

Living a Chocolate Life

SESSION I *SAVOR*

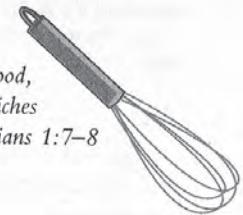
A CHOCOLATE SAMPLER

Check all that apply to you, and then discuss as a group:

- You have savored a rare, expensive European chocolate.*
- You have survived a chocolate baking catastrophe.*
- You often keep chocolate nearby to savor during Bible study or devotion time.*
- Milk chocolate is your preference. Or dark. Or white. (Circle one. Or more.)*
- You live a chocolate life as you savor God's sweet grace in Christ! (Intrigued? Read on!)*

MEMORY MORSEL

"In [Christ] we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, which He lavished upon us." Ephesians 1:7-8

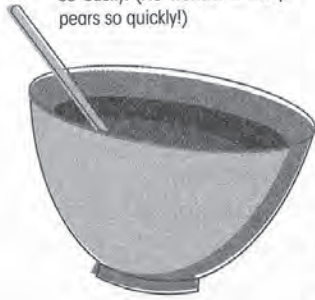


savoring *Grace*

Imagine you are about to receive the most exquisite chocolate indulgence. Not your average grocery-store candy, not even a finer, specialty-shop variety, but an extremely rare, delicate chocolate made from the highest quality cacao beans found only in the most remote region of Africa and shipped to

CHOCOLATE FUN FACT

Cocoa butter, the fat naturally found in the cacao bean, melts just below body temperature, which is precisely why fine chocolate melts in your mouth so easily. (No wonder it disappears so quickly!)



⇒ CHOCOTIVITY

Chocolate-Savoring Taste Test! (Turn to the end of this session to read about it in detail. Consider including this special activity at this point during your study time.)

only one exclusive shop, where each delicacy is handmade. There is a price to pay for this most exclusive chocolate. And someone who loves you has gone to great lengths to find and purchase this delicacy from the finest chocolatier in the world.

Now your loved one is ready to give this precious gift to you. You hold out your cupped hands to receive this extravagant present. As you look down, your jaw drops! A rare, foil-wrapped delicacy lies in your hands, waiting to be gently opened. *Go ahead; unwrap it.* What will you do next? Will you pop the candy in your mouth, chew quickly, and swallow as soon as possible to get rid of it? Oh my, *no!* For a once-in-a-lifetime moment like this, move the delicacy slowly toward your mouth. Observe the beautiful color. Take in the rich aroma. Lay this pure chocolate perfection on your tongue and allow your taste buds to dance with joy as you *savor* this exquisite morsel. Hold its delicate richness on your tongue for as long as possible, taking in the indescribable flavor and the smooth, creamy texture. And then notice how, ever so slowly, the sumptuous treat melts, trickles down your throat, and disappears.

Finished. A memory. Fleeting, wasn't it? That's how it is with chocolate. And that's how it is with most precious things we savor. We hold onto them as long as we can.

We revel in joys and friendships of our school years only to part ways upon graduation. We delight in our children's youth; then, before we know it, the nest is empty. We treasure the time spent with a loved one who lives far away; then, all too soon, we say good-bye. We relish getaway moments and weekends of rest, when we receive respite from the routine pressures of life; and in the blink of an eye, Monday morning arrives again. We savor the

best things of life as long as possible because, far too quickly, they disappear. Finished. A memory. Fleeting, weren't they?

As women *living a chocolate life*, we get to savor something so much greater than all the other things of life: we savor the gift of *God's sweet grace!* His sweet, saving grace is the one thing we can savor that will not melt, grow up, or leave. It will not change, fade with time, or disappear. God's Word assures us that grace is ours for much more than a fleeting moment; it does not become a mere memory but lasts for a lifetime.

So what exactly is grace? By definition, *grace* is "unmerited, undeserved favor." In our sin, we certainly don't deserve God's favor, do we? And there is nothing we can do to earn or merit it. But does God ever favor us! He is crazy about us! And what do we receive as a result?

Check this out: "**In [Christ] we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, which He lavished upon us**" (Ephesians 1:7-8).

#1 dig in!

Ephesians 1:7-8 above (this session's *Memory Morsel*) is full of good stuff. It proclaims clearly what we receive by God's grace and how He accomplished that for us. Explain here in your own words:

- a. What is meant by the word "redemption"? How does this powerful word help to further define the forgiveness that we receive through Christ for our "trespasses" (sins)?

b. What does it mean to “lavish” something upon someone? (Think of a chocolatey example.) What is being lavished here? What does this say about the measure of our Savior’s loving mercy toward us?

Earlier we talked about the best things of life, the things that we savor. By far, grace is the best *thing* of life. “**For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God**” (Ephesians 2:8). Grace is the best gift we will ever receive, even finer and richer and more extravagant than the most exquisite chocolate!

#2 dig in!

Open your Bible to **Ephesians 2:4–9** and read the context that surrounds the grace-filled words of **verse 8**, telling us of God’s free gift of salvation that is ours by grace through faith. Write down the words that speak of God’s demeanor toward us and His actions on our behalf.

✂ TAKE A BITE

Have you ever felt that your sins outweigh the size of God’s grace? that your mess has spread beyond the reaches of His mercy? Perhaps you keep falling into the same sinful trap and have begun to wonder how you can possibly be forgiven. Ponder this, but don’t stop here! Read on . . .



Every fleeting moment and all the other valued things of life are also gifts from God to enjoy. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we can savor our many blessings, giving thanks to the Lord for them while continually savoring His rich, lavish grace, His unending mercy, and His promised salvation in Christ.

While it’s difficult to grasp the extent of God’s grace, to comprehend how great is His love, how rich is His mercy, how generously He lavishes His grace upon us, we have His Word on it! These things are ours, although we’ve done nothing—and can do nothing—to deserve them. Maybe you’ve heard only the Law. The shame of your sins rings loud in your ears, condemns you, and reminds you that you do not deserve forgiveness. Maybe others have attempted to place conditions on God’s grace, causing you to wonder if you’ve sinned beyond the reaches of His mercy. As a result, maybe you find yourself falling into faulty thinking: *Yes . . . but you don’t know what I’ve done. I continue to fall in the same sinful traps. You wouldn’t believe how badly I’ve messed up.*

Chocolate-Frosted Grace

Let me tell you a story about mess-ups. One day I was expecting guests, and I planned to create a special dessert of unparalleled quality—a rich, extravagant, three-layer chocolate cake. (The recipe is included at the end of this session.) The made-from-scratch batter rose beautifully in my round layer cake pans as it baked and filled the house with a chocolatey aroma.

Fresh out of the oven came my beautiful cakes. Eager to complete the sumptuous layered dessert, I began to frost and stack the round layers as soon as they cooled. What I didn’t realize was that I needed to shave the mounded center of each layer before stacking them. (Could it be that I also failed to read the recipe’s directions?)

My work was almost complete when the top two layers, balanced carefully over the mound beneath them, split in half! Crumb-filled frosting and large chunks of cake tumbled down the sides of the cake plate and onto the table. What a mess!

I was distraught, but I had no time to start over. I didn’t want to waste the cake, so I disassembled each gooey layer and sliced off the rounded tops. (They were delicious, by the way.) I pieced my catastrophe together with extra loads of frosting, slathered on, layer upon layer. Somehow, all the flaws

of my messed-up, broken cake vanished under the grace-filled cover of rich, fudgy frosting.

God's rich, extravagant grace covers all our mess-ups, failures, and flaws, much like the thick, fudgy frosting that so beautifully concealed and healed my messed-up flop of a cake.

When we fail, when we make mistakes, when we crumble under the weight of our sin, our heavenly Father lavishes His thick, indulgent grace upon us. He covers our sins and forgives us through Christ's atonement on the cross.

A botched cake is a minor thing; a botched relationship or situation can be major. Maybe you think your failures, mistakes, and mess-ups are beyond repair, can't be covered up or patched back together. Do you wonder how God can forgive the crumbling mess you made? Remember this: no sin, no mess is too much for our Lord to clean up. **Romans 5:8** says, **"But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."** Did you catch that? *"While we were still sinners."* Recall the similar words we read earlier in **Ephesians 2**, that He made us alive in Christ even while we were dead in our transgressions! He chose you and me and saved us *in the midst* of our sin. He doesn't wait for us to try to get our act together by ourselves (as if we could!). He comes to us in the middle of our mess.

In the Middle of a Mess

Do you want to hear about someone else who made one crumbling mess after another? He was the man we know as the apostle Paul, the writer inspired by the Holy Spirit to pen many of the letters to Early Churches (the Pauline Epistles of the New Testament). The man chosen by God to carry the Good News of Christ to the Gentiles, as well as the Jews. This man, formerly known as Saul, had been a zealous Jew, a Pharisee (religious leader) with great authority. Saul was convinced that he had his act together, but he was sadly mistaken. He was so zealous for the Jewish law, so bent on persecuting followers of the Way (Christianity), that he used his authority to pursue, imprison, and oversee the stoning of early Christians. Years later, looking back, Paul said, regarding his former way of life, **"I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women"** (Acts 22:4).

#3 dig in!

Read **Acts 26:9–11** to hear more from Paul recalling and lamenting his former way of life. Next, turn to **Acts 7:58–8:1** to see Saul in the middle of his mess, doing the very thing he describes later. Note the connection between the two passages concerning one of Saul's specific actions. How can we tell that he was a man with great authority, and why is that significant here?

Then, right there, in the middle of Saul's mess, Christ came to him. The Lord called him out of the darkness and into the light of His grace! Our Savior chose Saul, speaking to him as he traveled from Jerusalem to Damascus to persecute Christians there too.

#4 dig in!

Read this amazing account as recorded in **Acts 9:1–19**. Discuss significant details, especially as they relate to God's lavish grace upon Saul and His work through a disciple named Ananias.

Years later, Paul would share the story of his conversion, how the Lord came to him in the midst of his sin (his mess), showered amazing grace upon him, and chose him for a special purpose. (Check out **Acts 22:4–16; 26:12–18; Galatians 1:13–17.**)

#5 dig in!

Paul spoke plainly and repeatedly of God's grace working in him. Read **1 Corinthians 15:9–10**. How can you tell that Paul, now an apostle chosen by God to spread the Good News, recognized the crumbling mess of his former life? What does Paul say about God's grace here? How can you relate to God's grace in your life?

Chocolate-Frosted Grace, Revisited

As I look back to my chocolate cake catastrophe, I realize that although I was able to cover and "fix" my broken chocolate mess, none of us can fix our sins and our state of brokenness. Brokenness takes many forms: *selfish desires* and *sinful pride*, *hurtful words* and *lack of forgiveness*, *critical spirit* and *crippling insecurity*, *lustful thoughts*, and *failure to reach out to others* with His love (and this is just a sampling).

✦ TAKE A BITE

What precious things of life do you savor the most? How are they fleeting?

#6 dig in!

- a. "I've messed up." We've all made one crumbling mess after another. Incomparably worse than a broken chocolate cake, our brokenness takes many forms. Look again at the list above. In what other ways may we be broken?

Even after the apostle Paul became a humble servant of the Lord Jesus, he admitted his ongoing struggle with sin. We commiserate with Paul, who laments in **Romans 7:19**, "**For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.**"

Only by the Holy Spirit's leading can we, with repentant hearts, acknowledge and confess our sins before the Lord, laying them at the foot of the cross. God, through the glorious riches of Christ, heals our brokenness. He covers all these messes and more with His perfection. Jesus makes us brand-new and mess-free! Christ's blood, shed for us, covers those sins. Our heavenly Father declares our sins forgiven!

- b. In what broken messes are you stuck today? Confess those areas of brokenness in which you struggle. If you feel comfortable doing so, write some of them below and share in your group. If you are studying this alone, consider sharing with a pastor, a trusted friend, or a loved one. As you confess your broken mess aloud or on paper, envision yourself laying each sin at the foot of Christ's cross, knowing God lavishes His rich grace and forgiveness upon you in your Savior, Jesus, who heals your brokenness.

Extravagant Chocolate Three-Layer Cake

3 c. flour	3 c. sugar
1½ tsp. soda	1½ tsp. salt
¾ tsp. baking powder	1 c. + 2 tbsp. water
1 c. + 2 tbsp. buttermilk	¾ c. butter, softened
1½ tsp. vanilla extract	3 eggs
6 oz. unsweetened chocolate, melted	

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour three 8- or 9-inch round cake pans. Sift together dry ingredients. Mix sifted ingredients with all remaining ingredients in large mixing bowl. Mix 30 seconds on low speed, then 3 minutes on high. (Batter will be creamy.) Pour batter into prepared pans. Bake 25 to 30 minutes. Cool 10 minutes, then remove layers from pans and cool completely on wire racks before filling and frosting with *Rich Chocolate Frosting*.

Rich Chocolate Frosting:

1 pkg. (8 oz.) cream cheese, softened ¼ c. butter, softened
2 oz. unsweetened chocolate, melted Milk
16 oz. (½ bag) powdered sugar (or more)

Cream cream cheese and butter together. Add chocolate and mix well. Add powdered sugar; beat until light and creamy. Alternately add more powdered sugar and a few drops of milk to reach desired consistency and quantity. Frost on completely cooled cake layers, **shaving the mounded center of each baked layer before frosting and stacking!**

CHOCOTIVITY

Chocolate-Savoring Taste Test!

Savor an assortment of chocolate varieties to kick off your Bible study. (What a great way to further a discussion centered on *savoring* God's grace!) Purchase fine chocolate bars: white (at least 20 percent cocoa butter), milk (30–40 percent cacao), semisweet (35–45 percent cacao), bittersweet/dark (50–70 percent cacao), extra dark (70–99 percent), and so forth. You may wish to include special varieties that contain added flavors, fruits, or nuts. Break each bar into small pieces and pass them around, one flavor at a time. Begin by passing around the mildest, lightest colors and flavors, then move on to progressively darker, richer varieties. Pause after each sample to share comments before moving on to the next.

Remember how you imagined savoring an exquisite, rare chocolate? Now, take each real bite-size piece and savor it. For fun, follow the same savoring instructions given when you imagined. Describe the flavors and textures you experience. Can you pick out added flavors? Is it particularly sweet and light or bitter and intense? Is the texture smooth or gritty? (Texture and flavor work together in the chocolate-savoring experience.) After several seconds, you'll notice how the savored delicacy melts, trickles down your throat, and disappears.