

PRACTICING FAITH

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

**A 6-WEEK CLUB CONVO
CURRICULUM**

DISCERNING

**CREATED AS PART OF THE CONVOCATION SERIES BY
THE SPIRITUAL LIFE PROGRAMS OFFICE**

WRITTEN BY RACHEL COLLINS

BIBLICAL STUDY BASICS

This section of the leader's guide is here to give you a crash course in studying the Bible. Think of it as Bible Interpretation 101. Each section contains a principle of Biblical interpretation, followed by a few sub points which are designed to help you get your footing as you study scripture. If you have questions about any of it or you want to talk further about it, please contact us in the Chaplain's Office. We'd love to walk with you through this section.

CONTEXT IS KEY

Where are we?

The context of a scripture passage within its larger book is important to understanding its purpose and meaning. So, the first thing we should ask ourselves when interpreting a Bible passage is: where are we? What book of the Bible are we in? What is that book about? Where is that book situated within

the larger context of the Bible? Knowing where we are helps us understand the context and helps us easily navigate inside our text.

Before and After

Just as the larger context of the passage is important, so is its immediate context. If you read a paragraph out of Harry Potter, after asking which book it's from, you'd next want to know what came immediately before and after that paragraph. Those clues help you to know what's going on! If a text starts with "therefore," it's natural to ask ourselves what came before it how did we arrive at a conclusion warranting the word "therefore?" The verses immediately before and after your text give you a leg up on understanding what it means.

Genre

The genre of the text is referring to the type of literature it is. The Bible is made of 66 distinct books- each having a separate genre. Scripture could be: historical narrative (think the book of Judges), poetry (think Psalms), wisdom literature (think Proverbs), apocalyptic (think Revelation), etc. Genre gives the text a distinct function. Just as you don't read poems for scientific answers, you also don't read a Math textbook to study for a history test. Knowing the genre helps you to know what you are intended to gather from the text.

TRANSLATIONS ARE INTERPRETATIONS

What is the Bible?

The Bible, like we said, is a collection of books. This collection spans centuries, nations, and languages. For you, the reader and interpreter, your task is to come to scripture as both an informed reader but also a willing listener. We come to the Bible to hear the stories, the voices of our ancestors, the chronicles of history, and the wisdom of God. Welcome. You're on holy ground.

The Languages of Scripture

Because the Bible spans centuries, spoiler alert, it isn't written in English. The autographs (or original manuscripts) were written in Greek, Hebrew, and a bit of Aramaic. Scholars have painstakingly learned these ancient versions of each language in order to understand the texts and translate them into English, just for you! Remember, every language of the world has its own character: idioms, emphases, words for things (and a noted absence of words for other things). For example, ancient Hebrew is a very pictorial language whereas ancient Greek feels a bit more precise (kind of like art vs. science).

Multiple Translations

So, the fact that there are different languages represented in scripture means each time the Bible is translated, translators make a leap. They leap from one language to another, choosing words and phrases that they feel best represent the meaning of the text. On top of that, the Bible can be translated word for word- which is super accurate but also usually sounds weird and awkward. Or it can be translated phrase for phrase- which is a bit less accurate but sounds more English-y. Finally, some are translated in larger chunks at a time. Not great for scholarship, but useful for making the Bible sound modern and very user-friendly. It's not that one translation is better than another... they just all serve different purposes. Now that we know those purposes, I suggest you choose a translation which feels good for your group and stick to it!

CULTURE INFORMS WRITING

The Bible as Ancient Text

Friendly reminder: the bridge between ancient times and today is vast. Remember the last time you had to adjust to a new culture? Maybe when you studied abroad or took a trip somewhere. There were so many new things to learn- small customs, greetings, how to get around, ask for things, etc. Reading ancient texts is similar- it takes some getting used to! Put in the time to learn the new culture and start crossing that bridge.

Authorship

Knowing who wrote the book you're studying is a great way to shrink that bridge. Sometimes it's not clear who wrote it, while other times there is a clear consensus. A study Bible, commentary, or a good google search will help you out. Knowing who wrote it, where they came from, and what their context is will help you understand why they chose to write what they did. A letter the Apostle Paul wrote from prison is going to sound different than a letter the Apostle John wrote as a free man. Authorship matters!

Audience

Who did they write it to? Also important. An email you send to your professor is going to sound different than a text you send to your friend. Audiences often drive thematic content of texts. Even this guide has an audience—you! This is written with you in mind, meaning it's giving you some highlights in an easy-to-digest way. If this were written and intended to be used as a textbook, it'd be written differently, right?

CULTURE INFORMS READING

Bridging the Gap

We started crossing our metaphorical bridge back there when we decided authorship, audience, ancient culture, language, and genre all matter. But in order to get further over the bridge, we need to talk about our culture too. This isn't a bridge to nowhere! It's a bridge to us, and we bring our own cultural assumptions, ideas, and biases. In order to cross the bridge from them to us, or then to now, we must understand how our culture informs our reading of the passage.

Who are you?

Sounds like a silly question, right? But it matters! Just like it matters who the author was it matters who the current reader is. This means asking yourself and your group some introspective questions. Remember, you are not neutral. You are swimming in culture, personal experiences, family history, and ingrained beliefs. Asking yourself how you bring your identity to the text is like practicing seeing the water you're swimming in.

Where are you coming from?

So, what is your context? And what is your group's context? It's hard to notice the water you're swimming in when no one points it out. It could be a helpful exercise to talk about your group's social identities (ie- gender, ethnicity, socio-economic class, education, sexual orientation, etc.) Those are often the ones we forget about but they tend to play a pivotal role in how we interpret the Bible. For example, the story of King Solomon's monarchy can be read through the lens of rousing political success. It can also be read through the lens of the exploitation of women and lower classes. Know your biases.

NO AGENDA VS. KNOW AGENDA

Reading with No Agenda

Shoot. I have a lot of biases. What do I do now? Glad you asked. Sometimes we are tempted to try and read the Bible with no agenda at all, ridding ourselves of all biases and aiming for complete "neutral." But guess what? Human people are literally terrible at being unbiased. So, new plan. Let's not aim for that. It's like aiming for an A+ on every assignment. Sounds exhausting. Plus, interpreting a religious text within the community of faith it represents was never meant to be a sterile environment devoid of bias, debate, and complexities. It was meant to bring these questions to the surface.

Do you Know your Agenda?

Instead, let's embrace our complexity. Embrace ourselves as chronically agenda-driven people. This changes the conversation from "I know the Bible says X" to "I think this passage says X but I also wonder if maybe my bias as a wealthy individual is contributing to my interpretation." OR, it can change our statements from "Obviously, this text is telling us X" to "I want the Bible to say X but I'm not sure if it does- what do you think?" Knowing and readily admitting we have an agenda, often driven by hidden cultural and social identities, helps us come to the Bible with humility and a willingness to listen to others in the group.

The Beauty of Uncertainty

But wait a minute, I hear you protest. Does this mean that we are promoting a sort of relativistic "all truth is truth" idea? Nope. Not really. It just means that we are willing to admit we are wrong. We are willing to listen to others. And that we believe our God is big enough to withstand our uncertainty. The beauty of uncertainty is community- we turn to one another for help, answers, and questions. We also turn to God in community with God's Spirit for help with clarity. However, it also means that we do understand that many genres in scripture are meant to render many interpretations. The Psalms, for instance, are poetry. Poets don't want you to solve for X, they want you to wrestle with their texts and ask what they mean.

OBSERVE FIRST, INTERPRET LATER

Understanding Inductive Bible Study

While some uncertainty and some bias are absolutely going to happen, there are strategies to help us be as un-biased as possible. One of those strategies is inductive Bible study. This Bible study method is helpful because it slows us down and asks us to read meaning FROM a text, not INTO a text. With enough contortion we can get any text to say pretty much anything we want it to, but we are not being faithful to it when we do that. Remember, we are on holy ground. Let's do this thing the right way.

What is Observation?

We want to build meaning from our Bible passage. So, observation is literally asking for clues- who, what, where, when, why? No observation too small! Here are some elements to observe in a text: repetition of words, contrasting statements, cause and effect, summary statements, progression of the story, simile/metaphor, names, places, objects of importance, etc. Anything that you see is fair game. Often this one is the hardest because we aren't used to stating the obvious. Let's say our text was James 2:14-26. In this example, "the word faith is repeated 14 times" is an observation. "This text is telling us to have faith" is NOT an observation because it makes the leap from what is in the passage to what the passage is doing.

What is Interpretation?

If observation is laying the puzzle pieces out to see them all, interpretation is the process of putting them together. This is where we begin to ask the question: what does this mean? Or, what is the text doing? Not mean "for us" (that's application). Just, what does it mean. Period. A good way to get at a solid interpretation is to ask "what would I title this passage?" Or "what is the main theme of the text?" In our example, an answer to that question might be "faith without deeds is dead" or "actions must support what we believe."

What is Application?

Application is where we now get to see the puzzle as a picture itself and ask what it means to us. Applying a passage responsibly relies heavily on the first two steps. This means, if the observation was "it says faith 5 times" and the interpretation was "faith without deeds is dead" then it would be irresponsible to say our application is "we should baptize believers." Not because that statement is incorrect, per say, but because it does not reflect our observations or interpretations. Perhaps a better application point may be asking ourselves "which deeds are God calling us to as a community which might reflect our faith?" Congruency here is important. That isn't to say that God's Spirit couldn't move us in a totally different direction, but the takeaway here is to avoid haphazard application of scripture without responsible study.

KNOW THE GRAND NARRATIVE

Where is your text in the story?

As we conclude our section on biblical study, remember to keep your study in the greater context of scripture. Always be asking how your Bible passage contributes to the greater narrative of the Bible.

Where are you in the story?

Also, remember to keep asking yourself and your group where you are in the story. This isn't to say we should insert ourselves into biblical texts. Instead, it acknowledges the fact that as the Church (God's people), we are part of the grand narrative of redemption. Don't lose yourself in your pursuit of these ancient texts. While the books weren't written to you in the historical sense, they were written for you in the spiritual sense. You are part of God's people. This is part of your story.

Where is the story headed?

Finally, remember that the story isn't over. The Book of Revelation paints a beautiful picture of the New Heavens and New Earth- the ultimate redemption of God's people and reconciliation between humanity and God. That's where we are headed, so allow that information to inform your interpretation. The witness of scripture points to the character of God.

Welcome. You're on holy ground.

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN: AN INTRO*

Understanding Inductive Bible Study

Let's take what we discussed in the Biblical Basics section and apply it to the Gospel of John. You don't need to read all of this to your group. Rather, I recommend you read it yourself and bring up certain components as necessary. Think of this section as turning you into a mini-expert on the background of the gospel of John!

Authorship

Most scholars have historically believed the apostle John (referred to in other gospels) wrote this text. John, not to be confused with John the Baptist (different guy), was one of the twelve apostles and is an eye witness to Jesus' ministry. While recent scholars have tended to question John's authorship and have instead subscribed to an anonymous author, the important point is that even with an unknown author, it seems as if the writer was close enough to Jesus to be able to describe events in good detail.

Audience & Purpose

John was likely writing for a Jewish audience. He literally structures some of the events around the Jewish calendar and his stories are set much more frequently in Jerusalem than any of the other gospels. The Jewish people were wrestling with who Jesus was- was He their Messiah? John, it seems, seeks to answer this. So, what does that mean? And how might it inform the purpose of the text? John's theme of life- eternal life, comes up again and again. One could argue this is his main purpose: to demonstrate Jesus as the source of eternal life.

Genre

We've been throwing around the term "gospel" a lot. What exactly is a gospel? A gospel is an eye-witness account of the life of Jesus. Each gospel (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) arranges elements of Jesus' life in order to communicate certain themes or emphases. They often contain a mix of Jesus' teachings, miracles, parables, and narrative about Jesus' life (such as Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection).

Date

The Gospel of John was likely written sometime after Jesus' death but before 70 AD. The cool thing about this dating theory is that it means the writing came relatively soon after Jesus' ministry, affirming the accuracy of the accounts.

Themes

Certain themes appear in each book of the Bible. For John, major themes include: eternal life, witness, life, Messiah, Jerusalem (Jewish identity), identity itself, and signs. Interestingly, there are zero parables in the gospel of John!

*Information in this section was summarized in part from Leon Morris' "The Gospel According to John" and Marianne Meye Thompson's "John: A Commentary."

Further Study

To dig a little deeper, check out:

- NIV Application Commentary: John
- Keener's Commentary on John
- Blueletterbible.com
- Marianne Meye Thompson's John: A Commentary
- Leon Morris' Commentary on John

WEEK BY WEEK STUDY GUIDE

Leader's Note:

Each week you will need a print out of the scripture text. Choose a translation which you enjoy reading and stick with it. We recommend using biblegateway.com to print the material. Try to print it without headings, verse numbers, or footnotes so that your group is encouraged to read the passage as a story.

Each week will begin with an introductory activity. Be sure to pay attention to the material needed, as some activities may need small items to be brought by the leader.

After the activity, there will be an introduction, which is meant for you to read for yourself to familiarize yourself with the week. Feel free to read any parts of it to your group that you feel are helpful.

The Bible study section is broken into Observation, Interpretation, and Application. For a refresher on these elements of Bible Study, see "Observe First, Interpret Later." Also, be sure to remind your group each week of what each element means and how to do it!

WEEK 1

Materials

Print out of John 1:1-18, colored pencils (or markers), pens, extra blank paper

Opening Activity

If your group is not familiar with one another, I encourage you to create a “getting to know you” game. This could be as simple as introductions around the circle or as complicated as an elaborate game. This opening activity is up to you! If you already know each other well, please go around the circle and have each person express what they hope to gain from this study. Regardless of whether you know each other take some time to talk about your own cultures (remember, our culture informs our interpretations). Take some time, also, as a group to write a group covenant- a commitment to learning, growing, sharing, etc. Be sure to include in that covenant a pledge to keep confidentiality.

Introduction

This week is an introductory week. It is meant to introduce the group to the Gospel of John as a whole. Feel free to take some time to do as much teaching as you feel comfortable doing- tell your group about what we talked about: authorship, audience, setting, themes, etc. Or, bring some reading to do together as a group for background on the text. Now is also a good time to give your group a snapshot of each week so that they know what’s coming and how the study works as a whole. Each week after this one will be a passage that contains an “I am” statement. These are statements Jesus makes, many of them metaphorical, about his identity. Introduce your group to these statements and how they might contribute to the text as a whole.

Leader’s Note

Remember, you can teach the introductory material as much or as little as you’d like. Just be sure to get the information across. If you’re uncomfortable teaching it outright, I encourage you to perhaps take turns reading from “The Gospel of John: An Intro.”

Scripture: John 1:1-18

The Word was light. The Word was God. The Word became flesh. This week’s scripture serves as the author, John’s, introduction to his gospel. A sort of poetic prelude. An artist’s narration of the creation story. It also introduces us to a character: John the Baptist. Remember, John the Baptist, as mentioned in John 1:1-18 is different from John our author!

Observation

As you start with observation, be sure to give a thorough explanation of what observation actually is (and what it is not!). Because this is the first week, allow everyone time to observe on their own, in silence, using colors. This will help everyone focus on the task and work out any kinks in their understanding. Here are some questions to think about during observation:

- Who is present in the passage?
- What is being said? What is going on?
- Where is it taking place?
- When is it taking place?
- What are the literary devices employed?
- What is the genre?
- What cause and effect do you see?
- Where are the contrasting statements?
- How does the text progress?

Come together after 4-5 minutes to share your observation. As the leader, write down everyone's observations on one sheet of paper to refer back to later.

Interpretation

Next, explain to your group the step of interpretation. Again, refer to the section "Observe first, Interpret later" for a refresher. Because this is the first week, let's keep our activities consistent. Give everyone time to practice interpretation on their own, in silence for about 4-5 minutes. Have them brainstorm and write down

answers to some interpretive questions:

- What is the main point of this text?
- What is the main theme that emerges?
- What title would you give this passage?
- What is the total sum of your observations?

Come together and have each person share what they think the main theme is.

Application

Finally, explain the step of application. This is the culmination of your study and it is only after observation and interpretation that you can safely venture into application. In order to explain application, it may be helpful to utilize the "crossing the bridge" analogy found in the Biblical Study Basics section. Give everyone 4-5 minutes to silently journal their application (and make sure to remind them that their application must tie into their main theme found in the interpretation section). Hand out new blank sheets of paper if need be.

Here are some questions your group can silently contemplate as everyone journals:

- What is this text revealing about the nature of humanity?
- What is this text saying to me about my spiritual formation?
- What is this text saying to my community?
- Is this text calling me or my community to confession and repentance?
- Is this text calling me or my community to action?

Come together as a group to share your application journaling. Challenge each other to follow through on any action points.

Leader's Note

Sharing application journaling is a vulnerable experience. Be sure not to pressure your group into oversharing prematurely. If you do not know each other at all, acknowledge the vulnerability and relieve the pressure to share intimate information this week. If you do know each other fairly well, you may be able to do the opposite: instead of relieving the pressure of intimacy, encourage vulnerability as an act of trust.

Prayer

This week involved a large learning curve and lots of heavy lifting! Spend a brief time in prayer today as a leader. Pray over your group!

WEEK 2

Materials

Print out of John 6:24-40, colored pencils (or markers), pens, extra blank paper

Opening Activity

Now that you have one week under your belt, it's time to dig a little deeper. For this week's opening activity, give everyone a sheet of paper and some drawing utensils. Instruct everyone to draw a large table. This table represents their current spiritual life. Then, over the next few minutes, each person will fill in their tables however they see fit, based on the prompt. Prompt: The table drawn in front of you represents your spiritual life. Take the next few minutes to fill in your table based on how you currently perceive your spiritual life. Is your spiritual state filled to the brim with all manner of food? Is it completely bare? Is it filled with just essentials?

After a few minutes, come together and share your drawings.

Introduction

This week's text is challenging. It challenges its readers to dig into its meaning and does not easily present one theme or one major takeaway. Your job as a leader this week is to help your group bring together disparate parts and craft meaning from this passage. Be sure to focus your group on asking deeper questions: what is the nature of belief? Why is the crowd so interested in bread? Etc.

Leader's Note

This text will likely bring up more questions than answers. Help guide your group to sit in the tension and remember, your group will likely walk away from many Bible studies with more questions than they bring in. Your job is not to solve problems, but rather to guide them to ask the right questions.

Scripture: John 6:24-40

Jesus declare that he is the bread of life. This is the first "I am" statement in the Gospel of John and it is a pointed commentary on the nourishment of Christ's incarnation for the whole of humanity. There is also a special nod to the Old Testament story of God's provision for the Israelites through manna (see Exodus 16). As you read through this text, remember the importance of cultural context and historical situation- there are a lot of those elements to note in this text!

Observation

This week, practice your study steps in pairs. Have each group member pair off and brainstorm what they observe together, referring to the questions in week one to stimulate observations. After 4-5 minutes of working in pairs, come together to share your observations in the whole group, noting which ones seem particularly important or relevant.

Interpretation

Next, get back in your pairs for interpretation. Have the pairs focus this week on crafting a well-worded title for this text. This title should come from the themes they discover. After 4-5 minutes, come together and share each pair's title and vote on the one you think fits the text best.

Application

Finally, spend 4-5 minutes journaling individually on the application points each person would like to take away from the study. After some individual reflection time, get back together in those same pairs to share. Focus on individual application this week. Commit to one action point for each person to do or commit to this week and allow that person's partner to hold them accountable to that action point in week three.

Leader's Note

Be sure to send an occasional encouraging text or email to your group members. Because this week involves a concrete action point with accountability, this week may be a great time to check in with each participant.

Prayer

This week we will stick to our pairs. Pray for your partner from this week, sharing prayer requests and encouraging one another.

WEEK 1

Materials

Print out of John 8:12-20, colored pencils (or markers), pens, extra blank paper, a large poster-board or large sheet of paper (big enough for everyone to see)

Opening Activity

This week's study is all about light. Light flooding the darkness. So, for our opening activity, have each group member, going around in a circle, share a 2-minute story of a time when they saw metaphorical "light" flood a metaphorically "dark" space.

Leader's note

For activities which involve story-telling, sometimes it is best to set a timer on someone's phone to make sure everyone gets an equal amount of time to talk.

Introduction

This week's scripture passage focuses on Jesus' relationship to both the darkness of the world and the light of the Father. Jesus defends his statement through the use of testimony and validity of the truth of who he is. Thus, your discussion will likely be centered on the identity of Jesus as he relates to the light of the Trinity in contrast to the darkness of humanity.

Leader's Note

This week's focus on light will likely bring up darkness as a result. Remember, it is your job as a leader to be on the lookout for any statements made which might reveal a deeper need. Be on the ready to refer group members to the Chaplain's office, Counseling office, health center, HRL, etc.

Scripture: John 8:12-20

The title of our study is "Illuminate." In this text, Jesus declares himself to be the light of the world! Jesus' light, emanating from his God nature, brings revelation into the darkness. This week will focus on the act of confession and repentance in response to Jesus' light.

Observation

Like week one, this week we will allow everyone time to observe on their own, in silence, using colors. This week's text lends itself to individual reflection. Come together after 4-5 minutes to share your observation. As the leader, write down everyone's observations on one sheet of paper to refer back to later.

Leader's Note

Remember- you can always refer back to week one for prompting questions regarding observation, interpretation, and application. If your group ever gets stuck, refer to week one to get them going again.

Interpretation

Next, give everyone time to practice interpretation on their own, in silence for about 4-5 minutes.

Come together and have each person share what they think the main theme is. Decide together on the best title for the text.

Application

Give everyone 4-5 minutes to silently journal their application (and make sure to remind them that their application must tie into their main theme found in the interpretation section). Hand out new blank sheets of paper if need be. As an additional application exercise, spend 3-4 minutes journaling individually on the following question:

What is an area of darkness in your life that needs the light of Jesus?

Come together as a group to share your application journaling. Challenge each other to follow through on any action points.

Leader's Note

Because this text is about light, it may bring some convicting parts to the discussion. Be prepared to spend some time talking about that during prayer.

Prayer

This week's prayer time is in two parts. Part 1 gives the pairs from last week some time to check in on accountability- how did each of you do with your action point from last week?

Part 2 will focus on group confession in response to the application journaling exercise. Feel free to structure this prayer time in a way that works best for your group.

WEEK 4

Materials

Print out of John 10:1-10, colored pencils (or markers), pens, extra blank paper, play dough

Opening Activity

In this passage, Jesus is the gate for the sheep (his followers). Jesus gives refuge to his sheep. Using the play dough, have each group member sculpt something which has brought them refuge or comfort. It could be an object, a person, a place, or an abstract idea/concept. Go around the group after a few minutes of sculpting and share your creation with the group.

Introduction

This week's text is all about Jesus giving his follower access and refuge. The entire passage is an extended metaphor: seeking to convey certain truths to the reader or listener through heightened language. Jesus' sheep know his voice and they follow him.

Leader's note

Metaphors and heightened language mean tricky interpretation. Be aware of this as you move your group into your scripture study and be sure to continue to anchor your discussion in context, history, culture, and the metanarrative of scripture.

Scripture: John 10:1-10

Jesus, in this scripture passage, says that he is the gate (some texts say door). Remember, each "I am" statement is meant to illuminate to us a part of God's character as revealed through Jesus. As you interpret, be sure to break down the metaphor with your group, paying attention to who Jesus is talking to and why. For this text, it may be helpful to familiarize yourself and your group fairly well with what comes before and after the passage.

Observation

This week's observation exercise will be a group-collaborative effort. The group leader will serve as the recorder and the rest of the group will shout out their observations as you write them down on your poster-board or large sheet of paper. Make sure everyone in the group can see your observations list!

Leader's Note

Remember- you can always refer back to week one for prompting questions regarding observation, interpretation, and application. If your group ever gets stuck, refer to week one to get them going again.

Interpretation

Next, the group as a whole will work together to come up with their interpretation of the text. Write down on the poster-board the main theme that becomes the consensus of the group and from there, write down your main title of the passage.

Discuss as a group how you went from observation to interpretation.

Application

Finally, because this week is all about group collaboration, focus your application efforts on communal application. What is this text saying to your group as a whole? Is the text challenging your group to work toward something or adjust something?

Leader's Note

Communal application can be challenging because the majority of us are immersed in a fairly individualistic culture. Our churches like to get us to think about our personal spiritual lives but rarely challenge us to think about our communities. Be ready to provide some examples of communal application and help the group brainstorm through directing questions.

Prayer

This week's prayer time will be done... you guessed it... as a group! But instead of choosing one person to pray, everyone will get to pray- just in short bursts. Think along the lines of "God, thank you for our time together." (that's it!). Then another person might say "God we pray for your wisdom in applying this passage to our lives" (done!). Then a third person might say "God we confess to you that we have not loved one another as we ought" (that's it!). See how each person prays a short prayer but everyone gets to pray? Encourage that style of "popcorn prayer" for about 5 minutes. Every gets to pray as many times as they like. Then you, as the leader, can close the prayer time.

WEEK 5

Materials

Print out of John 11:17-43, colored pencils (or markers), pens, extra blank paper

Opening Activity

The text today is about hope. The ultimate hope. The hope of resurrection. Jesus demonstrates this by resurrecting Lazarus and declaring himself THE resurrection and the life. For this week's opening activity, pass around blank sheets of paper and have each participant draw a scene from a movie. This scene must be one where the audience thinks all hope is nearly lost but then something changes- a superhero swoops in, the main character remembers a hidden skill, the antagonist is defeated just in time, etc. Have everyone go around and share their drawings- bonus points for silliness and bad drawings!

Introduction

This week's text is a narrative, a full story with a beginning, middle, and end. Quite different from what we've had with many extended metaphors and teachings from Jesus. Be sure to re-orient the group to think through the "I am" statement in the context of narrative and to think through what it means that it is told through a story. This miraculous story also gives a window into the future resurrection of Christ, so it's really important to think through what it means to situate this story with the over-arching story of scripture!

Leader's Note

Orienting your group to narrative means talking about how to interpret a narrative. Be sure to think through ahead of time what that might look like so that you can be ready to discuss this with the group.

Scripture: John 11:17-43

The story of Lazarus' resurrection is one which demonstrates the beauty and hope of Jesus' incarnation. In this story, Jesus literally illuminates the grave. Jesus shines light and hope on death- the ultimate hopelessness becomes the ultimate hope. What does it mean that Jesus says HE is the resurrection? That HE is the life? Let's explore this!

Observation

Like week two, this week, practice your study steps in pairs. Have each group member pair off and brainstorm what they observe together, referring to the questions in week one to stimulate observations. After 4-5 minutes of working in pairs, come together to share your observations in the whole group, noting which ones seem particularly important or relevant.

Interpretation

Next, get back in your pairs for interpretation. Have the pairs focus this week on crafting a well-worded title for this text. This title should come from the themes they discover. After 4-5 minutes, come together and share each pair's title and vote on the one you think fits the text best.

Application

Finally, spend 4-5 minutes journaling individually on the application points each person would like to take away from the study. After some individual reflection time, get back together in those same pairs to share. Focus on individual application this week. Commit to one action point for each person to do or commit to this week and allow that person's partner to hold them accountable to that action point in week three.

Leader's Note

Here is a friendly reminder again to send an occasional encouraging text or email to your group members. Because this week involves a concrete action point with accountability, like week two, this week may be a great time to check in with each participant.

Prayer

This week we will stick to our pairs. Pray for your partner from this week, sharing prayer requests and encouraging one another.

WEEK 6

Materials

Print out of John 15:1-17, colored pencils (or markers), pens, extra blank paper, a handful of something from nature (pebbles, blades of grass, twigs, leaves, etc), a container for those elements

Opening Activity

Today's text is another extended metaphor. This time, Jesus talks about gardening, vines, and branches. For the opening activity, ask each participant to take as many elements of nature from the bag that they want (without explanation). Everyone must take at least 2 but can take more. (make sure you, as the leader, have enough!). For however many elements each person took, that is how many ideas they must present for ways to stay connected to God after this study is over. For example, if I took 3 pebbles, I might say "pray daily, commit to a regular small group, spend time with God in nature."

Introduction

This last "I am" statement wraps up our "illuminate" study. This week, we will focus on what it means to "remain in Christ." So, you can utilize the last week as a bit of a reflection time, as well as a study of a new text. What have we learned over the last 5 weeks about Jesus' character? How does that communicate the importance of remaining with Jesus as the vine?

Leader's Note

Balancing a new text with summary elements can be tricky. Be sure to map out the timing of your study so that you're able to adequately reflect on the study as a whole while also making time for John 15.

Scripture: John 15:1-17

The vine. The branches. Bearing fruit. So many of Jesus' metaphors, teachings, and parables are directly related to the earth. The Bible opens in Eden. Jesus, when resurrected, is mistaken for a gardener. The Book of Revelation closes with a garden planted in the city. It seems like God really appreciates a good garden. "Dig" into what these metaphors mean and what Jesus as the vine reveals or "illuminates" to us about His character.

Observation

Like week four, this week's observation exercise will be a group-collaborative effort. The group leader will serve as the recorder and the rest of the group will shout out their observations as you write them down on your poster-board or large sheet of paper. Make sure everyone in the group can see your observations list!

Leader's note: Remember- you can always refer back to week one for prompting questions regarding observation, interpretation, and application. If your group ever gets stuck, refer to week one to get them going again.

Interpretation

Next, the group as a whole will work together to come up with their interpretation of the text. Write down on the poster-board the main theme that becomes the consensus of the group and from there, write down your main title of the passage.

Discuss as a group how you went from observation to interpretation.

Application

Finally, because this week is all about group collaboration, focus your application efforts on communal application. What is this text saying to your group as a whole? Is the text challenging your group to work toward something or adjust something?

Leader's Note

The last week of any small group can be hard. Make a plan during the application time to check up on one another after the study!

Prayer

This is our last week together. Take a little more time than normal to pray together. Bring up your action points from last week with the group and reflect on how well you've done with that application point. Reflect also on the study and allow each person to go around and share one thing they plan to take away from the six weeks. Allow each person to also share a prayer request which relates to what they shared about the study. Have each person pray for the person on their left. Close the prayer time with a blessing that you give to your group.

