

Water, Fire, Wind Leader's Guide

Introduction

“Kleenex is a brand, not an item.” Have you ever heard that? It’s called branding, and it happens all the time. Here lately the term “iPod” has been used in this way to refer to any miniature, portable music player. The name gets so closely associated with the product that it gets hijacked by other producers of similar products. It makes one wonder, has this happened with other things too—like Christianity? There are Christian music stations, Christian book stores, even Christian clothing lines.

Christian culture has become a way of life in and of itself. We tread on dangerous turf when our Christian culture influences our faith, instead of the other way around. It seems that Christianity has become more associated with the issues we stand for—or against—or political views we cleave to than it is about a living, breathing passion to follow and become like Jesus Christ.

While leading students away from a “Christian culture” mentality, *Water, Fire, Wind* examines the core elements of a relationship with God. It challenges students with three concepts; a spiritual foundation that keeps our faith from running dry (Water), a complete, all-consuming, soul dedication (Fire), and being moved to action by the power of the Spirit (Wind).

This leader’s guide breaks the book down into chapters for ease of study. Try to keep the groups consistent, since students will be asked to maintain a prayer partner. Encourage students to be genuine and vulnerable with their small groups.

In order to best prepare for this study:

- **Order copies of the book.** Make sure you get enough for each member of the group. This study will work best if each student has his or her own book and is able to read the chapters prior to each meeting. This will help them be prepared for the group discussions.

- **Set up small groups.** This study will work best if the group size does not exceed 8-10 students. If your group is larger than 10 students, consider breaking into smaller groups and finding additional facilitators. Make sure each facilitator gets a copy of this leader's guide, so they are prepared to lead their group each week.
- **Determine the best time to meet.** Will you do this small group study in place of your normal Wednesday night or Sunday morning lesson? Will this be an "extra" discipleship group that meets at a different time throughout the week? You need to decide what will work best for your group and communicate that to them. You may even want to make up a schedule and hand that out, so your students have a physical reminder of when the meeting times are.
- **Determine where you will meet.** Once you've figured out when you're meeting, determine where you will meet. Do you want to meet at church? Or would meeting at the facilitator's house be more beneficial to your students and the discussion?
- **Set up a reading schedule.** Once you've determined when you're going to meet and where, set up a reading schedule and distribute it to each member of the group, so they know what they are expected to have read for that week's discussion.
- **Bathe the experience in prayer.** Before you and your students actually start the study, be sure to lift the time you will spend together in prayer. Pray for each of your students specifically, asking God to help them be open to what He wants to say to each one.
- **Do the study yourself each week.** The best way to be prepared to facilitate your students' discussion is to have actually read the chapter and prepared.
- **Be flexible.** If your students have a lot of questions and/or insight on a particular week, or you feel the Holy Spirit is telling you that you and your students need to spend another week on a particular chapter, do it.
- **Continue praying.** Chances are prayer requests, needs, and issues will come to light as you and your students work through this study. Continue to take all of these things to God.

May God bless you as you and students journey through *Water, Fire, Wind*.

Chapter 1: The Way Is Lost

Plugging In

Have your students read Matthew chapter 5. To begin the discussion, write “You have heard...” on the top of a white board. Then have students summarize the “but I tell you...” thought that follows that statement in the sections of scripture about murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, an eye for an eye, and love for enemies.

Digging Deep

1. How do you define Christian? What does the author mean when he says, “I don’t want to be a ‘Christian’ anymore”? Why does he say that? Have you ever thought that?
2. On page 7, the author suggests that something has been lost. What is it that has been lost? Do you agree or disagree? Why? Have you ever felt like something was missing from the way we practice our faith?
3. What was it about the show dog that was so upsetting? Have you witnessed “soi-disant” examples of faith in your life? If so, explain. Do you personally have an example of something that you do in your life that is in danger of creating a “soi-disant” faith? If you’re comfortable doing so please share.
4. Why did Jesus quote the Law and then add, “but I tell you...”? What was he trying to do? Do you think that is still relevant today? Why or why not?
5. About what things in our life, culture, and form of Christianity today would Jesus say “but I tell you...”?
6. Answer this question from the end of the chapter: “Could it be that the world looks at Christians as strange, irrelevant, narrow-minded, and hypocritical, not *in spite* of how we have lived out our faith, but precisely *because* of it?” Explain your answer.
7. What does it mean when the author says, “We are not just missing key ingredients, we are missing elements”? What are the elements he is talking about? Have you personally experienced these elements?

Chapter 2: Water Fire Wind

Plugging In

Have your students read Luke 10:25-37, then move on to the questions below.

Digging Deep

1. What is the principle of the story found in today's scripture? How does this work against what the teacher of the law and the people listening to the story expected? (The people listening to Jesus would never have expected a Samaritan to be the hero; Jews openly despised Samaritans, but they esteemed the priest and the Levite, who followed the rules by not defiling themselves with the Samaritan. But Jesus saw the situation through eyes of grace; genuine love doesn't have cultural and racial boundaries.)
2. Who are the "Samaritans" at your school—the ones who are "rightly" avoided? Who does Jesus say your neighbor is? How is that different from whom your friends say your neighbor is?
3. What is the way of Jesus? What does the author mean when he says, "The way of Jesus is about the question, not the easy answer"?
4. What are the three fundamental elements that the author describes in this chapter? What do they represent in the Christian life? Why is the Christian life impossible without these elements?
5. At this point in your journey, what is your understanding of grace? Holiness? The Spirit? How have you seen these elements at work in your life?
6. Is there anything wrong with telling someone, "Just accept Jesus as your personal Savior"? In what ways might that be an incomplete description of what salvation is? Can you think of different words to explain it?
7. Explain the statement, "All you get from a tiny pamphlet is a tiny god." How does this apply to the way we perceive God and try to share him? What would it take to share how big God is?

Chapter 3: Grace Like Water

Plugging In

Read Matthew 5:43-48. To begin your discussion, brainstorm a list of the qualities of grace, based on this chapter.

Digging Deep

1. Before reading this chapter, what was your concept of grace? Has your definition of grace changed? If so, how?
2. Re-read Frederick Buechner's quote found on pages 25-26. Have you ever thought of grace in these terms? Based on this quote, what are some ways you experience grace daily?
3. What does today's scripture teach us? What is the motivation behind the command to "love others"? What does God want us to do? How does God love? What is our typical motivation for loving others?
4. Read Matthew 20:1-16. Which character in the story did you identify with the most? Was the landowner's decision fair? What compelled him to pay those who didn't work all day the same amount as those who did? How would you feel if you had been the first worker hired that day? How would you feel as the last? How can we apply this lesson to our lives today?
5. Read Matthew 18:21-35. What is the point of this passage? What are some debts others owe you? What are some debts you owe others? How do these compare to the debt we owe to God? What does God do with that debt? How does this story explain how God relates to us, and how he commands us handle our relationships?

Chapter 4: The Pine by the Stream

This is the first of four chapters that focuses on a fictional story that follows the life and growth of a tree. These sessions are intended to be very small-group discussions (think two-three students per group), where students discuss what they're learning and share what God is doing in their lives. Consider these sessions an experience of what the book is exploring—genuine relationship and communion in the Spirit.

For this session, provide each group with a copy of this week's leader's guide. Have each group work through the following questions.

1. Read John 8:1-11. Why did the people back off of the adulterous woman instead of stoning her? What does Jesus tell the woman in this story? How do we interpret what Jesus said—was he invalidating the law of Moses? What compelled Jesus to handle the situation the way he did? How do his actions in this story teach us about God's grace?
2. What is the way of Jesus? How can we live in the way of Jesus? How does Jesus' reaction on the Cross illustrate the way we are supposed to live?
3. How does this part of the story of the pine tree help us understand grace?
4. Did you identify with any part of the pine tree story? If so, how does the story of the tree match our spiritual journey?
5. Remember back to our reading for last week. Discuss this statement found on page 35: "We can't really love until we have been loved by the one who is love." What does that mean? Have you seen this at work in your own life?
6. Still remembering back to our reading last week, discuss this statement found on page 29: "Grace is not fair. . . . It is grace." What does this mean for you? Is the fact that grace isn't fair a good thing or a bad thing? What does that mean for the way we interact with the people around us? Should we be concerned about treating them the way they deserve to be treated, or about passing on grace? What does that look like?
7. Have you accepted the grace that Jesus offers?

8. Look at your group members for today. Commit to pray for each other every day for fifteen minutes for the remainder of this study. Exchange e-mail addresses and/or phone numbers so you can let each other know if there's something you can pray for each other about.

Chapter 5: Living Water

Plugging In

Read John 8:1-11 and Acts 15:1-11. Then move into the discussion questions.

Digging Deep

1. Read John 8:1-11. This is the second week in a row that we've read this passage. Why do you think that is? What's so important about this scripture? How can we live out this example of grace in our lives? Who are the "adulterous women" in your life? How can you show grace to them?
2. Read Acts 15:1-11. What was the debate in this passage? What was Peter's answer? By what standard did Peter live? What "circumcision" issues do we have in the church today? How should we respond to those who aren't yet "circumcised"? How would you summarize Peter's lesson?
3. The author talks about grace vs. non-grace Christians. Define each of those terms. Have you ever met a non-grace Christian (someone who wasn't as concerned with loving the people around them as they were with the rules)? How did that make you feel? Have you ever met a grace Christian (someone who loved as Jesus loved without condemnation)? How did that make you feel? Which one would you rather be?
4. In the story of *Les Miserables*, what is it that turns Jean Valjean's life around? Why did it affect him that way? Have you ever had an experience where someone cut you slack when they didn't have to? What was that like?
5. The author says, "When we don't understand grace, we don't accept it; when we don't accept it, we don't offer it. The result is that grace is withheld" (46). Why would it be difficult to offer grace if we have not received it?
6. What is the difference between having a grace-filled heart and having an attitude of self-righteous superiority? How do these two heart conditions differ in the way they treat people? In the way they relate to God? Discuss a time when you showed grace to someone else? What was that like? Why did you do it?
7. "If our church life becomes focused on the 'rules' and the behaviors our Christian culture says are acceptable, than those who don't yet follow those rules can feel

intimidated” (47). What does this mean? Is church a place for non-believers? Why or why not? How should we share our faith with others? Discuss the statement, “You don’t have to get cleaned up to take a bath.”

8. How do Lincoln and Jill’s stories illustrate the point of this section of the book? What can their stories teach us?
9. How has this three-week study of grace changed how you look at others? How you look at yourself? How you view God and his love for you and others?

Chapter 6: The Refiner's Fire

Plugging In

Read 1 Peter 1:13-19 and Isaiah 6:1-8.

Digging Deep

1. What does 1 Peter 1:13-19 mean when it says an “empty life” has been passed down from previous generations? What is missing from that life that makes it empty? What does verse 16 mean when it says, “Be holy, because I am holy”?
2. What are your feelings after reading Isaiah 6:1-8? What is the significance of the burning coal touching Isaiah’s lips? How does that apply to our lives? What “burning coals” does God use to refine us today?
3. What is holiness? On page 57 the author says, “Holiness becomes our *response* to God’s loving grace.” What does this mean? What is God asking of us when he asks us to be holy? (It means set apart, sanctified, committed entirely—body, soul, and mind—to him and his purpose.) Is being holy really possible? How do we become holy? (For guidance on this question, refer to pp. 67-8)
4. Why is fire such a good symbol for holiness? What are the qualities of fire, according to this chapter? How does that apply to what God wants to do in our life?
5. What does it mean to be “refined like gold”? Why must we be refined? What are some things that God uses to refine us? What are some ways in which you have been refined? Do you allow God to do the work he wants to in you?
6. How was life intended to be? (for help with this question, see the section “The Fall” found on pages 59-61.)
7. What is the best way of life? (see page 67, second to last paragraph for help) Why is that way best?

Chapter 7: The Pine and the Forest Fire

For this session, have students break into groups of 2-3. Provide each group with a copy of this week's leader's guide. Have each group work through the following questions.

1. Take a moment to re-read the passages from last week: 1 Peter 1:13-19 and Isaiah 6:1-8. Talk about any new insights that you may have. Then discuss how these passages have influenced your life this past week. Be completely honest—if they haven't, say so.
2. In this story, the pine tree is in despair at nearly being devoured by the forest fire; he's not the same tree. Have you ever felt this way? What are the "forest fires" that have threatened to consume you—family situations, loss of friends? What did you do or what are you doing in response to being in the midst of the fire?
3. Have you ever been "burned" by life in a bad way? Have you ever seen situations like that turn into something that helped you grow? How?
4. The pine tree didn't notice the growth or the healing that was coming about because of the purifying flames. When you are in the midst of a "forest fire," what is your response to the situation? What can you do to look for the ways God is going to work in you and around you in those times?
5. What are some things that keep you from committing yourself to God wholeheartedly? What can you do to change that?
6. Share how you and God are doing this week. What has your week been like? What have you read that God has used to teach you something? How have you learned to know him better?
7. Check in with your prayer partner. Let him or her know how you want to be prayed for in relation to what you're studying and learning about this week.

Chapter 8: Walk Through the Fire

Plugging In

Read Psalm 139:23-24. Then spend a few minutes in silence, asking God to search you.

Digging Deep

1. How often do you ask God to search you? Do you listen to what God tells you? What is the “way everlasting”?
2. The author said “We begin to believe that God’s will is better than our will” (75). What does this mean? How do we lay down our will? How do we get to the point where we can say like Jesus “Yet not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39b)? How do we know what God’s will is?
3. Respond to these questions the author asks on page 75: “If holiness is so important to God, then why don’t we see Christians living it? If God asks this of us (and we can believe that he has the power to deliver it), then why is holiness such a struggle for Christians? Why don’t we see more living examples we can point to in order to illustrate exactly what holiness is?”
4. The author says, “[We don’t see more Christians living the holy life] Because when they became Christians, they never really intended to live it” (76). What ways do we see this operating around us in society? What should our response be to this kind of not-real faith in ourselves? In others?
5. What is your reaction to the author’s statement, “We can’t really say that many have tried Christianity and found that it didn’t work—it would be more accurate to say that many have found Christianity a challenge to their self will, and *left it behind*” (76)?
6. Do you believe holiness is possible? Do you *want* to become holy and live the holy life? Do you agree with the author’s statement “Whatever you can live without, you will do without” (80)?
7. Before reading this chapter, what was your understanding of “sanctification”? What is your understanding after reading this chapter? What things has God set you apart for?

8. Read the illustration about “cleaning house” again on page 83. Think of your life as a house with rooms. Which rooms is Jesus allowed to walk in and clean? Which rooms is Jesus not allowed in? Which rooms do even you avoid?
9. The author also used a sponge to illustrate the idea of surrendering our will to God. What did you think of this illustration? Did it better help you understand the concept of surrendering? What areas of your life have you surrendered to God? What areas of your life are you needing to surrender?

Chapter 9: Kingdom of the Wind

Plugging In

Read Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 3:5-8; and Acts 2:1-13.

Digging Deep

1. What does it mean to follow? How do we live a life of holy grace? What is the purpose of this life? What makes this kind of life possible?
2. Respond to and discuss these statements: “God is an invisible life giver who is actively moving among us. We can’t see God’s Spirit, but we feel it all around us, just as we feel the breath in our lungs” (90); and “Wind is the way of following. We follow the Spirit of God and join the work the Spirit wherever it leads” (90).
3. Read Ezekiel 37:1-14. What was Ezekiel told to do? What actually returned life to the bones? What does this teach us about our lives? When God says, “I will put my Spirit in you and you will live,” what kind of life was he talking about? How is the Spirit able to bring a new and different kind of life into a person?
4. According to John 3, what must we do to enter the kingdom of God? How is the activity of God described? What is the emphasis of this passage? How can we apply it to our lives today?
5. What happens in Acts 2? What was the result? (the disciples took action)
6. Discuss these questions asked on page 93: “If we have been given the Holy Spirit, why don’t we see these miracles happening in our midst today? Where are the dramatic miracles that the early church experienced? Has the Holy Spirit lost power over time? Has the wind died down?”
7. What is your response to the author’s statement, “We won’t see the effects of the Spirit in our midst if we decide they are not possible and don’t pray for them” (95)? How does this statement apply to Bill’s story that the author told on pages 93-95? Have you ever been a part of a healing at the Holy Spirit’s leading? If so, what happened?
8. Why is it important to be “moved by” and “led by” the Spirit of God? What happens if we don’t let God’s Spirit lead us?

9. Discuss these questions the author asked on page 95: “What if we have become so full of activity that we are no longer available for action? Is it possible that we don’t see the movement of the Spirit around us because we have stopped going out into the world?”
10. On page 97, the author writes, “We can hide in our churches like caves. We can check service off our list and be done with it. Or we can stand in the wind.” What does this mean?
11. Close this session by having a volunteer read the final paragraph of the chapter on page 98. Pray with your students that you may all learn to hear the sound of the wind.

Chapter 10: The Pine and the Mighty Wind

For this session, have students break into groups of 2-3. Provide each group with a copy of this week's leader's guide. Have each group work through the following questions.

1. Take a moment to re-read the passages from last week: Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 3:5-8; and Acts 2:1-13. Talk about any new insights that you may have. Then discuss how these passages have influenced your life this past week. Be completely honest—if they haven't, say so.
2. Check in with your prayer partner. How has praying for him or her been going? How has it affected you to be praying for someone else on a daily basis? What growth have you seen as a result of this exercise?
3. In this chapter, the story of the pine tree continues. How do the trees in the pine grove view the powerful movement of the wind? What does this part of the story teach us about being led by the Spirit?
4. Discuss this statement from the chapter: "The wind has done what we could not. As the ancient ones have said, 'You can count the number of seeds in the apple, but not the number of apples in the seed.'" How does this apply to what this chapter is about?
5. Now apply this idea of "the working of the wind" to your life. Ask God what he wants to do in your life, how his Spirit wants to work. Keep praying for fifteen minutes a day, and add another fifteen if at all possible. During this second fifteen minutes, ask God to show you how he wants to move you.

Chapter 11: The Breath of God In Us

Plugging In

Read Matthew 25:31-46 and James 2:14-17 as a group.

Digging Deep

1. What is happening in Matthew 25:31-46? What is Jesus telling us about justice and compassion? How does this apply to our lives today?
2. According to James, is it possible to have faith in Jesus and not live it out—to not show compassion and to not fight against injustices? Why or why not? How can we live the way?
3. If we live by the Spirit, will our actions be different from normal, everyday practices of most Christians? Why or why not? What would it take for this to happen?
4. Respond to this statement: “God uses us. He used Moses to lead his people. He raised up prophets to communicate to the nations. He used the early church to spread the message of his love throughout the earth. And he calls upon his church today to be his hands to the world. If God’s kingdom will come, and his will be done, it will be done through us” (104).
5. In this chapter, how was the Korean pastor able to discern the author’s need? Why does the author tell us this story?
6. The author challenges you to examine your skills then use those skills to minister to others. What are your skills? Take an honest look at them, and don’t assume your skills have to be big and flashy to be important. What are your gifts and interests? Look for ways those can be a help to others. Pray for a way to use your gifts and interests to be shown to you.
7. In light of praying that your gifts be revealed to you and how you can use those to further the Kingdom, consider these two statements. What do they mean to you? How do they challenge you? What does it mean for the church?
 - a. “The longer we pray, the more we are changed, and the more prayer moves away from asking God for a blessing—to asking God how I can *be* a blessing.

Our heart becomes God's heart. We begin to take on God's love for those around us. We begin to take on God's love for the world" (108).

- b. "If we want to live by the Spirit, we need to consider how God's Spirit may be moving us out into the world. God's Spirit will give us direction—but we must listen. If we really believe that 'God so loved the *world*' (John 3:16), then we must ask ourselves what it means to follow" (110).
8. What does "justice" mean? What does "compassion" mean? Have you ever heard these things defined in this way? How do these things fit with what we've learned about God's will for the world? Describe how someone might live these out.
9. God's command is clear—remember all the verses on pages 110-111—we are to help the poor and needy. The orphans and widows. Who are these people in your life? How can you help?
10. Reflect: What elements of Christianity do the symbols "Water," "Fire," and "Wind" stand for? Why is it important to remember this? How can you "return to the elements"?

Chapter 12: The Axe and the Ancient One

For this session, have students break into groups of 2-3. Provide each group with a copy of this week's leader's guide. Have each group work through the following questions.

1. Take a moment to re-read a few of the passages we looked at in this study: Matthew 20:1-16; John 8:1-11; Isaiah 6:1-8; and Matthew 25:31-46. Talk about any new insights that you may have. Then discuss how these passages have influenced your life over the course of this study. Be completely honest—if they haven't, say so.
2. We have been studying the elements of Christianity—grace, holiness, and the movement of the Spirit. How can you use this knowledge to “go and do likewise”?
3. What have you learned in your prayer time for your partner? How about in your prayer time seeking God's direction?
4. Why does the Ancient Tree tell the young pine that it has been born for a noble purpose? What purpose is it referring to? How does this relate to your life and its purpose? What did the young pine learn about water, fire, and wind?
5. What have you learned about water, fire, and wind? How can they help you from being influenced by the culture around you? In what ways can they help you stay on the narrow road?