

Aim of lesson

To enable the young people to be aware of the impact that the work of the Almighty, in all its forms, should have on our daily lives and on our hopes for the future. It is not an attempt to prescribe the various ways in which God works - 'the wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth' - but to help us to live our lives in a way that is aware of the hand of God at work.

Bible background

Genesis 28; Exodus 17; 2 Kings 6; Malachi 2; Luke 19

Preparation required

It will be good if the young people can discuss their feelings and conclusions freely. Read through the notes and decide whether your group needs the biblical background to give them a basis for discussion or whether they need to air their views first, being prompted by your suggestions from the Bible.

Suggested outline of lesson

Introduction

Start off by getting the young people to think about how God worked in Bible times, and whether people were aware of his hand or whether they put too much down to 'time and chance'. The following examples might help, though you will no doubt think of others:

1. Jacob at Bethel was not aware of the presence of God (Genesis 28:16). He had been asleep in more senses than one.
2. Elisha's servant in Dothan was not aware of the angels of God - (2 Kings 6:17).
3. Malachi 2:17 is instructive. The people were acting unjustly themselves, then blaming God for the injustice. We cannot expect God to act in our lives if we are not prepared ourselves to read what he has written for us and to act upon it. Ezekiel 9:9 is making the same point.
4. The Israelites (Exodus 17:7) doubted whether God was with them, and as a result they were condemned to die in the wilderness. This should be a sobering warning to us, since many parallels are drawn in scripture between the exodus and our lives.

5. The Jews did not recognise Jesus as the son of God (Luke 19:44). They were not irreligious - that was not the problem; but they did not realise that God could intervene in their lives in the way he did through the Lord Jesus.

God at work

This should largely be a discussion lesson, so ask the young people to think about the points in their notes.

- Think of ways in which God influences events in the earth and, potentially, in our lives.
- For each of the examples you have thought of above, how can we be aware of this influence?
- Do you think that you, and people in general, are as aware as they should be that God may be at work in unseen ways? If not, how we can become more aware? Again, think of each of the examples you have been considering.
- Can it happen that people wrongly imagine the hand of God in their lives? How can we be sure that we are not fooling ourselves?

It may be helpful, if you have a large enough class, to split the young people into two groups. The sorts of points they should be able to make are summarised below.

Through his word

Reading the Bible teaches us about God and his purpose, causes us to be aware of our sins, and shows us the way of salvation. We can see its effects in others around us, and can increase its influence in our own lives by prayerful meditation.

In the world at large

We see God at work in the nations of the world, particularly in the Middle East. We should always be on the lookout for events that relate to the scriptures.

Through angels

It is clear from scripture that the angels are active in the lives of God's people and in the world in general. We cannot expect to see angels in the same way as Jacob did at Mahanaim (Genesis 32:1-2); we can only try to be aware of the potential, as illustrated in Hebrews 13:2, for example.

In response to our prayers

God may act directly in response to our prayers for help and guidance. He will also act in unexpected and unasked-for ways to help those who turn to him. Often his hand is not seen, and we are surely often unaware. Consider which is more likely: that God will help us without our being aware of it; or that we will imagine he is helping us when he isn't. Which would be worse?

There is a danger of which we need to be aware. It is sometimes possible to think that God has spoken to us directly, and told us to act in a particular way, when he has not. Sometimes people - in particular schizophrenics - hear voices telling them to do terrible things. Situations can also arise where people on opposite sides of a conflict both act confidently asserting that God is 'on their side'.

It would be sad if our only reaction to this danger was to shut our ears. What we do need to do is to make sure that we are guided above all by the scriptures, and that we are reading them objectively, not looking for verses to support what we have already decided we want to do. Helpful guidance may be found, however, in the words of a prayerful speaker or the advice of a godly friend.

The battle between flesh and spirit

In several passages, such as John 6:63; Romans 8:5-13; Galatians 5:16-17; 6:8, we are presented with a conflict between the flesh (the carnal mind, the old man, the sinful nature), and the spirit (the mind of God, the new man). We are only too aware of this conflict going on inside us, and it is clear from passages like 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 that the influence of the spirit of God is the only thing that will change us from being carnal to spiritual beings. Just as we understand ourselves because we know 'what makes us tick', in order to understand the almighty God we need to understand how he thinks and acts.

The aim of all this is that our way or thinking will be influenced to become more and more like the way he thinks, and the way the Lord Jesus showed us. It may be summed up in passages like Ephesians 3:17 and Colossians 1:27; 3:16.

Seeing the invisible

Finally, to emphasise the importance of this subject, take the young people to Hebrews 11. The chapter is about many different aspects of faith. Faith is introduced as being:

Sure of what we hope for: Faith means being convinced that God's promises to us are real, and that he will do what he has said.

Certain of what we do not see: Faith means seeing beyond the immediate circumstances of our lives and seeing the hand of God at work.

What it meant to the examples in the chapter was:

- An awareness of God and his hand in their lives.
- A willingness to act in the conviction that God was with them.

You could start them off by pointing out some of the early examples, then get them to look for themselves at the rest of the chapter, up to verse 27:

Verse

- 1 Faith is ... 'the evidence of things not seen' (NIV 'being ... certain of what we do not see'). Men and women of faith perceived things that were not ordinarily visible.
- 7 The flood was something 'not seen as yet', but Noah saw it and acted.
- 10 Abraham left one visible, real, city - Ur - to look for another one, invisible, and built by God.
- 13 All the patriarchs had seen the promises afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them.
- 14 They were seeking a country (also v 16).
- 22 Joseph talked about the time when the Israelites would leave Egypt. The Greek word *mnemoneuo* - like mnemonic - means that he remembered this - as though it had already happened.
- 23 Moses' parents saw that he was no ordinary child.
- 26 Moses knew of, and was convinced of, the reward that God would give to his servants.
- 27 Moses 'saw' God, even though he is invisible.

We should not think that God is only helping us when times are good - the experiences of the men and women mentioned here, and especially of the Lord Jesus, would show us that this is not the case. But faith can see his hand in all sorts of situations.

Relevance to our lives

We need to be changed from the human natures with which we were born, and that will only happen by the hand of God, in one way or another. We need to do everything we can in order to allow his influence in our lives to be as great as possible, so that the predominance of our own desires may be overcome.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, we are grateful that you work in our lives to bring us out of darkness into the light of your salvation. May we submit our wills to yours, and allow you to influence us in every way that we can, so that we may serve you and become more like you. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Other suggestions for activities

1. A helpful analogy, which you may like to discuss with the young people, is that of a rose, grafted onto a natural briar. The aim is that the new rose, which will

bear beautiful flowers, will flourish, using the physical support provided by the briar, but inheriting the more desirable nature of the graft - '... receive with meekness the engrafted word (NIV 'the word planted in you'), which is able to save your souls' (James 1:21). One of the aims of a gardener is to prevent the briar rose from producing shoots and suckers; if it does, then the strength of the plant will be devoted to 'the old man' rather than the new, and the flowers will be those of the briar. In just the same way we have to cut back the old man, our human desires, and to strengthen the new. If you have, or can borrow, a copy, 'The two natures in the child of God' by E.W.Bullinger (the Companion Bible man) is helpful, and may contain other useful ideas. It is available from the Christadelphian Office.

2. Ask the young people if there are occasions when they feel God has already been at work in their lives.
3. The young people may like to read 'Ways of Providence' by Robert Roberts.