



UNCERTAIN

THE CHURCH DURING DIFFICULT TIMES

HOW TO USE OUR MINISTRY PASS SERMON SERIES GUIDES

WHAT THIS GUIDE IS NOT

- > This guide isn't a set of sermon manuscripts. While sermon manuscripts can be both useful and a powerful training tool, our sermon series guides are different. Rather than tell you what to say, our aim is for this material to spark your imagination, assist you in planning your sermon, and offer a boost to your study time.
- > This guide isn't ironclad. While we hope you use our material, the pieces of this document are designed to be moved, tweaked, and altered. As you study the suggested passages, and pray through your message, this guide will hopefully be a launching pad, rather than a landing net.

WHAT THIS GUIDE IS

Included in each guide is:

- > A sermon series outline that breaks up the teaching set into a specific number of weeks.
- > A "big idea" of the series.
- > A passage, "big idea" of the sermon, topic list, and a number of illustrations and talking point ideas are included in each weekly section. The "Sermon Ideas and Talking Points" area is filled with observations about the text, relevant applications, creative ideas, and illustrations.
- > A small group discussion sheet (located in a separate document in this bundle).

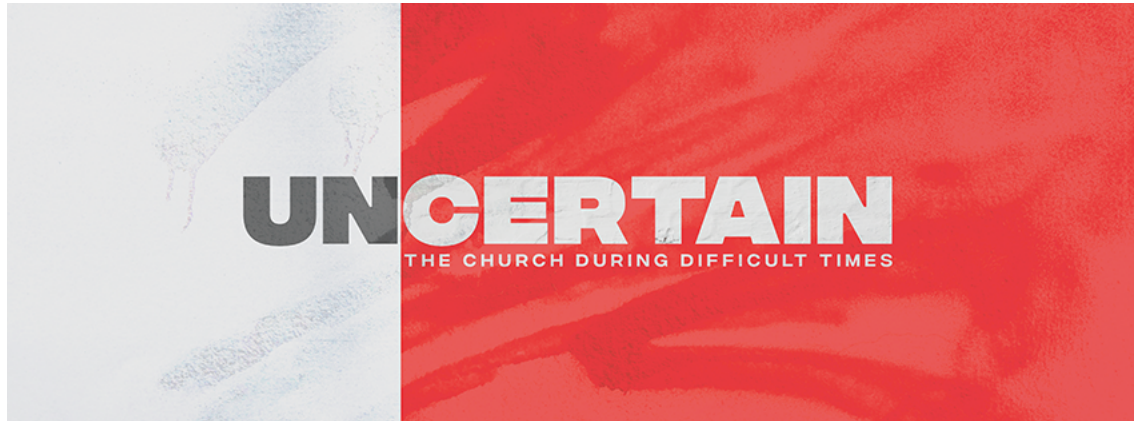
HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

- > Plan ahead. Our guides are best utilized in advance versus the day or night before. Read over the ideas and illustrations provided, thinking through how you can possibly utilize them in your message. We've purposely kept our guides simple so as to give you the best opportunity to create your own, unique message.
- > While we give you a passage and "big idea" of the message, take time to study the text.
- > Utilize the media contained in this bundle to promote and communicate your series message.

Note: Although we've worked hard to verify the accuracy of the material in this guide, we encourage all pastors to carefully review the information before sharing it with their congregation.



MINISTRY PASS



Uncertain: The Church During Difficult Times

Big Idea of the Series: This five-week series explores characters from the Bible who experienced seasons of uncertainty—the “in-between” trials of life. Job, Daniel, Abraham, Paul and the disciples all experienced times of frustration, pain, suffering, and difficult questions. We too experience these difficult times, and it’s vital that even in the midst of hard circumstances the church relies on God to carry us through.

Week 1

Text: Job 1:1–22; 4:7–8; 42:7–17

Topic: Suffering, Theodicy, Faith

Big Idea of the Message: Job never lost his faith in God but trusted him in times of suffering.

Application Point: Even when we don’t know why we are suffering, we should trust God no matter what.

Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. The book of Job belongs to the genre of Hebrew wisdom literature, as do Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and Psalms. In this book, a man named Job has everything taken away from him: family, wealth, and health (Job 1:1–22). God allows Job to suffer, and Job wrestles with why all of this happened to him. While everyone around him loses faith in God or blames Job for his own troubles, Job remains faithful to God and everything is restored to him.
2. Job wrestles with something called theodicy, an area of theology that tries to answer how a “loving, all-powerful God could allow people to suffer?” (Stephen J. Lennox, *God’s Story Revealed: A Guide for Understanding the Old Testament* [Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2009], 170). The book of Job could be summed up in the two-word question “Why, God?”
3. A common struggle between Job and his friends as he suffers is the question whether he is at fault (4:7–8). At the time people believed in retribution theology: if evil or sickness happened to someone, it was because of sin in their life (Stephen J. Lennox, *God’s Story Revealed*, 171). While this is true for some situations, it doesn’t seem to apply to Job. Job continues to justify his innocence

and to insist that his troubles are not because of some hidden sin in his life. By the end of the story, God reveals that Job has not sinned and wasn't being punished (42:7–17) In fact it is never really explained why this suffering happened to Job besides God's faith that Job would not abandon his belief. The story gives no answer as to why evil happens when it was not deserved in some way. However, Job ultimately continues his faith in God's wisdom and mercy in life.

4. Ask the audience their favorite comment for why bad things happen. Go around with a microphone and get a few examples. Is it all Karma? You reap what you sow? Stupidity?
5. Faith is the one constant thing that Job has throughout his suffering. His faith wavers and is frustrated. He complains to God (21:4), wishes that he was never born (3:3), and questions God but still comes back to a trust in the Creator of all. The faith of Job isn't pretty, but it is persevering. The answer to suffering is faith. Trust that God is good, powerful, loving, merciful, and wise. However, the God that Job had faith in was not an abstract concept, but a personal being with whom he had cultivated a relationship with before the calamity happened. As Christians we know what Job didn't know yet: that God revealed himself in his Son, Jesus. Christ's sacrifice didn't just atone for sin but gave us the right relationship with God. Hebrews says, "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).
6. When you suffer, what or whom do you put your trust in? When we are in pain we sometimes reach for anything that will bring relief. We eat too much. Turn to alcohol or other substances. Buy things we don't need. [*Pastor, you can have some props to visualize examples of ways we cope: alcohol, food, money, a heart-shaped chocolate box to symbolize relationships*]. Take a minute and write down what you turn to for comfort in times of pain and trouble in life.

Week 2

Text: Daniel 1:1–6; 2:24; 6:1–28

Topic: Exile, Hope, Influence

Big Idea of the Message: In exile Daniel never lost hope in God's plan for his people and his provision in both prosperity and persecution.

Application Point: Both in times of prosperity and of persecution, we will have hope in Christ.

Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. The book of Daniel is a part of the prophetic division of the canon in the Bible. Daniel was a Hebrew in exile during the time of Babylonian captivity. He, along with other young Hebrew men, was taken from Israel to Babylon to be trained as scholars and servants for the Babylonian empire (Daniel 1:1–6). Daniel rose in the ranks in the king's court and eventually had great influence with the Babylonian king. Daniel is noted for interpreting dreams (2:24) and being a man of God even in the worst of persecutions (6:1–28).
2. In the Old Testament, God's people were exiled from the promised land because of their sin. The empires of the age conquered God's people, and Israel would not be an independent nation again for thousands of years. Exile is a difficult time of transition. For the Hebrews, the time of exile was preparation before the coming Messiah. It was not for a short while, but would last years (Jeremiah 29:10). They would need to settle in their new homes (Jeremiah 29:4–7). Exile had times of prosperity and persecution (for example, Esther 3:1-15). For Christians, life can seem more like exile, not because of punishment, but because our true home will not be realized until the new heavens and the new earth when Christ returns.
3. Daniel experienced times in exile when life could be considered good. He was wise and had God's favor, a good job, and influence with Nebuchadnezzar. Instead of revolting during his time in exile, he strove to serve God every day despite his circumstances. This faithfulness of Daniel gave him favor with God and other people. Exile for Daniel was also a time of persecution. People wanted to destroy Daniel because of his faith in God, and thus the story of Daniel in the lion's den (Daniel 6:1–28). However, no matter in times of favor or struggle, Daniel did not waver and saw God provide for him in miraculous ways.
4. The story of Daniel in the lion's den is popular story with many parodies (<http://christianfunnypictures.com/2017/01/real-reason-daniel-survived-lions-den.html/redjaw-daniel-in-the-den-vegan-lions-2>). However funny, the reason for Daniel's escape was God's provision and favor in times of exile.
5. What tethered Daniel's faith in God was hope. For exiles, the hope of God's redemption was at the core of continuing in life. Daniel knew the exile was not permanent and had hope in the God of Israel. For Hebrews like Daniel, oral tradition told the stories of Abraham and Moses and how God redeemed his people in the worst of times. The God of Israel was a God you could trust and place your hope in.

Week 3

Text: Genesis 11:31; 12:1; 15:1–21

Topic: Promise, Covenant, Trust

Big Idea of the Message: Abraham believed in God's promise and covenant before anything happened in the physical world.

Application Point: Christians have a covenant with God and can believe in his promises in the worst of times.

Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. We first meet Abraham in the book of Genesis (Genesis 12:1). Abraham is the beginning of the Hebrew people, the nation of Israel, and ultimately, the church. He is also the human ancestor of Jesus the Messiah. Abraham is considered the “father of us all” when Paul refers to him in Romans 4:16.
2. God called Abraham to move from the city of Ur to a land further west (Genesis 11:31). Ur was the economic and cultural place to be at the time (<https://www.ancient.eu/ur>). Abraham had faith in this call of God and left everything he knew to go to this new place. He had no Scripture verses to memorize for the journey; all he had was a relationship with this God. Imagine moving from a booming metropolis (New York City or London) to the middle of nowhere because God said to. How many people would do that?
3. We all like an upgrade. Whether it's your phone or internet service, we like to think that we are moving up in life. Progressing forward and not backward. If you have ever moved from a large city to a small town—or from an important job to an entry-level position—you might have felt like you've moved down. Abraham's relationship with God was an upgrade, but at the time Abraham didn't know what was in store for him. He couldn't physically see the progress of what God was doing. When God moves us in our lives it can seem like we aren't getting an upgrade, but actually we only see one part of the story.
4. Later in the story of Abraham we see that God promises him he will have a son. Now both Abraham and his wife Sarah are old, and she is barren. However, God promises that Abraham will have a son and also that Abraham will be a “father” to many nations (Genesis 17:4). God ratifies this promise by making a covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15:18).
5. Covenant is very important in the Bible. Covenant goes beyond just a contract; it binds two people together through blood. In the Bible a covenant is “an agreement between God and humans in which God pledges to bless those who accept and commit themselves to him” (Millard J. Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001], 42). God's promise to Abraham becomes the promise to redeem the whole world through his human descendant (Jesus). God also makes a covenant with humanity through the cross for redemption and salvation (Mark 14:23–24). In times of transition and questions, when things don't make sense, we can rely on God's promise and covenant that he will be with us.
6. In 1942, General Douglas MacArthur was forced to flee the Philippines because of the advance of the Japanese army. As he was leaving, he declared, “I shall

return!” Two years later, in 1994, MacArthur returned to the Philippines and took back the island (<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/macarthur-returns>). He kept his promise.

7. Like Abraham, Christians must hold fast to the promises that God has declared over our lives. God keeps his word and fulfills his promise. Jesus promised to never leave us (Hebrews 13:5). We place our faith and trust in God for our finances, our health, our relationships, and every aspect of our lives, and we walk in faith that God will guide and take care of us. Just like Abraham we walk by faith on the journey of life.

Week 4

Text: Acts 1:6–8

Topic: Disciples, Kingdom, Expectations, Salvation

Big Idea of the Message: The disciples were challenged by Jesus and had to change the way they saw God and the world.

Application Point: We will let our expectations be shaped by Jesus and not by our own desires.

Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. The disciples of Jesus were a motley crew of people who followed the Messiah through his earthly ministry and after his death, resurrection, and ascension. They were made up of fishermen (Matthew 4:18–22), a tax collector (Matthew 9:9–13), and everyday people. They all followed Jesus as the Messiah and were shaped and formed as they walked with Christ.
2. As the disciples walked with Jesus, they were challenged by what he did and taught. Although everyone was Jewish, the disciples had assumptions about the Messiah and what he was supposed to do and look like. Jesus challenged their racism (Luke 10:25–37), self-righteousness (Mark 10:37), and unbelief (Mark 4:40).
3. A constant correction that Jesus had to bring to his disciples was concerning the nature of God’s kingdom and the role of the Messiah. For Second Temple Jews, the Messiah was a military king that would vanquish the Romans and establish his national kingdom. Throughout the ministry of Jesus, the disciples repeatedly tried to align Jesus with this expectation they had. When Peter cut off the soldier’s ear and Jesus healed the soldier in the Garden of Gethsemane, that was a surprise (John 18:10; Luke 22:51). Even before Jesus ascended to heaven, his disciples were asking if he was going to set up his kingdom (Acts 1:6). But Jesus told them to wait for the Holy Spirit and that they would be his witnesses to the world (Acts 1:7–8). Jesus wasn’t concerned about setting up powerful political kingdoms.
4. Have you ever had an experience when your expectations were not met? In this video, Paul Tripp talks about the pain of expectations in marriage and relationships: <https://www.paultripp.com/what-did-you-expect>.
5. God is redeeming the world slowly. A term that biblical theologians use is the German word *heilsgeschichte*, meaning salvation history (George E. Ladd,

Theology of the New Testament [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993]), 23). The entire Bible is a redemptive narrative. It is the story of the fall of humanity and the work of God to redeem humanity and the world. God's story of redemption continues to this day in the lives of those in his church.

6. We live in an instant culture. Nothing is more instant than the microwave. Food can go from frozen to ready within a minute or two. We are so used to instant communication that when someone doesn't text us back right away we aren't sure what is taking them so long! We are so used to instant entertainment that we need to be able to live stream games, movies, and TV shows from the comfort of our couch, whenever we want—and there better not be a hiccup in the signal. We have become so accustomed to instant that we might wonder why the birth of Jesus didn't happen immediately in Genesis 4 after the fall of Adam and Eve. But God is wise, and he wants to work his redemption throughout human history. There are no quick fixes for sin and its disastrous affects. God is not a microwave God; he cooks a good home-cooked meal from scratch. Most people if they were given the choice between a TV dinner or a home-cooked meal would prefer the latter. Yes, it takes more time, more effort, and maybe more frustration, but in the end it's worth it (and it's usually better for you).

Week 5

Text: Philippians 4:11–13

Topic: Contentment, Growth, Persecution

Big Idea of the Message: The apostle Paul went through tremendous hardship in his ministry for Christ. However, he was content and had peace in all circumstances.

Application Point: Even in the worst of seasons, we will find contentment in Christ and not in our circumstances.

Sermon Ideas and Talking Points:

1. Paul was an apostle of the early church and wrote much of the New Testament. Paul was not one of the original twelve disciples but was later converted to faith in Jesus the Messiah after a dark history of killing Christians (see Acts 9). Paul was educated (Acts 22:3), a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28), and ended up preaching the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 16:6). He also went through tremendous hardship and struggle throughout his life and ministry and was ultimately martyred.
2. Paul wrote a majority of the New Testament from prison. He was betrayed by former believers and false teachers (2 Timothy 1:15), shipwrecked (Acts 27:27–44), beaten (2 Corinthians 11:25), and shackled (Acts 16:16–34). While all of this was going he was telling the church to love others (1 Corinthians 13:1–13), respect the government (Romans 13:1-7), and grow in the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23).
3. Paul also talks of having a thorn in his flesh (2 Corinthians 12:1–10). Here is a humorous take on what that was: <http://redjawcartoons.com/thorn-in-my-flesh/>.

4. How do you react when life becomes hard? Encourage the congregation to take a moment and write down three ways that they have reacted to negative things happening to them in the last week.
5. Inspirational stories about those who have overcome obstacles can motivate us to reassess our own struggles. For nine-year-old Ezra, his struggles are real but so is his outlook on being thankful even when he asks God why:
<https://www.seeker.com/the-inspirational-story-of-9-year-old-ezra-frech-1501496416.html>.
6. Make a play on the words *content* and *contempt*. Contempt means “the act of despising” (*Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “contempt,” accessed March 27, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/contempt>). We can despise our lives and situations when we see negative circumstances, leading to a lack of contentment.
7. Paul writes about peace and contentment when he writes to the church in Philippi. He says, “I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:11–13). What do we do when we are in transit? We can be people who are content. Not in our circumstances, but in the God we know and live for. Our faith, hope, promises, salvation, and contentment don’t come from ourselves, other people, or our situations but from a personal God who created and loves us.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark office by Biblica, Inc.™