

YouthFaith

Biblical Text Messages About Young Souls

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Overview

Perhaps more than we have noticed, the Bible includes several accounts of the faith of young people. Though the narratives often do not spell out the exact age of its subjects, we can read a bit about the early faith life of Biblical figures in the stories of Jacob, Joseph, and David. Other stories give us only a fleeting glimpse of the young person. One is the Israelite slave girl who encouraged Naaman in II Kings 5:1ff. Another is Eutychus, the kid who fell out of the window in Acts 20:7ff, and whose name is easy to remember because you'd a-cussed, too, if you'd fallen from that third story perch. Yet, all Scripture is profitable for training in righteousness (II Tim 3:16), so we are not surprised that we find some instructive content about the faith life of young souls.

This four part series profiles four Biblical case studies in adolescent spirituality including Daniel, Mary, the sons of Eli (Hophni and Phinehas), and the rich young ruler. Each of these stories is brief enough to cover in one session, yet has enough content to provoke discussion for more sessions if desired. Each is suitable for junior high or senior high youth. The study can also be used with youth workers. The four profiles together cover a wide range of spiritual conditions from profound trust in God to out-and-out apostasy. They provide much content for reflection about our faith relationship with God and with each other. Most important, they give participants an opportunity to consider the Gospel and their personal faith in Jesus.

This is a "high end" Bible study rather than "Bible study lite." The series assumes the leader is reasonably well informed with Scripture, doctrine, and the stories used here. The discussion content is notched up rather than down. It does not merely rehash the surface features of the readings with closed-ended questions. But both senior high and junior high youth can delve deeply into issues of faith if the leader does good preparation, anticipates those issues, and facilitate the discussion.

Goals and Themes to Emphasize

The Gospel both "frees us from" and "frees us for." It frees us from slavery to sin and releases us from the threat and curse of the Law (as Paul discusses in Rom. 6). The Gospel then reflexively frees us for serving others in such ways that they can see, or see again, God's goodness in Christ (as Paul discusses in Gal 5). Because the Gospel always includes this both/and double blessing of from-and-for, Luther began his Treatise on Christian Liberty with this couplet:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

The goal of these Bible studies is that students will better recognize their simultaneous freedom in the Gospel and motivation in the Gospel, and further appreciate that they as young people are capable of great faith.

Apart from the Gospel, our relationship with God is only one of Law—which demands, accuses, and condemns us for our fallen and failed relationship with him. Apart from the Gospel, our relationships with others are also characterized by the Law, though it is often disguised in human and temporal forms. Our human relationships are defined by expectations, loyalties, desires, and other forms of law which we sinners impose on others. We then violate each others' rules and expectations—valid or not—and damage and destroy our relationships. Young people are increasingly sensitive to these direct and indirect demands of Law and are increasingly perplexed and frustrated by them as they gain experience in this fallen world.

The Gospel truly delivers us from these expectations and curses of the Law, and so Luther is entirely serious when he says, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none." This insight about the Gospel astonished and offended Luther's critics during the Reformation. No wonder they considered him a dangerous man and condemned him. He threatened to undermine the obligatory fabric of society.

But apart from the Gospel, our relationship with God is also one in which we condemned sinners seek to appease God and others through our own self-rustication efforts. Because our relationships are already flawed and frustrated by our sinful condition, we attempt to create our own ways to make things right, trying anything from Hallmark cards to being the good child, student, or church worker in order to sustain the relationships we need and crave. Young people come to recognize these inauthentic motives in others and themselves. We frequently hear their concerns about trust as they experience real and imagined betrayals.

The Gospel replaces our flawed motives with a genuine appreciation for God's love in Christ, and so Luther is also correct when he says, "A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." Under the Gospel, our self-justification projects by which we try to make ourselves right with God and others are transformed into sincere service to others. This transformation of motive happens first and fully as a gift by the promise of the Holy Spirit and then, slowly, this service becomes part of our character rather than a response to the Law's accusations, false promises, and threats. Luther's critics also had trouble understanding this power of the Gospel, though Scripture testifies to it in such texts as II Cor 5:21 and II Cor 3:18.

As you lead students through these four spiritual profiles of young people, remain alert to or even create instances to highlight this both/and nature of the Gospel. Connect these texts and the discussion back to the accounts of Jesus' ministry in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Consider other faith encounters such as the stories of Zacchaeus, the woman at the well, Nicodemus, the woman taken in adultery, and the calling of Matthew. Then look for ways to link their own relationships to this power of the Gospel—this power to release us from broken, law-dominated relationships and to re-connect us to each other through the persisting and prevailing forgiveness of Christ.

Themes to Consider

-Help participants notice the ways our relationships are often defined and measured by rules, regulations, and the Law. The left-handed kingdom of the world must function this way. But our relationships as they exist within the right-handed kingdom are defined and lived according to the Gospel.

-The faith that justifies (*sola fide*) is a saving faith that is all-sufficient. That is, we can't have a faith that almost saves. Yet the Bible also talks about faith that grows. Consider how we see these two senses of faith expressed in the four profiles of youth faith. Note how justification and sanctification are expressed.

-Daniel and the sons of Eli are OT figures. Mary is an inter-testamental figure. The rich young ruler encounters the Christ and is a NT figure. Consider how these figures relate to God's promises in Jesus.

-Catalogue the conditions that promote faith and that threaten or erode faith.

-Look for how the Law functions in each of the episodes.

-Faith and spiritual formation are the work and gift of the Holy Spirit. Yet we face barriers to faith as Jesus describes in many of his parables. Keep track of the barriers and obstacles to faith development for the young people in these profiles.

Preparation Tips

1. Preview all four of the profiles to consider similarities and differences and to anticipate issues and concerns.
2. Pre-read the Biblical texts and the lesson in this study a few days before presenting the content. Try putting yourself in the place of the young person in this study (Daniel, Mary, the sons of Eli, and the rich young ruler).
3. Read through any footnotes and textual notes for these chapters and verses.
4. Do some background reading on the historical context of this event using your Bible's introduction to that book, a Bible handbook, and any commentaries available to you.
5. Each profile has a few ideas for student participation. You may be able to think of better ones for your kids.

Profile 1: Daniel



Introduction:

You may prefer simply to start right in with the Daniel story. (See the *Discussion* section.) However, since this is the first of the profiles, you may want to begin with an introduction to the series. One way to begin is to talk about a more current example of a faithful young person. Two recent public examples may serve.

Cassie Bernall was one of the high school students shot and killed at Columbine High School a few years ago. She had recently become a Christian and is reported to have testified to her faith at her death. A number of books and articles are available such as *The Martyrs of Columbine: Faith and the Politics of Tragedy* by Justin Watson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002; ISBN: 0312239572); and *She Said Yes: The Unlikely Martyrdom of Cassie Bernall* by Misty Bernall (Pocket Books, 2000; ISBN: 0743400526). Another example is the story of Danny Phillip's challenge to scientific naturalism in his public high school, described in *Defeating Darwinism* by Phillip E. Johnson (IVP, 1997)

These two examples are not suggested as paradigms of exemplary faith. They are stories of sinners who, nevertheless, did or said something that linked their faith to a very public event. The point is not to single them out for spiritual valor (though this may also be the case). The point is that you may want to begin with some event closer to your students' times and experience.

Most instances of faith expression are not as public and conspicuous as these two suggested examples. Most of us live out our faith in the quieter realms of family, congregation, and community. Consider some possible local examples of youth faith such as a young person now in the armed forces, or doing mission work, or pursuing a commitment to an intentionally godly vocation. (I once counseled with a young man who was deliberating between gaining an MDIV or an MBA. He elected to earn the MBA and direct his considerable talents and resources to funding mission activities, which he successfully did.)

Another way to begin is to display the book, *Jesus Freaks*, by DCTalk (Bethany House, 2002). This book is a variation of the classic *Book of Martyrs* by Matthew Fox. Select an example or two of younger martyrs and share their stories with your students.

The Text: Daniel 1:1-21

Background:

Chapter One in Daniel could be titled, "The Lads Go Away to School." We don't know all the specifics such as the ages of Daniel and his friends, and the Book of Daniel is in some ways one of the most difficult pieces of Old Testament literature. (See your study Bible introduction or the commentaries for discussion of date, author, and circumstances.). The opening episode, however, is a strong testimony to the spiritual life and convictions of youth.

At the beginning of the Southern Kingdom's exile in 605 B.C., adolescent boys from leading families in Judah were rounded up, transported to Babylon, and enrolled in palace education to serve in Nebuchadnezzar's court. They were to be culturally assimilated as one of Babylon's imperialist strategies for pacifying newly conquered territories: neutralize the current leadership and replace them with new, young, hand-picked, locally trained minions. To accomplish this acculturation, the Babylonians conducted a six-part program that included changing their language to the language of Babylon, giving the participants new names, a social life mixed with other youth drafted from other cultures, a court education in the traditions of Babylon, privileged living conditions, and royal food and wine.

"But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine." (Dan 1:8) Instead he appealed to the court official in charge, requesting that he and his three Jewish comrades eat only vegetables and eliminate the wine. When the official hesitated, Daniel proposed a ten day trial period for the diet change. The official consented, and the test was a success. What's more, young Daniel and his three colleagues were blessed by God and attained further remarkable successes throughout the rest of the program. Their placement in service to this foreign, Gentile king set the stage for the later stories we know so well.

Why Daniel drew a line at the food and wine part of the acculturation program is not spelled out. Perhaps it was because some of the foods violated the dietary laws in the Torah or perhaps because the first portion of the food and wine was dedicated to idols. He did not seem to balk at being given the new name, Belteshazzar, that honored the Babylonian false god, Marduk. Nor did he resist the multi cultural indoctrination in pagan ways. Judah was exiled as a consequence of neglecting the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai. Maybe the food issue was specific and conspicuous enough in the covenant that it became a decisive point at which Daniel could locate and organize his identity and convictions.

The Daniel narrative portrays remarkably strong, positive images for adolescent spiritual formation, images that encourage young people and those who minister to them. Daniel and his friends are caught in the ravages of war, force-marched a thousand miles from home, and isolated from adult spiritual guidance—of which there was little left then, anyway. They are under enormous pressure to compromise their faith identity with God. They are surrounded with peer examples who are capitulating to the circumstances of political and material reality and are being rewarded for their cooperation. Yet for the sake of his religion, Daniel risks offending Nebuchadnezzar, the most powerful man on the planet, who had just defeated his country and—by ancient ways of reckoning—his God. This story, better than any theological treatise, confirms that young people are capable of great spiritual integrity. Daniel exhibits judgment in selecting his identity issue, conviction and persuasion in dealing with the court official, and fellowship in sustaining community with his friends. Most of all he displays faith and trust in the God who transcends the world’s events, borders, and limitations.

Discussion Guide: use handout on the following page

Activities:

1. Identify the five or six methods the Babylonians used to break these young people of their history, identity, and religion. Which of these would you consider a strong threat to faith in God (a real faith-breaker)? Mention or note something available to Daniel or to us that helps us to keep faith with God (a faith-maker).

Babylonian Method	Faith-Breaker? yes / no	Faith-Maker ideas

2. If you have enough participants, consider forming a panel of up to four persons with the panel members representing Daniel and one or more of his friends, Hannaniah, Mishael, and Azariah. The rest of the group will question the panel about their decision to resist the Babylonian pressure to break faith with God. The group can also ask about the affect their life in Babylon had on their faith. The panel can, in turn, question the participants about challenges to their faith in our society today. Give the two groups some time to prepare.

Profiles in YouthFaith: Daniel



Consider this...

1. Many of us know about Daniel from childhood Bible stories of Daniel and the Lion's Den. Mention some facts and information about Daniel and his times. (Check the introduction to the Book of Daniel in your Bible.)
2. Read the profile of Daniel in Dan 1:1-21. (Watch out for the pronunciations of names.) Offer any comments and questions about the text.
3. You may remember the Borg episodes from the Star Trek: Next Generation television series. The Borg's warning to those they intended to conquer was, "You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile." Daniel and his friends were to be assimilated into Babylonian culture. Discuss their situation as exiles to Babylon and whether resistance was futile.
4. The Babylonians had a programmed method for converting these young people to Babylonian culture and erasing their original identity. Locate their five or six methods described in vv 2 - 7. Discuss why the Babylonians did this with these young people. (Yes, they were all boys.)
5. Daniel chose to resist assimilation by resisting the food. We don't know with certainty why he chose this particular part of the program to resist. Perhaps he knew one of Moses' old songs from Dt 32. (See Dt 32:34-42.) Consider why they drew the line at the matter of food and not one of the other methods used by the Babylonians.
6. We don't know his age, but Daniel is a young, perhaps as young as twelve. He is separated from his family, most of whom may be dead. He has been removed from his country, his religion, and all that he grew up with. Talk about possibilities for how and why his faith in God remained strong and guided him in his choices.
7. Daniel and his three friends did still have each other. Discuss how their friendship may have helped sustain their faith and trust in God.
8. We may wonder how we would hold up if we were in Daniel's situation. Hard to say. But say something about this, anyway.
9. Notice that God did not tell Daniel what to do (such as to resist the Babylonians, talk to the official, or decline the Babylonian's food). Daniel decided to do this on his own. Talk about how our faith enables us to make decisions and not just wait passively for God to step in. Note especially how the Gospel (God's promises to us in Jesus) empowers us to make tough decisions.
10. Obviously, Jesus is not in this story. Yet in Jn 5:39, Jesus says all the Scriptures are really about him. Pose some ideas or questions about how this story of four young Jewish guys captured and taken to Babylon may be about Jesus.
11. God seems to have intervened and helped Daniel through these challenges to his faith and identity as God's person. But God doesn't always save us from bad times. For example, Jesus ended up crucified despite his prayers in the garden of Gethsemane. Across the centuries, many Christian martyrs have died for their faith. Describe a faith so strong.

Profile 2: Mary

The Text: Luke 1:26-56



Background:

Mary may be the supreme exemplar of spirituality. She did not hold any office such as prophet or apostle. She was not a theologian. What's more, she was a she. Yet Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians have venerated her for centuries, and Protestant Christians of most sorts continue to respect her in Christmas services and pageants, canticles and hymns, and noted days on the church calendar. Inspired by her maternal condition and the Holy Spirit, even Mary herself sings, "Behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed." (Lk 1:48) She was right. She is remembered and revered for her humility (Lk 1:48), obedience (Lk 1:38), piety (Lk 1:47), tenderness (Lk 2:7), and commitment (Lk 1:46). Yet, though her age of fourteen or fifteen years at the angel Gabriel's visit and announcement is widely acknowledged, Mary is not much regarded for her adolescent spirituality. That is a loss, but it can be re-gained.

Granted, adolescence as we experience it today did not exist in first century Galilee, and women then did commence child-bearing shortly after puberty for important social and biological reasons. Nevertheless, she was a teenager, and that is good reason to recognize Mary as a Biblical example for spiritual formation in young people. Apart from any accretion of pious, non-Biblical traditions surrounding her, the Scriptures confirm several truths about her spiritual character in addition to the virtues already listed.

Mary exhibits a godly fear at Gabriel's appearance. Yet, like any inquisitive young person, she does not hesitate to start asking questions: "Hello--what's the deal here, dude? No husband, but baby-bound? Like, how'm I supposed to explain this?" (Lk 1:34, very paraphrased) She certainly displays endurance both physically and emotionally given the condition of being pregnant and the travel to Bethlehem. Mary's song, *The Magnificat*, signals her sense of justice, a concern that can be quickly kindled in young people: "He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree." (Lk 1:51-52). (Recall that Mary as a child had learned her Scriptural stories and songs, so we need not be surprised at her fluency here.) Less frequent but certainly potential in the young is her regard for her heritage: "He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his posterity forever." (Lk 1:54-55) After the birth of the Child and the shepherd's visit with their report, "Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." (Lk 2:19) Here is the young person's interior capacity for reflection.

If Mary is a narrative model for spiritual formation in young people--and she is--surely it is for what her kinswoman Aunt (?) Elizabeth says of her in Lk 1:45, "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished." Given the dubious circumstances of the pregnancy, the legal options open to Joseph as the offended fiance, the unpleasant but real alternative for her to end the pregnancy, all the social implications for her, Joseph, and the families, and a long history of God's people not believing what the Lord has said to them, Mary's faith and trust is nothing less than blessed. This faith story invites young people to inquire, endure, and reflect with her all that it means to believe what the Lord has said by the Child born to this teen virgin.

Discussion Guide: use handout on the following page

Activities:

1. When visiting with Elizabeth, Mary has much to say in 1:46-56 about what has happened to her. This section of Scripture is sometimes called "The Song of Mary" or "The Magnificat" (from the work "magnifies" in 1:46). At first, she seems to talk about herself. But then she changes the subject to God and describes several of both God's judgments and blessings. Fill in the tables to compare who gets what judgments and who gets what blessings. Discuss the differences in faith that make these two tables different.

Who gets?	What judgments?

Who gets?	What blessings?

2. Mary talked a lot with Elizabeth, her older relative (1:7). But perhaps she also talked to a good friend in her home town of Nazareth, too, just the way we would. Get a couple of participants to role play Mary and a friend talking about what has happened to her. Give these two some time to prepare. While they're doing that, the rest of the group can devise some questions and topics for the two of them, especially about faith, trust, reliance on God, and making decisions. Conduct the conversation between the two friends. The group listens in but cannot interrupt. When the conversation is done, the whole group can debrief the two friends.

Profiles in YouthFaith: Mary



Consider This ...

1. Many of us know the Christmas stories well. Mention some facts and information about Mary and her times.
2. Read the profile of Mary in Lk 1:26-56. (You may also want to scan the other stories in Luke chapter 2 for a further look at Mary.) Offer some comments and questions about the text.
3. Gabriel addressed Mary by saying, “Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you.” But Mary is alarmed, not pleased. Consider whether Mary is someone special with unusual faith or is just a kid like the rest of us.
4. Special or not, Luke does record some positive features of Mary’s character and faith. Scan the text and identify some of these positive characteristics. Discuss whether these are part of faith.
5. Mary’s faith is not an unquestioning faith. She challenges Gabriel in 1:34. Talk about whether a strong faith can include questions, express doubts, or include uncertainties.
6. Discuss whether Mary could have said no to Gabriel. (Other Biblical figures did say no to God. See for example, Ex. 3:1ff, Isa 7:10, and II Cor 2:12.) Consider her actual answer in 1:38 and her extended answer in 1:46-56.
7. Mary understood the circumstances she was entering into (being pregnant without a husband), what the Jewish laws said about that, and what that could mean for her. Discuss whether she was naive or faithful or both.
8. Mary’s faith seems to include the heritage of her family and her people (1:54-55). Consider whether our faith is more an individual faith, more of a group faith, or both.
9. Mary did not decide to have faith. She is already God’s faithful person when Gabriel visits her. Note some of the decisions her faith enabled her to make.
10. Mary says that we will call her blessed. Though “blessed” is often translated “happy,” in Greek (Luke’s language) it actually means “to have the indwelling of God,” that is, to be satisfied or content because God is with us whether life goes well or not. Try describing Mary as blessed or not blessed. Try describing yourself as blessed or not blessed. (The English word “blessed” literally means “blood on you”! Figure out why this is a good expression.)
11. Take a look at 1:45 and why Elizabeth says Mary is blessed. Explain what exactly was fulfilled or accomplished and why that is a blessing for us.
12. Luke gives a lot of space in his Gospel to talking about Mary—who is around fourteen or fifteen years old. Spend some time talking about the faith of kids today.

Profile 3: The Sons of Eli



The Text: I Sam 2:11-17; 2:22-36; 3:10-18; 4:1-18

(These selections will convey the episode of Hophni and Phinehas. If time permits, read more or all of the story from I Sam chapters 1 through 4.)

Background:

Ask people, young or old, for examples of youth in the Old Testament and, if they know their Bible stories, they will mention Samuel. As for Samuel, his peculiar and fascinating story begins with an interesting revelation event in his early childhood (I Sam 1 - 3), but the real youth story is about the subjects of that revealed information, the sons of Samuel's mentor, Eli the priest. We do not know their exact ages or the time line of events, but what is certain about Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas, is that "the sin of the young men was very great in the eyes of the Lord." (I Sam 2:17)

Their story runs from I Sam 1:1 to 4:22 and recounts a sordid tale of greed, fraud, sexual immorality, hypocrisy, sacrilege, blasphemy, and death. As sons of a priest, Hophni and Phinehas were raised as priests and likely began sacrificial duties at the age of twelve. Early on, they began using strong-arm intimidation to collect select and excessive portions of the sacrifices brought by worshipers to the tabernacle at Shiloh. Since they were also keepers of the ark of the covenant and its powers, the people evidently thought it prudent not to protest.

Matters worsened when the brothers initiated the Canaanite practice of sacred prostitution at the tabernacle. Father Eli registered some weak reprimands, "but they would not listen to the voice of their father" (I Sam 2:25) in part, no doubt, because Eli himself was compliant with their behavior. His indulgence is exposed when God asks him, "Why do you scorn my sacrifice and offering that I prescribe for my dwelling? Why do you honor your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choice parts of every offering made by my people Israel?" (I Sam 2:29) The story comes to a miserable close when, despite the presence of the ark, Hophni and Phinehas are slain in battle against the Philistines. Upon learning the news that his sons are dead and the ark has been captured, Eli falls over backward, breaks his neck, and dies.

The text about Eli's sons is not the sort of inspiring and heart-warming story we hear from motivational speakers on the Christian speakers circuit. Yet it is a deeply spiritual story about deeply flawed spirits. Hophni and Phinehas are scoffers. Their scoffing starts young and persists to a bad end. They demonstrate that young people are capable of ingrained, hardened resistance to the things of God and that Pharaoh still has brothers among God's people, some faithful like Moses, others unfaithful like him.

The story also reminds us that in the deepest sense, conditions for young people today are no different from when Hophni and Phinehas were young men. Now, then, or in Paul's time the same spiritual conditions persist: "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man," Paul writes to the Corinthians. (I Cor 10:13a) The spiritual circumstance in which we all, young and old, find ourselves is that temptations *have* in fact overtaken us, just as they overtook Hophni and Phinehas and the Corinthians. Our temptation and fall is not merely a danger or possibility—it is spiritual reality.

To address this spiritual reality, Paul continues in the next sentence, "God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape that you might be able endure it." (I Cor 10:13b) The usual understanding of this assurance is that the provided way of escape is some extra measure of personal self-control so that some temptation will not defeat us or perhaps some special insight about how to avoid a temptation.

We certainly can improve our ability to avoid and resist temptation. An alternate understanding of "the way of escape," however, is the central message of Paul's letter: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." (I Cor 2:2) Avoidance and resistance are our solutions to our spiritual condition, but we cannot perfect these solutions. Christ crucified is God's provision for our fallen spiritual condition, and he is the author and perfecter of our faith in that provision. (Hebr 12:2)

Would Hophni and Phinehas be receptive to such a solution? Did they come to believe that they were just too far gone? Can young people reach a spiritual point-of-no-return? I Sam 2:25 raises that disturbing prospect when Eli voices the most troubling concern of the old covenant: "If a man sins against a man, God will mediate for him. But if a man sins against God, who can intercede for him? But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the Lord to slay them." Yet in the testimony of Christ and him crucified, we have a new word that "it is Christ Jesus who died, yes, who was raised from the dead [the death that God willed for Hophni and Phinehas], who is at the right hand of God, who intercedes for us." (Rom 8:34) Here is our ministry of spiritual formation for those who are Hophni and Phinehas among us.

Discussion Guide: use handout on the following page

Activities:

1. Fathers and Sons: Inventory the features of faith and faithful relationships that you see or don't see in these fathers and sons:

Eli	Hophni and Phinehas	God the Father	Jesus

2. The study group becomes the hard-hitting investigative reporting team doing an expose' on Hophni and Phinehas. Search the texts in I Sam 1 - 4 carefully and detail all the dirt on these two young spiritual thugs. But then explore the sort of editorial that Jesus might write on these two weak souls with deeply flawed spirits. Consider the old expression, "There but for the grace of God go you or I."

Profiles in YouthFaith: The Sons of Eli

Consider This ...



1. Many of us know the story of Samuel but not the story within that story: the episode of Hophni and Phinehas. Begin by reviewing what you know about Samuel as a boy and his calling by God.
2. This reading is a little more complicated than the readings for Daniel and Mary. Read the sections about Hophni and Phinehas in I Sam 2:11-17; 2:22-36; 3:10-18; 4:1-18. Or, read the extended story from I Sam 2:11 - 4:18. Or read the entire story from chapters 1 - 4.
3. This is not a heart-warming story about faith and happy endings. Share some reactions and ideas about the people in this story, especially Hophni and Phinehas.
4. Hophni and Phinehas are the priest's kids. These days we sometimes gossip about PKs and TKs (pastor's kids and teacher's kids). Consider whether faith and a faith life is harder for these kids.
5. Hophni and Phinehas were given much. Born into Eli's family, they were automatically given the job of priest, probably at the age of twelve. Their faith, life, and livelihood were gifts from God. Talk about their use and misuse of these gifts and how their treatment of these gifts effected their faith.
6. You possibly know people whose lives look like the lives of Hophni and Phinehas. Name no names, but instead name some of the conditions that contribute to such lives. (Think about Eli, the father of Hophni and Phinehas.) And name some of the decisions and behaviors that contribute to such lives. (Think about Hophni and Phinehas robbing the sacrifices to God.)
7. Hophni and Phinehas were killed in battle at the end of the story. Did they come to believe that they were just too far gone to be restored to faith, or was there still hope? Examine this question using I Cor 10:13 and suggest different ways God may provide a "way of escape" from temptation. Check to see if your list of ways includes what Paul says is the point of his letter to the Corinthian in I Cor 2:2.
8. This story contains one of the most disturbing statements in Scripture. Read I Sam 2:25 and talk about this for a moment. We noted in an earlier profile that all of Scripture is really about Jesus (Jn 5:39). Read some addition texts also in the Bible such as Rom 8:31-39 and I Tim 2:4. If time allows, read also the story of Jesus calling Matthew in Mt 9:9-13 and Jesus calling Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-9. Collect all this content together and offer some insights about God's will.
9. Samuel is not portrayed as the good guy in this story. He's not mentioned much at all. Discuss why the story does not contrast Hophni and Phinehas with some good role model as a lesson for how we are to behave.
10. One of the best known texts about faith is Hebr 11:1. Many Christians like to quote this verse as a definition of faith. But look further. As Hebr 11 lists many faithful people in the Old Testament, notice what the writer then says in 11:113-16 and 11:39-40. Now see what the writer is finally saying about faith, not in 11:1 but in 12:1-2. Spend some time comparing 11:1-3 with 12:1-2 and what faith looks to and sees.

Profile 4: The Rich Young Ruler

The Text: Mt 19:16-22 (parallels in Mk 10:17 and Lk 18:18)

Background:



In Mark's Gospel, he's rich (Mk 10:17). In Matthew, he's rich and young (Mt 19:16). In Luke, he's rich and a ruler (Lk 18:18). In any case, he's rich. Put them together and he's the rich young ruler who asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life."

We've established that he's rich. His age can't be determined, but some hints from the text give us the picture. Luke doesn't say what he rules, but he is Jewish, not Gentile, and because he is rich, he is a good candidate for being "the ruler of the synagogue." The ruler of a local synagogue was an honored position held by a member of the community (in some cases a woman) who was wealthy enough to underwrite many of the building's expenses and respected enough to effectively organize services and activities. We can reasonably speculate that this young man had inherited the wealth and the position from his deceased father. We know that Jesus is about thirty years old (Lk 4:23) and that this young man knelt before him, which suggests he is considerably younger than thirty. We know that he believed he had "observed" all the commandments "from my youth," which indicates he was past the age of thirteen and was *bar mitzvah* (a son of the law). Call him later teens and rich. What's more, he shows up in all three synoptic Gospels as a notable illustration of spiritual formation in young people.

The rich young ruler is a seeker. He purposely comes to Jesus with an interest in eternal life and some notion of "the good." He has more than his wealth and personal prestige on his mind. When he declares that he has kept the commandments, he seems to speak not self-righteously but sincerely as he has been taught to believe "from his youth." He doesn't yet understand the enormity of his claim about keeping the law any more than he understands about addressing Jesus as "good". Therefore, Mark reports that Jesus looked upon him with love. The young man wants something. He is looking for something. Despite all that he has, he glimpses in Jesus something of great good. He wants it. Maybe.

Perhaps his riches have taught him to want good things. Wanting and having the good in life is in his upbringing. It's in his blood. He is drawn to the finer things, and he has those that his world had to offer. He can therefore pursue what this world cannot offer, and Jesus seems to be the way to that acquisition. The young ruler's question is the right question for his aim to acquire the finer things: "What must I do to have eternal life?" "What must I do?" But his ideas, beliefs, and convictions don't jibe, and spiritual formation always includes disassembling and reassembling beliefs. Luke signals this disrupting activity in two phrases: "And when Jesus heard it, he said..." and "But when the young ruler heard this, he became sad."

The young man's belief system is in disarray. In terms of the journey image of spiritual formation, he's all over the map. The young man believes that he has located what's good in Jesus. ("Good teacher", *agathe didaskale*, is an address never found in Jewish literature in master-disciple relations) He believes that he has located the good in what he does. ("All these I have observed.") He believes his good is located in his wealth and possessions. ("He became sad because he was very rich.") He believes that he can do something to secure the good. ("What must I do?") He believes that he cannot do some thing—leave his life as the rich young ruler—to secure the good. ("He went away sorrowful.") He believes and he doesn't believe that he can have his good teacher and his good life and his good works. As the expression goes, he has no idea. That is, he has no coherent set of beliefs that locate his life and the good simultaneously in the same place.

His story and his mixed-up ideas alert us that much of our ministry with young people involves detecting, challenging, and helping them redesign their notions about themselves, the world, the good, Jesus, and eternal life. For the rich young ruler, this will take some untangling—with which, interestingly, Jesus does not much help. Jesus lets him walk away. He doesn't say, "Wait, let's talk some more." He doesn't engage the young ruler in rabbinic debate. Jesus looks on him with love and watches him go.

The Gospel writers do not explain Jesus' strategy and let us also go away to draw our own inferences. Here, then, is an inference. Our young people are like the rich young ruler who reflects the beliefs of his times, heritage, and world as these clash with the Word of a new and different kingdom, both come and coming. Jesus has rather bluntly exposed the young man's convoluted ideas and now lets him walk away to grapple with the mess. Our young people will need time and opportunity to consider whether they locate their good in themselves, their efforts, their works, what their world has provided or promised them, or whether they locate it where Jesus indicated: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.... Come, follow me." As for the rich young ruler, he will have even more to consider when he gets news of his good teacher's crucifixion. Next he will have to deal with rumors of a resurrection. Sometimes we can only wonder in which kingdom young people will locate their good, just as we wonder about the rich young ruler: "And then Jesus appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep" (I Cor 15:6). Was the young ruler among them?

Discussion Guide: use handout on the following page

Activities:

1. Down through the ages, thoughtful people have tried to figure out what is truly worthwhile and important about life--what they called "the good"--though they often had trouble identifying and defining it. Whatever the good is, this is what would be worth having faith in, going after, or worshiping. (Worship comes from the word "worth" plus the suffix "ship" and means "that which is worth participating in or pursuing.") Join this ancient discussion by having an informal debate about what is "the good." Try comparing different responses by discussing or filling in this table:

The Rich Young Ruler	Other Ideas	Jesus' Words about the good

2. Jesus responded to people's different spiritual conditions in different ways. He did not conduct a "one-size-fits-all" ministry. Have a round-robin session of naming different people Jesus met in his ministry, then recalling or reading the text about how he addressed their spiritual condition and faith situation. A starter list might include Zacchaeus, the invalid lowered through the roof, and the Pharisees. (If you'd like, try tossing the nerf ball to different participants or use some other involvement method. One can name, the next one or whole group can explain.)

Profiles in YouthFaith: The Rich Young Ruler



Consider This ...

1. This story is familiar to some of us. Review what you know or think you know about this story in the Gospels. Then go to discussion item #2..
2. The story occurs in all three of the synoptic Gospels. Read the account in Mt 19:16-22. You may also want to read the follow-up exchange in 19:23-30. If you wish, you can also find the parallels in Mk 10:17 and Lk 18:18. Did you know the story like you thought you did? Or were you remembering your impressions from some childhood Bible story and not what the Scripture actually reports?
3. The rich young ruler is what we might call a “seeker.” From the story, try to figure out what he is seeking. A firm conclusion about this may not be possible.
4. One glaring feature in the story is the young man’s claim to have kept the commandments (“from my youth,” as he says in Mk 10:20). That’s quite a claim. Consider whether he is being self-righteous or if he might be sincere in believing this.
5. Another interesting feature in the story is the word “good.” Jesus deliberately picks up on this expression, perhaps because the young man seems confused about where to find “the good.” Read the text again and list some possible sources and locations from which this young man is seeking “the good.”
6. Notice how in Mt 19:17 Jesus re-directs the young man’s search for “the good.” Discuss different people’s definitions of “the good” and what participants in this study group believe is “good” or “the good.”
7. An old saying goes, “You can tell what people really believe not by what they say but by what they do.” Talk about what the rich young ruler seems to believe and whether he even knows what he believes.
8. Jesus’ behavior in the story is as interesting as the young man’s. Jesus won’t give him a straight answer but instead refers first to “the commandments” and then to Commandments four through ten, but not to Commandments one through three. The young man knows the Commandments and has to keep inquiring. Discuss why Jesus deals with the young man in this way.
9. When it comes to faith, the rich young ruler is unlike Daniel, Mary, and Hophni and Phinehas. Consider similarities and differences in their understanding of faith. Try to describe the faith and spiritual condition of the rich young ruler.
10. At the end of the story, Jesus just lets the rich young ruler walk away. He doesn’t go after him, try to talk to him, or try to help him. This non-response doesn’t sound like the Jesus we were often told about in devotions and Bible stories. Explore why Jesus lets him walk and what this strategy may have to do with the young man’s faith. (We might find another parallel to this in Lk 15:11-13.)

