



The Power of Play Bible Study - 5 Sessions

Overview:

In each of this five-part Bible study series on play, participants will grow in God's Word around the topic of play and gain a foundation for how God views play. Participants and leaders will also identify the essence of play and understand the place of healthy play for stronger mental health. They will set some play goals, grow in connection through play, and develop a stronger sense of their own unique needs and experiences associated with play and connecting with God through play.

Each session will journey through the following study map:

Play personality question: This is an opening question for an individual on their own or group members to share something about themselves and in the process, gain new insight into their unique personality and needs.

Play Info: These segments have info about the aspects that make play what it is. A study leader or member might read the section aloud or simply share the basic concepts with their study group. These sections will specifically cover several researched properties of play, in no particular order except the convenience of making points clear and connected to God and His Faithfulness towards us.

Play Connections: These segments dive into God's Word to see how the properties of play reflect our Creator and Redeemer God to us. Because of Jesus's work on the cross for us, we can be in relationship to God in all things, including play in our life. How does our Creator God, our Savior, and our ever-present Spirit reveal themselves through the "First Article Gift" of play? How does the Word inform us of ways play can be healthy and unhealthy in God's freedom, and also God's boundaries? Look at each set of Scripture verses and ask what is the connection between God and play.

Playful Prayer: What if prayer were one form of play? We are invited to delight in time and communication with God. Our prayers can be spontaneous, scripted, creative, or very run of the mill. The important part is that they connect us to our Savior. We'll close each study session with a moment of creative playful prayer, but if you prefer to use your own, go for it!

Play Ideas: It's time to put what we've learned about play and know about play into action by...yep, playing. Choose from my list of play ideas, or use any of your own. The goal is to give yourself a chance to play, rather than only learning about play.



Session 1: Play and God as Creator

Play personality question:

What was your favorite way to play as a kid? Was it something outside or inside? Did it involve action figures or dolls? Was it book-related? Building-related? Technology-related?

Play info:

Why bother with play? If you are able to read this paragraph, you may feel like asking the question, "Aren't I a little too old for play?"

Let me first assure you: You are not!

Play is a gift God gives us as children, in order to:

- communicate with our caregivers and the world around us
- to practice how to be friends and neighbors
- to learn how to solve problems
- to strengthen our muscles, joints, and organs
- to process the good things and joy-filled things of life as well as those things which are difficult

Look at the list above and think about what you shared about your play personality a little bit ago. How did the way you liked to play as a kid also connect you to one of the play purposes on the list above?

Play may not seem like something that is very important. It may not seem like something seriousness or deeply spiritual. It isn't a big theological word, like justification or sanctification or adiaphora or diaspora. Yet, play is related to all these things. Play, like all good ideas, was God's idea first. Before psychology and education researched it and recognized the value of play, it was God's. Before we as humans figured out how to play, God knit play into our DNA as humans, just as He knit rest and eating and other good gifts that make being a human a human. Play is something we all do in one way or another.

In our five-part study of play, I want to introduce you to two or three things that make play actual play rather than not-quite-play or something sort-of-related-to-play. These things are called properties of play. Research of little kids, teens, and adults, has identified that we all might play in different ways, but there are 7 things that give it the name "play." Real play, when it contains most or all of these properties is good for our heart, our soul, our mind, and our strength. Play, with most or all of these pieces is especially good for our mental health, our emotional health, and the health of our relationships. Play is one-way God gives us to help us take care of ourselves and steward the heart, soul, mind, and strength He has given to us.



With each property, I'll give you a list of Scripture to search through on your own or as a group. Look closer to see how each property of play connects us to God as Creator, Redeemer, and Comforter.

Then, you can use the list of ideas I provide, or your own ideas to play together. Thinking about play is good, but thinking *and* playing is better!

Last, we'll have a play prayer, which will incorporate the properties of play we learned about and the Scripture which connected us to God. This prayer will always have a creative, or playful, element, but if you feel like you are done playing, you can simply pray the prayer on your own or as a group, or say your own unrelated prayer to close your time.

Alright, now that you know what you're getting into. Let's talk play!

Play Connections: What do these verses say about God and (indirectly) about our experiences with play?

God created every good thing...including play, but don't trust me. What do the following Bible verses have to say about God as the Creator?

- Revelation 4:11
- John 1:1-4
- Colossians 1:16

God likes to see us doing lots of great stuff, but He also just likes to see us enjoy our lives, and most of all God likes to spend time with us. In the Song of Songs, the couple in the poem are always hanging out in the vineyards or meeting by the trees. This shows us God's desire to be with us, as His people. He doesn't *need* us to create all kinds of meaningful Kingdom work all the time. Sometimes, being together with Him in His Word is the "work" we are supposed to be doing. Jesus's name is Immanuel, "God with us." Not "You better get to it and do some stuff." Things that don't seem very productive for God, are still good things of God.

What do the following verses tell us about God's desire to spend time with us?

- Song of Songs 7:10-11
- Hebrews 4:15-16
- John 15:3-5

Playful Prayer:

Read the explanation to the First Article of the Apostle's Creed in Luther's Small Catechism.



What kinds of things has God given us for this body and this life? Use a white board or large paper to brainstorm what things you might add to Luther's small representative list of God's provisions for our body and soul. Don't forget the intangible things like play and rest. Then, have each member of your group choose an item and offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God for that item. People can pray spontaneously, or use the template below.

Thank you, God, for all your good gifts, those which we can see, those which we cannot see, those which seem obvious to us, and those which seem less obvious. We thank you for _____. Thank you, especially for Christ Jesus, for forgiveness, and for the ability to enjoy these things in relationship with You.

Play ideas:

What are the different ways God has made people creative? Brainstorm a list of ways people create and experience creativity (art, music, cooking, museums, film making, etc.) Make the above list and everyone in the group pick one item from your list to engage in before you meet again. Make the above list and choose one or more items to do together as a group. Don't forget to put it on the calendar so it happens!

Play charades – use the list of play time favorites of small children everywhere and see if you can get your friends to guess them as one of you acts them out



Session 2: Play and the Freedom of Salvation

Play personality question:

When you were little how did you decide what you were going to play and when? How do you decide what to play and when now?

Play info:

When I was a kid, my sisters and I would play school for hours on end. The only drawback was that I was the youngest in our family and so it felt like I never, ever got to be the teacher. It always seemed to be someone else's turn. School was fun, but I ended up sneaking in pretend school sessions on my own when my sisters were absent for sporting events or away at friend's houses. It might seem boring to play school when you are the only one playing, but it wasn't. This way I got to choose my part. I assigned stuffed animals their seats and I got to grade their blank pages that I filled in while no one was watching. It wasn't boring. It was empowering.

At the heart of play is learning how to make choices and believing we have a voice to make our own choices, maybe not all the time, but some of the time in life. When we were tiny infants we needed a lot of help, but as we grow older we need a little less help and a little more independence. Play is one way we grow and discover that independence.

True play is voluntary, according to play property number one.

Play Property 1: Play is voluntary.

For your brain and your body to understand an activity as play, it's important that no one forces you to do it. There is something we call "guided play," like when a teacher pans the room and points out the blocks, the puzzles, the sensory bin, and the dress up for you to choose from, all organized around a central learning theme. This kind of play might become voluntary when you run to the dress up and tell your friend next to you, "Score!" But if you feel like you have no choice in the matter, it might be learning, but it isn't play. Part of the mental health benefits of play come because we deeply desire both freedom and also a sense that we are capable of making our own choices.

And God who values both – freedom and choice. God could have made robots when he created the world, but he didn't. He made people, whom he loves, and who unfortunately can mess up. Living with the knowledge that we could make a wrong or sinful choice at any minute is part of being human. Yet, even though we mess up all the time, God didn't want to take freedom from us. Instead, He sent Jesus to die for us. I think this is one reason, as Christians, we get to have a fuller understanding of play.



We know that God created play, but we also know something better...because we are justified, that is because Jesus died for us, we have true freedom to play.

If I am playing and always wondering when I'll mess up, when I'll do something wrong, then even something voluntary like play because laden with the weight of my imperfections and incapacities. I end up wondering if I'm ever doing it right. But, with Christ in my life, I know He is right, so I that I can be free.

However, play is not sin and sin is not play. There is no freedom in hurting myself or others. That's a great trick of Satan when he makes the apples of life look so good – stealing the block because I wanted it more, smashing someone's sandcastle in my rage, or using the playfulness of sex for my own pleasure without the safety and commitment of marriage for my partner's heart. Those apples always turn out to be rotten. Sin as play isn't voluntary because again, it ends up holding that weight rather than freedom when all is said and done.

Play Connections: What do these verses say about God and (indirectly) about our experiences with play?

What do the following verses tell you about the value God places on freedom? And what freedom looks like in our lives and in our play?

- Galatians 5:1
- Galatians 5:13-14
- 1 Corinthians 6:12
- 2 Corinthians 3:16-17

Play info:

Play property two is also freedom oriented. [Play Property 2: a sense of freedom from time.](#)

Have you ever done something you loved so much that you looked at the clock and it was a whole hour or two later than you expected? Or have you had that experience when you walked out of the movie theatre and are shocked to see that it's dark outside? That is because you were likely playing, or experiencing an aspect of something feeling playful for you.

In that zone where we lose a sense of time, we have what psychologists call "flow." Flow is when our neurons connect in a unique way and our brains are more focused and productive, our senses are heightened. Learning happens faster in flow and the information is stickier to our brains. Hormones release that make us feel good and strong, coaxing us to believe that we are up for challenges and are resilient human beings. God designed the intricate structures of our minds and thyroids and hormones to do amazing things we can't even imagine!



So, losing track of time occasionally can be really healthy for our mental wellbeing. It can also remind us that God, He doesn't need time. We don't have to worry about our past, or struggle for our future, because God is in our past, our present, and our future. There are times, playful times, when we can set aside what was and what is to come, to enjoy a moment with our Savior and this good life He has given to us.

Play connections: What do these verses say about God and (indirectly) about our experiences with play?

What do the following verses tell you about God and time? And how does that connect to the ways we experience time or lose track of time in play?

- Rev. 1:8
- Matthew 6:31-34
- 2 Peter 3:8-9

Playful Prayer:

Consider what an average day in the life of each of your group members looks like. Draw a large pretend clock and add to it details like when you each get up, eat lunch, go to practice, head to work, etc. Have members take one or two hours of the day and pray for the activities of your group at those hours and thank God for being present in the Holy Spirit in your lives throughout the day.

Play Ideas:

Win, Lose, or Play – draw a specific age from a hat, then use a white board or smart board to draw your favorite thing to play with at that age, see how quickly your friends can guess the item

Create a music play list together around the concept of freedom or Freedom in Christ. Make a calendar of your week and use colored pens and stickers and creative tools to make it seem a little more fun than your cell phone calendar or school planner.

Schedule at least one "play break" on the calendar to do something voluntary that helps you lose track of time.



Session 3: Play and Identity and Purpose

Play personality question:

When you played as a kid, did you enjoy group play, prefer to play by yourself, or both? Were you usually a follower or a leader when you played with other kids? Tell us a story about a time you remember playing in a group or on your own as a kid.

Play info:

Whatever our preferences, most of us have had experiences both playing on our own or playing with other kids in a class or group environment. Both of these kinds of play help us to understand ourselves a little better. As we play with our toys or enjoy some physical or creative activity we start to understand what we like or don't like, how we want to spend our time, and whether we are extroverted or more introverted or a lot more introverted.

God's Word helps us remember that He values each of us as unique individuals. Playing with others helps us begin to understand that you are different from me and I am different from you. Even when we know our identity is secure in Jesus Christ, we can appreciate the different personalities, talents, and tastes God has gifted to each of us.

Name something you didn't like to play as a kid that other kids seemed to like so much. (Leaders consider sharing an example and asking the group about their experiences. Heidi's example: I just wanted to read and read and read, when everyone else was playing dodgeball or group games, enjoying sports and recess...I'd really have liked a small reading nook to spend my days.)

Name something you don't like now that people around you seem to be really into. (Leaders consider sharing an example and asking the group about their experiences. Heidi's example: I do not like crime TV shows, whether fiction like Law and Order or NCIS or unsolved kind of mystery shows or crime podcasts. Nope. For me, there feels like enough drama in life. I don't really want to hear about more while I'm trying to relax.)

We're all different. That is a good gift of God that connects to that next property of play in our study.

Play Property 3: For it to be play, it has to be something that is attractive to you.

What's fun for you may not be for me and that's ok. We can disagree on how we like to play, because we are different people. If I try to conform to how you like to play, that's a wonderful way to connect and build friendship. If I recognize that it's not my



favorite thing, but it is fun for you, I'm learning more about myself and that's good for my mental health. When we have a strong understanding of who we are in Christ-loved, redeemed, transformed, made new – and also who we are as unique individuals, then we are also growing in our spiritual health to see more clearly how we can be kind with one another and sacrifice for one another.

Play Connections: What do these verses say about God and (indirectly) about our experiences with play?

What do the following verses have to say about our identity in Christ, as well as our identity as unique individuals as God's children?

- John 1:12
- Jeremiah 1:5
- 1 Corinthians 12:27-29
- Romans 15:7

Play Info:

We really like things to be productive in our culture, meaning we like to have something to show for our time, whether it's a lifetime, a month, or 15 minutes. We like tangible things, things we can touch and point to and show and tell for the ways we have spent our time. We ask each other, "What did you do at school/work today?" whenever we get in the car or sit down with family or friends each evening. Or we ask, "What do you do for a living?" when we need to make small talk with each other. When we play, we often don't come away with something to show for it, and that can make it feel useless or at the very least, unnecessary.

God doesn't need us to be productive though. He wants our lives to be purposeful and meaningful, but that purpose and meaning comes from Christ alone. Knowing God gives meaning and purpose to every intricate thing in our life, whether we have something to show for that time or not. When you pray, do you come away with something to show for it? No. But that time was infinitely valuable to God. The value God places on knowing us and being with us, and the value He wants us to place on knowing and being with Him shows up in our next play property.

Play Property 4: Play is time spent without purpose.

Play is purposeful in its own right. As Christians, I think we understand this better because we know that nothing we ever do is apart from God. When I eat, He's there. When I work, He's there. When I learn, He's there. When I sleep, He's there. And so, when I play, He's there too.

The Bible tells us that God delights in us and we are invited to delight in Him, especially in His Word, but also in the creation He has given to us and the time we



spend with Him. He never leaves us for forsakes us. What if play was mostly about God's goodness? What if play was one area of our lives where we were able to identify that God is a good God because He isn't always expecting things from us.

In play, we also come face to face with the fact that we won't always be productive, we won't always have something to show for our time, which helps us also to rely more heavily on God when other things feel out of our control. This has surprising mental health benefits, because so much mental health stuff – anxiety, worry, hopelessness – is impacted by our feelings that we either have too much or too little control. In God's arms, we have just the right amount of control. We can make some choices, but God has all the plans. We have a purpose in Christ Jesus, to share His love with the world, but we aren't responsible for that purpose, the Holy Spirit is.

Play Connections: What do these verses say about God and (indirectly) about our experiences with play?

- Jeremiah 29:11
- Romans 8:28
- Psalm 18:19
- Zephaniah 3:17

Playful Prayer:

There is a theological word that's fun to say: adiaphora. It means, "stuff that doesn't really matter for our salvation." Someone else would likely say a fancier definition, but that's the gist. Adiaphora is a concept that reminds us that not everything has to be so, so important. That God sent Jesus and Jesus is enough, and there is freedom in knowing that some things are good or bad for the day, but I don't need to get worked up about them because they are not going to be round for eternity.

Create a list of things that just don't matter, or things that feel really important today, but won't matter much in 10 years, like donuts or which school we go to or that math test yesterday or our last argument with our parents. Then, take a moment to pray over each of those things, knowing they matter to God, but also that they don't have to be a big deal in the long run.

Play Ideas:

Conversation about "tiny topics." – Challenge yourself for one hour to talk about only the most insignificant things you can think of...no politics, no life changing goals, but look around you and look for insignificant things or search the internet for silly news and discuss them as a group or with a partner, just for the fun of conversation.

Classic youth games – use the internet or your youth leader mental arsenal of games or ask the participants what some of their favorite group games are and get some of



them on the calendar in some way shape or form; or gave one out spontaneously in the moment

Physical competition or talent show with no prize – we attach a lot of purpose to sports and competition for our youth today, create an opportunity to sing karaoke, play an instrument no matter the skill level, or participate in a game of PIG on the basketball court just for fun

Pure silliness – tell jokes, play Pie in the Face, show off some dance moves together, engage in a time of silliness just for kicks



Session 4: Play and empathy (loving one another)

Play personality question:

Who did you like to play with when you were little? Family members or friends or both, share one or two names along with a story of a time you remember playing with them. Who do you like to play with now?

Play Info:

Playing on our own has plenty of benefits. Play can help to regulate our emotions, like an unconscious check-in allowing our brain and our heart the space to breath. Sometimes in life we run from place to place, to-do list activity one to to-do list activity seventeen, but play leaves a little space - a space where anger that once was hotly ignited can dissipate, loads of energetic excitement can be run off, or contentment can come to the surface with a sigh of satisfaction. We also know that play on our own can help build self-reliance and confidence in our skills. It can help us be better learners as we find more and more ways to discover and grow.

God, again, connects every neuron and circuit in our bodies. As the crafter of our whole bodies, and the designer of all good things, it's pretty amazing the surprises He built into his creation gifts for us to grow as individuals.

Play is good as an individual, but also has incredible benefits relationally. I'm reminded of the Psalms of Ascent in the Bible. These Psalms, or songs really, are found in the book of Psalms chapter 120-134. Each song was sung by groups of Jewish worshippers headed to the temple during the yearly feasts. It brings to mind memories of processing into the church as a child alongside other children and my Sunday school teachers waving palm fronds and singing "Crown Him with Many Crowns" or "Majesty." This brings us to our next property of Play.

Play Property 5: a diminished sense of consciousness, aka who cares what I look like.

There are only so many places in our lives we can drop the masks. If the world was not impacted by sin, it would be different, but you and I know that there are plenty of spaces in life that may not like our way of moving in the world, may not like the way we talk or communicate, may not like our belief in a Savior named Jesus.

Those moments of marching and waving our palm fronds to the sky as a preschooler help build in us the ability to stick up for what we believe in later in life. Each moment we have of play that helps us step outside of our concern for embarrassment or not fitting in, gives us a greater and greater ability to withstand the embarrassments of life when they come to us. They help us shake off people's opinions. There is only one opinion that truly counts at the end of the day: God's. And when He looks at us, He



sees Christ's sacrifice for us. When we pick up God's Word in our lives, He helps us hear His opinion louder than all those other voices. God also gives us parents and friends, who are imperfect, but also hopefully give us places to be unembarrassed and take off the masks as well, as they remind us of God's love and affection for us.

Being unabashed in our faith, even as small children, can also build in us self-compassion, which is the ability to believe we are forgivable and loved, even when we mess up. Remember that fit you threw at the Children's message when you were three years old? God doesn't judge us for those things, He judges us for Christ, and the same is true today. The diminished sense of consciousness that comes with play helps us to reclaim that when we are twelve, sixteen, or eighty years old. Who cares what I look like when I'm having fun because God sees Christ in me no matter what.

Play Connections: What do these verses say about God and (indirectly) about our experiences with play?

- Romans 8:1-4
- 2 Samuel 6:14-22
- 1 Thessalonians 5:11

Play Info:

If we could live in that diminished sense of consciousness place, the place of no concern or no embarrassment, that would be great. But life isn't like that. We do have work to do, vocations to attend to – friend, student, family member, etc. And those are also good things of God. So there will also be a time that is not for play. This is where the next play property comes in and it builds more empathy in some really good ways.

Play Property 6: the desire for play to continue, aka being bummed when it ends.

There is a time for laughter, but also a time for tears, the Bible tells us. There is a time for stuff to get done, and a time for rest. There is a time for video games, and a time for conversation. There is a time for playing house and action heroes and lightsabers and sledding, and a time for other things. We will play our whole lives, but whatever we are playing in each moment, it can't last forever. God made us to grow, and to grow in many different ways. Play is simply one of them. These are the things of life that help you commiserate with your friends when they are grounded and can't join in the fun, or have a paper due and need to hole themselves up at the library or with their laptop. There is a communal sense, meaning a shared sense between all of us, that we would rather be playing. We grow in empathy with one another when we look around and see the ways we are pretty universal as humans – we were made to work and made to play.



Play itself, is often better together, and when we've been playing with someone or several someones, we leave with a shared sense of disappointment that it's over, but also a shared sense of satisfaction. When you read a couple of the Psalms of Ascent in your play connections section in a bit, look for the community experience built into each one. You will often find words like we, our, or those. The feasts of the Old Testament served as rich festivals of confession and forgiveness for God's people, reminding them to continue to look forward to the Messiah who was to come, Jesus Christ. We occasionally will experience the same playful togetherness in our worship, alongside our somber expressions of confession and creeds of commitment.

There's a time to connection with God seriously, and a time to connect with God playfully. Most importantly, we want to connect with God constantly, in everything. It's one of the reasons God created lots of people, rather than just one person on this planet.

These playful connections we have with one another in and outside the church building, help us to know we have belonging, that we aren't islands in this sea of humanity, but that God connects us to one another. The sensation and mental awareness that we are connected builds in us empathy, love, care, and concern for our neighbor, and also serves as a reminder each time that the God of the Universe wants to be with us, so He sent His Son to make that possible.

Play Connections: What do these verses say about God and (indirectly) about our experiences with play?

- Ecclesiastes 3:4-5
- Psalm 126
- Psalm 133

Playful Prayer:

Open the photos of your phone. Have youth share phone photos with one another and tell a little about the people in their lives. Ask youth to take 5 minutes or more and pray quietly for the people in their phone pictures. Or, instead of praying quietly, they might take the time to write the names of people in their phone pictures on a whiteboard or on paper and then spend time together praying over the names on the page.

Play Ideas:

Dancing – Just Dance or other dance competitions really bring on that diminished sense of consciousness or embarrassment

Hymn word search – draw words frequently found in hymns from a hat (garden, cross, advent, etc.) and ask individuals or teams to find an example as fast as they can; once



they have found it, have them read the hymn verse in which they found it aloud, or sing that verse together. The first individual or team to find something with each word gets 2 points, and others who find it get 1 point.

Guys night and girls night – connecting in unique ways can grow relationships of support closer

Fast food progressive dinner – visit drive thrus or dining rooms in your community, order one item or drink at each place, give the cashier a swag bag or goody pack as a thank you for being an awesome part of your community

Ice cream championship tournament – visit 2 or more places in your community with ice cream offerings and vote on your favorite, present the winning establishment with a certificate from your group (this can also be done with French fries, Christmas light displays, you name it!)

Neighborhood prayer walk with donuts – order some donuts, preferably with sprinkles for added fun and walk around your neighborhood praying over the businesses, homes, parks, etc.



Session 5: Play and Processing a Broken World

Play personality question:

What did you do for yourself when you were little to help yourself feel better? When life is hard, what do you do for yourself now to make yourself feel better?

Play Info:

I don't think we say one phrase often enough:
Life is hard.

Life is good, yes, very good. But friends, life is also hard.

Mental health struggles are real, anxiety is real, heartache is real, divorce is real, death is real, disappointment is real. It's important that we honor those hard parts of life alongside the good stuff. We can leave room to say "I'm sorry, Life can be so hard," to one another and recognize the weight of that for one another. Otherwise, if we act like life is all milkshakes and puppies, we ask those around us to shove their fears and disappointments and hurts way down deep. Here's a mental health secret: We were made for the Light and so was all our hard and difficult stuff. With Christ in our lives, we can be honest when things are hard and still thankful to Him for all we've been given.

Look around you, name one hard thing in life right now, today. Let's shine some Light of Christ for others, by letting them admit the hard stuff. What you share might be personal, in your family, in your school or your neighborhood, or on the other side of the world.

Play is one way we have to process all the hard stuff of life you just mentioned. This leads us to the final play property.

Play Property 7: Play is improvisational.

Play as improvisational means we can do with play what we need; we get it make our play up as we go along. This makes play extremely meaningful as we use it to express ourselves, work through problems, make some meaning with God and those around us, and recognize room to change life's narrative as it comes at us, to change our own story outside of our play, just as we might inside of it.

If I can be honest with you, this property of play is my favorite and leaves me standing in awe of God's grace in our lives. Having a place to process life's hard stuff is important. Can you imagine life with stacks and stacks of hurt built up inside of us? I know some of you can imagine it all too well. It is a comfort to me that God gives me



His Word, His Holy Sacraments, His community of believers, and still He gives more grace according to James 4:6. Play is a place of humility before God. When we play, we might be fourteen or 41 years old, but we get to be children before God. We are always much-loved children before God.

As a mental health therapist, when I watch a kid work through their struggle with play, or when I see teens wrestle out all their pent-up frustrations of life in healthy ways like conversation or living room wrestling matches, I think, "Wow. God knew we would need this." God knew we would need a joy-filled space, sometimes a quiet space, an alone space or sometimes a connected space to ponder and consider and pretend and imagine and hurt. Play is a language built by God for our hearts, souls, minds, and bodies. Much like words help us express ourselves, or thoughts help us work out a problem, play is another weird and wonderful way God gave us to move all the hurt and struggle that gets blocked up inside of us out of our bodies and into the light.

The world will never stop being less full of sin until Jesus comes back again for us. It will have its goodness and it unfortunately won't stop being hard. But that doesn't mean it will ever be without God's light and grace. Turn to God's Word to discover more about Him in the middle of the hurt, rather than away from Him. In God's Word you will discover a perfect God of love, a perfect God of life, a serious God, and also a playful God. Because Jesus died on the cross the hurts of life are temporary for us. There is Hope and hope is an anchor as well as a good dance partner.

Hope in Jesus is what keeps us playing when we feel the burdens of the world and play is one of the ways that God lifts some of those burdens that are sitting on our chest. When we connect God's Word to each part of our life, including play, we get to see God more clearly and Jesus working every day, all the time – we see the freedom we have in Christ, our identity and purpose in Him, the value of empathy and love for our neighbor, and that big, beautiful hope in a world that is sometimes hard.

Go and play my friends. Play in Christ and for Christ, who gives us every good thing in His great love for us.

Play Connections: What do these verses say about God and (indirectly) about our experiences with play?

- Psalm 71:17-24
- 1 Peter 5:10
- 2 Corinthians 4:17-18

Playful Prayer:

Create a prayer mosaic. Use a large piece of poster board or a piece of paper. Have someone draw a cross on it and have people add many colors all around it. You might



also include drawings, doodles, or sketches too, as visual reminders of the ways you each like to engage in play. Then, on the other side of the poster board or paper, write down ways in which the world is hard, pray about these things, give names and prayer requests where appropriate. As you pray, tear off those section of the poster board or paper. Last, piece your picture back together, gluing it with the cross and colors side up to another paper or poster board. What a great thing it is to honor the hard things of life, but also know that Christ's cross covers all our wrestlings and pain with His Hope and love

Ideas for play:

Nature – getting outside is one of the best things for our mental, take a walk in the park or hit a hiking trail and take some time to thank the Creator for all that is around you

Electronics – it's true, as we get older especially, electronics are often part of our play; have an internet scavenger hunt, use your Bible app to search any old word, have a video game party

Dorky games that involve strategy – sometimes we need reminders that we can control some things in life but not all things in life, games of chance give us this; sometimes we need a reminder that we have some control at all, games of strategy help us feel powerful and remind us we have a brain to make choices in this life
Hope – it's like Pig or Horse in basketball, but you use the word Hope, which is fun to say with the word

Stay up too late – sometimes we need rules to keep us healthy and occasionally it feels good to break rules that are only suggestions while not sinning against someone, (So, don't stay up to late when your mom or dad told you to get to bed.) ;)
Be weird together– find fun ways to break social norms as a group without hurting anyone, talk to strangers in elevators, eat soup with forks, enjoy cereal off of plates, have a candlelit dinner at the park, wear your clothes backward or inside out; beyond fun and silly, this creates group bonds, which are also good for our mental health