



TOP 7 YOUTH GROUP LESSONS

Created by Ministry to Youth
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Disappointment — — — Page 2

Doubt — — — Page 6

Fruits of the Spirit — — — Page 12

God's Faithfulness — — — Page 16

Going Deeper — — — Page 22

The Prodigal Son — — — Page 29

Tough Times — — — Page 33

DISSAPOINTMENT

Bible: John 16:33

Bottom Line: Never lose heart... God is always with you!

OPENING GAME: WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS

SUPPLIES

- Lots of lemons, cut in half
- 2 Pitchers
- 2 bags of sugar
- Styrofoam Cups
- Bag of ice
- 2 tables
- Paper Hearts – one for each student

HOW TO PLAY THE GAME

Divide your group into two teams and have each team line up across the room from two tables.

On each table, place a pitcher, a bowl of lemons, and a bag of sugar for each team.

Choose an adult to be the nominated “lemonade taster”.

Explain: You’ve heard the phrase ‘When life gives you lemons, make lemonade’?

Well, today we are going to do just that!

When I say GO, the first person from each team will run to the table, grab one lemon, and squeeze it into the pitcher as fast as they can, and then run back to their team.

Then, the next person in line will take their turn.

After everyone has taken a turn squeezing lemons, nominate someone to add sugar and ice to your group’s lemonade.

Each team will serve a prepared glass of lemonade to the “lemonade taster” who will judge which team made the best lemonade.

After the best lemonade is chosen, congratulate the winning team and serve the rest of the lemonade to the students.

TEACH

Wait for responses.

Okay... now, think about one of the most disappointing days of your life... what happened?

Wait! You don't have to share with the group because it's probably not something that you want to relive again.

But, I'd like to share one of my most disappointing memories with you...

Share a story from your teen years in which you were truly disappointed and things didn't work out how you thought that they would.

Let's face it, there are just some days that aren't that great.

Life can be really hard.

And here is something that sometimes Christians don't talk about much: God knows that life is hard.

God never promised us that this life would be easy, in fact, Jesus told his disciples and us these amazing words...

Read John 16:33.

And if anyone knows how hard this life can be, wouldn't it be Jesus?

But listen to the amazing hope and promise that He gives to us – He has overcome the world and He has come to give us peace.

And you hear a similar reminder in other parts of the Bible too.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.

"Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal"

You start to get the idea that what Jesus is giving us is a peace that is beyond anything that can ever happen in our lives.

Life hands us lemons and Jesus says to just keep your eyes on Him and watch what He does.

Does it mean that everything is "poof... perfect!"?

You just magically get the grade on the test that you wanted... or you make the team?

Not necessarily, but what He does promise us is that if we look above the things of this life, and look to Jesus that we see things differently.

When the world sees chaos, we see peace.

When we should lose hope, we find joy.

It really doesn't make sense, but it does.

And that is why Paul says in the verse that I just read – Don't lose heart.

What are some of the reasons that you can think of as Christians that we shouldn't lose heart?

Write down what the students share.

Not only do we have eternal hope and know that even when this world ends and our bodies die, we will be with Jesus... but even as our bodies get old and the world seems to be falling apart, God is making all things new.

The things that are eternal are beyond what this world sees.

Jesus came into a world filled with darkness and death and despair and turned things upside down.

And that is why we, as God's people, are the ones that have hope even in the darkest times because we have a hope.

We know that this world is not all that there is.

We know that even though we might be disappointed or beaten down, that God is with us.

It really is all about perspective.

Choosing to see things from God's point of view.

Choosing to see lemonade, instead of sour lemonade.

Choosing to see the love that God has for us that can't be stopped.

Not even death.

I want to give each of you a heart to put in your pocket, or to put somewhere that you can see it, to remind you to not lose heart.

In this life, we will have disappointments and hurts.

But, don't lose heart because you are not alone and God loves you so much.

And the peace and the hope that comes through Jesus is honestly the kind of thing that won't fade.

No matter what kind of disappointments you may face.

And when the times get tough, you know that there is one you can go to who understands disappointment like no one else: someone who was betrayed by his friends, misunderstood by those around him, and seemed to have lost everything.

Jesus knows disappointment and that is why his words to us should ring so clear...

Read John 16:33.

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

So, take heart.

Give each student a paper heart.

Close in prayer.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Who is someone that you have seen struggle with disappointment and how did they handle it?
- What disappointments are you struggling with? Take some time to pray for one another.
- Which disappointment that Jesus faced can you identify with the most?
- How does it make you feel to know that Jesus had disappointments?
- What is the heart that you received tonight going to remind you of?

DOUBT

Bible: Psalm 10 (preferably from the Message)

Bottom Line: Doubt is often the evidence of faith.

OPENING GAME – I DOUBT IT

SUPPLIES

- Bible trivia (from your brain or find some online!)
- Notecards
- Pens for each youth

Say: (in an overly dramatic voice)

Today, we are going to play a game that will test even the best Bible scholars among us.

You will scratch your heads in agony as you doubt if you truly do know the right answer.

Only the bravest should step forward.

Ask for 6 brave volunteers who feel confident in their Biblical knowledge.

Have the volunteers go in the other room to spend time with their Bibles (make this a funny challenge), making sure that they cannot hear what is going on in the room.

Tell the group once the volunteers are in the other room: Today we are going to try to make our Biblical scholars doubt their answer to these questions.

I want to see your best arguments and confusion tactics, ok?

I will bring the contestants in one at a time and ask them one question each, and once they answer, try to make them second-guess their answer. Then we will call the next scholar in and on and on.

Once the volunteer has answered the question (or attempted to answer) have them join the group. It will be funny to see their reactions as they realize they have been tricked into doubting their answers.

After the game, ask the contestants:

- What was the most difficult thing about answering the trivia questions with others trying to make you doubt your answer?
- Did you doubt whether you had the right answer? Why or why not?
- How is this game like trying to figure out what you believe?
- Is it ok to doubt? Why or why not?

TEACH

Today, we are talking about doubt.

Doubt can be a tough topic, and today you might be surprised by what you will discover.

I want everyone to take some index cards and a pen.

As we talk about doubt, if you think of a question or a doubt that you have, please write it down on those cards.

Don't put your name on it because if it were me and my name were on it, I might not write out my honest doubts.

It's hard to admit that you have doubts.

I know because I have had doubts.

Share, if it isn't too fresh, some of the doubts that you had when you were younger in the faith.

For example, maybe you doubted about prayer or the problem of evil and why bad things happen.

Share honestly, but don't 'rip the bandaid' off too much with this short sharing.

Would it surprise you to hear that many of the greatest Christians throughout time have had serious doubts and questions about the faith?

Feel free to choose one of the prominent Christians mentioned in this article:

<http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/7-prominent-christian-thinkers-who-wrestled-doubt>

King David in the Bible was said to be a man after God's heart, and even he had questions.

Read Psalm 10 (NCV):

"Lord, why are you so far away?
Why do you hide when there is trouble?

Proudly the wicked chase down those who suffer.
Let them be caught in their own traps.

They brag about the things they want.
They bless the greedy but hate the Lord.

The wicked people are too proud.
They do not look for God;
there is no room for God in their thoughts.

They always succeed.
They are far from keeping your laws;
they make fun of their enemies.

They say to themselves, "Nothing bad will ever happen to me;
I will never be ruined."

Their mouths are full of curses, lies, and threats;
they use their tongues for sin and evil.

They hide near the villages.
They look for innocent people to kill;
they watch in secret for the helpless.

They wait in hiding like a lion.
They wait to catch poor people;
they catch the poor in nets.

The poor are thrown down and crushed;
they are defeated because the others are stronger.

The wicked think, "God has forgotten us.
He doesn't see what is happening."

Lord, rise up and punish the wicked.
Don't forget those who need help.

Why do wicked people hate God?
They say to themselves, "God won't punish us."

Lord, surely you see these cruel and evil things;
look at them and do something.
People in trouble look to you for help.
You are the one who helps the orphans.

Break the power of wicked people.
Punish them for the evil they have done.

The Lord is King forever and ever.
Destroy from your land those nations that do not worship you.

Lord, you have heard what the poor people want.
Do what they ask, and listen to them.

Protect the orphans and put an end to suffering
so they will no longer be afraid of evil people."

After reading Psalm 10, ask the following questions:

- What were some of the questions that David asked of God?
- What did you think after reading this Psalm, especially knowing that it was written by a man who truly loved God?

So, let me ask you: Do you have doubts?

Do you secretly worry that your questions or doubts are wrong?

Maybe some of you have already written questions down on your cards....and most of you have questions but are afraid to write them down.

Let me share a few things that doubt says about us:

#1 – Doubt sometimes shows that we have faith.

Expressing the fact that you have questions about God or faith or the Bible is a really scary and brave thing to admit.

And unfortunately, some adults and even pastors can feel uncomfortable with questions, but God does not have a problem with the questions.

In fact, God says that we should come to him with our requests and our needs

Many Christians have found that when they come to God honestly with their questions, that something amazing happens, which leads to..

#2 – Asking questions of God requires that we have faith that He is there and loves us.

Think of any relationship in your life: when you get to the point that you can ask honest questions, that is when you know that your relationship is close.

You aren't putting on a show or acting like everything is fine, but being honest and vulnerable.

That takes faith.

#3 – Doubt can lead us closer to God and help us grow in our faith.

Many Christians who are very strong in their walk with God will point to the times that they had a crisis of faith or asked serious questions.

Why do you think it works that way?

How can doubt bring you closer to God?

Imagine that you go to God with those doubts and questions that make you worry that you aren't strong enough and that you actually have him answer?

God wants us to ask him questions.

God wants us to come to him with those questions.

And through that searching, amazing growth can happen in your life.

#4 – Doubt can lead to answers that strengthen you and prepare you for real life, which can be tough.

One of the main questions that people ask about is “why do bad things happen?”

Maybe share your own struggle with this question.

And though there are no easy answers, when you go to God with these questions, you learn things about him.

That he is loving and fair always.

That he knows our hearts and motives, and we don't have to ever worry that He doesn't understand us or 'get' us.

5 – Doubt can lead you closer to God if you just simply go to Him.

Does it mean that He will immediately answer you?

No, probably not.

And God has shown a habit of answering His children in strange ways, such as whispering to them, speaking in burning bushes, and even in the life of a tiny baby born in a manger.

But this is something you can be sure of: God wants to talk to you.

He wants to hear what you are thinking, and if you listen or watch....you might just be surprised in how God talks with you about your questions.

Maybe someone will come up to you with just the thing you were asking or you hear a song with words that really speak to you.

It might take years or seconds, but keep on going to God and waiting on those answers.

And know that God loves you.

You are safe asking him...questioning him.

I want you to take a minute and just write down the questions and doubt that you might have.

Don't put your name, but know that I will be here afterwards to talk if you want to come up and say “hey, that was my question...can we talk more about this? “

And I will take these questions and try to answer these questions in lessons the next few weeks.

I was going to read them out loud in a minute, but only to show you all something really important, so write on the card “Don’t read out loud” if you don’t want me to read it.

Give the students a few minutes (some will finish quickly, some will take longer) and pass them in to you.

Read the questions/doubts slowly and making sure to not let this become a time to laugh at others or try to guess who wrote what as this might be very vulnerable for some.

As you read, you will likely find very similar questions, which is a great insight into the group of where to go with future lessons.

After you have read the questions, ask:

Were you surprised by any of the questions?

Raise your hand if you have asked any of these questions at some time in your life?

(Hopefully, most of the students will raise their hands).

I hope you see through this simple exercise that you are not alone in your doubt or your questions.

Share some of the questions that you yourself have asked.

If there are questions that you feel a need to immediately answer address those with the group at this point as you feel is age and situationally appropriate.

What questions or doubts did you hear a couple of times as I read? I hope this lesson gives you some peace in realizing that no one has all the answers.

No one has it all together in this faith thing, and that is actually a good thing because it is in asking questions sometimes that we learn.

It is the questions that can drive us to really depend on God and one another in ways we wouldn’t if we had all the answers.

God loves us just as much, if not more, after hearing these questions and doubt than he ever has.

Close in prayer.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What questions did you hear that were asked the most by the group?
- How does it make you feel to know that everyone has questions or doubts at some point
- What is the one question that you would ask God if he were sitting next to you right now?
- What are some of the ways that God might answer your questions or doubts?

FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT

Bible: John 15:5, Galatians 5:20:22–23, Proverbs 16:32, Matthew 5:43–48

Bottom Line: Stay connected to Jesus and good stuff comes out of your life.

OPENING GAME: KEEP IT UP

SUPPLIES

- Masking tape
- 2–3 beach balls (more if your group is large)

Description:

Split the group into two even teams and mark a line down the middle of the playing area with masking tape. Each group takes one side of the playing area.

Players spread out wherever they want on their side.

The game will consist of beach balls being thrown (or hit) and caught between the two sides.

Players attempt to keep the balls moving and not allow the balls to hit the ground on their side of the playing area.

If a ball hits the ground, the opposing team is awarded points.

The team that has the most points at the end of the game wins.

Variations:

If your group is large, consider adding more beach balls.

If your group is really big, consider dividing it into four parts instead of two.

After the game, say:

In life, we often react to others in the same way we are treated.

If your brother hits you, you hit him back. If your parents yell at you, you yell back.

Sort of like what happened in the game we just played.

If one team hit the ball hard, the other team reacted by hitting it hard too.

If one team got real competitive, the other team did too.

Today, we're going to explore how we can react differently to others.

We're going to discover how we can break the cycle.

If someone is mean to us, we're going to learn the secret to how we can react in love rather than hate.

Let's get started!

TEACH

SUPPLIES

- Jar of small pickles
- A few trash bags
- Bag of large marshmallows
- Good, ripe fruit
- Rotten fruit

Say: To get started today, I need two volunteers.

Choose two volunteers to come up front. Have them stand about 10 feet apart.

Give one volunteer an open jar of pickles.

Put a trash bag over the other preteen (so their clothes don't get pickle juice on them).

Place trash bag or plastic sheeting over the floor where the volunteer is standing.

Give the volunteer an open bag of large marshmallows.

The volunteer then attempts to throw a pickle into the mouth of the other volunteer.

Next, the other volunteer attempts to throw a marshmallow into the mouth of the other volunteer.

They must stay 10 feet apart while throwing the items. Continue, throwing a pickle and marshmallow.

Keep track of how many marshmallows and pickles land in the mouth of a volunteer.

After the activity, congratulate each volunteer for their effort and ask the audience to give them a round of applause.

Say:

Believe it or not, if someone throws a smelly pickle at our faces, we can learn to throw a soft delicious marshmallow back at them!

What do I mean by that? I mean that it is possible for us to react in love rather than anger.

We can forgive rather than seek revenge. But, we can't do it by ourselves.

Let's look up a verse in the Bible that helps explain this.

Read Galatians 5:22–23 (NCV):

But the Spirit produces the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. There is no law that says these things are wrong.

What do you think these verses means? (Get responses)

A lot of times people misunderstand these verses.

They think God is saying to be full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. God is saying more than that.

He is saying that those characteristics are formed in our lives when we stay connected to Jesus.

Let's take a look at another verse that will help us understand this concept.

Read John 15:5 (NCV):

I am the vine, and you are the branches. If any remain in me and I remain in them, they produce much fruit. But without me they can do nothing.

Jesus is saying that a branch needs to stay connected to the vine in order for fruit to grow. Good fruit will naturally come out of a branch that is connected to the vine.

[Show good, ripe fruit]

The branch doesn't need to try and create the fruit in its own power. Its job is to stay connected to the vine.

When it does, good fruit will be produced. Like this fruit I'm holding in my hand.

Jesus is saying that we are like the branch. Our goal is to stay connected to Jesus.

If we stay close to him in our everyday lives, then good fruit will come out of us.

The good fruit is the characteristics we read about in Galatians 5:22–23 – love, patience, kindness, goodness, etc.

Like a branch can't make the fruit, we can't simply choose to be loving, patience, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and have self-control.

It's the Holy Spirit's job to create those characteristics in our lives. Our job is to stay connected to Jesus.

When we do, good characteristics flow out of us.

We find ourselves naturally reacting to the bully at school with love and compassion. We are more likely to forgive our friends. We are more patient.

Sure, it's a choice we make. But ultimately, it's God working through us to make us more like Him.

[Show bad fruit]

So, what happens when we don't take the time and effort to stay connected to Jesus?

Well, bad stuff comes out of our lives. Much like if you were to break off a branch from the vine, the fruit goes bad.

Our lives begin to look like rotten fruit, like in this fruit I'm holding. Yuck.

The Bible actually talks about what this bad fruit looks like.

Read Galatians 5:20 (NCV):

...worshiping gods, doing witchcraft, hating, making trouble, being jealous, being angry, being selfish, making people angry with each other, causing divisions among people...

So, when we're feeling jealous, angry, and selfish or causing drama around us, those things are the bad stuff coming out of our lives because we are not connected to Jesus.

We're unconnected to Him.

We're not spending time with God in prayer, worship or allowing God to speak to us from the Bible.

Here's the bottom line of today's lesson: Stay connected to Jesus and good stuff comes out of your life.

When we choose to surrender our lives to Jesus, the pollution of sin in our lives is cleaned up.

We now have an opportunity for good stuff to come out of our lives.

We have an opportunity to live the way God wants us to live.

We won't be perfect. We'll mess up often. That's just a part of being human.

In order to have good stuff come out of our lives, we have to stay connected to Jesus.

When we do, the Holy Spirit will make us more loving, kind, patient, etc.

We'll be able to return a sour pickle with a soft marshmallow.

We'll be able to react differently than we were treated.

[End lesson]

GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

Bible: Exodus 3:1-14; Deuteronomy 7:9; Malachi 3:6; Job 23:13; Matthew 13:8; Isaiah 55:10-11

Bottom Line: God is faithful so we can believe what He says.

SUPPLIES

- Chairs (4-6 depending on the size of your space)
- Cushions or other "obstacles" your space might provide
- Several blindfolds (one for each group)
- Stopwatch (optional)

OPENING GAME: FOLLOW FAITHFULLY

Before the game, set up an obstacle course with items from around the room.

Chairs and cushions work great for this.

Divide your students into groups of three and blindfold one person in each group.

The teams of three must stay in a line, in front and behind the blindfolded person.

The team members in the front and back of the blindfolded player must guide the blind person through an obstacle course using only their voices.

When the three players return to where they started, the blindfolded person must then attempt to follow the same path alone, trying to remember each step and turn they took, while still blindfolded.

If the blindfolded person is successful and is able to make it to the end of the obstacle course, then their team wins.

If the blindfolded player is not successful, all three players will come back to the starting line and another player from the team will be selected to be blindfolded.

The team will get into formation and once again go through the obstacle course.

Remember to change the obstacle course pattern each time you play a new round.

To add an extra element of difficulty, see which team is able to make it through the course the quickest.

TEACH

Say: Some of you were really great leaders and some of you were excellent followers – both were pretty difficult roles!

It was important that you didn't give up at any point in the game... you just kept going no matter what.

So, I want to ask this question: What does it mean to be faithful?

Allow a few students to respond.

In our culture, the quality of faithfulness can be difficult to find.

The idea of love and leave or here today and gone tomorrow is so prevalent among people.

Friendships end.

Relationships are on and off.

Even marriages end with one of the leading causes being "unfaithfulness."

We want everything in the world and we want it quick.

Sometimes we have a short attention spans for all things, including relationships, and we don't have the patience and take the time to invest for the long haul.

However, every now and then, we encounter someone who breaks the mold of normalcy in regards to faithfulness.

It is likely that at some point in our lives we will have that one family member, or friend, maybe you even have more than one, that could be described as faithful.

Tried and true.

In a society that struggles with being faithful, how do we identify it?

Ask: What does faithfulness look and feel like? How do we define it?

Allow a few responses from students and share your personal definition of "faithfulness."

Now, take a look at the people in your life.

Close your eyes and take a mental inventory of those who impact your life on a regular basis.

Who could you describe as being faithful?

Chances are only a few names come to mind.

Even now, you're thinking of someone who you believe is the definition of faithfulness.

They're dependable.

They're trustworthy.

They're not going to let you down.

But, they're human.

That's reality.

Only God himself is ultimately faithful.

If you are a Christian, you have been adopted into the family of a Father who keeps you on his mind.

He will never write you off or leave you alone.

God will not change His mind in regard to you nor will he leave you behind.

If you are a member of God's family by faith, then you have entered into a relationship with God, our Heavenly Father, who will stick closer to you than a brother.

We are unable to talk about God without coming to the realization that He is our faithful God!

There are multiple encounters between God and men and women in the Bible that illustrate His faithfulness.

When Moses encountered God at the burning bush to receive his heavenly assignment, he first questioned God's credentials.

Moses asked God to reveal his name and in God's own fashion he responded in Exodus 3:14 by saying, "Yahweh: I am who I am."

Read Exodus 3:1-14.

One day Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian. He led the flock far into the wilderness and came to Sinai, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire from the middle of a bush. Moses stared in amazement. Though the bush was engulfed in flames, it didn't burn up. "This is amazing," Moses said to himself. "Why isn't that bush burning up? I must go see it."

When the Lord saw Moses coming to take a closer look, God called to him from the middle of the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

"Here I am!" Moses replied.

“Do not come any closer,” the Lord warned. “Take off your sandals, for you are standing on holy ground. I am the God of your father —the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” When Moses heard this, he covered his face because he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord told him, “I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries of distress because of their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them out of Egypt into their own fertile and spacious land. It is a land flowing with milk and honey—the land where the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites now live. Look! The cry of the people of Israel has reached me, and I have seen how harshly the Egyptians abuse them. Now go, for I am sending you to Pharaoh. You must lead my people Israel out of Egypt.”

But Moses protested to God, “Who am I to appear before Pharaoh? Who am I to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt?”

God answered, “I will be with you. And this is your sign that I am the one who has sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God at this very mountain.”

But Moses protested, “If I go to the people of Israel and tell them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ they will ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what should I tell them?”

God replied to Moses, “I am who I am. Say this to the people of Israel: I am has sent me to you.”

Again, in Deuteronomy, God reveals His faithfulness to us.

Read Deuteronomy 7:9.

“Understand, therefore, that the Lord your God is indeed God. He is the faithful God who keeps his covenant for a thousand generations and lavishes his unfailing love on those who love him and obey his commands.”

In Malachi, God says that He does not change.

Read Malachi 3:6.

“I am the Lord, and I do not change. That is why you descendants of Jacob are not already destroyed.

Even Job, in the midst of trial and hardship, testifies that God does not change.

Read Job 23:13.

But once he has made his decision, who can change his mind? Whatever he wants to do, he does.

And in the New Testament, we read that Jesus is faithful.

Read Hebrews 13:8.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

We know these attributes of the faithfulness of God, but being in a relationship with Him brings this faithfulness to light.

God is faithful in character and in action.

He has the last word on all things.

Read Isaiah 55:10-11.

“The rain and snow come down from the heavens and stay on the ground to water the earth. They cause the grain to grow, producing seed for the farmer and bread for the hungry.

It is the same with my word I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it.

So, whatever God says, happens.

He is a never-changing God, so what He says goes.

The Bible says in Matthew 24:36 that one day, the very foundations of our earth will pass away.

We can believe that because God says it.

His faithfulness is foundational to who He is.

God’s attribute of faithfulness is transferrable to us.

Do you remember when your parents were concerned that you had healthy friendships?

This was probably especially true as you grew to become more independent and started choosing friendships for yourself.

They wanted to be sure that you did not get involved with other people who might lead you astray.

They did, or do, this with the understanding that spending time with the wrong crowd likely meant that you could become part of the crowd.

However, conversely, good friends had a healthy influence on us.

The same is true about Christ.

When we are a part of God’s crowd, His attribute of faithfulness becomes one of our characteristics.

We become faithful in reading our Bible and praying.

We become faithful in worship.

We become faithful witnesses of the life-changing power of the Gospel.

We become faithful stewards with our money.

We become faithful in our work ethic.

So, God's faithfulness not only describes who He is, it shows us who we, as His children, can become.

Think about our God who knows everything about us, the God who created us, and then we can come to understand that in spite of being all-knowing of our every fault and our failure, He never chooses to forsake us, or leave us.

God is always faithful.

His faithfulness leads us to Himself.

There's nothing that I can do that would change His mind about loving me intently.

There's no place I could go to escape Him.

There's not a chance God's faithfulness will ever cease.

There, we find hope and peace and confidence in knowing that the God we serve will not fail us.

Because His faithfulness extends throughout the generations, we can be confident in knowing that just as He was faithful to Noah, Moses, Job, Esther, Ruth, and so many others, God will be faithful to you and I today.

God's faithfulness is our example.

He leads us to be faithful in response to his own faithfulness bestowed upon us.

Close in prayer.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Think of someone that you view as "faithful." How is this quality shown in their daily lives?
- Do the influences in your life and the people around you, encourage you to be faithful? How?
- Can you think of an instance in your life where you know that God was faithful to you? If you're comfortable, please share.
- Other than the stories that were mentioned in our lesson today, can you think of other instances of God's faithfulness in the Bible?
- Why is it difficult for some people to believe that God will never leave them?
- What steps can you take to become more faithful to your family, friends, and to God?
- Are there any situations in your life you could improve by demonstrating faithfulness?

GOING DEEPER

Bible: John 7:37-39; Isaiah 55:1; John 4:14; Ezekiel 47:1-7; Ezekiel 47:8-12

Bottom Line: The more we experience and interact with the Spirit of God, not only is our deepest need met but we experience “new life” within.

(Note: This lesson is a bit different than all the other ones. There is no opening game nor discussion questions.)

TEACH

SAY: Today, we’re talking about “going deeper” in your relationship with God... but what does that mean? Allow a few responses.

If you think about it, you will have relationships with hundreds, if not thousands of people, throughout your lifetime – some of those relationships will be shallow, maybe you will just know someone for a small amount of time, or you will only see them occasionally.

But you will also have deep and meaningful relationships, with people like family and close friends... those that know the “real” you and you really know them.

When we’re talking about “going deeper” with God, you have to understand that it’s not only a desire that we should have within us to experience and interact with the Spirit of God, but God also wants to interact with you... because He wants to give you something that you can’t experience outside of your relationship with Him – new life.

Let’s begin by reading John 7:37-39:

“On the last day of the festival, the great final celebration, Jesus stood up and shouted out, ‘If anybody’s thirsty, they should come to me and have a drink! Anyone who believes in me will have rivers of living water flowing out of their heart, just like the Bible says!’

He said this about the spirit, which people who believed in him were to receive. The spirit wasn’t available yet, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”

Here’s a little background on the Feast of Tabernacles.

“On the last day of the festival, the great final celebration, Jesus stood up and shouted out...”

When the Scripture mentions “the festival,” it’s referring to the Jewish festival of Tabernacles.

In the time of Jesus, it was one of the 3 great annual pilgrimage feasts (the others being Passover and Pentecost).

It consisted of an 8-day celebration when thousands of Jewish people would come to Jerusalem from all over.

The point was to remind the people of when their ancestors were “wandering in the wilderness, living in tents or tabernacles,” after being freed from Egypt, and before settling into the Promised Land.

The Feast of Tabernacles was a symbol of great national hope because it represented two things: the coming of the Messiah and the liberation from Rome.

It was also an agricultural celebration, coming at the climax of harvest season.

Lavish celebrations including – lighting of lamps, dancing by torchlights, march of priests and people around the altar carrying citrus fruit and waving palm branches.

The climax of the Feast of Tabernacles was on the last day.

On the last day, the priests would pour out water and wine around the altar, and say various prayers.

There were two main themes among those prayers, which Jesus spoke directly about.

Jesus directly addresses these themes when he has a big audience, and at the climax of the festival – at just the right moment, he says something about both of them.

They were familiar concepts, but he gave them new meaning.

Let’s look at those two things that Jesus spoke about.

Thing #1 – Water

“If anybody’s thirsty, they should come to me and have a drink!”

We’re talking about the Middle East – it’s mostly desert and mostly hot – kinda like our summer weather.

Water is the #1 requirement.

If a town or tribe had a good water supply from a stream, spring, or well, it could thrive.

If not, it would be in trouble.

So, when Jesus talks about water and being thirsty, everyone can immediately relate.

But Jesus’ words here were also an echo of Isaiah 55:1. His listeners would have made that connection because it was familiar to them. It is one of the great evangelic invitations in the entire Old Testament.

Read Isaiah 55:1:

The Lord says, “All you who are thirsty, come and drink. Those of you who do not have money, come, buy and eat! Come buy wine and milk without money and without cost.”

Jesus is making a profound point that we'll dive deeper into in just a moment.

But first... just a few chapters back, in the Book of John, Jesus has a conversation with a woman at the well, and says these words:

Read John 4:14:

“But anyone who drinks the water I'll give them won't ever be thirsty again. No: the water I'll give them will become a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

John, the writer, is telling us a story. He wants us to really get Jesus' point.

In fact, he's been talking a lot about this concept in the passages leading up to this. It's been a key theme leading up to this point.

All of these passages of Scripture are telling us something and they're causing us to go below the surface.

Before we dive into what Jesus is saying here, let's put together all of the pieces of HOW he's saying it.

How is he saying it?

Water. Everyone is aware of their personal need for water, especially in a desert climate.

He's got a huge audience of thousands of people, who have been at an 8-day festival celebrating the hope the coming of the Messiah and the liberation from Rome.

At the climax of the festival he says these words, just as the priests are pouring water and wine over the altar, saying a prayer related to rain for their crops.

Keep in mind this is also an agricultural festival, and it's the peak of harvest season.

It was the perfect moment.

The context of his message brings with it a certain level of:

Depth. Meaning. Purpose. Weight.

Jesus wanted his audience to get it. He wanted to grab their attention. He wanted to share a profound truth. He didn't want them to take his words lightly.

So, what is Jesus really saying? And what could this mean for you and I?

Jesus' message was a new idea... a new concept.

Jewish spirituality in Jesus' day was full of religion, rituals, and rules.

Jesus' words went much deeper than that.

His point – The spirit of God satisfies the deep thirst our souls have for something “more.”

Like water gives life to our body, the Spirit gives life to our soul.

This “life” has a never-ending supply. Like water from a spring, it just keeps coming... because we continually need it.

When you engage or interact with with the Spirit of God, something deep within your heart is satisfied.

When you pursue God, you are whole

These words cut through all our doubts, questions, hurts and fear we have about the Church, God, and the Bible.

He is simply saying, “Come to me as you are. With all your doubts, fears, hurts, and questions. Come to me.”

Jesus' words go below the surface stuff of religion, rituals, and even the hustle of everyday life.

He's speaking to the very core of what it means to be human; to the deepest part of ourselves, and saying that an intimate, personal relationship with our Creator is what we crave.

The Spirit of God is what brings our life purpose and meaning.

Based on personal experience, I believe this is an ongoing experience.

It's a life-long journey.

We'll make mistakes and mess up.

We'll look to other things to fill that void because it's all a part of being human... it's a part of the process.

Thing #2 – New Life

“Anyone who believes in me will have rivers of living water flowing out of their heart, just like the Bible says!”

What is living water? Such a strange phrase.

I thought it meant that the water was “alive.” It's always been a bit confusing for me.

Let's go below the surface.

Literally, “living water” is simply “running water” that comes from streams or rivers, rather than a spring or well.

Water that's more likely to be fresh and clean, rather than stagnant.

The basic idea here is that fresh water is "life giving" to all that it comes in contact with – the fish and all that is within it; the trees and plant life.

Then, Jesus makes a connection that resonates with his audience.

"Rivers of living water flowing out of their heart, Just like the Bible says!"

Where? Most likely in Ezekiel 47 and the Jewish audience would have made that connection.

In Ezekiel 47:1-7, Ezekiel was describing a man showing him a river flowing out of the Temple.

As he moved along the river, it got deeper and deeper.

Read Ezekiel 47:8-12:

"The man said to me, "This water will flow toward the eastern areas and go down into the Jordan Valley. When it enters the Dead Sea, it will become fresh. Everywhere the river goes, there will be many fish. Wherever this water goes the Dead Sea will become fresh, and so where the river goes there will be many living things. Fishermen will stand by the Dead Sea. From En Gedi all the way to En Eglaim there will be places to spread fishing nets. There will be many kinds of fish in the Dead Sea, as many as in the Mediterranean Sea. But its swamps and marshes will not become fresh; they will be left for salt. All kinds of fruit trees will grow on both banks of the river, and their leaves will not dry and die. The trees will have fruit every month, because the water for them comes from the Temple. The fruit from the trees will be used for food, and their leaves for medicine."

What did the Jewish people of Jesus' day think that passage meant?

Here's what I found when I did some research. I could be wrong about their interpretation – I'm not 100% sure.

And there may have been some different thoughts about it among the people in Jesus' day.

So, this is the best I could find.

The New Jerusalem was thought to be a literal place that was to come at some time in the future.

They believed that one day in the future, the Messiah will be anointed as the king of Israel and sit on the throne of David in Jerusalem.

He will rebuild the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

During this time, Jews believe an era of global peace and prosperity will be initiated, the world will turn toward the one God of Israel.

Whatever they actually thought was true about that passage, Jesus put a different spin on it.

What did Jesus have to say about that passage? He is the source of “new life”!

As we pursue God, our spirit, or soul, comes alive. A change happens on the inside of us.

God moves. He speaks. He’s on the move in our lives. Then, we begin to notice an outward change. We’re more loving, compassionate, at peace, accepting, caring, and so on.

We experience new life on the inside. Then, stuff on the outside changes. We’ll never be able to change our actions or attitudes purely by will power alone.

It’s God at work in us.

What does that mean for you & I? The more we experience and interact with the Spirit of God, not only is our deepest need met but we experience “new life” within.

As a result, characteristics like love, peace, understanding, joy, and compassion surface in our lives.

God’s very presence in us overflows in every area of our lives.

I think many of us can look back and see moments in our lives where we experienced “new life” for a period of time.

(Take this opportunity to share a personal story of a time when you experienced “new life” for a period of time.)

Now, I’m an idealist. I want to believe this is an ongoing experience, but that’s simply not reality.

What I am about to say is detouring a bit from the text, but I believe there is a lot of truth in it.

I think the idea of “new life” points to the idea that there are “seasons” of life – periods of time that have a certain overall theme to them.

“New life” looks different in each of those seasons.

(Share some of the seasons of life you’ve been through and what God was doing in each of them.)

I think it’s worthwhile for us to recognize what season we’re in and what God is doing in that season.

Even in the winter (pain, trauma, hurt, suffering, etc), God is still at work in your life – He’s doing something.

Sometimes death happens before new life... winter before spring.

If we pay attention, we’ll see what God is doing in and around us.

Here are some questions to reflect on: What season of life are you in right now? What kind of “new life” is God bringing forth?

WRAP UP

I’ve done a lot of talking. Thanks for hanging in there.

As I wrap up, I’m going to read this passage one more time:

“On the last day of the festival, the great final celebration, Jesus stood up and shouted out, ‘If anybody’s thirsty, they should come to me and have a drink! Anyone who believes in me will have rivers of living water flowing out of their heart, just like the Bible says!’

And I leave you with this question...

What is it that God is speaking to you this morning?

(Pause and allow students to have a moment of reflection. Either play a soft worship song or have a minute or two of silence.)

End in Prayer.

THE PRODIGAL SON

Bible: Luke 15:11-32

Bottom Line: No matter how far we may run away, God will always love us.

SUPPLIES

- Chocolate pudding or Spaghetti O's (a very messy food)
- Bowls
- Paper towels

OPENING GAME: EAT LIKE A PIG

Set up a long table in the front of your space.

Ask for 4-5 'brave' volunteers to come to the front and stand behind the table.

Say: Today, we are going to hear a story in which the main character becomes so desperate for food that he had to eat what pigs eat.

So, today our challenge is to eat like pigs... which just means it will be messy!

We will set a bowl of messy food in front of you and you will have to eat it without a fork or spoon... and without using your hands.

We're going to see who can clear their bowl the fastest – Ready? Go!

Once the first group has participated, see if there are others who would like to take the challenge and even change up the foods if you like.

Be sure to take photos!

TEACH

That's probably not the way that most of you eat... but it was hilarious to watch!

Today, we are going to divide into groups and tell the story of this guy that I mentioned earlier that ate with pigs.

This is the story of the "prodigal son" found in Luke 15:11-32.

Often, the Pharisees and religious leaders of the day, would complain that Jesus would associate with sinners – notorious criminals and tax collectors.

Jesus was telling this story of the prodigal son to those people.

Divide the students into groups of 6-8 people and give each group a Bible.

Say: Each group is going to read the story found in Luke 15:11-32.

Read the Scripture and come up with a creative way to share the story.

Make sure and involve every person in your group because once you are done, we will have a chance for each group to share their retelling of story.

Also, try to tell us what you think Jesus was trying to get across through this story.

Give the groups 10-15 minutes depending on how involved and creative they get.

Then, give each group a chance to share their retelling.

Jesus chose to share deep things about God, the Kingdom, and faith through stories called “parables.”

These stories were real and easy to relate to.

Let’s see...

Are any of you the youngest child in your family?

How would you describe the younger son in this story?

What do you think about him asking his father for his inheritance?

Raise your hand if you are the oldest child in your family.

How would you have felt if you were the oldest son in this story?

See, there are heavy emotions and drama in this story because let’s face it... families can get really messy, right?

If you have a funny story, with some good drama, share a story about your siblings.

In this parable, the younger son basically goes to his father, and says: “Hey, old man... you know how when you die I will get your money and stuff... yeah, I want it now”.

In a super selfish way, it is like he is acting like his dad has already died.

And then, the son leaves and goes crazy, wild doing all kinds of things that he shouldn’t do and blows all of the money.

He ends up wishing that he could eat what the pigs are eating and decides to go back and beg his dad to just let him have even a scrap of mercy.

And here is where we get to the real amazing part of the story.

If you were his father, what would you have done if your son came back after all of those things had happened?

But no, this father (who is supposed to represent God, by the way...) has been waiting and looking for his son to return.

And not just that, when he sees him, he runs to him, hugs him, and showers him with blessings.

This father is radical and does exactly the opposite of what you think he would do: He welcomes his son home with open arms.

And even so much that it really makes the older son super mad and jealous.

Maybe some of you can relate to the oldest son: He had stayed with the father and had done what he thought he was supposed to do.

But, here is where you can see a bit more into the hearts of the characters...

Yes, the older son seemed to follow the rules, but in his own way, he was rebelling because he didn't trust his father.

And also, he was just kind of whiny!

Maybe he thought that he was the favorite son now that his younger brother was gone.

Whatever it was that the older son thought, one thing he didn't about think was how relieved he was to see that his younger brother was home and safe, which kind of shows what was in his heart.

But, like the father tells the older son – this son was dead and is now alive.

See, Jesus told this story to each one of us.

In our own individual way, we have gone to God and insulted him... we have taken the love and gifts that He has given us and just thrown them away.

And all the while, you know what God wants for us?

For us to be home and to know that we are loved by him.

As hard as it must have been for the father to let his son go, it's almost like he knew that he needed to go and try it his way.

But you know what, the father probably knew that it would end badly for his son.

So, he was waiting for him to return home and no telling how long the father had just been there waiting and watching for his son on the road.

And I think that Jesus wants those of us who think that we have gone so far away that God would never want to take us back to really stop and hear these words.

Feel the arms of God around us when we return home ashamed and broken.

No matter what you have done.

No matter how far you have tried to run away.

No matter how bad you have failed.

God loves you and will always be standing there waiting to see you return home.

And when he sees you, it's like he runs to hug you and welcome you home.

That is the kind of love that God has for you.

You are his child and nothing will ever change that.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Which son in the story do you relate to the most and why?
- How do you think the father felt in the story?
- How did you expect the father to react when the prodigal son returned?
- How does it make you feel to know that God loves you no matter what you do?
- Think of someone you know who may be running from God (don't say any names, but think of them to yourself). Take a moment to pray that they would turn back to God.

TOUGH TIMES

Bible: 2 Corinthians 4:7-9

Bottom line: We have hope in God, even in the tough times.

SUPPLIES

- Clay pots of all sizes/shapes
- Notes: Pots will get broken. The more pots you have, the longer the game will last.
- Lay one pot aside for the lesson.
- Various sizes of balls (foam, ping pong, tennis, basketballs, etc.)
- 2 Buckets
- Painter's tape
- Sharpie

OPENING GAME: JAR BOWLING

Set-up terra cotta pots in a straight line against a wall outside.

Have the students form two teams of equal size and create single file lines.

Next, use the masking tape to create a line for the teams to stand behind.

Place various sizes and types of balls in a bucket by each line – one for each team.

Designate a leader as the "scorekeeper."

The goal of the game is to score the most points by knocking over the most pots.

Teams will take turns playing, one person at a time.

When it's your turn, choose one ball and try to knock over a pot.

If the ball leaves the ground, or you throw it, you will lose one point for your team.

Each team gets a point for each pot they knock over.

If the pot breaks, you will win an extra point for your team.

When all of the pots are broken, or you have decided the game is over, add up all of the points and declare a winner.

Be sure to clean up any broken pieces after the game is over.

TEACH

Have the extra terra cotta pot and Sharpie on hand.

Say: Have you ever had “one of those days”?

You know... the kind where you think “Wow, I should just go back to bed and try this day again.”

Share, if you have one, a day or even a week or year that was very tough for you.

Each of us go through tough times.

Allow a few students to respond after each of the following questions.

Think about your own life and people you know: What are some of the difficult times you or others have faced.

How do you feel when you see the news?

What types of hard situations do you see other people facing?

Now, if you could sum up all this pain in an emotion – what words would you choose?

As they share, write the words on the extra pot in bold letters with the Sharpie – or invite the students to write the words on the pot.

I wish that I could say that all of these things that happen and the hurt we’ve written here just didn’t exist, but that would be a lie.

Life can be very hard.

But, the good news is that God is always with you.

And for those who follow Christ, we have hope in God, even in the tough times.

Paul, who wrote a huge chunk of the New Testament, had his fair share of tough times-

Read 2 Corinthians 11:23b-27.

I have worked harder, been put in prison more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers.

I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights.

I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm.

Allow the students to respond after each of the following questions.

Say: List some of the trials that Paul faced.

How would you feel if you were Paul?

How did he deal with all of this?

Let Paul tell you in his own words how he dealt with all of these things, because they are pretty inspiring:

Read 2 Corinthians 4:7-9.

We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves.

We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed.

Ask: What words did you hear that describe how tough times can make you feel?

Write the words on the pots being careful not to include the 'but not' words in verses 7-9.

Paul doesn't diminish or discount the pain.

He felt it... yet it's the 'but not' part of his words that I want you to focus on...

Listen again to his words:

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

Life is hard.

Our world and the people in it can be cruel.

I think Paul reminds us with his image of a jar of clay that life can be really hard, and it can sometimes leave us feeling all these things we wrote on the pots... depressed, alone, confused...

But with Christ we are not ever destroyed, in despair, abandoned or destroyed... why?

Because we hold in these breakable jars a treasure.

A treasure that will not be destroyed.

The treasure of Christ living in us gives us life.

See, with Jesus you are NEVER alone.

Paul could face anything because he knew that Jesus was with him and within him.

Close in prayer.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Share a tough time that you have encountered and how you dealt with it.
- How could knowing that Jesus is with you during tough times?
- Which of these words or phrases from the scripture stuck out to you, or described how you've felt during different times in your life: struck down, pressed, destroyed, or persecuted?
- Are there other words you would add to this list?
- Share any tough things that you are going through and pray together and for one another.
- Re-read 2 Corinthians 4:7-9 and choose the 'but not' phrase that connects the most with you.
- Have you ever thought of yourself as a "treasure"?
- How do those who do not have a relationship with God handle the hard times in life?
- How can you keep from making poor decisions during the tough times?
- As a group, come up with a "plan" that will help you when you face difficulty. Example: Pray, talk to someone who will help you turn to God, have Bible verses that you can read, etc.