film containers and such to avoid the kids thinking those are normal toys and don’t try to play with any at home.
- I think the skits do a good job of bookending the main points for the children.
- I like that they emphasize taking the leaflets home and doing them with family each day.
- P.61 Strong historical point: Jesus’ death and resurrection is the center of ALL history. Also emphasizes “this is true for all who are Christians.” That is, Jesus’ death and resurrection is the center of MY history (baptism, forgiveness of sins, made me His child, eternal life, resurrection).
- P.61 and throughout, missional: brings out importance of sharing the good news of Jesus with others, that Jesus died for all, and to serve our neighbors in love.
- Primary focus throughout is teaching the Word and teaching Jesus. The bulk of the lesson is direct Bible teaching.

#### Bible Challenge Leader Guide

- “God’s precious Word is the focus of this site, where our goals are to explore and learn the Bible...The Holy Spirit will have a powerful effect on the children in your VBS as they learn about God through His Word.”
- P. 4- “When we look at His Word, we can see that we are sinners. We can see that we have a Savior, Jesus!”



- P.4- “God washed the earth with a flood. He washed away our sins through Jesus in the waters of Baptism. He made us new! His steadfast love is ours forever!” This is a good tie in to Baptism. They could incorporate the 1 Peter 3 verses to bring in Scripture.
- P. 6- “God made a way! He sent Jesus to live a perfect life. Then Jesus died to pay for the sins of God’s people... Jesus died and rose for you too!”
- I think the combining of the notebooks for lesson three is a great visual.
- Some good statements about what God does for us: L4 “Thank You for giving me faith to believe in You. Thank You for the promise of eternal life.” L5 “There is one thing we did not find—Jesus! That’s right—we didn’t find Jesus, because He has found us! We were lost in sin. We could never find our way to the treasure. But Jesus, our Treasure, has found us!” [Aside: the writer of this curriculum uses excessive exclamation marks, to the extent that they eventually lose their impact. An occasional one would be more meaningful and impactful.]

#### Music Leader Guide:

- The music cd and video dvd are in the back of the book, but they are also able to be downloaded directly to a computer, which some churches will appreciate.
- “Make VBS music work for your church! A variety of songs and styles are provided for your choice, including original theme songs and hymns.”
- P. 6 – Provide hymn suggestions for each day.
- The songs seem like typical VBS songs, plenty of actions for the kids to join in, and while the song *Come and Follow* is a bit sparse on content, the rest of the songs seem to have decent lyrics.
- I appreciate the variety provided as options to choose from, both new and old songs and hymns. CPH lists two hymns with rich spiritual content for each day, which is excellent. But as is often the case with most VBS kits, much of the modern music provided is simply not good, well-written music, even if the lyrics are accurate. In my opinion, it would be better to draw on a wealth of good, well-written hymns and songs (both old and new) every year rather than trying to create something for the sake of novelty that is not well-written. The music is often contrived and awkward or lyrics do not fit with the music. At least one of the songs in this kit contains lyrics that are not worthy of the content we are singing about: p.26-27, “Come on let’s move; Get in the groove” as well as “hop, hop, hop” and “twist and shout.” What does this have to do with the eternal good news of Jesus mentioned in the same song? It seems to make a mockery of it. P.16-17 example of contrived lyric: “Jesus is our priceless treasure [good]; He is all---to ev’ryone.” What does it mean that He is all to everyone? He paid the price for all, yes, but not all receive Him, many reject Him. It seems the writer was trying to stretch something to fit and rhyme with the next line that ends with “won.” There is plenty of excellent music in this VBS, but recommend skipping these two songs.

#### Crafts:

- All the crafts seem simple and it would be easy to pick up things at the dollar store to go with them instead of spending more to buy specific glitter/yarn/beads etc.

#### Leaflets:

Broken up in to 3 different groups, good presentations (age appropriate) of the daily lessons in each:

- Early Elementary Leaflets
- Elementary Leaflets

- I like that, even though there is a story format of the bible lesson included, the kids are supposed to use their bibles to look up the answers for the activity.
- Early Childhood Leaflets and Stickers (ages: 3-5)

### **Destination Dig: Unearthing the Truth About Jesus**

*Lifeway (Preschool Starter Kit- \$99.99, Kids Starter Kit- \$99.99, Multi-Age Starter kit- \$99.99. All three are also available as digital kits- \$129.99 each)*

\* First Impressions:

\* Format: site-rotation (Opening and Closing plus sites for Storytelling, Bible Challenge, Games, Snacks, Crafts)

VBS 2021 is headed to present-day Israel where discovery awaits at Destination Dig. Kids will unearth more than dirt as they dig up exciting evidence that proves biblical events were not just stories. As junior archaeologists, kids will explore real-life archaeological finds that have helped to uncover the truth about Jesus! Along the way, they'll discover the truth of Jeremiah 29:13, that God reveals Himself to us when we seek and search for Him with all our hearts.

Key Bible Verse: Jeremiah 29:13

\* Themes for each day:

1. Truth: Jesus Came as God Promised

- Bible Story Title: Jesus Was Born (Isaiah 7:14; Micah 5:2; Matthew 1:15-2:6)
- Today's Point: Jesus is the Savior God promised.
- Bonus Verse: Isaiah 9:6a
- Artifact: pottery jars holding Qumran scrolls

2. Truth: Jesus Demonstrated God's Power

- Bible Story Title: Jesus Healed a Blind Man (Psalm 146:8; Isaiah 35:5-6a; John 9:1-41)
- Today's Point: Jesus has the power God promised.
- Bonus Verse: John 9:33
- Artifact: Pool of Siloam

3. Truth: Jesus Was Betrayed and Rejected

- Bible Story Title: Jesus Experienced Betrayal and Rejection (Psalm 41:9; Isaiah 53:3,7; John 13; 18:1-19:16)
- Today's Point: Jesus knew what would happen and still followed God's plan.
- Bonus Verse: Matthew 20:28
- Artifact: Caiaphas' steps

4. Truth: Jesus Died and Rose Again

- Bible Story Title: Jesus Is Alive (Isaiah 53:5,9-11; John 19:17-20:18)
- Today's Point: Jesus fulfilled God's plan to be our Savior.
- Bonus Verse: John 11:25
- Artifact: Grave stone (rolling stone)

5. Truth: The Bible Is True

- Bible Story Title: Philip Told the Good News (Isaiah 53:7-8; Acts 8:26-40)
- Today's Point: The Bible is true and helps us tell others about Jesus.
- Bonus Verse: Romans 1:16
- Artifact: Qumran Scrolls

### General:

- With so many kits and pieces that go with the kits this might be overwhelming for some churches.
- There is a focus, in places, on the response to the salvation message (decision theology), though I think it can still be worked around.
- There seems to be so many pieces of material to sift through- it is very confusing.
- I do really enjoy the theme, but I think in general the amount of materials is confusing and while the content wasn't bad, I think it could have been better.

### Administrative Guide

- Includes a CD-ROM so things can be accessed digitally- helpful, but standard for most kits nowadays.
- The first page gives a quick 6 step guide for VBS director's that I think would be helpful for someone to start figuring out what they need to do.
  - Step 1 – P.4-10: “Know Your Purpose Theme, and Bible Content”
    - I do like that the first thing they ask on p.4 is “why VBS matters and what you hope to accomplish by offering VBS at your church.” It gives a great way of focusing the purpose for the church (outreach, evangelism, or growth for those currently attending the church)
    - “Be sure you do not overshadow the importance of the biblical content with the theme.” I think this happens with most VBSs to some extent so having a reminder here is also good.
    - The ‘Why VBS’ section on p.5 includes some good distinctives: gospel-centered, all ages, equips parents, etc.
    - P.8-9 have curriculum highlights for the various age groups
  - Step 2 – P.11-30: Planning pages – include many helpful forms/charts/schedules/rotations/etc. for the director.
  - Step 3 – P.31-40 – training helps, also p.40 includes a ‘transition from VBS to Sunday School’ page to encourage continued attendance.
  - Step 4 – P.41-44: Promotional and publicizing ideas
  - Step 5 – P.45-48: registration
  - Step 6 – P.49-56: Continue the Connection- follow up tips. Include some good ideas to try and help plug in new families and kids to the church after VBS.

### Decorating Made Easy

- Includes a DVD-ROM
- Has a lot of great ideas for the décor

### Sample Adult Leader Guide: (for Adult VBS)

- Start with God's Plan of Salvation
  - References the need for ‘believer's baptism’
- “At Destination Dig, adults will discover real-life archaeological finds that have helped to uncover the truth about Jesus. Stories from the Bible will leap off the pages as adults explore where Jesus walked and examine artifacts that bring the world of the Bible to life. Adults will study tangible pieces of the past to learn the truth about who Jesus is and why He came. Along the way they'll discover the truth of Jeremiah 29:13 that God reveals Himself to us when we seek and search for Him with all our hearts.”
- I'm guessing they are intending this more so for outreach and new believers than for believers already in church, as it seemed more like a youth lesson than an adult lesson.

- P. 11-12 – these sections seem a bit juvenile. Not that there is anything wrong with them, but I think they will be off-putting to some adults.
- I do really like the idea of having an adult study component to VBS, however, this just seemed to miss the mark.

#### Sample Worship Rally Guide:

- P. 4- “the gospel will also be presented throughout the week in Bible Study classes, as every single day focus on having a relationship with Jesus.” I like that they state that this is a focus every day.
  - “you may choose to dismiss younger children before a time of focused evangelistic emphasis...” I dislike that they suggest simply excluding the younger children from hearing the gospel. This seems to be an ‘age of accountability’ view, meaning the little children don’t need to hear the gospel per se.
- P. 5 – While still solidly in the ‘decision’ camp, this does provide some helpful advice, such as things to be aware of like children doing things for praise or approval, or to follow along with their friends.
- P. 9 – I find their inclusion of all the pledges interesting, I also don’t think I’ve ever heard of a pledge to the Bible. Though, if they wanted a statement or profession of something, I think focusing on a creed would be better.

#### Sample 3s-Pre-K Leader Guide:

- P. 9 – “You will notice that each day’s Scripture passages include both Old and New Testament sections. We want learners to discover that there is a solid connection between what God promised in the Old Testament, what Jesus fulfilled in the New Testament, and what we can see today as evidence that it is all true.” I like the emphasis on connecting the OT and NT.
- P. 11 – In the ‘Tell the Bible Story’ section, they only focus on Joseph believing the angel that Mary would have a baby. I realize the passage they are using is from Matthew, but I think it would strengthen the point they are trying to make, as well as provide a little bit more content to the Bible story time to include the passage from Luke about Mary believing the angel as well? If not for the little kids, then at least for the older ones.
- There seems to be a lot of repetition that Jesus is God’s son that was sent and a part of God’s plan, but in the lesson, they don’t say why there was a plan, and why we needed God to send Jesus. Perhaps since they suggest a specific gospel presentation they are thinking it will be covered there, or that since these are younger children they don’t need that included? I think it’s a missed opportunity in the lesson though to provide an actual gospel message.

#### Multi-Age Preschool Bible Study Leader Guide

- Front Cover: “Sharing the Gospel with Parents” – This might be indicative of the rest of the pack, gearing any gospel to parents and adults rather than the children.
- This is different than the sample provided.
- There are a lot of activities for each lesson, which provide a wide variety of ways to emphasize the Point for each day.
- No gospel message in the lessons. I don’t know that I saw any parts in the lesson that would allow the kids to understand exactly why the Good News, was so good.

#### Sample Grades 3-4 Bible Study Leader Guide:

- Leader content seems very similar to the one for the little kids.

- P. 11 - #7 & 8 – Here they at least ask the question about why we need Jesus, but they don't really give much of an explanation of what sin is- it feels very superficial. They did include a suggestion as this being a spot to share the Gospel, but it feel like it's more of an add on if time type of thing rather than being an actual focus in the lesson.
- P. 14 – in the last activity option they provide a little more content on why Jesus was sent “Jesus came because we are sinners. We are stained with sin just like out dirty pennies, but Jesus came for us, to give us His perfect life...” however they still don't give a real explanation of what sin is and why we are sinners. And as an optional activity, there's no guarantee that they would be doing this in their lesson time.

### Multi-Age Kids Bible Study Leader Guide

- Includes all the getting started tips and guides for the teacher.
- This is not the same leader guide that was provided as a sample, there must be a separate one for that specific grade level- there seem to be a lot of ‘things’ needed for this VBS, but unlike other kits, the extra ‘things’ aren't crafts or miscellaneous but actual needed leader content.
- P. 8 “Open your Bible to Matthew 2.” Except it doesn't appear to have them read from the Bible- it looks like you then read the ‘story’ they have in the guide rather than the verses. I dislike using the Bible as a prop in this way, there's no reason to not simply read the actual verses.
- P. 20 – “Jesus took what was before them and instituted a new ordinance...” views the Lord's Supper as a practice that demonstrates faith rather than a Means of Grace.
- P. 31 “Once you understand these facts about God's plan for salvation, you can respond...” This limits salvation to only those who can understand- they also refer to Destination Decision cards to give the kids- the decision theology is coming through more here.
- General: The core Bible stories are good overall (included on the back of the visual lesson poster and in the leader guide), and the goal of connecting Old Testament prophecies with New Testament fulfillments is very good. Why are the Review Questions and Discussion Questions (on the back of the visual lesson poster) NOT included in the leader guide? This review and discussion should be a significant focus of the teaching session and will easily be overlooked and skipped if not included in the leader guide. The leader guide does not even *refer* to the questions to direct the leader to using them. The leader guide should focus more on the development of this discussion with further guidance to truly teach and reinforce the Bible text. Without this teaching portion, the lesson becomes quite empty with mostly “activities.” Also, on the back of the visual lesson poster, there are only answers provided for the Review Questions; there are no suggested answers or guidance provided for the Discussion Questions on the posters or in the TM. Many teachers may not know how to answer these questions or how to guide discussion without some assistance.
- The healing of the blind man is a perfect lesson to talk about “faith.” But the leader guide does not address it at all. The story includes the line, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?” and the man's response “I believe, Lord!” But there is no application of this in the lesson and no encouragement to talk about it. Very important missed opportunity!
- The leader guide provides a helpful option of two extra activity ideas for younger kids and two extra for older kids so that churches can adapt according to their needs.
- The lessons provide activity options labeled for both “younger” and “older” kids, but there really is little to *challenge* an older child level, both cognitively and in the activities which should be intended for reinforcement and for building upon Bible truths.

- It would be beneficial to provide more encouragement for *reading* the Bible. Help students learn how to use their Bibles. For younger students, the teacher could read the Bible text; for older students, they could read it. L3 does suggest three different verses to read in that lesson, but they do not read the core Bible text. Students do memorize a Bible verse in each lesson, which is good.
- L3 Jesus was Betrayed and Rejected really does not apply the Bible text; it does not answer the question, *So what? So what if Jesus was betrayed and rejected?* The TM (p.24) mentions that “Jesus followed God’s plan because He loves you and wants everyone to be saved from the penalty of sin.” This is true, but without going further, it sounds like universalism—that everyone will be saved. There is no conversation about sin and our need of a Savior and no encouragement for confession of sin, though the lesson sets it up for it. (It would have been easy to add another question or two to the back of the poster or a couple of sentences in the TM for clearer teaching.) Teachers should be encouraged to deepen this conversation and possibly include more Scripture about sin and confession and salvation.
- L4 has a stronger Gospel focus in the “Live It” section encouraging students to admit their sin, believe in Jesus, accept His forgiveness, and confess their faith to others. It would be good to have a stronger Gospel focus in every lesson.
- L5 does remind kids that “the most important truth revealed in the Bible is that Jesus loves them and they can trust Him as Savior and Lord” and invites children to talk to the teacher privately about becoming a Christian. A more thorough Gospel presentation and conversation on the last day of VBS would be a good idea.

#### Multi-Age Kids Bible Study Leader Pack

- The visual posters with lesson illustrations, maps, and charts are beautiful and well done for classroom use.
- The flashcards seem like they’d be really great to use, but I could see them being used as a standalone without the Leader Guide, which means the kids lose any gospel presentation content which makes the stories a bit more superficial. The lessons themselves don’t have any real explanation as to why Jesus needed to come.
  - Lessons 3 and 4 do mention sins, but just briefly and without any further explanation.

#### Sample Student Leader Guide:

- P. 9 – “Point out that no gift we have ever received compares to the gift of Jesus. Explain that this gift is free but we have to receive it.” It might just be the wording here, but it seems a bit synergistic, in that we also have to do something in the act of receiving the gift.

#### Student Activity Books

- All the booklets include a Gospel message on the back cover. They all use the phrase “we all choose to disobey God”. This makes it seem a bit like we can choose either to obey or disobey; which disregards our sinful nature and negates our need of a Savior. They do make clear in the part following that we can never earn our own salvation, but I think it could be laid out much more clearly to avoid the issue. This language is also in the Sharing the Gospel pages that they have in the admin and other guides. In general, it’s not badly done- but that phrasing can be misleading.
- In general, the information provided is good *information* (summary of Bible lesson and some interesting facts), but it would be beneficial to have more actual *learning* activities for all ages, especially for the older children in order to challenge them.



- L2 p.5 – Trenches to Treasure – The TM does not give much guidance in this activity. It would be best if students actually read all the verses, but time may not allow. What is the point of following the swirls from a colored trowel to a Bible text, without any association? It would have been better to have a particular theme or point for each text that students are to look for in the Bible text to help them to learn specifically something about Jesus' power.

### Music

- The theme song is very catchy.
- “Christmas Song in Summer” – “Joy to the World” is a good emphasis. But: “just go ahead and jam to a jingle bell rock” leading into “For unto us a child is born, a Son is given, Christ the Lord” is incongruous and sacrilege. What has one to do with the other? What does jingle bell rock have to do with awe and wonder of God Incarnate? This same issue carries over into “Dig It” song. “Jesus gave His life for you, can you dig it?” and “Can you dig it? He was betrayed and rejected” seems to make light of sacred acts of God in Christ. The other songs have much better lyrics.

### **Mystery Island: Tracking Down the One True God (2020 used again)**

*Answers in Genesis (standard starter kit- \$99.00, standard digital starter kit - \$248.00, super (traditional or contemporary) starter kit- \$189.00, super digital starter kit- \$288.00)*

\* First Impressions:

\* Format: Site Rotation- 4 sites: lesson, recreation, crafts, and snacks.

Goal – Is there just one God? . . . Who is God? . . . What is God like? . . . Does God love me? . . . Can I know God? Our kids grapple with questions like these every day. At Mystery Island, we'll uncover the truth about our Creator God! There's a sea of confusion about who God is and what he's like, so we'll track down the one true God and learn how amazing he is through the pages of Scripture. Each day, kids will learn more about one of God's amazing attributes (great, almighty, ruler, Emmanuel, trustworthy) and how that applies to their lives.

### Overview

#### Day 1-

Title:	God is Great!
Bible Passages:	Paul in a City of Idols- Acts 17:16-34
Lighthouse Lesson Focus:	God is GREAT! He is the one and only God who is the awe-inspiring Creator.
Apologetic Focus:	There's Only one God as revealed in the Bible. You can't make up a god of your own choosing.
Treasured Verses:	Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable. Psalm 145:3
Animal Pal:	Camo the Chameleon

#### Day 2-

Title:	God is Almighty!
Bible Passages:	Jonah- Book of Jonah, Psalm 139
Lighthouse Lesson Focus:	God is ALMIGHTY! He is all knowing, all powerful, and all present.
Apologetic Focus:	God can do all his holy will without effort. God's miracles are real and effortless.

Treasured Verses: Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh. Is anything too hard for me? Jeremiah 32:27

Animal Pal: Flip the flapjack Octopus

#### Day 3-

Title: God is Ruler!

Bible Passages: Isaiah's Vision- Isaiah 6:1-3, Psalm 8

Lighthouse Lesson Focus: God is RULER! He is the majestic king who is holy and perfect.

Apologetic Focus: God is the same in the Old Testament as he is in the New Testament. He was and is and always will be in charge.

Treasured Verses: And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" Isaiah 6:3

Animal Pal: Clark, the great white shark

#### Day 4-

Title: God is Emmanuel!

Bible Passages: God Came to Earth (Gospel Presentation)- Select Scriptures

Lighthouse Lesson Focus: God is EMMANUEL! He is the loving, good Savior who came to earth.

Apologetic Focus: God is three-in-one – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Even though there is mystery to this. God is also knowable.

Treasured Verses: But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8

Animal Pal: Jam the immortal jellyfish

#### Day 5-

Title: God is Trustworthy!

Bible Passages: David Trusts God- 1 Samuel 17

Lighthouse Lesson Focus: God is TRUSTWORTHY! He is our rock. We should praise, thank, worship, adore, and live for him.

Apologetic Focus: God is bigger and greater than our unanswered questions. We can trust him.

Treasured Verses: Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make strait your paths. Proverbs 3:5-6

Animal Pal: Trusty the macaw

#### General:

- Overall a stronger Gospel focus than in years past in the introductory information, lessons, and supplementary resources. The Gospel message penetrates more regularly throughout rather than confined only to one particular lesson, though Gospel is still not as prominent as it could/should be. The tone seems less agenda-driven than in the past.
- Creative approach is investigative, with students having mystery clues every day that are incorporated into biblical truth in the lessons.

#### Director's Guide

- p.8 goal provides good introductory focus: "We want kids around the world to hear about and personally meet our awesome God and to understand how they can receive eternal life through repentance and faith in Christ Jesus."

- p.16-19 provides helpful age level characteristics to guide communication with various ages.
- p.27-31 daily devotions have strong emphasis on the one true God and His attributes and characteristics in contrast to false gods. Also, that Jesus is infinite and is God.
- p.33 shows adaptability for various schedules and formats.
- Loads of practical helps throughout for planning and decorating, etc.

### Assembly Leader Guide

- p.14ff daily assembly scripts highlight a Mission Moment, partnering with Children's Hunger Fund. Churches may choose to substitute a mission organization of their own choosing.
- Uses traits of particular animals each day to magnify God's character, power, or abilities.
- p.37-56 Daily Dramas are quite lengthy and some churches would not have time to incorporate. They attempt to creatively teach or reinforce the daily themes, but should definitely not replace the core Bible lesson as the spiritual point is a small part of each drama.

### Junior Teacher Guide

- Lessons include daily devotional for teacher (same as in Director's Guide) which provide helpful background and focus for each lesson.
- L1 There is only one God—the God of the Bible. He is true and can't lie and is trustworthy. Every word of the Bible is trustworthy and true. Confronts several false teachings that are prevalent in society (and even the church) today. But also Christ-centeredness: "God...wants to have a relationship with us. God sent his Son, Jesus, who lived and died and was raised from the dead, so we can have that relationship if we turn from our sins and seek him" (p.15).
- L3 P.33-34 good emphasis that God in the Old Testament is the same identical God in New Testament times (the same in His holiness, love, kindness, goodness, rule, etc.). This lesson focuses mostly on God's holiness and His glory and the details of the scene in the temple (angels, seraphim, holy). These things are not bad in themselves, but the lesson completely misses the clear teaching of our sin (Isaiah with unclean lips) in contrast to God's holiness (v.5). The lesson does not even mention verse 7, "your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven." Why would the writers skip this amazing opportunity to teach about sin and grace?
- L4 P.38 devotional for leaders confronts the heresy in our culture that all monotheistic religions believe in the same God (e.g. Mormonism, Islam, JW) and provides examples of their heretic teachings and reveals the truth of the Gospel in Jesus Christ.
- P.41-43 addresses sin (finally!) – "anytime we disobey God it's called sin" and that we sometimes sin with our lips by things that we say. "The Bible tells us in Romans 3:23 that we all sin." But Jesus never sinned, and He took the punishment for sin that we deserved. "We all sin against God and deserve to be punished. But Jesus died on the cross to take the punishment we deserve so we can be forgiven and become children of God if we trust in what Jesus did for us rather than trying to earn God's forgiveness." Mentions eternal destinies of both heaven and hell (hell is rarely mentioned in VBS kits).
- P.43 ends core part of lesson guiding students through Admit, Believe, Forever Receive slogan that is characteristic of AIG kits. Overall it is a good presentation, but "forever receive" may be intended to convey eternal security (that it is impossible to fall away from Christ after believing). E.g. "If you sincerely believe this, you will forever receive him into your life and be part of God's family for all eternity." Teacher should be sensitive to this and use language that does not give the impression that a person can

never fall away or walk away from their Christian faith. God is able to keep us in faith, but we can still be deceived by the devil, the world, and our own flesh and can choose to walk away from Him.

- P.43 Gospel invitation – “If you want to hear more about how you can become a child of God, or if you have questions about this, let’s have you go with \_\_\_\_\_ now. The rest of us are going to move on to our next activity.” This is much better than asking students to raise their hands in full view of other students (where they can be greatly influenced by peer behavior). Many students may still feel conspicuous, leaving the room in this way. It may be better to keep an open invitation for students to come and talk to the teacher or others at any time or after VBS, etc.
- The teacher guide for this age level is text-heavy—there is a lot to get through (though overall it is good and biblical content). Teachers may find it necessary to reduce text into allotted time depending on time constraints. The format is a dialogue back and forth between Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 so is intended to be team-taught (but not essential). One marginal suggestion notes that the Bible Treasure Hunt sheets can be sent home instead of covering in class (which would reduce the time required in class).
- Questions at the end of each lesson are intended to reinforce important biblical truths such as the character and nature of God, sin, false gods, etc. Lessons overall are strong on biblical content and are not fluffy or moralistic.
- Back cover “Leading a Child to Christ”
  - Good foundation at the beginning with Romans 1:16 at the top (gospel is power of God for salvation)
  - Opening paragraph shows centrality of Gospel for VBS: “VBS presents an ideal opportunity to share the life-changing gospel of Jesus Christ with all attending. Every leader and team member should be ready to clearly present the gospel and counsel those wanting to learn more.”
  - Good emphasis that salvation is God’s work, not ours.
  - Good caution about not using abstract phrases with children such as “ask Jesus into your heart.” “Becoming a child of God” is more concrete language.
  - Sin, confession, forgiveness are all important words used.
  - “Some children may not want to make decisions...” reflects decision-theology, which we believe is contrary to biblical teaching, but this is not a central focus. Also mentions “Fill out a decision card.”
  - “How long does God keep his children (Hebrews 13:5b, John 10:28-29)” is likely an attempt to teach eternal security again, but these verses are used out of the context of the rest of Scripture, which clearly teaches one can choose to turn away from God and reject Him.
  - Good instructions for continuing to grow in faith: read your Bible, obey, pray, go to a Bible-believing church, tell others about Jesus.

#### Primary/Pre-Primary/Toddler Teacher Guides

- Most of the above for Junior would apply here, but with somewhat reduced text for younger age levels.

#### Student Leaflets

- great that leaflets are provided for all age levels. L1 and L4 have especially strong Gospel messages (sin and salvation). Take-home leaflets are a wonderful tool for encouraging reinforcement of learning in the home and for evangelism in the home in non-Christian families. It’s highly recommended that churches provide take-home leaflets for all students!

### Contemporary Seashore Songs

- Most of the songs focus on the attributes of God related to Creation, His power, His love, King of kings, etc. It would be good to include at least one song in your VBS that has a stronger Gospel message. Not sure what “jump, jump” really has to do with the good content of the song “Jump.” “King Over Everything” song is a contemporary rap.

### **Wonder World Funfest: Amazed by Our Extraordinary Savior**

*RBP (Starter kit- \$124.99 available in KJV and NKJV)*

\* First Impressions: looks like it could be fun. There are a lot student book/teacher guides- could be overwhelming- though they could also be very helpful

\* Format: Site Rotation

Key Verse: Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift. 2 Corinthians 9:15

Daily Themes: Grab some cotton candy! The gates are opening at Wonder World Funfest. With this fair theme, kids will experience a bustling fairground, carnival activities, and extraordinary exhibits, complete with rides, animals, and treats. In the Bible lessons, students will marvel at the Scriptures’ revelation of Jesus long before He came to earth and at the show stopping events of His earthly ministry. Amazed by Jesus, students will learn to love Him and live for Him.

Day 1: An Extraordinary Plan: God’s Word Anticipates Jesus  
Bible Text: Genesis 1-3 (3:15), Micah 5:2, Isaiah 53  
Topic: Jesus, the Promised One  
Memory Verse: All things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Luke 24:44  
Theme: In Jesus, God’s promise of salvation is fulfilled.  
Objective: Amazed by prophecies about the Messiah, students will have confidence that Jesus is the long-awaited Savior.

Day 2: Extraordinary Power: Nature Obeys Jesus  
Bible Text: Luke 8:22-25  
Topic: Jesus, the wonder-working Son of God  
Memory Verse: But the men marveled, saying, What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him! Matthew 8:27  
Theme: Before Jesus, all creation must bow.  
Objective: Amazed by Jesus’ authority, students will choose to make Him Lord of their lives.

Day 3: Extraordinary Food: Jesus Satisfies a Crowd  
Bible Text: John 6:1-14, 22-35, 47-51  
Topic: Jesus, all we need forever  
Memory Verse: He that believeth on me hath everlasting life. I am that bread of life. John 6:47-48  
Theme: With Jesus, our spiritual hunger is satisfied.  
Objective: Students will realize that Jesus alone can satisfy spiritual hunger.

Day 4: Extraordinary Light: Jesus Heals a Man Born Blind  
Bible Text: John 9:1-41  
Topic: Jesus, our Light Giver

Memory Verse: I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life. John 8:12

Theme: With Jesus, spiritual darkness becomes light.

Objective: Students will understand that Jesus has given us the answers to life's most important questions in His Word, the Bible.

Day 5: Extraordinary Faith: Jesus Raises Lazarus from the Dead

Bible Text: John 11:1-45

Topic: Jesus, the life-giving Savior

Memory Verse: I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me. Though he were dead, yet shall he live. John 11:25

Theme: With Jesus, we don't have to fear death.

Objective: Filled with hope at Jesus' power over death, students will share that hope with others.

#### General:

- There are CDs and a DVD for music and director's resources
- I think there is a solid reliance and emphasis on Scripture throughout
- Overall, I thought this was a fairly solid VBS, however, there are still parts that place more emphasis on decision theology, but I think those would be easy to work around.
- The title "Wonder World Fun Fest" sounds more like a carnival than Bible teaching and makes me suspicious from the beginning. Why would they choose such a title? My initial thought is that this kit is more likely to focus on "fun stuff" to do that have little or nothing to do with teaching the Bible.

#### Director's Guide:

- P.2 adds to the above impression about the carnival-like focus at the beginning when it says "Step right up! . . . Can you see the rides spinning and smell the cotton candy and popcorn?" Then in the next paragraph talks about the view from the top of the Ferris wheel, games to play, exhibits to see, rides to enjoy, etc. It does also talk about Jesus who is extraordinary and that we can be confident in our amazing Savior (great!), but the "Fun Fest" concept seems to work against, or even make light of, teaching life-transforming truths of Scripture. The daily locations continue to follow the fair theme: The Grandstand (Opening and Closing Assembly), Bible Exploration Booth, The Midway, Concession Stand (Snacks), Craft Barn (Crafts). Their intent is to provide a creative approach, which could be effective but hopefully won't distract from or make light of VBS goals of teaching the Word and transforming lives.
- P. 15- "Present the gospel in simple Scriptural terms." They have a clear goal of making sure the gospel is preached every day and provide various resources to include (like the wordless presentation items that we carry).
  - Good caution about using symbolic, confusing, abstract language with children. Though language such as "Ask Jesus into your heart" may be common in evangelical circles, it is confusing for young children who have concrete minds. Believe, receive, and trust are better and more concrete words.
  - Good caution about avoiding "herd instinct." In a group setting, children are often likely to respond in order to please you or others, or because their friends are doing it, so to them it seems like "the thing to do." A stronger option is to give personal attention to children, be observant of and sensitive to their spiritual needs in class, and encourage children to talk with you as a teacher individually if they have questions or want to learn more about Jesus the Savior.



- P. 16 “Always use the Bible” I just appreciate this as a starting point.
  - “The Problem: Sin” does mention that “We are **born with a ‘want to’** to have our own way and do wrong things” (addresses our sinful nature). Gospel emphasis that we “cannot get to Heaven by trying to be good. Forgiveness of sin is a free gift from God (Eph. 2:8, 9).”
  - God’s Loving Solution section – good emphasis that we are to “believe” in Jesus. Also later uses the word “accept,” but does not turn it into Law by demanding a “decision” or to “choose” in the narrative text of this section.
  - On the “How Can I Become God’s Child” poster (see back cover), they do have their three steps – “Admit that you are a sinner, Believe Who Jesus is and what Jesus did, and Choose to trust in Jesus” – so the decision type presentation is shown there.
- P.17 Strong teaching on believing in Jesus, forgiveness of sin, being part of God’s family (Invitation section); Jesus loves you and died to take the punishment for your sins, and you can show your love and thanks to Him by praying to Him, reading your Bible, learning more about Him at church and Sunday school, and telling others the wonderful good news; as well as a reminder that when you sin you should confess your sin to Him, and He will forgive you (Follow-Up section).
- P.18 Good emphasis on praying for students, teaching with an open Bible, and loving your students. Praying that God will work in their hearts in life-changing ways. This page does also reference decisions: “Each class should be a time for decisions, first about salvation and then about spiritual growth.” This statement seems to contradict most of the rest of the page, which has been talking about *God’s* work, and suddenly it is turned around into being *our* work and *our* accomplishments.
- P. 21-28 provide a lot of good info on age characteristics, teaching tips for different ways kids learn, teaching special needs students, etc.
- P. 35 – an option for Adult VBS, this seems like it would be a great tool, especially for those parents who aren’t members, to connect with the people at the church whether it’s done concurrently with VBS or after.
- P. 44 – setting up stores with fake money and prize points seem a little bit like a way to try and get churches to buy a bunch of their novelty prizes (pg. 45), though churches could easily go to the dollar store and pick up a bunch of little things there too.
- P. 48-55 “Vinny the Vendor Skits”
- P. 56-65 game booth ideas – these could be ways to get the older youth more involved in VBS by having them ‘run’ the games area.

### Student Booklets

- From an educational perspective, in general the student leaflets don’t provide a lot of biblical content or teaching. As teachers, we want to provide more than simply a memorable experience with VBS; we actually want students to learn and grow in their understanding. What is there is quite good, but sparse, with some unnecessary distractions from the “Fun Fest” theme. Especially the Middler and Junior levels would be capable of deeper learning and should be challenged more. Another point is that these pages are likely being sent home with the students every day and often may be shared with parents or other family members. This is a great evangelism opportunity and a way to get spiritual content / biblical teaching into a home that may be void of it. The shallowness of these pages seems like a missed opportunity, both for the students to apply the lessons in their lives as well as to spread the Gospel beyond the classroom.

### Primary Teacher Manual

- I like that they have a few different ideas to use for games to start each day
- P.25- at the bottom of the page, they include teacher helps for dealing with the evolution/creation aspect of this day with added resources that can look into.
- P. 27 “He would send a Savior Who would take the punishment for the wrong things we do.” And lower on the page “Sin is the Bible’s word for the wrong things we think, say, and do.” Again they could do better with explaining sin here, but otherwise I like that they start the week with a clear Gospel message.
- The issue seems to stay the same on each day, but that also means they have a time set aside each day for the Gospel message
- P. 33-35 Explore the Bible - this seems to draw more from the Mark narrative than the Luke one it uses as it’s Bible text. Overall it probably would have been made better by including all three passages from Matthew, Mark, and Luke.
- P. 50 “On our own, we cannot know Who Jesus is, what God wants us to do, or what is sin and, therefore, wrong to do. It’s like being in darkness. But as you learn about Jesus from God’s Word, the Bible, it’s like Jesus gives you light and helps you understand.”

### Junior Teacher Manual

- P.2 and many of the other introductory pages are the same as the Director’s Guide. Same comments apply.
- There is a lot more emphasis on the students reading the actual Scripture passages rather than just listening to the leader tell the story. Though a lot is done in a story-telling type style. They could go further and actually just read the whole passage- that shouldn’t be beyond 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders.
- P. 28, for the sin discussion, I think they do better with the older kids not focusing solely on wrong actions (though that is there on p. 27). Also on p. 35 – “We were born sinners, and our sin forever separates us from Holy God. Thankfully, there is a powerful solution to this problem!”
- P.31 – Desired student response: “Amazed by Jesus’ authority, students will choose to make Him Lord of their lives.” This phrase about “making Him Lord” is unfortunately common in evangelical circles—it may be well-intended, but good intentions do not equal theological accuracy. Nowhere in Scripture does it say that we somehow “make” Jesus Lord. Jesus IS Lord (Phil. 2:10-11 Rom. 14:11). It has nothing to do with us. God has made Jesus Christ Lord over all. It would be better to encourage students to “confess” (agree together) that Jesus is Lord, using biblical language. Fortunately, the lesson does not dwell on this point (making Jesus Lord), but rather focuses on Jesus’ power over all things, our separation from God because of our sin, Jesus’ power to rescue us from our sin, and that Jesus is trustworthy.
- P.35-36 – Though this is Baptist curriculum and references a “decision time” in various places in the curriculum, the language is *not* overtly “decision language” [e.g., You must do this! Choose! Decide! It’s all up to you!] throughout the curriculum. A proper language would be what I call “faith language” which freely uses biblical words and concepts that show our condition and God’s work (sin referencing our sin nature and our helpless condition, encouraging children to believe, receive, trust, and recognizing the gift of faith, etc.). Examples on these pages include: we are separated from God because of our sins, Jesus saves people from the punishment of their sins, put your trust/have faith in Jesus, believe in Jesus.
- P.36 – “God knew people—including you—would sin, or do wrong things.” By itself, this could be perceived as limiting sin to only wrong actions, but the surrounding text clarifies that we *are* sinners.

- P. 36 “If you have already put your faith in Jesus, your biggest problem has been solved! And even though God doesn’t always take away the scary situations we face, you can trust God to help in those situations.” I like that they included the fact that there are still hard or scary situations that we will face as believers.
- P.37 – A good application of this text that when Jesus calmed the sea, “He made a powerful statement about Himself. Only the Creator can control His creation like that. By His actions, Jesus was declaring that He is God.” This affirms foundational scriptural truths [which are often denied in our culture and even compromised in the church today] that the God-man who came to earth and walked among us IS God, that He existed from the beginning of time, and was present as Creator at Creation.
- P.42 – Affirms doctrine of original sin: “We are *born sinners*—thinking saying, and doing things” contrary to God’s Word.
- P. 43-44 – “A lot of times we try to feed our spiritual hunger with distractions like friends, sports, video games, family, or popularity. – Discuss: What kinds of things might others your age try to feed their hunger with? – We want these things to make us feel full and happy, and maybe they do for a while. But sooner or later, we feel discontent again.” I thought this was a great question and discussion for the kids, since so much of our culture is based on distraction- this could make for a really good conversation with the kids.
- P.44 – Good follow-up for students trusting in Jesus, encouraging them to keep growing in their faith: We still “need to grow daily in our love for Him. And we need to meet with Him through reading His Word—that’s how He talks to us—and prayer—that’s how we talk to Him.”
- P.45 – Notice the contradiction of this language! “We **don’t have to do anything** to earn a relationship with Jesus. We **simply have to believe** in Him!” We say we “don’t have to do anything” but in the same breath, we say this is what we “have to do.” It’s easy for us to fall into this kind of language, but it is not biblical. God invites and enables us (Gospel) to believe, receive, trust, but it is not something we “decide” to do or accomplish. It is a gift of God. (“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” Eph. 2:8-9.) A simple correction would be: “We don’t have to do anything to earn a relationship with Jesus. Salvation is a gift. Believe in Jesus. Trust in Him. He will save you.” This would avoid turning Gospel into Law.
- P.52 – the Decision language is more prominent on this day, but I think they also ended it well, “Even for those of us who’ve already place our faith in Jesus, at times our vision can get cloudy or we can even have spiritual blind spots. We may have areas of sin that we can’t see.... We need the light of God’s Word. We need to read it regularly so God can show us our sin and show us how to live so we can see, or understand, clearly.” Emphasizing spending time in God’s word regularly.
- P.58ff – Lesson 5 uses a drama to teach the Bible lesson. Some of the drama text embellishes Scripture. When using this drama, it would be good to preface the drama by telling students that “it *may* have happened something like this.” Then be sure to highlight the main biblical points, clearly stating what we can *know* from Scripture.
- P.60 – Here is another obvious contradictory statement (similar to p.45). The first part is very good: “When we believe in Jesus, we fully trust that He alone will save us. We don’t doubt Him and try to save ourselves in any way. We can’t do good things to get to Heaven. It’s only through believing in Jesus” [GOSPEL]. But then immediately follows with: “But you have to choose to believe in Him” [LAW]. Gospel has been turned into Law. What God intended to be Good News, we have taken upon ourselves as something we have to (but cannot) accomplish.

- P.60 – Good missional emphasis to share the Good News. When we believe in Jesus, we can't keep it to ourselves (like the disciples). "The best news you could ever tell your friends is that Jesus is alive and that they will have eternal life if they believe in Him!"
- P. 62 – Apply it now section- I thought this was a really good game to include to make the point that doing good things isn't enough "These things are not bad things to do. In fact, they are very good. However, they are bad if we trust in them to give us eternal life. There is only one way to eternal life, and that is through believing in Jesus—Jesus is the life-giving Savior!" This is a strong conclusion to the VBS week and to the curriculum.
- Overall, the lessons in this curriculum are better than the theme. The theme seems shallow, but generally the curriculum itself primarily focuses on the biblical text of each lesson. There are a variety of activities throughout each lesson that are intended to reinforce and apply the lesson, but the lessons are overall Word-centered and Christ-centered, and "bells and whistles" do not distract from *real* teaching.

## **Big Fish Bay: Hooked on God's Mercy**

*RBP (Starter kit- \$124.99)*

\* First Impressions: This looks interesting, Jonah is always good to go through and the theme looks fun.

\* Format: Site Rotation

Daily Themes: "Big Fish Bay is a nautical theme where kids explore an exciting bay, fish off the pier, and venture out to sea, complete with a lighthouse, tall ships, and coastal animals. During lesson time, kids will embark on a journey into the life of Jonah. They'll encounter God's mercy and see how His compassionate heart was most fully expressed in Jesus' death and resurrection. Seeing God's mercy, sharing God's mercy—kids will be "Hooked on God's Mercy."

Day 1: Overboard: Jonah Runs from God  
 Bible Text: Jonah 1:1-16  
 Topic: Following God's Direction  
 Memory Verse: "Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful" Luke 6:36  
 Theme: God's Leading is always best for us.  
 Objective: Students will realize that God's direction is best, so they need to follow Him.

Day 2: In the Sea: Jonah Thanks God  
 Bible Text: Jonah 1:17-2:10  
 Topic: Looking to God for Rescue  
 Memory Verse: "The Lord is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works. All thy works shall praise thee. Psalm 145:9,10  
 Theme: God's rescuing work is the answer to our greatest needs.  
 Objective: Students will respond to God's offer of rescue and will thank Him for His rescuing work.

Day 3: On the Lifeboat: Nineveh Receives God's Mercy  
 Bible Text: Jonah 3:1-10  
 Topic: Sharing God's Compassion  
 Memory Verse: "Thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive; and plenteous in mercy unto all them that call upon thee." Psalm 86:5  
 Theme: God's compassion and mercy are worth sharing.  
 Objective: Students will realize that nobody is beyond God's mercy and will seek to share God's mercy with others.

Day 4: Against the Wind: Jonah Is Angry at God  
 Bible Text: Jonah 4:1-11  
 Topic: Choosing what God wants  
 Memory Verse: "Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good" Romans 12:21  
 Theme: God's desires should be our desires.  
 Objective: Students will compare God's desires with what they want and will identify ways to have God's perspective.

Day 5: From the Lighthouse: Jesus Shows God's Mercy  
 Bible Text: Luke 23:33-46; 24:1-12  
 Topic: Trusting in Jesus' work  
 Memory Verse: "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us." Titus 3:5  
 Theme: God offers us His mercy through Jesus' death and resurrection.  
 Objective: Students will look to Jesus, the One Who truly showed God's mercy, and will seek to follow His example.

#### General:

- It's coming from Regular Baptist Press, so there are going to be differences in some areas, but overall, it is very gospel and Christ centered throughout the whole week.
- They do a good job of having solid Scripture lessons each day.
- This would work well for both smaller congregations as well as VBS that is doing more outreach.

#### Director's Guide :

- "P. 3 "Big Fish Bay is designed to be effective for reaching your community – and it's adaptable to your situation."
- P. 15 Leading a Student to the Savior – I do like their focus here to "stick to terminology used in the Scripture..." instead of using churchy language.
- Pg. 16-17 continues with ways to share the salvation message and for the most part use Scripture to respond to various questions kids might have. Though it still has the 'choice' or 'decision' aspect in a few places, I don't think it's nearly as heavy hand as it could be.
- Ps. 19-20 – unfortunate but necessary abuse prevention guidelines, they also suggest some additional resources for churches.
- Ps. 21-28 provide a lot of good info on age characteristics, teaching tips for different ways kids learn, teaching special needs students, etc.

#### Middler Teacher Manual

- They have the kids reading verses from each day's text, which is great to see, though I think since there aren't too many verses within any of the text selections they could just have them read the full text throughout the lesson rather than just certain verses.
- Day 1
  - P. 26 "The Bible, God's Word, calls the wrong things people do "sin." This whole lesson so far seems more focused on only the wrong actions being presented as sinful or bad.
  - I do appreciate that they have a Gospel presentation right away on day one.
- Day 2

- P. 36 “Jonah thought for sure he would pass out.” I really dislike it when things like this are added, it would have been fine if they had said something like ‘Jonah must have thought’, or ‘might have thought’ because then they aren’t presenting it as fact. Scripture says nothing about what Jonah thought before the fish swallowed him.
- The escape room activity sounds very fun.
- Day 4
  - P. 54 “sin is the Bible word for the wrong things that we do.” I think they could have done a much better job with describing sin, and making sure it wasn’t limited to merely wrong actions.
- Day 5
  - They do a pretty good job here of telling about Jesus’ death and resurrection, and our need for a Savior here.

#### Primary Teacher Manual

- Similar in many ways to the Middler TM, with lessons adjusted for the younger children

#### Junior Teacher Manual

- P. 7 “Motivate each student to take steps that will bring about lasting change. Effective teaching should lead to changed lives.” This is a great emphasis to have going into the VBS.

### **Rocky Railway: Jesus’ Power Pulls Us Through (2020 kit available again)**

*Group (Standard starter kit- \$193.99, Digital starter kit- 229.99)*

\* First Impressions: It’s always hard to tell with Group, there is (per their norm) a lot of manuals in the tin and it’s still just overwhelming to figure out where to even start.

\* Format: Site Rotation

\* Goal – Kid’s discover that trusting Jesus pulls them through life’s ups and downs.

\* Daily Themes: Climb aboard for mountains of fun at Rocky railway! On this faith-filled adventure, kids discover that trusting Jesus pulls them through life’s ups and downs.

Day 1:

Bible Point Jesus’ power helps us do hard things.

Bible Verse For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength. *Philippians 4:13*

Bible Story Ananias helps Saul. (Acts 9:1-19)

Day 2:

Bible Point Jesus’ power gives us hope.

Bible Verse So be strong and courageous, all you who put your hope in the Lord! *Psalms 31:24*

Bible Story Paul encourages others in a storm and shipwreck. (Acts 27)

Day 3:

Bible Point Jesus’ power helps us be bold.

Bible Verse He gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless. *Isaiah 40:29*

Bible Story Peter and John teach about Jesus. (Acts 3:1-4:31)

Day 4:

Bible Point Jesus’ power lets us live forever.

Bible Verse The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. *Romans 8:11*



Bible Story Jesus' death and resurrection. (Matthew 26:17-28:10)

Day 5:

Bible Point Jesus' power helps us be good friends.

Bible Verse Love each other in the same way I have loved you. *John 15:13*

Bible Story The church is united. (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35)

General:

- There's not a lot of Bible usage, it mostly seems to be dramatized or simplified stories rather than using the actual scripture passage.
- In general, it feels like they have a theme and work out activities, crafts, etc. and then find a Bible passage to try and stick into it, rather than building a VBS around the content, it's trying to create/insert content into the VBS.
- It seems like the kids spend more time learning about trains or their animal buddies than they do about anything spiritual. There a lot of good interesting content, that I'm sure kids would enjoy- but it ends up feeling like a watered down VBS, or a slightly religious after school program.
- There is a lot of mention throughout of 'being friends with Jesus', and while I don't think that's bad, but it doesn't really give the kids an understanding of Jesus as their Savior. It would have helped had they had a strong salvation message throughout to go along with the friendship aspect.
- There are so many ways this VBS could be great, but they make very odd choices to avoid or water down content throughout that makes it disappointing.
- No gospel message until day 4.

Director's Guide :

Not reviewed

Bible Adventures – Elementary Station Leader Manual

Overall

Day 1

- P. 6-7 Not a fan of the skit for this day. Nowhere in Scripture does it say anything about Ananias running, hiding, and trying to avoid what God told him to do. I get what they are trying to do, I just wish they had done it in a way that didn't add things into the passage that aren't there, if it was the leader who started getting scared and trying to hide when Ananias tells him about Saul that would have been better.
- P. 9 "You can ask God to help them do hard things." I do like that they make time for the kids to pray for each other.
- P.5-7 Dramatic irony that the beginning of the lesson welcomes kids by telling them we'll be "exploring a **totally true Bible story** from the book of Acts" (good) but then immediately jumps into a **totally not true story** about Ananias, one of the characters from the Bible text (not good). The intro sets it up for children to believe what they are hearing and then deceives them from the very beginning. How are they to know what is truth and what is not truth? It is absolutely essential that when we say we are teaching truth, it is consistent with Scripture. The Scriptures do not say anything about Ananias wanting to run and hide (like Jonah did). It does not even say that he was fearful. Rather, Scripture shows his immediate obedience after being instructed by the Lord: "And Ananias departed and entered the house" (the house where Saul was staying).

- Also, “doing hard things” is presented on two completely different levels but made to be the same. P.5 mentions it may be hard for some kids to “dribble a basketball.” The hard thing in the Bible lesson is obedience to God or trusting Jesus. While dribbling a basketball may be hard for some kids and may be a wonderful thing to learn to do, and God gives us the mental and physical skills to accomplish it, it is not on the same level as obeying God when we are commanded to do something hard. A comparable hard thing might be obeying your parents when they ask you to do something you don’t want to—that is a hard thing to do, but God can and does give us strength to do it.
- P.8 the “trust fall” is a poor illustration for what it means to trust God or what it “feels like” to trust God.
- Poor and unbiblical lesson overall.

#### Day 2

- P.15 “His name is Paul, and from what I hear... The Emperor in Rome doesn’t want people following Jesus, because the emperor wants people to follow him...he’s off to stand trial in front of the emperor himself...” The emperor had little to no part in Paul’s arrest and subsequent trials until he appealed to Rome. This seems like they needed a ‘main villain’ type character to work off of for some reason. I don’t know why they couldn’t have been more truthful and talked about the Jews who were against Paul instead.
- P. 14-18 –I’m not sure why they needed to edit out all the other prisoners on the ship, and make Paul the only one.
- P.13 Again the lesson begins by mentioning “Today’s totally true story from the Bible” but then proceeds to tell a story with probably more details that are not true than ones that are true. Children will not be able to discern which details are true and will likely receive it all as truth. This story from Acts 27 has vivid and adventurous details that could have been effectively used to teach the Bible truth that Jesus’ power gives us hope.

#### Day 3

- P. 21 – “Open your Bible to Acts 3. Today’s power-packed, totally true story comes from the book of Acts.” I like that they are having them actually open their Bibles, but where are they actually reading from it? It seems to be used as a prop for the leader to tell the story- why not actually read from it?
- P 24 – pray for boldness section – I liked what they did here, especially encouraging the kids to pray together, and for each other.
- This lesson stayed closer to Scripture and even explained that Peter and John “told the crowd that Jesus had died for their sins. They told the crowd that they needed Jesus.” Unfortunately, the writers did not use the connection in this lesson to talk about our sin and our need of Jesus. Good emphasis that Jesus’ power can help us be bold in what we believe. But what do we believe? Do we believe that God desires all man to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth? Salvation for all people? This would be the most important thing to be bold about, and this is what Peter and John were being bold about. States “Jesus’ power made someone bold so I could hear about Jesus,” but never defines what that is.

#### Day 4

- P. 29 – first mention of sin so far, but “Sin – wrong choices we make – tears us apart from God.” Makes it only our choices that can be sinful, on the bottom of the following page, they do specify that “we all have sin.” However, since they preface it with “even though we do a lot of great things,” it seems like it diminished what sin is. In general, I think this is a pretty poor way of explaining this to kids.

- P. 31 – this is better “When we sin, the ultimate consequence is separation from God. Forever.” Though it still makes it wrong actions/choices rather than being sinful by nature.
- P. 32 “We’re powerless to save ourselves.” I do think they have tried to make this point a few times, which is good, and repetition of similar phrases can reinforce the kid’s understanding that we can’t earn salvation.
- P. 33 there is a box here called “helping Children Follow Jesus” for use “during the week, if you sense that a child might like to know more...” but otherwise the day 4 lesson, seems to be the only gospel presentation. It seems odd, after the day three emphasis on boldly sharing, it appears that they are tentative in sharing anything remotely close to the Gospel message. Almost as if boldness is fine, if they’re just talking about how great Jesus is and all the nice, pleasant stories about him, but if they get into actually talking about what he did and why, that boldness seems to be missing.
- P.29-33 “Sin—wrong choices we make—tears us apart from God.” Only speaks of sin as the “wrong things we do” or the “bad choices we make.” Never acknowledges sinful nature or original sin. E.g. even in the conclusion, still only goes so far: “Jesus died and took the punishment for all the wrong things we do” and “when we ask Him to, he’ll take away the wrong things we’ve done.” No, He doesn’t remove the wrong things we’ve done; but He does forgive and forget our sin when we confess it. When we don’t believe in original sin, then we believe there is actually some good in us—in essence, we believe only the bad things we sometimes do taint our internal goodness. This is contrary to the teachings of Scripture. This lesson attempts to present the Gospel, but if we are only bad sometimes then we don’t always need a Savior. The problem is our sinful heart, and our sinful actions flow out of our sinful hearts. That’s why we always need the Savior.

#### General:

- The Bible Point page for each lesson provides interesting and helpful background information in relation to the Bible text.
- No mention of sin or the need of a Savior, L1, L2, L3, L5.
- Many churches that use this kit are using it for outreach to unchurched kids. But the lessons are void of content that would help children to see their sin and need of Jesus the Savior.
- Daily Bible Point concepts are good, but some of the Bible texts selected or the way they are presented are not the best foundations for the Bible points (or are misconstrued).

#### Sing and Play Express and Rocky Wrap-Up:

- P.3 – “You may be tempted to integrate music from your regular children’s ministry...” I still don’t like that they are discouraging churches from using songs the kids already know just to sell their own music.
- Their songs are sparse on content.
- P. 31-32 – The balloon illustration could be good, but it does little to explain WHY we have hope in Jesus and WHY that fills up ‘the balloon’. Perhaps it will later on? But I find it discouraging when these lessons don’t actually teach anything other than a pithy saying or catch phrase that becomes meaningless after a while. It needs more depth.
- P. 39 not really a content issue, but more of a logic one “... but few – if any – received rabbinical training” if no Jews are receiving rabbinical training, which is what is implied by the ‘if any’, then they would have had no rabbis at all.
- P. 44 “Sometime we have to stand up for what we believe. We have to say things that are unpopular. We need to share what we believe about Jesus... even though no one else feels the same way. Being bold can be hard – but you’re not in it alone!” This is a good

start for the Bible point, though I wish they would have included the memory verse here to tie in Scripture.

- P. 56 if this skit is any indication, “Jesus’ power lets us live forever!” is only about avoiding death, or making it less scary. It makes no mention of sin so far.
- P. 60 “Our life on earth will end, but because of Jesus, we can have the power to live with him in heaven forever...Jesus had to give up his own life by dying on a cross.” Still no mention of why he had to die on a cross or how that makes it so we can live forever.
- P. 57-65 There’s a lot of talk about death, and living forever with Jesus, but with minimal explanation as to why we need Jesus and how we can live forever with him. Outside of the Bible Adventure rotation there doesn’t seem to be any mention of sin and minimal mention of wrong-doing. They’ve watered down the Gospel to the point that it seems universalistic to me, that everyone will live forever with Jesus.
- Music lyrics are mostly vague and subjective. Very little conveys or teaches who God is and what He has done for us. The best ones are “The Old Rugged Cross” and “The Same Power.” But “The Power Shuffle” is three-quarters nonsense. Why waste time on nonsense when you have these kids maybe 2-3 hours a day? Please teach biblical truth through music! (e.g. “1, 2, 3. Now take tiny little jumps, four to the front. 1, 2, 3, 4. Four jumps back, but you better look back. 1, 2, 3, 4. Now freeze, and everybody clap your hands. Now stop. I feel it in the air right now. It’s all around, I see it everywhere. It’s the power, yeah, yea, God’s power.” Are students going to think the power of God we “feel” in the air is the feeling they get from the feel-good endorphins being released through physical hoopla and exercise?

#### Imagination Station

Overall- they always seem to have such long supply lists, and this doesn’t seem to be any different. The crafts/experiments do seem interesting and fun.

#### Little Kids Depot Director Manual:

- P. 8 There’s some good info on age development for working with the little kids.
- Includes all the general tips and prep for doing the little kids vbs.

#### Little Kids Depot Bible Adventure & Mission:

- P. 10-12 the skit- at least here they’re not sending Ananias to hide or try and avoid Saul (why couldn’t they have done this for the older kids?), at least it’s not changing scripture. Though it is still reading into it a bit with the presumed thoughts/feelings, and paraphrasing presumably to make it simpler for little children- though I think it would have been just as easy to explain what persecution means rather than altering the words.
- P. 17 “God changed Saul’s heart...” I appreciate that they point out that it was God who did the work on Saul.
- P. 23 “Jesus’ friends Peter and John were going to their special church, called a Temple...” I feel like there is a better way of explaining a temple or that it might not even need to be explained, but calling it a ‘special church’ I think gives the kids a weird idea of what the temple is compared to the church.
- P. 30 “Heaven is so perfect and special that people with wrong choices stuck to their hearts can’t come in. It’s like a time out from heaven.” I think this starts out well, though it’s God that is perfect and special, and his presence that makes heaven what is it, but it essentially makes the point that sin separates us from God. However, I’m not quite sure what to think about comparing being in sin to being on a time out from heaven. On the one hand it does give an easy visual, but a time out is temporary and kids might think that

being excluded from heaven is just a temporary thing too, almost like bringing in a view of purgatory.

- They use the word sin once on day 4, it's interesting that they'll go through the whole show of a nail going into wood while explaining what happened to Jesus when they nailed him to the cross, but the word sin is too much?
- Since L4 is the only lesson that really dealt with salvation in the Elementary curriculum, special attention was given to reviewing this lesson for Preschool. The concept of sin is avoided and twisted even more. Saying that "wrong choices" give us a "time out from heaven" is confusing at best. It gives the impression that we may fall in and out of grace instead of being a sinner/saint at the same time and trusting in Christ for salvation day by day, moment by moment. The writers relentlessly avoid use of the word "sin" and minimize the impact by reducing our offenses to mere "wrong choices." P.31 "[Jesus] let the soldiers punish him for all the wrong choices I've made." Jesus was punished for much more than a few wrong choices here and there that humans make.

#### Little Kids Depot Exploration Stations:

- In general, trains are always a hit with little kids so they'll probably have a lot of fun with the crafts here.

#### Closing Circle – Preschool

- It seems like the little kids material has a better consistency/use of the Bible story/focus throughout than the older kids material.
- P.20-22 L4 again minimizes the impact of sin: "We've all made wrong choices that make God sad. Because of these choices, we can't get to heaven by ourselves. But today we heard that Jesus died on a cross. He was punished for all our wrong choices." Prayer at end: "Jesus showed his amazing love for us by dying on the cross. He was punished for all our wrong choices."

#### Student books

- Elementary – Tracking with Jesus
  - Story forms of the Bible story
- Preschool – Bible packs
  - Interactive, multisensory Bible activity, mini version Bible story, stickers, parents update.

#### **Wilderness Escape: Where God Guides and Provides (2020 kit available again) Group**

*This is not a new kit- below are comments made back in 2014 when it was reviewed previously*

#### General:

- Each day's Bible point makes a statement about God and then leads to the conclusion, "so trust God." The effect/tone of this can be law: "God did this, so I had better do this." Instead of allowing the Gospel to motivate or enjoying the grace and peace of the Gospel.
- Lessons do follow Bible text fairly closely (other than embellishments for dramatic effect), but conclusions and applications are sometimes contrived in order to make them practical for the student.

#### Celebration Leader Manual:

- Daily God Sightings – look for God, witness God’s hand in everyday life. “God hasn’t retired, you know. He’s as busy now as he’s ever been. But until you see that with your own eyes, it’s *tough to have a vibrant faith*. God can seem distant or impersonal” (P.12). It is good to be aware of God’s handiwork in the world around us, but something about the presentation of this seems to imply that a vibrant faith is something I manufacture or create or muster up if only I would see God more in the world around me, rather than God’s invisible work in my heart and *through His Word* to strengthen and vitalize my faith.
- P.14 truth of God’s Word. “...get to know Moses, whose true story is in God’s Word – the Bible.” Encourages teacher to hold up a Bible. Good emphasis.
- P.25 “God not only provides for our physical needs but also selflessly provided the ultimate sacrifice in His Son, Jesus. Just as the Israelites didn’t get what they expected, we may be surprised by God’s provision. Today, you’ll help families understand how our friendship with God deepens as we see the ways He responds to our needs.” This first reference to Jesus in the curriculum seems contrived and unrelated.
- P.40 “Jesus took *the bad things we do* with him to the cross. He died for our sins and came back to life again. Because of Jesus, we will live forever.”
- P.45 “By dying on the cross, Jesus took the punishment *for the bad things we do*.”
- P.47 good comparison of OT Passover to Jesus’ sacrifice. “Although they didn’t understand it at the time, that sacrifice looked forward to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus, the Lamb of God, who shed his blood and died so that all who believe in him might be saved from spiritual death and eternity apart from God. Our need for God’s salvation is no less today.”
- P.51-52 “Sins are things like saying mean words, lying, disobeying, hurting people, and not doing the good things God wants us to do. Each one of us has sinned. . . . sin keeps us from being with God because God is pure and perfect.” Good emphasis on how sin separates us from God, and only Jesus could take the punishment for our sin. But always referred to as wrongdoing, bad things we do, etc.
- P.57ff last lesson – always refers to Ten Commandments as “guidelines” and never the purpose of showing us our sin. P.63 “The Ten Commandments were important laws that would keep the people safe, keep them following God’s way, and keep them happy.”
- P.64 God guides us by the words in the Bible, *through worship songs*, by the loving Christians he’s put in our life, and *sometimes by speaking to us*. Is this implying extra-biblical revelation??

#### Moses’ Tent Leader Manual:

- Dramatic presentations of the Bible stories by narrator living in Bible times, sometimes embellishments (should be clarified what is truth).
- Many references throughout to how the people “felt” or how that makes you “feel” do not add to the quality of the lesson.
- P.34 Ten Commandments again only referred to as guidelines and ways to “discover what God values and expects from his people.” Also p.36, “If we don’t obey these commandments, bad things can happen” (Moses speaking) – creates improper motivation for obedience. P.39 “Bad things happen when we don’t obey God’s commandments, and people and families can be hurt.” Absolutely no mention of the Ten Commandments or other laws of God pointing out our sin and need of a Savior.

Overall: Does this kit have any student materials or specific handouts to send home with students? Disappointed overall. Not as strong as other kits. Not as solid Bible teaching or applications. Very little mention of Jesus and what He has done for us. Very little mention of sin and our need of a Savior (mainly Lesson 4 relating to Passover). Lacks Gospel focus in lessons.



This is my least favorite kit reviewed so far of the 4.

**Northwestern Publishing House** has a variety of VBS kits available from past years. *Comments below are from past reviews.* Reviewer comments by Brent Raan in black, by Marian in blue.

**Ready, Set, Gold! (2004, 2019)**

(reviewed only Level 3 sample)

\*2004 Olympic theme very well done

\*very good overall focus – Gospel-centered lessons and music

**Build on the Rock (2005)**

(reviewed only Level 3 sample and teen/adult lesson)

\*Jesus is the Rock, the foundation of our faith

\*some of the daily themes seem a bit of a stretch to make them “fit” – but lessons themselves are excellent (e.g. Jesus Builds with Safety in Mind, Jesus Built Me to Build, and Jesus Can Fix Anything)

\*very good overall focus – Gospel-centered lessons and music

\*not as strong as some of their VBS programs have been – may not give highest recommendation this year but would have no hesitation using it because of solid theology and good Bible teaching

**Set Sail! Join the Crew! (2006, 2019)**

(reviewed only Level 3 sample and teen/adult lesson)

\*students referred to as “God’s crew” – as part of God’s crew, they trust Jesus the world’s only Savior, use God’s Word to guide their lives, use talents to work with other believers, use words and actions to glorify God, trust God for all their needs.

\*overall very good focus, Gospel is clear, good daily themes

\*theologically no major issues, but not as strong of a Gospel emphasis as they have often had, and some of the applications are a bit contrived to fit a theme

**Making Tracks (2007)**

(reviewed only Level 3 sample and teen/adult lesson)

- ◆ The theme is based off of the parts of a train- engine, hopper (grain) car, car carrier, boxcar, and caboose. For example, “The engine powers the train. What does Jesus have the power to do?” At first, I thought of the children that are not very familiar with trains. I’m not sure if children will be able to connect the lessons with the different parts of trains. Basically, it might be a stretch.
- ◆ There seems to be a flow in the lessons- ranging from Jesus meeting our physical and spiritual needs (day 1) to Jesus desiring us to be saved (day 3 lost sheep and coin) to God wanting us to tell others about the Savior (day 5)
- ◆ Format is flexible
- ◆ Jesus Christ is glorified and lifted up as Lord and Savior in this material.
- ◆ Suggestion is made of having a “Sidetracked!” session during each lesson, where “Engineer Ed” comes in unannounced and has a teaching. I don’t think this would be a good idea.
- ◆ A list of a bunch of questions is given in each section to help students apply the Biblical story.
- ◆ Possibly a lack of gospel-motivation?
- ◆ The teacher’s book is easy to follow
- ◆ I appreciated the attention to detail in the illustrations throughout the student lesson book, especially the one on Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch.
- ◆ MC: Good mission focus closing last lesson (sometimes lacking in NPH publications) includes encouragement to tell others about Jesus: tell family members and friends what learned in VBS, sing songs about Jesus, invite others to church and Sunday school. For those far away: pray for them, give offerings to help pastors, teachers, and missionaries reach people in places where I can’t go.
- ◆ I think I would be okay with suggesting this VBS. The content seems to be good, but my only hesitation is that the kids will catch on with the train idea.

**Soaring High (2008)**

(reviewed only Level 3 sample and teen/adult lesson)

- ◆ The theme “Soaring High” takes children through different places on earth on a hot-air balloon ride (i.e. California, Brazil, Yellowstone National Park, etc.) and connects a truth from Scripture from observations of

these different places. For example, the gold of California is connected with the truth from Scripture that “Jesus is our best treasure”

- ◆ Classroom format; churches would buy a “Student Lesson CD-ROM” and would print off student sheets according to how many students are expected to come. Cost: \$69.99; regular printed student books can be purchased as well \$4.75 each level
- ◆ Classes are broken up into levels: 2 grades per level (i.e. K-1 is Level 2)
- ◆ First impressions: I didn’t see any overt mention of sin. Right away in Day 1 Jesus is presented as “our best treasure.” In the teacher’s guide (p13), it says after quoting Rom 6:23, “These words remind us that we deserve to die and go to hell because of our sins. Jesus saved us by living a perfect life for us, dying on a cross to take away our sins, and then rising from the dead. What wonderful gift is ours because of what Jesus has done for us? Eternal life in heaven.” What about a call to believe?
- ◆ “God’s Message” for Day 5: “Jesus is the only way to heaven” “Because of Jesus we will live in the perfect homes he has ready for us in heaven.”
- ◆ I liked the illustrations connected with each biblical story. Jesus is shown as a toddler when the Magi visit (which is not often the case with illustrations of the Magi visit). Their attention to detail is good.
- ◆ NPH did a good job of rewriting the biblical story in a way that kids could understand without compromising on important truths and details. (at the Kindergarten level)
- ◆ The flow of the week seems awkward to me. It goes from “Jesus is our best treasure” which is based on the story of the visit of the Magi to the Creation story to Peter and John helping a beggar (God wants us to help others) so on and so forth.
- ◆ Like the kit from last year, this kit has a person that interrupts the classroom teaching time to teach a lesson. I still don’t think this is a good idea. Granted churches don’t have to use this option. If it were to be used, I think it would distract children from what they were learning from the teacher. If God is speaking to the kids, I don’t want anything to get in the way.
- ◆ I liked the Adult/Teen bible study sheet that was in the sample pack. There were many activity options given that force people to dig in to the biblical story a little deeper. For example, one of the activities had the teens/adults looking up all the references to “Bethlehem” in the Bible and reporting on the “context of each (book, time, characters involved, events surrounding it, and so on)”
- ◆ I do like the idea of connecting things from nature with a biblical story. A church could really run with this idea. I can imagine a church finding a video about each place (California, Brazil, Yellowstone, Lake Michigan, and Hawaii) that highlighted what the VBS kit was highlighting and show that to the kids to help them better understand the connection. At the same time, I don’t know how interested the children would be in this type of setup.
- ◆ It seems as if this kit accurately portrays the biblical stories and makes correct interpretations. But, I do think this kit is a little weak on applying the Law and Gospel *personally* to the hearts of children. With that said, I think I would recommend this kit.

### **Dive In! (2009)**

- ◆ The theme “Dive In!” is built around the concept of using different features/aspects of sea creatures to teach biblical truth.
- ◆ Classroom format; churches would buy a “Student Lesson CD-ROM” and would print off student sheets according to how many students are expected to come. Cost: \$69.99; regular printed student books can be purchased as well \$4.75 each level
- ◆ Classes are broken up into four levels: 2 grades per level (i.e. K-1 is Level 2)
- ◆ Notes from Level 3 Teacher’s Guide:
  - Page 4- students are referred to as being “member or nonmember” just a note to keep in mind WELS’ teaching on membership
  - Page 4- different options are given for teaching the Bible story. Each option is creative and teachers are encouraged to be creative as they teach the lesson.
  - Page 5- “May I Interrupt?” Once again NPH encourages VBS leaders to have an interruption for the class time. I really don’t think this is a good idea because I think it would derail the train of thought for the kids in the class.
  - Page 6- I was impressed with the way the story of the Fall into sin was handled on this page. The Law is fully preached, bringing guilt. The Gospel is brought in at the opportune time and Christ is identified as the fulfillment of Gen. 3:15.
  - Page 7- additional ideas for class time are given on this page. The questions posed are ones that children often ask. The answers given are very solid. For example, in response to the question, “My friend told me that good people go to heaven. How can I know if I have been good enough?” is answered with, “Your friend is wrong. No sinner can ever be good enough to get to heaven on his or her own. Only Jesus, God’s perfect Son, is good enough. He never sinned once so that he could save you from your sins.”

- Page 12- “When the devil misused God’s Word, Jesus fought back by using God’s Word correctly.” I appreciate the concern to correctly handle the Word of God.
- Page 26- Some of the sea creature characteristics can be a bit distracting from the main focus. For example, “The dolphin looks like it’s smiling, but it can be dangerous. Even so, God has used dolphins to do things that people would say are kind and helpful.”
- ◆ Notes from Level 3 Student Guide:
  - Example of a Prayer: “Dear Holy Spirit, you have given me faith in Jesus so that the gifts of forgiveness and life in heaven are mine.” I noticed an emphasis on God giving and working faith into our lives throughout the lessons.
  - “The devil spoke through the serpent.” Interpretive statement. Was the devil personified as the serpent? Scripture doesn’t say specifically.
- ◆ OVERALL, I really liked this VBS curriculum. It was well done in light of the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. Along with a clear message of salvation and God’s work in giving that to us, there was a good emphasis on good works done in thankfulness to God. The sea creature theme was a bit of a stretch at times, but in comparing this theme to previous NPH themes, this one has been the best. I would recommend this VBS kit.

### Space Station Salvation (2011)

\* First Impressions: Looks like this is not very user friendly. [The VBS sample is incomplete, but a variety of resources are available for purchase that provide much more thorough teaching aids, lesson plans, and program ideas.](#)

\* Format: site-rotation/classroom director can choose

\* Themes for each day: Journey to Alpha One Star: The Beginning of All Things (Genesis 1-2); Beta Two Star: A Promise in the Stars (Genesis 3, 12, 15, 18, 21); Gamma Three Star: The Brightest Star Is Born (Matthew 2:1-12, Luke 2:1-20); Delta Four Star: The Sun Stops Shining (portions of the Gospels); Omega Five Star: A Believer Shines for Jesus (Acts 6:1-7, 8:4, 8, 26-40). [Themes and biblical texts obviously progress from the fall into sin to the promise of a Savior to the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus to an example of a believer proclaiming the Gospel in the New Testament church.](#)

\* Level 3 Day 1, Focused only on Creation and never mentioned Jesus except in the prayer before hand and after the lesson. I believe they tried hard with this lesson but yet they left Jesus out of it. I don’t know about the other lessons but there was no gospel in Day 1. [My impression is that the Gospel is likely presented with this lesson in other sources we don’t have access to such as the daily devotional and theme song, though salvation is not the primary focus of this lesson \(but rather Creation\). The Gospel message would definitely be a focus of lesson 2 and the following lessons if the theme and texts are any indication.](#)

- Unfortunately, only one lesson is available for previewing, which gives a limited glimpse of the curriculum. It may be a very good curriculum, but would be very costly to purchase each individual item without being able to return them.
- Some excellent points and emphases in Lesson 1:
  - How God’s creation of Adam was different from other creation
  - Marriage from the beginning was and is the union of one man and one woman.
  - Work existed and was a privilege before the fall of man into sin (it was not a curse after the fall of man as is often taught).
  - Prayer at beginning is excellent: “Help those of us who believe in you to grow stronger in our faith. Send your Holy Spirit to lead those who have no faith to believe in you and your promises.” Closing prayer thanks God “for sending your Son, Jesus, to live, suffer, die, and rise from the dead to take away our sins.”
- Lesson begins with *Space Station Salvation* devotion for Day 1, which may be excellent but is not included in the student sample to view. Use of this devotion is strongly encouraged in the teacher manual to introduce the lesson and likely gives clear focus to the lesson.
- Lesson overall is very Word-centered and focuses on teaching the truth of God’s Word and holds God’s Word in high regard.
- Lesson encourages use of the theme song “Salvation Station,” which reminds students “of the salvation Jesus earned for them. He lived perfectly in their places, suffered, died on a cross, and rose to forgive their sins and give them life in heaven.” Unfortunately, the lyrics are not included in the sample lesson so we did not have the chance to preview.
- Activity #9 clearly states that when the first people sinned, the entire world was ruined by sin. “That’s why God sent his Son, Jesus, into the world.”