

DIG

DEEP

CHOOSE

LAYER 5

Week #1

HIGH PLACES AND LOW PLACES

INTRODUCTION

What is something that you have waited for with much excitement and anticipation? Did the experience live up to your expectations? How did you feel when it was over?

I could hardly wait for August to come. All year long I had anticipated going to my first church camp. 7th grade had been one of the most exciting years of my life, and I knew that the pinnacle of my year would be the end of summer church camp. Most of my friends were a year or two older than I, and they often talked about how wonderful 7th grade camp was. Of course, they didn't reveal the details of the camp those were meant to be a surprise but they did reveal to me that it would be the single best experience of my life. Finally, the long awaited week arrived, and I was off to camp, my heart filled with high expectations. I was not disappointed. The week was in fact one of the best weeks of my young life. Along with thirty of my close friends, I experienced the life changing joy of a personal encounter with the Lord. Though I had attended church and Sunday School for as long as I could remember, 7th grade camp was the place where everything I had been taught came to life. I understood that God was real, that He loved me, that He wanted a personal relationship with me, and that I was now part of God's family. I felt God's presence in a stronger, more tangible way than I ever had before. I wanted to stay at that camp forever. But of course, the week ended, and we loaded the bus for a long journey home. While we were driving home, one of my

friends sat next to me and said, "I think this feeling we have is going to go away. We're not going to feel close to God like this when we get home." She had spoken the fear that had been nagging at my own heart since the moment we started driving. Desperate, I looked out the window and prayed fervently to God, "Please don't ever let this feeling go away. Please stay with me always." We rounded a bend in the road, and I beheld a miracle the answer to my prayer. There in the sky was the largest most brilliant rainbow I had ever seen. I knew that God had given Noah a rainbow as a promise, and I wondered if He was giving us this rainbow as a promise never to leave us. As I looked at the sky and wondered, I felt the gentle voice of the Lord reassuring me that this bus ride home from camp was not an ending, but a beginning. And I was at peace.

SCRIPTURAL FOUNDATION

Read the following scriptures:

Matthew 17:1-9

Psalm 42

Matthew 28:20b

Psalm 139:1-16

Romans 8:38-39

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did Peter want to build shelters and stay on the mountaintop?
2. What "mountaintop" experiences have you had?
3. Why is it necessary to come down from the mountain?
4. How is the Psalmist feeling in Psalm 42?
5. Since God has promised to always be with us, why do we sometimes feel far from Him?

6. On a scale of 1-10 (1 being far from God and 10 being close to God), how do you feel right now?

7. What can we do when we are feeling far from God?

8. What is the difference between faith and feelings?

SUMMARY

God promises that He will never leave us and that nothing can separate us from Him. The constancy of His presence is a truth and a reality based on Scripture. Yet, as human beings we often feel that God is far away from us. (Or that we are far away from God.) Fortunately, God's truth is not based on our feelings. It is natural for our feelings to go through highs and lows times when we feel very close to God, and times when we feel far from Him. There are two keys to weathering the low times; the first lies in allowing our faith to lead us despite our feelings, rather than allowing our feelings to guide our faith. The second lies in making consistent choices that foster regular spiritual growth. Remember that your relationship with God is just that a relationship. As is the case with all relationships, it requires an investment of time, trust, and commitment. God has already invested in you, and He is waiting patiently and eagerly for you to invest in Him.

PRAYER STARTER

As a group, pray for the following things:

- That each person would base their faith on the truth of Scripture rather than on human feelings
- That each person would know for sure that God is always with us
- That each person would grow closer to God
- Any other prayer requests shared by group members

DAILY BREAD

During the week, read and reflect on the following scriptures:

Psalm 43

Mark 9

Week #2

AN ORDINARY TUESDAY

INTRODUCTION

Recall a time when you felt God's presence in a strong way.

It all started on an ordinary Tuesday of an average week of an uneventful summer. Three seemingly unrelated experiences of mine were about to converge together to create something wonderful. Event #1: As a teacher, I had my whole summer free. Unfortunately, my husband worked all day, so I was often alone. Tuesdays were housecleaning days. Event #2: I had been praying for several months for God's direction for my life. I was trying to decide upon a graduate school and a program to advance my career and to create some options for myself. Event #3: I had just finished reading a biography of Hannah Hurnard (author of Hinds Feet on High Places) and was marveling at how she had learned to hear God's voice in every aspect and every moment of her life. I too wanted to experience such intimacy with God. So as I began my routine Tuesday housecleaning, I prayed that I would experience God in a powerful way. I was half way through vacuuming the living room when I felt God's love and peace wash over me like a series of waves. I turned off the vacuum and dropped to my knees on the floor. For nearly an hour, I stayed there on the floor feeling God's love and God's presence in a more powerful way than I ever had before. I also began to feel a peace about God's provision for my future plans as well. As I knelt there in my living room, simply experiencing God, I had the feeling that He had already worked out every detail of my future education and career. When I stood up, I

decided to stretch my legs and walk out to the mailbox to retrieve the mail. My jaw nearly dropped to the floor when I found in the mailbox a brochure for a brand new Master's degree program in education from Utah State University. I read through the application requirements, and began working on completing them. Three weeks later, on my birthday, I received my acceptance letter. While God's provision and direction were certainly a blessing to me, the greater blessing was that I learned that I could seek and find God on my own on an ordinary Tuesday.

SCRIPTURAL FOUNDATION

Read the following scriptures:

Luke 2:1-20

Proverbs 16:1-9

John 15:1-11

1 Chronicles 28:9

Deuteronomy 11:18-21

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did people expect Jesus to come?
2. How was God's plan different from the expectations of man?
3. Make a list of other times in Scripture when God moved in a way that was unexpected.
4. What are your expectations for how and when God moves?
5. What does it mean to abide (remain) in Christ?

SUMMARY

As Christians we are used to the idea that we will experience God in some way when we come to church on Sundays and when we attend different church activities such as retreats or camps. This expectation that we'll experience God in these places is right and good we should be experiencing God then. However, sometimes we limit ourselves to thinking that these are the only times and places where God will move. On the contrary, God is active and moving all the time; we have only to seek Him in order to be near Him and to be a part of what He is doing. God desires to be a part of our lives every day and in everything we do. We just need to look for Him. When we find Him, we'll be pleasantly surprised to discover that He is already moving in ways that we never would have expected.

PRAYER STARTER

As a group, pray for the following things:

- That each person would experience God on a regular basis, in unexpected ways and times
- That each person would learn to abide in Christ
- Any other prayer requests shared by group members
- Take time to sit quietly in the Lord's presence. Lay down your expectations and agendas and simply ask God how He wants to move. Share your experiences with each other.

DAILY BREAD

During the week, read and reflect on the following scriptures:

John 1

John 2

Week #3

FEAST OR FAMINE

INTRODUCTION

What is the best meal you have ever had? Have you ever experienced prolonged hunger?

Fatigue. Low energy. Dizziness. Decreased immune function. Dry, scaly skin. Swollen bleeding gums. Decaying teeth. Painful joints. Fragile bones. Slow reaction time. Difficulty paying attention. Poor growth. Muscle weakness. Bloated stomach. Organ function difficulties. Death.

These are the signs of physical starvation.

Dry lips. Dry mouth. Flushed skin. Irritability. Headache. Sunken eyes. Painful joints. Fatigue. Blotchy skin. Confusion. Lethargy. Cold hands. Rapid breathing. Rapid, weak pulse. Low blood pressure. Dizziness. Fainting. High fever. Inability to cry tears. Death.

These are the signs of physical dehydration.

SCRIPTURAL FOUNDATION

Read the following scriptures:

Matthew 4:4

John 6:25-58

Hebrews 5:11-14

Jeremiah 15:16

John 7:37

Revelation 22:17

Psalm 73:23-28

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How important is food and water to our physical health? How long can we go without them?
2. What is our spiritual food and water?
3. How important is it for us to "consume" spiritual food and water regularly?
4. Review the lists of symptoms of physical malnutrition and dehydration. How could those symptoms translate to spiritual malnutrition and dehydration?
5. What does Jesus mean when He says that He is the Bread of Life?

SUMMARY

Just as our physical bodies require a regular intake of food and water, so our spirits require consistent nourishment. When it comes to physical food, we would be horrified at the prospect of only being able to eat once a week (or once a month or once a year). Yet, too often too many Christians allow their spirits to become malnourished because of irregular and infrequent fillings. The good news, however, is that God wants us to partake of a spiritual feast which He freely gives to us. What then is our spiritual food? It is an active relationship with Jesus Christ. How do we "eat and drink" of this relationship regularly? Primarily through four means: 1. Bible study. 2. Prayer. 3. Worship. 4. Fellowship. The rest of this layer will focus on each of those four means of spiritual nourishment.

PRAYER STARTER

As a group, pray for the following things:

- For each person to experience God's feast
- For discipline for each person to participate in regular prayer, Bible study, worship and fellowship
- Any other prayer requests shared by group members

DAILY BREAD

During the week, read and reflect on the following scriptures:

Psalm 23

Mark 14

Week 4

LOVE LETTERS**INTRODUCTION**

How would you describe the perfect marriage?
How would you describe the perfect parent child relationship?

Funerals are a time to remember the person who has passed away and to reflect on his or her life. There were many things said about my grandmother at her funeral, but the one I remember the most is a short phrase used by my aunt to describe both her parents. She referred to the "Legacy of Love" that existed between my grandmother and grandfather. She described their 60+ years of marriage as being filled with romance, companionship, trust, joy, and commitment. Even after 60 years of marriage, their love for one another was evident to everyone who knew them. My grandfather wrote and recited love poems for my grandmother, they traveled around the world together, they went ballroom dancing every Saturday night for more than 50 years, and they constantly declared their love for each other in words and actions. Perhaps the most poignant declaration of their love for each other exists in the volumes of love letters they wrote to each other. My family has binders full of hundreds of love letters written by my grandparents to each other every single day he was stationed overseas during World War II. Those letters not only tell the story of their lives during those tumultuous years, they also reveal the legacy of love that characterized their entire marriage. Of all the things left behind by my grandmother, those letters, and the legacy of love they represent, are the most valuable.

SUMMARY

God is passionately, wholeheartedly, unconditionally, and unwaveringly in love with us. He has written us a magnificent love letter, called The Bible. Reading Scripture is not intended to be a burdensome task we do out of duty; rather it is intended to be a shared experience of love between the bride (us) and the groom (God). The Bible is also much more than mere written words. It is living. It is active. It is the revelation of God himself. There are many ways to study Scripture; the important thing is not so much how we do it, but that we make a commitment to regularly read the Word of God. Doing so will keep us close to God's presence, provide for our spiritual growth, and establish us in an eternal legacy of love.

PRAYER STARTER

As a group, pray for the following things:

- That each person will feel the deep passionate love God has for him/her
- That each person will learn to love God more and more
- That each person will hunger and thirst for regular time spent reading Scripture
- Any other prayer requests shared by group members

DAILY BREAD

During the week, read and reflect on the following scriptures:

Song of Songs 3
Revelation 19

Week 5

TRYSTING PLACE

INTRODUCTION

Who is someone to whom you look forward to seeing as often as possible? How do you know what your priorities are?

ROMEO "But soft!

What light through yonder window
breaks?

It is the East, and Juliet is the
sun.....

See how she leans her cheek upon her
hand!

O that I were a glove upon that
hand,

That I might touch that cheek!"

JULIET

"Ay me!"

ROMEO "O, speak again, bright angel! For thou
art As glorious to this night, being
o'er my head, As is a winged messenger of
heaven..."

JULIET "O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou
Romeo?

Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn
my love,
And I'll no longer be a Capulet."

Most of us are familiar with this famous balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet. In the play, Romeo and Juliet are forbidden by their feuding families to see or speak to one another. Romeo and Juliet's love for each other, however, is so strong, that they defy their parents and seek a trysting place to express their love for one another. Despite all the risk and difficulty that faced Romeo and Juliet, the strength of their love drove them to continually seek to be together.

SCRIPTURAL FOUNDATION

Read the following scriptures:

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

James 5:13-16

Isaiah 56:6-8

Philippians 4:4-7

Matthew 6:6

Matthew 14:22-23

Luke 22:39-46

John 17

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is a trysting place?

2. What is prayer?

3. Why do we pray?

4. How can we pray continually?

5. What does it mean to be a house of prayer?

SUMMARY

Prayer is about relationship with God. Although forbidden love and feuding families don't keep us from being with the Lord (on the contrary, God openly invites us into His love, and our church family supports us), other obstacles can keep us from spending time with the Lord in prayer. Usually busyness, distraction, worldliness, and unbalanced priorities become blocks to our prayer life. However, as we grow in relationship and intimacy with the Lord, we begin to long for His presence more and more. We find ourselves pushing other things out of the way and securing a trysting place to be with the Lord as often as possible.

PRAYER STARTER

As a group, pray for the following things:

- That each person would make prayer a priority in his/her life
- That each person would seek a trysting place with the Lord more and more often
- That each person would learn to hear the Lord's voice in prayer
- Any other prayer requests shared by group members
- Take some time to sit quietly in the Lord's presence and simply enjoy relationship with Him

DAILY BREAD

During the week, read and reflect on the following scriptures:

Psalm 5

Luke 11

Week 6

SURROUND YOURSELF

INTRODUCTION

With whom do you spend most of your time? What is your definition of the word "family"?

Alone. Isolated. Rejected. Unloved.

I read somewhere that isolation is the number one cause of depression.

I read somewhere that the search for love is the number one reason for premarital sex.

I read somewhere that the need for acceptance is the number one reason for experimenting with drugs.

I read somewhere that lack of acceptance is the number one cause of eating disorders.

I read somewhere that rejection is the number one cause of suicide.

Connected. Valued. Accepted. Loved.

I read somewhere that it is not good for man to be alone, so God gave him a soul mate.

I read somewhere that we are unconditionally loved, valued, and accepted.

I read somewhere that we have been adopted into a huge family full of love and grace.

I read somewhere that we are supposed to bear one another's burdens and live together in perfect love and unity.

I read somewhere that we were created to be in fellowship with God and with one another.

5. How can frequent fellowship with other believers help us live out Philippians 4:8-9?

6. Consider 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 and Matthew 28:19-20 together. What relationship should believers have with unbelievers?

7. In what ways are you influenced by your friends and family?

8. In what ways do you influence your friends and family?

9. Evaluate your current relationships. Do they draw you closer to God or pull you further away from Him?

10. How can you use the gift of your friendship with others to help draw them closer to God?

SUMMARY

One of the primary ways in which we experience God's love is through and within our relationships with one another. As the body of Christ we are intended to love, help, encourage, support, teach, and care for one another. When we surround ourselves with Christian friends and frequently spend time with other believers, not only do we create positive influences for our spiritual growth, we also experience the deep life-giving relationships God meant for us to have with other people. Does this mean that we should not interact with unbelievers at all? Certainly not. In fact God commands us to continually reach out to unbelievers and to draw them into His family. Being a part of God's family is what fellowship is all about.

PRAYER STARTER

As a group, pray for the following things:

- That God would strengthen each person's friendships and family relationships
- That God would reveal if there are any relationships that are causing problems and should be ended
- That God would deepen the relationships among your small group
- That God would show each person how to reach out to unbelievers and bring them into God's family
- Any other prayer requests shared by group members

DAILY BREAD

During the week, read and reflect on the following scriptures:

Proverbs 14

Proverbs 22

Week 7

PRACTICE HIS PRESENCE

INTRODUCTION

What does the word "worship" mean? What is your favorite way to worship God?

During the 1600's there lived a simple but influential French monk named Brother Lawrence. The most famous of his writings is a short book called "The Practice of the Presence of God". In it, Brother Lawrence describes how one can be in continual conversation with God. He describes his own life of washing dishes and tending gardens and how during his day he constantly dialogs with God. Because of his practicing of the presence of God, Brother Lawrence's entire life was an act of worship. God calls all believers, not just monks, to live in this constant communion with Him. Everything we do, from getting ready in the morning, to going to school, to hanging out with our friends, to lying down to sleep at night can be an act of worship if we do it with our hearts and minds focused on God.

**"There is not in the world a kind of life more sweet and delightful, than that of a continual conversation with God. Those only can comprehend it who practice and experience it." ...
Brother Lawrence**

SUMMARY

Sometimes we get stuck in thinking that worship is only something that happens on Sunday morning at church. In fact, worship is much more than a weekly event it is an attitude and a lifestyle. Worship is adoring God for who He is, agreeing with God about who we are, acting on our faith in all situations, and aspiring to be continually aware of God's presence in our lives. Worship begins with a choice to focus our hearts and minds on God and on the things of God rather than on ourselves and on the things of this world. Worship finds expression through many avenues: music, silence, prayer, poetry, art, acts of kindness, acts of mercy, trust in God, and many more. The outward expression of worship, though important, is of less concern to God than the inner condition of our hearts from which our worship should spring naturally as we grow ever closer to God.

PRAYER STARTER

As a group, pray for the following things:

- That each person would learn how to practice the presence of God in their daily lives
- Any other prayer requests shared by group members
- Take time to worship God together in whatever way the Spirit leads

DAILY BREAD

During the week, read and reflect on the following scriptures:

Psalm 95

Psalm 96

Week 8

A GREAT COMMITMENT**INTRODUCTION**

What is the biggest commitment you have ever made? Why is it hard for us to make commitments sometimes?

A recent fast food commercial touts that the way to lose weight and to have a healthy body is by making a series of small, healthy choices including eating at their restaurant rather than other restaurants. While I'm not sure that fast food of any type is the road to healthy living, there is a significant wisdom in the statement that health is a series of small choices. It is easy for all of us to make the grand commitment and say, "Yes, I want to be healthy." But it is harder to live out that commitment in practical terms through our daily, small choices. We could, in fact, fulfill our commitment to good physical health by continually making good, healthy choices in the small things choosing to take the stairs instead of the elevator; choosing an apple instead of a candy bar; choosing to play a sport instead of watching tv; choosing to eat less at each meal; choosing a glass of water instead of a can of coke. Similarly, our spiritual health and growth is dependent on small daily choices. It is easy for us to say "Yes, I want to be a strong committed Christian." But in order to really live out that commitment, we must make good, healthy choices on a regular basis choosing to stay connected to the body of Christ through regular fellowship; choosing to pray and read Scripture, even when we are busy and distracted; choosing to have faith in God, even when we don't feel Him in a strong way; choosing to worship Him in our thoughts, words,

and deeds. Choosing to make a commitment to God requires more than just good intentions; it requires follow through in the way we live.

SCRIPTURAL FOUNDATION

Read the following scriptures:

Revelation 3:14-21

Matthew 6:19-24

James 1:5-8

Hebrews 12:1-2

1 Corinthians 9:24-25

Psalms 37:3-6

1 Kings 8:56-61

Joshua 24:14-15

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the warnings and the instructions given to the church of Laodicea in Revelation 3:14-21?
2. What does it mean to be double minded? And why is double mindedness a problem?
3. What things in your life compete for your attention and devotion?
4. What does a life fully committed to the Lord look like?
5. How do Bible study, prayer, fellowship, and worship help us remain in God's presence and grow in our faith?
6. What choice faced Joshua and the Israelites in Joshua 24:14-15? How are we faced with that same choice today?
7. What will you choose? How will your choice effect your daily life?

SUMMARY

Coming into a relationship with God is a choice. We can choose to accept His gift of forgiveness and life, or not. Growing in relationship with God is also a choice. We can choose to seek Him regularly in prayer, Bible study, and worship, or not. We can choose to surround ourselves with people who will support and encourage our faith, or not. We can choose to turn away from the things that draw us away from God and to turn toward the things that draw us closer to God, or not. God's love and God's presence are constant; it is we who choose whether or not to live in the light of his mercy and grace.

PRAYER STARTER

As a group, pray for the following things:

- Give each person the opportunity to commit or recommit themselves wholeheartedly to the Lord
- That God would remove any double mindedness
- Any other prayer requests shared by group members

DAILY BREAD

During the week, read and reflect on the following scriptures:

Luke 16
Joshua 14