



IN THE MIDST: A 40 END GOALS STUDY ABOUT HUMBLE CONFIDENCE

youth  ESOURCE

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

As we go through life, we all come face to face with trials, questions, and tough issues. In the midst of these questions, what do we do? Who or what do we turn to? The purpose of this study is to remind the participants that God does not leave them empty-handed with their questions. He offers us more than just the answers that we are looking for. He gives us what we truly need: namely, Himself. Rather than trying to tackle all the big questions that youth will encounter, these four lessons will provide a framework that can be applied to any situation, question, or struggle. No matter what our question, God does have gifts to offer us and they are enough to sustain us through any trial.

Structure of the Leader's Guide

This leader's guide is meant to equip you in order to get the most of the Bible study itself. Here are the categories of content that you'll see in the guide:

- **Words in black:** These are the actual questions and content from the participant handouts. Your page numbers will differ from the participant handouts, but you're all working with the same set of questions, verses, and commentary. What differs in the leader's guide is that instead of blank spaces below the questions, there are more words in blue and italics.
- *Words in orange and italics:* This makes up the bulk of the leader's guide. It is blue and in italics so that you can print it out either in color or black and white and still know which parts are the leader's guide additions. Some of this content is simply sample answers to the questions that are being asked. This doesn't mean that these are the only possible answers, but hopefully it gives you an idea as to what your conversation could be about. Other sections of the blue content are ideas of follow-up questions, tips, examples, or application points that don't appear on the participant handouts. Certain questions can go in a number of different ways, depending on your group needs, and the blue words are my attempt to identify a few of those deeper discussions that may be worth having in your group. The final type of information in the blue letters is commentary on the question or study itself, trying to explain what I'm trying to get at or accomplish here. This is like the "director's commentary" or "behind the scenes" info that movies have.

Though these additions certainly make the guide longer, my hope is that they keep the flow of the study clear and help you know some ways to connect this better to your group. Sometimes there are questions that a certain group may not understand clearly, and hopefully the blue words will help you be able to know what the purpose of that question or section is so that you can get to that same point by asking a different question or using an

additional example. Use what is helpful to you, skip over that which isn't, but please read through it ahead of time so you have an idea of what's there and what could be helpful. Otherwise you'll have 2-3 paragraphs of information that you're trying to read for the first time while your group only has 1-2 sentences.

- **Overviews:** Each lesson has an "overview" section at the beginning section, which has a brief summary of the content of the lesson, contains the learning goals or outcomes that the lesson is trying to foster, some key passages, and the name of the companion devotion that corresponds to that lesson. This overview is not in the participant handouts, just in your leader's guide. You don't need to teach anything from the overview, just be aware that it is there and try to keep especially those learning goals in mind as you go through the study.
- **Activities:** Many of the lessons contain activities that are just mentioned in the participant handouts. This leader's guide contains the instructions, links, or whatever else is needed for each activity. These activities are one way to bring variety to how the group is interacting with each other and with the Scriptural truths. The goal throughout each lesson is to do this in various ways (Scriptural readings, small group and large group discussion, activities, song lyrics, etc.) to connect with a wide variety of learners and experiences. Hopefully the lessons provide enough framework for you to be able to adapt it to fit your group size and circumstances.

Devotions

This Bible study also has four companion devotions, one for each lesson. These devotions take the theme of their corresponding lesson and illustrate it in a more narrative form. They are meant as a supplement for this study but could also be used on their own. I hope they will be a useful tool for you to help your group's discussion and reflections continue even after the study is done.

Navigating Difficult Questions

Because this series deals with questions that youth are asking or wondering about, this can initially seem rather intimidating. You may be thinking, "I don't know enough to do this!" or "What if they ask about something that I can't answer?" If this is you, know that you are not alone. This leader's guide is designed to give you the tools to navigate a framework in which to have those types of difficult conversations. The fact that a youth is willing to ask a difficult question or be honest about what they're struggling with is in itself a very good sign. It means that they feel you are a safe, trusted person that they can talk with, and it's in the context of that relationship that God will work through you as you bring His Word to that youth.

I want to point you first to a great article by licensed counselor Karen Merritt, about walking with youth through struggles. She says that, "The goal is always to seek first to listen and understand as you walk alongside your youth." Notice that you do not need to be the expert on their struggles in order to love them well. I'd encourage you to read the rest of that article here:

<http://www.youthsource.com/2021/10/21/giving-comfort-to-hurting-teens/>

Regarding specific topics (evolution, the problem of suffering, sexuality, etc.) that may be brought up, the search feature on the YouthEsource site can be very helpful to see what resources we have on a given topic. Also, I've personally found the ministry of Brad Alles to be very helpful, particularly his

study "Big Questions, Biblical Answers", which explores a Christian worldview on 10 common questions that young people ask.

As this study reinforces, it is more about people that need to be loved rather than questions that need to be answered. If you keep that perspective and focus on the five gifts of God that this study highlights, you will be equipped well to navigate these conversations.

Tips for Group Leaders

One of the difficulties of writing a Bible study curriculum is that it's impossible for me to contextualize the study to fit every group's need. I try to fill in the gaps in the study, to create a space for good discussion and engagement with God's truth, but as the leader, you have the opportunity to allow that to guide you when helpful, and to adjust when unhelpful. These leader's guide notes are not law, they are simply a guide to help you facilitate learning and growth in your group.

When I first led a group Bible study, I thought I was doing the right thing by always making sure that something was being said. Over the years, I've realized that the more that I can facilitate thinking and discussion from the whole group rather than quickly giving all the answers, the more learning takes place. As Bible study leaders, we need to be careful not to turn the study into a lecture instead of a discussion. This happens when the leader asks a question, gives the group 1-2 seconds to answer, and then jumps into reading the leader's guide to them.

Anytime the leader dominates the conversation or launches into a large commentary after each group member's contribution, it shuts down the conversation. This especially happens after you've looked at the lesson ahead of time, prepped for your discussion, and are all excited about what God is teaching in His Word. That excitement, while contagious in many good ways, can also result in you being too eager for everyone else to learn what you're excited about. When this happens, instead of allowing the youth to discover the truths on their own, we just give them all the answers. Keep the focus on helping the group to discover these truths for themselves rather than quickly giving all the answers to them.

To aid with that, try to observe what I call the 1/3rd Rule: No more than 1/3rd of the discussion time should be taken up by the leader talking. Give your group ample time to think of answers (10 seconds is recognized by educational researchers as appropriate wait time) and encourage contributions from everyone by having them write down answers to share with a partner or small group. Use the information in this guide to help you lead, but make it your own by changing wording, asking your own questions, and using examples from your context. If you're doing the study virtually, try to utilize polls or break-out rooms to help facilitate discussion that way.

My Prayer for You

Blessings to you on this study on God's gifts. Yes, it is a study on questions, but more than anything, it is focused on God's gifts. My prayer is that as a leader you not only remind your youth about these gifts, but that you would be reminded of them as well. I pray that God would teach you in your preparation and your facilitating and teaching, because oftentimes what God is teaching you is what He is preparing you to teach others. Don't be afraid to allow God's Word to teach and shape you in this process too. God is with you, His promises are true, and that is a recipe for a great study. God's richest blessings to you on this journey!

LESSON 1: PERMISSION AND PRESENCE

Overview

Summary: Life comes with all sorts of difficult issues, situations, and questions. If we as the church don't help youth wrestle with these in safe conversations, they will look elsewhere for answers (and will not find the truth there). While we may not always get the answers we want, God does give us what we need. First, He gives us permission to ask questions and to wrestle with tough topics. So many Christians don't ask questions (out loud) because they don't think they are allowed to. Looking at examples in Scripture, we see that God gives us permission to ask questions, because He is not scared by those questions.

While God does give us permission to ask questions, He does not guarantee that He will give us answers that make sense to us. But that does not mean that He leaves us empty-handed. No, He gives us what we really need: Himself. We have the presence of God, so we are never alone in the midst of questions, doubts, and trials.

Goals: That participants will...

- Be more comfortable asking the questions they are wrestling with
- Believe that God is bigger than their questions
- Trust that God is present, holding them in the midst of their questions and trials

Key passages: Psalm 13, Isaiah 53, Psalm 73

Corresponding Devotion: "Can I Really Ask That?"

Lesson Plan

Introduction

Opening activity: Take 3 minutes and write down as many questions about faith and life that you or others ask of God or of the church.

You can have youth do this individually, but it may be better to break your group up into smaller groups of 3-4 people and have them write down their questions on a separate sheet of paper, or in the blank space on the lesson handout. They can range from questions like, "Why are there different races?", "Did evolution or creation happen?", "Why did you let them die?", "Does praying really do anything?" Some will be innocuous or even silly questions, while likely others will be very serious and even personal.

The purpose is not to dive into answering any of these questions now, but it is wise to be aware of some of the ones that are being asked that you may want to talk about more later on. Also note that just because a question is asked here doesn't mean that whoever asked said it is actually asking it themselves. They could just be using it as an example of questions that people in general ask.

Whether they're in groups or individually, if your comfort level in your group is high, invite them to read their lists, and have the rest of the group raise a hand if whoever is sharing asks a question that they too had on their list. Hopefully they'll notice themes in the types of questions that are asked, and it will help whoever is really struggling with any given question feel less alone.

Follow-up: What prompts these types of questions?

Here, you want to think more about the "deeper" questions. Take one as an example, and discuss why someone would ask that question. For example, "why did they have to die?" would likely be asked by someone who lost a loved one and is having trouble coping. "How do science and creation fit?" could be asked by someone who is studying in the field of science or research.

The purpose of this question is to dive deeper into a few of these questions, and to realize that these questions almost always arise naturally from various circumstances. Life gives us these trials and circumstances that almost demand us to question. It is natural to ask questions. This lesson will help you talk about how we have permission to ask questions, and this is a first step in that direction.

Why are we nervous or afraid to verbalize difficult questions sometimes?

We don't want to sound foolish, ignorant, or like we're doubting (even if, we are). But even deeper than that, we are afraid if we really let out what we're thinking about or struggling with, that whoever we're talking to will judge us, look at us or even treat us differently, or will abandon us entirely.

What are the results when we don't ask these questions out loud?

We end up trying to deal with the questions on our own. Normally this doesn't work out well, because as we dialogue internally about them, normally our questions become magnified and seem worse than they actually are. We can overthink things easily when we're the only one in the conversation. We end up convincing ourselves that we can't ask anyone else or that no one else would understand or care, and so we end up distancing ourselves from others.

Our questions can alienate us when we keep our struggles to ourselves. We become so afraid that people will reject us based on whatever we open up about, so to be safe, we don't open up at all. But that isn't actually the safe choice- because we're doing ourselves emotional, relational, and even spiritual harm by keeping everything bottled up.

Oftentimes, church is the last place that people want to ask questions. We're afraid that God will abandon us (or perhaps His church will). This study is designed to change that expectation, and invite you into the truth of God's invitation to you. God does not leave us empty-handed when it comes to the difficult issues, situations, and questions of life. In the midst of questions, we have a speaking God and a giving God. The purpose of this study is not to answer every one of your questions, but to point you to the sure and certain gifts that God gives in the midst of your questions.

God's Gift of Permission

The first gift that God gives us is permission. God gives us permission to ask our questions, no matter what they are. What are your initial reactions to this gift?

Group discussion- there are really no wrong reactions here. One common reaction might be surprise. Many are convinced that there are certain things that can't or shouldn't be talked about in the church, or things that we can't say to God.

One of the places that we clearly see this gift of permission given in Scripture is in the psalms of lament. These psalms are a great example for us of how God's people deal with questions, doubts, and trials that they cannot understand.

The lament psalms are actually the largest category in the Psalter. While we will only look at mainly Psalm 13 and 73 in this lesson, consider diving deeper into some of these psalms in a later study or for devotional readings. The main characteristics of the lament psalms are an address to God (often in the form of questions), a reason for the questions or complaint, request for God's help, and declaration of trust in God. For the purpose of this brief introduction to the lament psalms, the questions on Psalm 13 will mainly look at the address to God and the final response of trust.

Look up Psalm 13:1-2. How does David respond to the trials and questions he is going through?

This question is geared towards just the first aspect of a lament psalm, the address to God, so don't move to the rest of the psalm just yet. Try to keep the discussion within these first two verses.

The point is that David responds by crying out to God. He has serious questions, and he doesn't hold back. He freely shares what he's thinking with God. Sometimes the lament psalms even sound accusatory at times, because they are so honest.

Why is this better than bottling up all his questions inside? What is significant about who David is bringing his questions to?

The first question here is in response to the previous discussion on the issues that come from bottling up questions. David's example of lamenting, of asking questions, of crying out to God is better because it does not involve denying that something is wrong, when clearly something is. Crying out to God is better because once you acknowledge the hurt and pain, you can actually move towards healing. Crying out to God reminds you that you are in His hands rather than yours, and through faith we see that this is exactly where we need to be.

The second question brings up the distinction between David talking with one of his advisors or buddies and him bringing them directly to God. Oftentimes, we can think that God is too busy for our needs much less our laments or questions. But we need to be reminded who we are crying out to. The God who loves us, who hears us, and who can actually do something about it, when and where He wills.

What benefit is it to us, that God gives us permission to...

-Ask any question to Him

We can be completely honest. I don't need to go to the world or the internet for some questions that God doesn't want asked. We are given a place for open conversation, which leads to healing.

-Admit that we don't know the answers to our questions oftentimes

Asking questions means that we don't have the answers. It is healthy and humbling for us to recognize this. We need to admit that we don't know and that we need help rather than trying to rationalize our own answer, which will likely not match up with God's truth.

-Express the full range of our emotions

Part of being human is having emotions, whether we want to admit it or not. Christianity is not about being happy all the time, but about being saved by grace. We are allowed to weep or be angry at things that are not the way they are supposed to be.

-Wrestle with the reality that things are not the way they should be

When we lament about the brokenness of our world, it points us to our need for rescue and restoration. In other words, it points us to Christ.

In the midst of your questions, you can be fully honest with God. Your questions will not scare Him off. They will not surprise Him. God does not respond to your questions by saying, "Oh myself! I never thought about that one before! I have no answer!" Nor does He abandon you, saying, "I can't believe you asked that!" God doesn't leave David because of his questions, troubles, or even his sins. And He promises that He won't leave you because of yours. He doesn't want you to go anywhere else you're your questions, because He knows that the world will cannot give you true hope, comfort, or answers. That's why the second gift He gives you in the midst of questions, is His presence.

These two gifts are coupled together in the same lesson so that we are ending on a strong note of Gospel promise. Biblical lament is never just about acknowledging the injustice of the world, it's also about holding fast to God's promises no matter what.

God's Gift of Presence

The psalms of lament demonstrate that we have permission to bring our questions, doubts, and struggles to our heavenly Father. But they also show us that we are meant to do more than simply ask questions. The lament psalms direct us to what we do next: we trust in the Lord in the midst of what we do not understand.

Read Psalm 13:5-6. How do these verses answer David's questions from earlier in the psalm? Where do they shift his focus?

We return back to Psalm 13, and see that David is anchored in God's faithfulness and presence with him no matter what. The interesting part of this, is that David doesn't actually answer any of his previous questions. He still doesn't have the answers he is seeking, but he has something greater than that: God Himself. This is a key insight from the text that is worth diving into, because it has tremendous application to our questions and lives today.

Read Psalm 73:23-26, which is the "trust" section of another lament psalm. Where do we turn, especially when we don't have answers to our questions?

"My flesh and heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever". We turn to the Lord, who is always with us. In the midst of failing flesh and heart, questions we don't understand, the Lord is our portion.

At this point, if you haven't discussed it yet, this would be a good point to talk about the presence of God. How exactly is God present? He is present with us always, through the indwelling of His Holy Spirit. God the Father is present as creator and sustainer of this world. Jesus is present as the Word of God made flesh. The primary way that we experience the presence of God is where He promises to be present: His Word and His Sacraments. It's not a matter of "feeling" His presence, but experiencing it just where He promises, especially in the Divine Service. Questions and doubts try to draw us away from the church. Biblical lament drives us deeper into worship, as we become more aware of how much we need the gifts of God.

Read Isaiah 53:3-6. Then discuss these two questions, which are the key questions for the whole lesson:

Where is God in the midst of your questions?

He is with you. He doesn't leave after you ask a question, no matter what it is. He is with you, carrying your transgressions (sin), pain, and suffering and taking your punishment, as the Isaiah passage says. He is alongside you, forgiving you, saving you, and calling you to live as His forgiven child.

Again, this is another opportunity to talk about where exactly God is present. We are driven not to find God by looking internally, but by looking externally to His Word and His Sacraments, which give us the gifts we need in order to walk through times of struggle and questioning.

What difference does this make?

Knowing that God is with you, means that you are never alone. You are not isolated by your questions or your struggles. The difference this makes is that your questions no longer need to separate you from God's church. You don't need to try to do this all on your own! How freeing this is!

The closing activity seeks to make this difference and the practice of lament experientially rather than just intellectually.

Lament Activity

Activity explanation: We're going to take some time now to actually enact the Biblical practice of lament. First, we are going to verbalize that which we see is broken and wrong in our world and in our lives. Then, we will reflect on God's faithfulness and His presence that is always with us, using a hymn to guide our reflection. The goal is that just like David was anchored in Psalm 13 by his trust in God, that this reflection time on God's presence and promises would lead us, by faith, to trust in God in the midst of whatever it is that we are lamenting.

Instructions: Give them 3 minutes to lament silently about something. It could be an injustice they see in the world. A question that they have for God. A struggle that are

experiencing. Something that they know is not the way God designed the world to be. Whatever it is, give them time to think about it and even write it down. After those few minutes, invite the group to share their lament out loud. There is a certain level of trust needed here, so always lead by example.

Following the lament portion, invite the group to reflect on God's faithfulness through the words of a hymn. I would recommend either "He Will Hold Me Fast" by Keith and Kristyn Getty (lyric video: <https://youtu.be/g36BapRFHaQ>) or "Abide with Me" (LSB #878) by Henry Francis Lyte (lyric video: <https://youtu.be/oRd7JuH5mdl>)

One idea is to print out the lyrics to the song you choose, so they can reflect on them and have them highlight a promise that stands out to them in the lyrics.

My struggles/questions/troubles/laments:

This spot is a place where the participants can write out whatever it is that they are lamenting. Writing it out, or even saying it out loud, makes it more tangible, which also makes the healing of the Gospel more tangible.

My reflections on the faithfulness of God and His presence with me always:

During the song, have participants write down what promises of God (from the lyrics of the hymn or from Scripture passages that come to mind) that they're holding on to.

Conclusion

As His dear children, God gives us permission to be honest with Him. He would much rather us wrestle with the struggles of life in the context of the church, and in conversations with His Word and other believers than to try to find answers apart from Him. While God does give us permission to ask questions, He does not guarantee that He will give us answers, especially not answers that make sense to us. But that does not mean that He leaves us empty-handed. No, He gives us what we really need: Himself. We have the presence of God, so we are never alone in the midst of questions, doubts, and trials.

In the words of Psalm 73:28: "But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord my refuge, that I may tell of your works." It is indeed good that God draws near to us, through His Word, through His Sacraments as He is truly present with us through His body and blood in the Lord's Supper and adopts us into His family in the waters of baptism. Even with these great gifts in the midst of our questions, God still has even more to give. We'll talk more about that next time, and in the meantime, God will be with you wherever you go. Just like He promises.

LESSON 2: PROMISES

Overview

Summary: God not only gives us His presence, but He also gives us answers. He gives us clear promises that are enough to hold onto us no matter the storm of life. This lesson will help youth hold onto those clear promises in the midst of that which is unclear or confusing. The question behind the question for most of the big struggles in life is, "Why doesn't someone do something about the pain and the brokenness in this world?" For that, we not only have an answer, we have the only answer that brings hope: in Christ, God has done something, and God will ultimately do something. That's what we hold onto in certain hope and faith even when we don't understand everything, like the disciples in John 6. "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!"

Goals: That participants will...

- Look to God's Word for the truth
- Know that God has done and will do something about the pain and brokenness in this world
- Trust in the clear promises that God offers in His Word
- Believe that these promises are for them, by faith

Key Passages: John 6, 2 Corinthians 5, 1 Thessalonians 4

Corresponding Devotion: "Dealing with Why"

Lesson Plan

Introduction

So far in this study, we've asked a lot of questions. In this lesson, we're going to dive into one of the biggest questions of all: why?

What are some situations or circumstances that cause us to ask the question, "why?"

Many of the questions from the last lesson that were brought up in the introduction were probably "why" questions. They are the most prevalent when it comes to the "deeper" questions that we face in life. Situations like death, divorce, health problems, natural disasters, or injuries can cause people to ask the "why" question of not only themselves, but of God. Keep in mind, that just because it is a natural question to ask, doesn't mean it is the final question we should be asking or that it's the most helpful.

Consider the phrase "I can't believe why God would allow this to happen." Let's unpack a bit of what's going on behind this statement. Something has happened that is not good. Perhaps it's a death, disaster, or diagnosis of some kind. One of our first responses to these types of scenarios is to try to figure out a reason why it is happening. Because we want

someone or something to blame. Even if we follow that trail and find someone to blame, does that bring healing? Why or why not?

The blame game never brings healing. Even if I do decide that I need to blame God for my problems, how does that solve anything? I can stop believing in Him because I'm mad at Him, and that certainly doesn't bring healing. Or I can decide that I need to blame myself for the situation. That doesn't bring healing, only intense guilt. The "why" question does not end and doesn't lead to hope or peace.

There are going to be circumstances that happen in your life that you can't understand. There are teachings from God that don't seem to quite add up as you try to reason it out. When we come up against those moments where God isn't acting the way we want Him to, or saying what makes sense to us, or seems to be silent when we desperately need a word, what do we do? Let's dive into God's Word to find an answer to these significant questions.

"This is a Hard Teaching"

In John chapter 6, Jesus is teaching a crowd of people who have followed him since he miraculously fed over 5,000 people by multiplying one boy's lunch. As He teaches them, He begins to teach that He Himself is the "bread that came down from heaven" (v41) and talks about eating His flesh and blood (v53-54). This simply did not compute with those who were listening. In verse 60, they responded, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"

This is an extremely abridged version of the story- feel free to read more of the passage if your group would benefit from the larger narrative. But the point here is really seeing this as an example of what we all face in life: something that God says or does (or doesn't do), doesn't make sense to us.

They are at a decision point here. Jesus has spoken, and they are wrestling with His teaching. They don't understand it, and what they think they understand, they are against. At this point they have three main options for how to respond:

1. They can accept the teaching, without understanding it.
2. They can try to find a way to make it make sense, even if that involves changing the message.
3. They can reject the message, and the One who gives it.

What are the difficulties with each of these options?

The difficulties with option 1 is that it's hard to accept things that we don't understand. The purpose here is seeing that even choosing the faithful option isn't without its difficulties.

Option 2 involves us putting God on our level and assuming that He will act and speak in ways that make sense to us. God never promises that, in fact He says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Isaiah 55:8). This way leads to confusion at best, and heresy (false teaching) at worst.

Option 3 is the most dangerous option. Rejecting the message means rejecting the God who gives the message. God's people do this throughout the Scriptures, especially in the

Old Testament. The good news is that God sends the prophets to call them to repentance, and He does so in our day to through His Church. So, the story is not completely over yet, even in option 3, but it is absolutely the wrong place to be.

Read verse 66 of John chapter 6. Which option do many of the followers choose? How is this a "natural" even though tragic response?

They choose option 3: "After this, many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him." These are tragic, heartbreaking words. Yet, they are "natural" in the sense that this is far too common. When what I want, think, or believe (or what the world says) is at odds with what God is saying or doing, so often we assume that we are right and that God is wrong. It is the heart of idolatry, but we have to recognize that this is behind our rejection. Deep down, we assume we are right and God is wrong.

How can our responses today mirror these former followers of Jesus from John 6?

Here if you want to dive into a specific issue, you can take an example and run with it. For example, there are people who struggle with what God says about homosexuality, and so they either change what God says or, too often, they leave the church because they assume that God must be wrong about this. Or someone who is grieving the death of a loved one and stops coming to church for a long time because they are so mad at God.

Read John 6: 67-69. How does Peter respond to this difficult teaching?

It's important to notice that Peter doesn't say that he understands the difficult teaching. No, he confesses the faith despite what he doesn't understand. Instead of allowing what is not clear override his entire belief system, he turns to what is clear and trusts in those promises. Nowhere else can I find the words of eternal life, so I'm sticking with you, Jesus.

How can that be a guide for us as we deal with difficult questions, troubles, and situations in our lives?

Peter's confession shows us that we should hold on to the clear promises of God (namely forgiveness, life, and salvation) in the midst of those questions, teachings, or situations that we don't understand. We hold onto those clear promises given to us at the cross and the empty tomb, even as we seek to understand, if we can, our questions.

God's Gift of Promise

Just like Peter in John 6, we are called to hold on to the clear promises of God in the midst of things that we do not or even cannot understand. The reality is that God rarely chooses to answer our "why" questions. But knowing that He is our heavenly Father, who loves us, we can trust that He has done so for our good. So instead of demanding answers that God has chosen not to give us, what if instead, we sought after those questions which He does answer? That's the key to our response.

In the midst of questions, where do we go? We turn to the clear promises of God, namely the words of eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let's look closely again at Peter's answer. He says, "To whom shall we go?" His response, what he holds onto is not a what or even a why, but a *Who*. What is the significance of that response?

Peter's response is relational, not intellectual. We hold onto our relationship with God, not just some rational sense of what we understand. That doesn't mean that there is no room for intellect in the faith, but that rationality is not the deciding factor on doctrine because God regularly does things (such as saving us while we were enemies of God), that make no sense in our eyes.

No matter what the "why" question that we have, God ultimate has a "who" answer in Jesus Christ. He is the answer to the "question behind the question" of most of our "why" ponderings. The real question that everyone wants the answer to is, "Why doesn't someone do something about the pain, sin, and brokenness in the world and in my life?"

You may want to dive deeper into this question for a few minutes, because this really is the great philosophical question. The real issue isn't arguing whether or not there's pain and suffering in the world. The real issue is, "Why doesn't someone do something about it?" That's the question that remains unasked when someone says, "I can't believe in a God who would allow that hurricane to happen." What they're really wondering is, "Why didn't your God do something?" We can point to the cross and the empty tomb and boldly declare: God has done something. He has taken all of the pain, suffering, and sin on Himself and paid the price for all of it, so that we would have forgiveness and life eternal. And we can point to the new creation and Jesus' return and declare: And He will do something. He will make all things new.

That's THE big question, when it comes down to it, and in Christ alone, we have an answer. The world cannot answer this question. But we as Christians can. Why doesn't someone do something? In Christ, God has done something. And in Christ, God will do something. That's our bold confession of hope and promise, and it's the only true answer that's out there.

Read the following verses. What do they say about what God *has* done for you:

One idea here would be to break up into smaller groups and have each group read and then report on the promises of God in their passage.

Isaiah 53:4-5 - *Christ has taken our pain, suffering, and sins and paid the price for us. We don't have to carry the weight of it anymore.*

John 3:16-17 - *Jesus died for us, so that we would have eternal life. Verse 17, which deserves to be just as famous as 3:16, reminds us that we are no longer condemned. Many people won't step foot in a church because they believe it "isn't for people like them". This message of no condemnation in Christ Jesus needs to be said more often.*

2 Corinthians 5:18-21 - *We are reconciled to God. He doesn't count our sins against us, because Jesus became sin for us. Now we have His righteousness.*

What do these verses say about what God *will* do for you:

1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 - *By faith, we will be raised from the dead along with all those who have gone before us in the faith. We have not seen those dearly departed loved ones for the last time, thanks to Christ.*

Romans 14:8-9 - *Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. Not even death can separate us from Him.*

Revelation 21:1-5 - *God will make all things new in the new creation. There will be no more death, mourning, or pain. We need to talk more about the restoration of all things after Christ returns- because this is where our truest hope is found.*

In the midst of difficult questions and trials, God does not leave you empty-handed. Instead, He gives you the sure promises of your risen Savior, Jesus. That's why we seek after His Word to find answers to our questions. When there are no answers, perhaps it is because we are asking the wrong questions. Instead of "why", we focus on "who": Jesus.

Conclusion

So how do we respond when things don't make sense? We ask the questions and wrestle with the answers that God gives, when He does give them. But ultimately, we hold in faith to the clear promises that God does give, namely the promises of forgiveness, life, and salvation that are yours now and forever in Christ Jesus. Whenever you feel like God isn't speaking to you, go to where you know for sure He speaks: His Word. But you don't have to do this in isolation. That's why God has put you in a family, into His Body. That's the gift that we'll talk more about next time.

LESSON 3: PEOPLE

Overview

Summary: One of the lies that Satan wants us to believe is "you're the only person who has ever asked that question, had that struggle, experienced that trial, etc." He wants us to be isolated by our questions, but God puts us into a family (the body of Christ) that is rooted in forgiveness, truth, and sacrificial love. This family will not abandon you in your questions or struggles. Instead, they will remind you of God's truths, they will cover you in prayer, and they will be strengthened by God's gifts alongside you. As a member of this body, you have the blessing to not only be cared for by this body, but to help care for others in the same way.

Goals: That participants will...

- Invite others to come alongside them in their questions and struggles
- Identify at least 3 key believers in their life that they can lean on
- Encourage and support their fellow believers in their times of trouble

Key Passages: 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 2

Corresponding Devotion: "Not the Only One"

Lesson Plan

Introduction

"I'm the Only One" Activity

Activity Explanation: What I want you to do is to try to come up with something that makes you unique out of everyone in the whole room. For example, "I think I'm the only one here who has been to South Africa" or "I am the only spelling bee champion here" or "I am the only one who doesn't have a pet dog". Think of something, share it, and we'll go around and see if you're the only one, or if others have that in common with you.

This activity is meant to introduce the concept of being the "only one" which we sometimes think of in a positive sense. The next part of the lesson will transition into talking about the negative side of being "the only one".

Being the only one can cause a sense of independence and pride, but it can also be tremendously isolating. When it comes to questions or struggles, what are the dangers of feeling like you're the "only one" who has dealt with a particular thing?

If I'm the only one who is struggling with this, then no one will understand me. No one will be able to identify with me or help. In fact, what they will probably do is judge me or be so disappointed in me that they will want to get far away from me. Satan loves it when we are isolated in our sin or questions, because then we are more susceptible to temptation.

One of the lies that Satan wants you to believe is that you're the only person who has ever asked that question, had that struggle, experienced that trial, continually committed that sin, etc. The underlying accusation is, "If the people around you knew who you really were, what you really struggled with, if they really knew your story, they would run away." This is only compounded by the fact that many of us have experienced such rejection when we have opened up about our lives. Our fear of rejection magnifies our questions or struggles and minimizes the possibility of forgiveness and restoration. But God does not want us to walk through life alone. It's why He gives us the gift of His people.

God's Gift of People

"Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another: 'What! You too? I thought I was the only one.'" -CS Lewis, author

What are your reactions to this quote? What aspect of friendship does it highlight?

Lewis' quote highlights the similarities and comradery of friendships. We can bond over the things that unite us, that are the same. Knowing that you're not the only person who has gone through something or has some characteristic, is actually really important. As we'll note later on in the study, you don't have to go through a similar experience in order to care for someone, but it really does help someone not feel alone when they know that others can relate.

God does not leave you alone to struggle with the trials and questions of life alone, He has placed you into a family of faith. Not with just those who look like you, have the same favorite sports team as you, are the same age as you, or anything like that. God has placed you into a diverse body made of people with different gifts, but united in Christ. Read Ephesians 2:13-22. What is so important about each of these gifts that unite us as believers:

-Forgiveness

We are imperfect people, but because we are forgiven in Christ, we are not defined by our sins. Nor do we define others by theirs. Forgiveness is what takes care of the fears we talked about in the opening part of the lesson in terms of rejection and abandonment. The church is a people centered on forgiveness, so we do not abandon someone who is in sin. Instead, we speak God's Word, both Law and Gospel, and proclaim God's forgiveness to those who repent. Forgiveness remains central, because the Church will not perfectly do the job of caring for one another. You will be disappointed, but our involvement in the church is not based on their track record, but on Christ's, who is the head of the Church.

-Peace and reconciliation

Because we are forgiven, and Christ has made peace between us and God, we can be at peace with others. It becomes a part of our DNA- we are people of peace and reconciliation and this unites us in the midst of a divisive world.

-Fellow members of God's household

God has called us into the same family, which means we are on the same team. Even when we have disagreements and when sin gets in the way, we are still family. Family by the blood of Christ, who forgive one another through that same blood. We love each other

and serve one another like family, and this unites us despite any other outward differences we may have.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-21. Why is the gift of unity in the body of Christ a blessing? Why is the gift of diversity among the members of the body also important?

Unity is such a blessing, because we can help and support one another no matter what. Diversity is also a gift because we have different gifts and experiences and that means we can serve others better. I don't need to do everything, because I'm only one part of the body. There are other people with other gifts that can serve in ways that I can't. That is good news, because it means the church doesn't revolve around me!

Read 1 Corinthians 12:25-26. How are we to respond when one member of the body of Christ is suffering or struggling?

We come alongside them. We never let someone suffer alone. Even if we can't help the pain or fix the problem, we at least can make sure they never walk through it alone. We support one another no matter what.

Part of being a part of this body of Christ is leaning into the body when you are struggling. Let's talk a bit about what that could look like for you. Who specifically are you going to lean on in this current season of life?

This simple activity is designed to help participants write down 3 specific Christians that they can lean on with whatever they are dealing with in life. That doesn't mean that they can't, or shouldn't lean on others, but that these are their "go-to" first contacts. Have them write down the names of 3 fellow believers that they can come to with any question, problem, or concern. Encourage them to not just write their name down, but then actually lean on them in times of trouble.

Also, encourage them to think generationally about this. Don't just write down three friends names, but think about a generation or two older than you. Who do I know that's older than me that I can lean on? There is tremendous benefit from having intergenerational relationships of support and encouragement within the body of Christ.

Activity- Who are My First 3?

- 1. Have participants actually write down 3 names in these blanks.*
- 2.*
- 3.*

Love in Action

Another aspect of this blessing of God's gift of people is that we have these opportunities to not just receive love and forgiveness, but to give it too. In John 13:34-35, Jesus says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Notice that the key in this passage is not that "you can answer every question" or that "you can perfectly identify with someone's struggles", but rather that you love.

In God's view, it's not about questions that need to be answered, it's about people that need to be loved. How does this change our perspective on those around us who are struggling?

This is such a key paradigm shift when it comes to questions. Oftentimes, we think we can help best by providing the answers to someone's questions. But more frequently, the best help we can provide is to care for someone and love them through their struggles. Instead of disqualifying ourselves because we don't "know enough", we instead see those around us as people that God wants us to serve and love. It opens up so many doors up ministry.

Because we are a part of the body of Christ, we help one another. Even if you can't answer their question or personally identify with their struggle, there are still ways you can love one another individually, as a youth group, and as a congregation. For each of these groups, try to come up with a specific list of at least 3-4 ways that you can help those who are struggling:

These three areas are meant to help participants see that there is much that they can do on their own, but also there are ways that we serve together that multiple that care beyond what we could do on our own.

-As an individual (What gifts do I have individually that can help others)

With all of these, try to be specific. Answers like "prayer" or "listening" are so important and should be discussed. But also consider unique gifts like baking, writing, or repairing and how those gifts can be used to help others who are struggling.

-As a youth group (What combined gifts does our group have collectively that can help others)

How can our youth group help those who are struggling? Think about how you could reach out to a specific need group in our congregation or community (veterans, widows, the homeless, new parents, etc.).

-As a congregation (What gifts does our congregation have wholistically that can help others)

As you think about what your congregation can do corporately, remember that Word and Sacrament ministry in the Divine Service is such an important way to help those who are struggling. Don't think that everything has to be a new program. Maybe you really commit to inviting to church those who you know are struggling, so that they can receive God's gifts, which is exactly what they need.

Also think about what unique assets your congregation has. Do you have facilities that could be used to help someone? Could you host game night or other event to help connect people who are lonely and in need of community? Or an open gym for teens who need a safe alternative to being on the streets? Do you have experienced members that can help someone apply for a job or learn a new skill? More than just financial giving, think about the talents and experiences that God has given you as a family of faith.

Scenario 1: A friend of yours in your youth group is struggling with big questions of faith and if he believes or not. You're wondering if you should invite him to the next gathering,

or if you should leave him alone to figure out his questions and hope he'll come back when he's ready. You don't want to bother him or make him upset.

How should you respond in this scenario? Even if you can't answer his questions, can you still help him?

Scenarios are a good way to bring a real life situation into the discussion. First, I would give the friend in this scenario a name. Pick a name that is not represented in your group in any way, so you avoid the distraction of thinking you're talking about a particular person behind their back.

In terms of the scenario itself, what you want to help the youth discover is that you certainly don't want to badger your friend. But you also don't want to just leave them alone, because the last thing they need is to be alone in their struggle. Check in with your friend, let him know you're praying for him, invite him to events, and reach out in other ways can all be ways to help even if you can't answer his particular questions. Also consider connecting him with someone who can help him work through his specific theological questions, because we do have places to turn for answers.

Scenario 2: One of your friends is going through a really tough time. Her dad just died. You have not experienced death in your own family like that, so you're having trouble relating specifically with what she is going through. Is there a way you can still help her, even though you haven't walked that same path before?

This scenario is similar to the first, but this time emphasizing that you can help your friend even though you don't have the same experience. You are not disqualified from caring for someone simply because your experiences are different. If you gone through something similar, you can help in a unique way, but that does not mean that others can't. You can connect them to someone that has a parallel experience, if possible. But in the meantime, you still have all of the various caring acts of a Christian (prayer, call or text, meals, inviting to an event, sitting and listening, etc.) that we need to put into practice on a regular basis.

Conclusion

Galatians 6:2 says, "Carry one another's burdens, and in this way you fulfill the law of Christ." We are not meant to struggle in isolation. Ever. So whatever you're dealing with, bring it to some of your brothers and sisters in Christ. If it's sin, you'll hear about the promise of forgiveness. If it's grief, you'll be reminded of the hope of the resurrection. If it's a question, you'll be pointed to the ultimate answers that God gives us in Jesus. Regardless of what it is, you will be surrounded by people who will not give up on you, who love you, who are praying for you, who will receive God's gifts with you, and who will point you to your Savior who died, rose, and lives for you. You never have to walk alone!

LESSON 4: PERSPECTIVE

Overview

Summary: When we're in the middle of a struggle or we're wrestling with a difficult question, we tend to magnify that problem so much that we lose sight of the truth. God offers us an eternal perspective that shrinks our questions and expands our view of who God is. Death, doubt, disease, conflict, and pain do not get the last word. God does. And it's a word of hope, restoration, and peace. Knowing the ending of the story changes the way you view and live the rest of your story.

Goals: That participants will...

- See their troubles as temporary, and God's promises as eternal
- Have hope in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come
- Cling to God's mercies which are new each morning, pointing to the Day when all things are made new

Key passages: Lamentations 3, Revelation 7, Philippians 3

Corresponding Devotion: "Spoiler Alert"

Lesson Plan

Introduction

Can you think of a time in your life where a change of perspective really helped you out? (looking at something from a different view, getting an extra set of eyes on a problem, taking a break from homework and starting back again later, etc.)

The parenthetical prompts in the participants handout should help stir some ideas of different perspective scenarios. As always, be prepared to lead with a story of your own to open the discussion.

When we're in the middle of a struggle or we're wrestling with a difficult question, what we oftentimes need is a change of perspective, because when we're in the thick of it, we tend to magnify that problem so much that we lose sight of the truth. What God gives us is an eternal perspective that shrinks our questions and expands our view of who God is. This video message provides a visual illustration of what an eternal perspective is, and how this new perspective changes how we view our story:

Video: [An Eternal Perspective- Rope Illustration](#)

Notes: *There is a spot provided for participants to take a few notes during the video, if they would like. The video is a 20 minute message that I gave on the topic of "An Eternal Perspective." I've used this video in other Bible study settings before, and the visual illustration seems to be really helpful for making this truth concrete, and hopefully it will do*

the same for your group. You can always watch the video beforehand, get your own rope, and do the illustration live and lead the discussion from there rather than using the video.

God's Gift of Perspective

How can our questions, fears, and doubts cause us to zoom in on the "blue section" of our lives so much so that we lose sight of what really matters?

The "blue section" prompt is referencing the rope in the video, which has the tiny blue section on the end that is meant to represent our time on earth, and the rest of the rope which represents eternity (in heaven). Our questions become so focused on what's going to happen tomorrow or the next day, that we can forget that our life is not just about our time on earth. Our eternal life in Christ means that we have the new creation to look forward to, yet so often we live as if that isn't even on our radar. We are so focused on sports, entertainment, grades, dates, and the like and none of those will last.

"Knowing the ending to the story changes the way you view the rest of the story." Let's talk about your story. What's the ending to your story? How do you know?

This is a golden opportunity to really speak the Gospel to one another. The pronouns here are important. This is not someone else's story- this is yours! Make it personal for everyone in the group. This salvation is for them!

Revelation 7:9-17: Through faith in Christ, you are in this multitude! Which means you will never hunger or thirst in the new creation. God will wipe away every tear from your eye. That's the ending to your story.

Philippians 3:4-14: Paul focused on the prize for which God called him heavenward, because that eternal life is the ending of his story. That meant that the stuff he was going through today was not so big. The accomplishments that everyone else brags about, don't matter to him. He considers them "loss" compared to Christ. That's a great example of how the ending of the story changed the rest of the story. It changed Paul's whole outlook on his life.

Knowing that this is the ending to your story changes the way you live the rest of the story. How does the ending give you a new perspective through these various questions and difficulties of life:

-Relationship issues: A break-up, while certainly painful, is not the end of your story. The relationship you were primarily created for is with Christ.

-Injuries and disappointments: The end of your sports season, perfect GPA, or not getting into your dream career path is certainly not to be celebrated. But it is not the end of your story, because what really matters is not what you do but what Christ has done for you. God can still do tremendous life-changing ministry, even through your broken story. That's how powerful the Gospel is.

-Death of a loved one: We mourn those whom we love that have died in the faith. We miss them. But we also realize that we haven't seen them for the last time. We may miss out on some of the blue section of life with them, but we have the whole rest of the story (eternity) to look forward to, which makes the time lost seem so small in comparison. This gives us hope and comfort in the midst of grief.

-Questions and doubts: *There are some questions that I simply will never know the answer to. But what I do know is the ending to my story. I know the answers that I really need to know. That carries me through whatever else comes my way. Like Peter professed in John 6, that we looked at in lesson 2: "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."*

The Last Word

The hope of the resurrection and the new creation, when God makes all things new, changes the way we go through trials, temptations, and questions. Because now we know what lasts, what really matters. A particular chapter in your life may be full of fear, doubt, confusion, and brokenness. But you are not alone in that chapter. God is with you always, and so are His people. His promises of forgiveness, life, and salvation are yours today and always in Christ Jesus. And that chapter is not the whole story. It's not even the last chapter. Death, doubt, disease, conflict, and pain do not get the last word. God does! And because you are in Christ, God's last word is a word of hope, restoration, forgiveness, and peace.

This last word is also a word of renewal for you each and every day. Read Lamentations 3:19-23. How is God's renewal not just a "eventually" word, but also a promise for you each day?

The purpose of this closing passage is to remind everyone that our hope is not just something for the future. The Gospel breaks into our reality today. His mercies are new for you, not just when you die in faith, but today. We can be renewed and restored today.

Conclusion

Life in this sinful, fallen world will continue to bring up all sorts of tough topics and issues. Hold on to the gifts that God gives you to carry you through. In the midst of questions, God gives you...

Permission (God give me permission to ask questions)

Presence (Instead of just giving me answers, God gives me Himself)

Promises (God gives sure answers and promises and I can trust in those no matter what)

People (God's people surround me so I never have to walk through life alone)

Perspective (I can know that trials and suffering are not the end of the story)

We'll close with the last words of the last book of the Bible, Revelation 22:20-21: "He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.' Amen. Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen."

This conclusion one final summary of the whole series. My hope is that, while you probably haven't answered many of the big questions that your group may be asking, you have provided them with a framework in which to deal with those questions. They will know that they can come to you (or to other believers) and ask their questions. They will

know that God will not abandon them in their struggles, and so won't be afraid to be honest in prayer. They will know that God is with them, and will want to receive His gifts to strengthen them during their struggles. They will hold onto God's sure promises even as they wrestle with ones that are less clear or that they can't understand. They will not walk through this alone, but will involve other believers to pray for them and encourage them. And they will know that the ending of their story is eternal life in Christ, and that would give them an eternal perspective about their situation.

Being rooted in these 5 gifts of God gives you a strong foundation from which to continue discussions on any specific topics or questions going forward. You may want to host a Q&A night or "Difficult Questions" panel where you can apply this framework and these 5 gifts toward specific situations, questions, and scenarios. Refer back to these gifts when you counsel youth through various issues. Give a summary to their parents so they can begin to use this framework as well. The more you, as a community of faith, can be focused on the gifts of God in the midst of questions, the more great conversations you will have about really tough issues. But no longer do you have to feel ill-equipped to handle such tough conversations. You at least know five different places that God points us in the midst of questions, and ultimately they all point us to one place: to Christ our Savior. Regardless of where these discussions take you, know that the Lord is with you wherever you go. God's richest blessings!