



SIX-WEEK PRE-EVENT DEVOTIONAL

NYC 2023

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Overflow

Introduction

Have you tried to buy a bottle of water at a convenience store lately? There are so many kinds of water to choose from that it's pretty overwhelming. Not too many years ago, getting a drink of water was simple. People would turn a knob on the kitchen faucet and fill up their cups or pitchers. That was it: just water. Today the selection is out of control! Where do you even start? You might need some time to decide what kind of water you prefer.

We could easily say our shelves are "overflowing" with water! With that in mind, isn't it ironic that 75 percent of Americans and Canadians are chronically dehydrated? We have more water than ever, and we've never been thirstier!

From the very beginning to the final pages, Scripture is filled with imagery of water flowing. We see waters of chaos, rivers, lakes, floods, wells, rains, large seas, and small cups of water. Through these symbols we begin to understand God's story—a story that tells us we were created to be filled with rivers of God's abundant life. We have the potential to let this life overflow into our thirsty world. But we tend to choose dehydration. We often find ourselves willingly living in the desert, longing to be filled.

One of the greatest mathematical minds in history belonged to a man named Blaise Pascal. He was born in 1623 in France, and his mom died a few years later. His dad taught him and his siblings Latin, Greek, and other subjects but refused to teach geometry because he felt the topic "too attractive and enticing." Have you ever thought of geometry like that? But Blaise just couldn't be stopped from studying it. When he was 15, he developed a provable theorem called the "mystic hexagon" and published a book called *Essay on Conics*, which you probably haven't read. He went on to invent calculating machines and published many more books. When studying perpetual motion, he inadvertently created a device that became known as a roulette wheel." Needless to say, he was smart.

When he was 31 years old, this brilliant scholar came to grips with an emptiness in his own life. He craved more. He felt hopeless and helpless. Then he had an experience with Christ, and it changed him. He wrote these words in *Pensées* (1670):

What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace?

This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself. (#425)

He had been influenced by St. Augustine of Hippo, who said, "Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee."

Despite fancy marketing and endless variety, we will remain thirsty until we actually drink deeply. In the same way, we were created to be filled to overflowing with God's abundant life. We will always be searching for more until we experience this filling and begin to walk in ways that spill over into the world. Let us drink deeply together!

Hey, Leaders

As we prepare for Nazarene Youth Conference 2023, let's begin to examine the idea of overflow that weaves its way through Scripture. It's so important to build a strong biblical foundation for these concepts if we want this NYC to be more than just a cool event. Challenging students to dig deeply into the well of living water presented throughout the text will allow them to be perpetually, spiritually hydrated and not simply be filled up once or twice.

We all know the Christian journey is not an event. Unfortunately, our students can easily settle into an event-driven faith. They tend to leave camps, retreats, or worship services and, as much as they try, they just don't develop the daily practices they need to sustain a relationship with God once the emotional high is over. This resource is intended to further the realization that NYC is a movement rather than a moment. We hope you, as a leader, will embrace these scriptural studies so that they become part of a daily routine in your life.

This is a six-week Bible study focused on specific, metaphorical passages dealing with water, filling, and overflow. Leaders, we hope we can lead our students to not only have authentic experiences with Jesus that fill us to overflowing, but also find the secret Jesus offers the people in John 7:37-38: "On the last day, the climax of the festival, Jesus stood and shouted to the crowds, 'Anyone who is thirsty may come to me! Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, "Rivers of living water will flow from his heart"' (NLT).

The purpose of this study is for you to gain a deeper understanding of these texts, these ancient streams of living water. Each week, you will work through the curriculum with your students. You will learn together. We know the most important element of a good lesson is the leader! The book is only a pathway to help you, the leader, lead.

This Is the How

First: Students and leaders will all read the Weekly Summary.

All should read this before meeting together. Leaders might want to give students time to read it during the meeting if most of the group looks lost! It is just a way to be prepared for the lesson.

Second: Leaders will use the Leaders Only section to help guide the group lesson.

We hope this section will help you guide your group through a good discussion. We want you to be able to engage students in dynamic ways without spending too much time in preparation. The Leaders Only segment will be divided into the following sections:

Teach:

This section will turn the Weekly Summary into a discussion-based lesson. It will contain some teaching advice and some more in-depth information. Use the questions in this section to generate discussion.

Engage:

This section contains activities designed to get students involved in the lesson. Some of these ideas might require a little preparation, but they will add so much to the lesson. Engaging students in interactive ways is essential.

Connect:

This section calls for response.

Third: Leaders will challenge students to take the Daily Challenge in the week that follows to reflect on the previous week's lesson and prepare for the next week.



Ride the River

Living into Your God-Given Purpose



WEEKLY SUMMARY

This is the detailed story of the Eternal God’s singular work in creating all that exists. On the day the heavens and earth were created, there were no plants or vegetation to cover the earth. The fields were barren and empty, because the Eternal God had not sent the rains to nourish the soil or anyone to tend it. In those days, a mist rose up from the ground to blanket the earth, and its vapors irrigated the land. One day the Eternal God scooped dirt out of the ground, sculpted it into the shape we call human, breathed the breath that gives life into the nostrils of the human, and the human became a living soul.

The Eternal God planted a garden in the east in Eden—a place of utter delight—and placed the man whom He had sculpted there. In this garden, He made the ground pregnant with life—bursting forth with nourishing food and luxuriant beauty. He created trees, and in the center of this garden of delights stood the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

A river flowed from Eden to irrigate the garden, and from there it separated into four smaller rivers. — Genesis 2:4–10, VOICE

The Great Plains of Kansas, Oklahoma, eastern Colorado, and Nebraska were known for years as the Great American Desert because, although they had plenty of prairie grass, they were dry, arid places that didn’t get much rain. They had few trees, so by the definition of the time, they were considered “desert.” But then rain began to fall. People started moving in. Large farms removed much of the native grasses. Crops grew. Life was good.

Then, in 1930, the rains stopped. It turned out that the rain was just considered a “climate fluctuation,” and the area returned to its normal weather pattern—a dry desert.

A place with no water is a place with no life. Plus, the farming methods of the early settlers had left the soil unprotected. The conditions for chaos were in place. For almost ten years, there was a drought in this land, and in the middle of the drought, huge storms lifted the dirt high into the air as huge mountains of soil blew over the Midwest, resulting in the “Dust Bowl.” It was part of a nationwide depression. Dust and dirt were everywhere! It was the worst ecological disaster the United States had ever faced.

Have you ever just felt dry inside? Have you ever felt like some kind of drought in your soul has left you questioning whether God actually matters? Have you ever been surrounded by a storm of circumstances that just makes life messy?

In the opening scenes of Scripture, we are presented with a dry and arid desert. No native vegetation to keep the soil in place. No rain to nourish the soil. It was a drought. The conditions for chaos were in place. There was no water. There was no life.

We learn something powerful at the very beginning of God's story: where there is dry desolation, God provides a river of hope. Where conditions for chaos exist, God springs forth waters of life.

In this desert, God created waters to nourish and irrigate. As the waters flowed, God brought man and woman together, created a garden of delight (did you know Eden means "delight" in Hebrew?), and gave them a purpose. The people God put in the garden were to care for it, to make sure the rivers kept flowing and the trees kept growing. The river was massive enough to bless all people, and it was all a gift from God.

Something about a river is powerfully alive. If you've ever ridden the river on a raft or kayak, you know this. Your job is to just keep the boat afloat and let the water push you along. The water seems alive with purpose. Likewise, God has this incredible purpose for each of us. This purpose is not a struggle to find if we can just keep riding the river.

The problems come when water surrounds us, but we choose the desert instead. We know the woman and man in the scriptures chose their own wisdom over God. Despite being surrounded by the gift of water, their souls seemed to be dying of thirst. Tragically, this story tells us that though it seems simple enough to stay nurtured in the waters God provides, we often choose the desert of our own desires over the river of God's purpose.

In 1939, the rain began to fall again in the middle of America. The dust lingered, but new life began to grow. And a movement began that would bring abundance to this once empty and dry land.

NYC is a movement. It could be just the kind of rain you've been praying for. Though you feel dry inside, though your church seems stagnant, and though it seems our world is in a major drought, we know the story of God always includes a downpour and overflow. As we prepare for NYC 2023, may we start patching the boats and repairing the paddles as we anticipate the overflow of God's living water into our lives. May we each find our purpose as we ride the river together!

Main Point: *God brings rivers of life and purpose in the midst of the deserts we all face.*

A lot of people struggle with feeling like they have a purpose in life. Dr. Kenda Creasy Dean said in *The Godbearing Life*, “Believing in God is not the issue for teenagers today; believing God matters is the issue.”

This belief beckons students to embrace God’s purpose. God matters. Even when our circumstances are almost intolerable, God’s purpose continues in our lives, and his hope flows from us into the world.

Teach:

Ask:

- Have you ever felt spiritually dry or empty? Talk about this place in your life.
- What practices can you add to your life that will help you through the “desert” places you experience? Why are practices like this important during these times?

The Bible is filled with descriptions of rivers of waters that flow through and out of dry and desert-like places. Genesis 2 describes a dry place. God created the world, but it was without water. It was dry and desolate until God acted. He gave the world a gift: water that nourishes; water that brings life. Man and woman were not created until springs or mists of water were given because without water, life is not sustainable. Into the desert flow rivers of life-bringing waters. This is not just how God’s story begins. It is repeated time and time again.

Engage: Before the meeting, go to a store and buy a bottle of water. Find the most descriptive kind of water you can, and look it up on their website. (For example, Fiji Water has an awesome website that will convince you this is the greatest water on the planet.) Prepare the water by chilling it, and then have the bottle perched in a small ice bucket or cooler—make it look exquisite.

Say to the students, “It wasn’t easy to find, but after much effort and expense, I offer you the most exquisitely refreshing water in the world.” Then read the description of the water from the website.

Now offer the water to some volunteers you choose from the group.

Say to the volunteers, “Now, before we partake of the water, let’s build up an appetite for it.”

Give each volunteer a cracker. (If you have the right kind of group—only you will know—you could also add ½ teaspoon of soy sauce, hot sauce, garlic salt, etc.) Instruct the students to eat the crackers. As they eat, get out some chilled cups, fill them with ice, and slowly pour the water into them, making a big deal but moving slowly. After pouring the glasses, offer the students the water.

Ask these debriefing questions:

- 1) Was this the most exquisitely refreshing water in the world?
- 2) Was drinking this water satisfying? Why or why not?

Something about water just satisfies us. It fills a physical longing. Many of you know you can live without food for a few weeks, but you can only live without water for a few days. We need water. It is fitting that Scripture uses this metaphor all through its pages. The inspired writers believed that our need for God is much the same as our need for water. If we are to truly live a life of abundance, if we are to really find our God-given purpose in life, we need to ride the river God provides.

But why do we like the desert so much? We people have a way of breaking things. I remember standing on a glass-bottom floor in the CN Tower, 150 stories in the Toronto skyline. It was an unsettling experience to look down past my feet and be so high in the air. Just then, my youth pastor friend said, "You know, everything man has made eventually breaks." I scurried off the floor and down the elevator. He was right. Even when God gives us a free gift of purpose, abundance, and meaning, we sometimes just mess things up.

Teach:

Ask: Why do you think some people continually choose the desert (dry and lonely places) instead of the river (growing and living places) in their Christian lives?

It is true that people often choose the desert. But sometimes, by no fault of our own, we experience desert places or wilderness places. Maybe we were doing great, and then something really big happened that shook our faith. These difficult times can be really hard on us, but they can also be good for us. The biblical story begins in a river-fed garden, but quickly people found themselves in the desert. We know the desert was significant because God's people were in it . . . a lot.

Engage: If you want an interactive way to teach about these desert experiences in Scripture, you could use the following activity:

Get a clear plastic tub and fill it with ten or so river rocks and sand. Talking about the importance of desert/wilderness stories in Scripture could be more engaging with the sand as a visual. Depending on the size of the group, you could pass the "desert" around and ask students to imagine themselves in a desert.

On each rock you could have a biblical desert story written in permanent marker and have students dig those stories out of Scripture and discuss them (e.g., "Moses" is written on rock—talk about Moses's experience in the desert. "Manna" is written on rock—talk about Israelites wandering).

We know the desert is important, even if it is difficult. The desert for a Christian student represents this place where we don't feel God's presence—that place in Genesis 2:5 where "there were no plants or vegetation to cover the earth. The fields were barren and empty, because the

Eternal God had not sent the rains to nourish the soil or anyone to tend it" (VOICE). But in these places, God builds our faith and *reveals our God-given purposes*. We know that if we read the story to the end, we see the desert doesn't go on forever; God sends a mist, and God brings a river. We just need to ride it, and as we do, we begin to live into that purpose that God reveals in the wilderness.

Teach: Use this time to point to NYC. Ask the students, "As you prepare for NYC, what kind of 'desert places' do you find yourselves in? [Identify some of these.] Do you think a movement like NYC could be a catalyst for God to bring new life into this generation? How could something like this happen?"

We believe God has big things in store for us. We believe God longs to reveal purpose to students today, even to those who are in the desert places.

Teach: Say, "This might be a good time to think about your own circumstances and really start thinking about other students who are planning to come to NYC and their desert places. So many students today are struggling and need a downpour of God's grace, hope, and purpose in their lives that will overflow to the world."

Connect: Help the students write their own life purpose statements. Explain that this is just a simple statement that describes and defines their life purpose. Why do they exist? Answer this question with a simple response. You can encourage your students to use Scripture or embrace a certain scripture to back their statements. One example of a life's purpose statement might be, "My purpose in life is to . . . point young people to Jesus." (Use your own example here.) For a student, it may be simply, "To make Jesus famous, not me;" "To glorify God in everything I do;" "To use my gift of . . . to make God known," etc. Encourage students to write these statements and either share them in this session or when you come back together.

Say, We will close each week by saying this Scripture from Romans 15:13: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

DAILY CHALLENGE

Monday: Read Genesis 2:4–24 and spend three minutes in silent prayer. What does this story teach us about the purpose of people?

Tuesday: Read Deuteronomy 8 and spend three minutes in silent prayer. What does this chapter say about the desert and God’s faithfulness in these moments?

Wednesday: Read Luke 13:1–13 and spend three minutes in silent prayer. What does this episode of Jesus in the desert teach us about temptation and faith?

Thursday: Read the “At the Well” Weekly Summary and spend four minutes in silent prayer.

Friday: Read John 4 and spend four minutes in silent prayer.

Saturday: Review the “At the Well” Weekly Summary and spend five minutes in silent prayer.



At the Well

Responding to God's Calling on Your Life

WEEKLY SUMMARY



Then Jacob hurried on, finally arriving in the land of the east. He saw a well in the distance. Three flocks of sheep and goats lay in an open field beside it, waiting to be watered. But a heavy stone covered the mouth of the well. —Genesis 29:1–2, NLT

He [Jesus] had to go through Samaria on the way. Eventually he came to the Samaritan village of Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there; and Jesus, tired from the long walk, sat wearily beside the well about noontime. Soon a Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Please give me a drink." —John 4:4–7, NLT

I was seventeen years old and I was in the desert. I was part of a youth group mission trip to Arizona where we worked on a church at a Native American reservation. The temperature outside was 100 degrees in the shade, and we were painting and doing light construction work in the heat. At night we had worship services, and during one of these moments I surrendered my entire life to Jesus. It is such a clear memory today, and it rearranged my life. In the desert I heard God calling me to jump in with both feet and ride his river for the rest of my life.

The next day I punched someone in the face.

Anger had ruled that day. I had lost my cool. It caused a big division in our youth group, and the rest of the trip was just a desert again. My own immature choices had led me right back into the wilderness. It was more disappointing, though, because I knew I had dedicated my life to Christ completely. I felt alone. I was a failure. I went from a high high to one of the lowest lows in my life.

As we traveled back home, I sat alone. Face in hands. Distraught. I felt someone come and sit by me. A hand on my back. A man named Jim, who used to be a pastor but was on the trip as an adult sponsor, had come to sit next to me. He told me everything was going to be all right. He reminded me that God was calling me, and that no matter what I'd done, God still loved me. He told me the commitment I had made to Christ was still valid and strong.

Those words were exactly what I needed. I was thirsty in my soul, and through Jim, God allowed me to drink deeply of his love and grace.

Jacob had made a mess of things. He was a deceiver. That's what his name meant. He came out of the womb grabbing his twin brother's ankle, trying to be first. He was competitive and tricky from day one. All this scheming took him to the desert, the dry place. But in the middle of the desert was a well. A resting place. An oasis. And even better, there was a woman, Rachel. He thought she was beautiful. So, in the desert, a man and a woman found each other at the well. It was a place of refreshment, hope, and life.

God called Jacob and Rachel to continue the covenant. To bring the river of life into the world. Jacob would know God's blessing, and he would offer it to others. But he would also continue to make a mess of things. It's just the way people roll.

Jesus changes things. In John 4, we see that Jesus arrived at what many scholars believe is the same well, the well of Jacob. It's a familiar story to many. A woman came to draw water and Jesus began a conversation with her.

Here Jesus was in Samaria—a place the Jews said you shouldn't go—talking to a Samaritan woman, a thing the Jews said you shouldn't do. Jesus pushed through these boundaries. Why? Because he knew this woman was like Jacob in the wilderness. She was dying of thirst. Her soul was unfulfilled. She was making a mess of things, and Jesus knew what she needed: living water! Jesus himself. He would be one to satisfy her soul.

At the well, Jesus called the woman to a new way of living. She heard the call and shared this living water with others. Soon the whole town knew of Jesus because of one woman at the well.

Jim had heard God call him years before that mission trip in Arizona. He knew he had a purpose. And for me, his healing words were a reminder of God's living water in my life.

In the same way, God is calling you. Whether you're still in the desert or you're loving life in the river, Jesus is pushing through boundaries to call you into a life of purpose. Will you stay at the well long enough to hear him? Will you go from the mountaintop and really start sharing this living water with others?

Jacob did indeed answer God's call, and the whole world was blessed because of it. It wasn't a perfect journey, but it was a lasting one. Jesus called the most unlikely people in the most unlikely places. We don't know the name of the woman at the well, but we know she responded to Christ's living water and overflowed to others. And in the same way, God calls us today and can use us—despite the messes we make—to bring an overflow of hope into our world.

Main Point: *God is calling each of us to overflow to others, even when our choices or circumstances lead us to desert places.*

How long do you think the average attention span is for fourteen- to eighteen-year-olds?

It's not very long, and it's getting shorter. Recent studies indicate that the average time a person can really pay attention to something is just seconds! We all know it is hard to just focus on one thing for very long. Something else is always popping up and enticing us to focus on it instead.

Corporations in the US and Canada know this well. Social media platforms are designed with just one goal in mind: "How can we keep the attention of our customers?" Attention *is* money! That's why the social media algorithms place that perfectly timed ad right when a person is most vulnerable to consume. They are attention experts.

We are not. It's easy to live in such a distracted world that we lose our way. It's easy to get off track.

Engage: Play the classic youth ministry listening game. You will need:

- A blindfold

- Paper for students and pens/markers

- Open space to set up a course

You could divide up into two teams and play this as a competition or just have one person going at a time. One person (or two, if playing on teams) is designated the Traveler, and his or her job is to get to the finish line. Another person is designated as the Voice of Direction. That person must stay at the starting line and is the only person allowed to give directions.

Next, give each student a piece of paper and tell them to write down something that can distract them (e.g., music or TV streaming, social media, busy schedules). Blindfold the Traveler. Then take the students' papers and lay out a course, putting the papers all around on the floor.

The goal is for the Traveler to reach the finish line without stepping on a paper while only the Voice of Direction is guiding him or her. While the Voice of Direction is trying to guide, the other students can be a noisy distraction, even yelling out false directions. If a Traveler touches a paper, he or she returns to the starting line. The game is over when a Traveler crosses the finish line.

After the activity, ask some follow-up questions about how difficult it was to hear the Voice of Direction through all the distractions.

Teach: Say, "With so much distraction, it's hard to hear good directions and even harder to stay focused on the journey. This is how it is sometimes with God's calling on our lives. We have this calling from God to live into an amazing purpose, but we often fail to hear it and can easily get sidetracked from it."

It's crazy to think that the God who created the entire universe is so interested in each of us that he includes us in his plans for the world. He calls each of us to participate in his rescue operation. We all have a part to play. We just need to listen and then stay focused on the journey. We can help make God's dream for the world a possibility.

God promised Abraham that he would be with him, bless him, and multiply his family, which would bless the world. Abraham's son Isaac carried on the blessing, and Isaac's son Jacob was also used by God. Jacob was someone whom God called, but he was always making things difficult. His choice to deceive his father and steal his brother's blessing (read Genesis 27) led to broken relationships and eventually led him away from his calling into a lonely place as he fled for his life. He was in the wilderness when he had a vision from God at Bethel (read Genesis 28) and eventually found a deep well, where he began to realize God had a plan to continue the covenant through him.

Teach: Review the story of Jacob in Genesis 27–29. Present a summary to students, describing the way Jacob was deceitful and why he was forced to flee his family and go into the wilderness. Tell about Jacob's dream at Bethel of the staircase ascending to heaven as God promised to bless him, and explain the eventual interaction with Rachel. After a quick review, ask the following questions:

- Where did Jacob miss the mark and live a life of deceit?
- What was the main purpose of Jacob's dream at Bethel?
- Do you think Jacob deserved to be assured of this kind of blessing?
- Why would God choose someone like Jacob?
- What was the significance of the well? How did it connect back to the Adam and Eve story? How did it point ahead to Jesus at the well with the Samaritan woman?

It was thirty-eight generations later when Jesus showed up at a well in Samaria. Jewish people usually chose to go the long way around Samaria to avoid encountering people who lived there. Samaritans were basically Jewish people who had married outside of their ethnicity and had different religious practices. Jesus recognized all these things, but he also was interested in teaching his followers that all people were important, and that all people were created and called. His interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well was not acceptable behavior to some, but Jesus was willing to push through the normal way of doing things in order to make sure this woman heard the good news of Jesus. At the well, Jesus gave this woman a gift of living water—a well that would never run dry.

Engage: As an illustration, get a bucket with a strong handle or a rope on the handle and fill it halfway up with water. Say, "Jesus introduced something totally new to this Samaritan woman and to all of those who were listening to him and following him."

Ask the students, "What would happen if you took this bucket, lifted it over your head, and turned it upside down?" They should all respond that they would get wet. (Some will probably volunteer to do it). Ask them, "Why? Why would you get wet?" You may need to prompt them to

say that you would get wet because of the “law of gravity.” Then ask, “But what if we introduced a new law?” Now, take the bucket, stand up, and spin it around in a vertical circle quickly (You’ll want to practice this ahead of time). The water should stay in the bucket. To make sure you understand what you are doing, look up some YouTube videos first about water revolving in a vertical circle, or google some information about inertia and circular motion.

Say, “When you introduce a new law—inertia and circular motion—the water’s behavior changes. Jesus offered the Samaritan woman a new law. It didn’t make sense to her at first. She simply wanted water. But Jesus offered her living water—the hope that comes in believing and trusting in *him*. He is the water that brings life to the world. Each of us can experience it for ourselves.”

NYC 2023 could be a time for us to allow Jesus to be more alive in us than ever. We all make decisions that can lead us down dark and disappointing paths. God is patient with us. Even when we feel alone and useless, God gives us a dream. God gives us a blessing—a gift called grace. He offers us water that fills the inner desires of our lives. This summer might be a time when God moves in a new way in your life to help you fulfill your calling.

Connect: Challenge students to connect the biblical stories of calling to their own calling. Say, “This week, take some time to study the elements of calling found in a biblical figure of your choice (e.g., Gideon, Moses, Mary). As you study these passages, examine the different things God does to call these people. Write down these things (e.g., God speaks through a messenger, God affirms the person, God invites them to do something, God encourages them, God gives them power to do it),

Now, look at your own life and see if God is speaking to you in the same way. Where and how is God calling you?

Let’s say Romans 15:13 together:

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

DAILY CHALLENGE

Monday: Read Genesis 28:10–22 and spend three minutes in silent prayer. In what ways is God reassuring you, walking with you, and calling you?

Tuesday: Read John 4:13–14 and spend three minutes in silent prayer. How would you describe your life with Christ right now? Is it a stagnant lake or a spring of living water? What is the result of Christ’s living water?

Wednesday: Read John 4:39–42 and spend three minutes in silent prayer. What was the Samaritan woman’s eventual response to Jesus’s invitation? How is your life overflowing to others?

Thursday: Read the “Go With the Flow” Weekly Summary and spend four minutes in silent prayer.

Friday: Read Ezekiel 47:1–5 and spend four minutes in silent prayer.

Saturday: Review the “Go With the Flow” Weekly Summary and spend five minutes in silent prayer.



Go with the Flow

Living a Life of Holiness



WEEKLY SUMMARY

In my vision, the man brought me back to the entrance of the Temple. There I saw a stream flowing east from beneath the door of the Temple and passing to the right of the altar on its south side. The man brought me outside the wall through the north gateway and led me around to the eastern entrance. There I could see the water flowing out through the south side of the east gateway.

Measuring as he went, he took me along the stream for 1,750 feet and then led me across. The water was up to my ankles. He measured off another 1,750 feet and led me across again. This time the water was up to my knees. After another 1,750 feet, it was up to my waist. Then he measured another 1,750 feet, and the river was too deep to walk across. It was deep enough to swim in, but too deep to walk through. —Ezekiel 47:1–5, NLT

A small trickle of water through the woods—this was a stream near my grandfather’s farm. It was barely noticeable most of the time.

Then one day, we pulled up to his house, and I heard a dull roar. My cousin and I had a sense of adventure, so we headed through the woods toward the roar. When we came to the creek, it wasn’t a small trickle but a swiftly moving, deep stream. You could hardly cross it. The path it cut was alive with color and movement. Animals were scurrying out of the way. Flowers and grasses were growing on both sides of the stream. The roar was getting louder. We hadn’t arrived at the source. Then we turned a corner, and appearing out of nowhere was a massive waterfall. It was flowing so fast and hitting the ground below so hard that we had to be careful not to get swept away. Steady rains had transformed an insignificant spring into a large, loud, and life-giving river. We stood there speechless and amazed.

The vision Ezekiel had of the temple left him speechless and amazed. The temple was the place where the presence of God dwelt. Everyone knew the presence of God was a dangerous place. God was holy. God was huge. God was overflowing with righteousness and justice. And in his presence, all impurities would be brought to light, and any impure thing could not exist!

That’s why the priests who entered into God’s presence took special care to “purify” themselves. This was not just an attempt to live a good life or do good things; this was about ritual cleansing with water from all physical impurities. An impure person was someone who had contacted anything considered unclean. These were things like dead people or animals, blood or other bodily fluids, diseases, or sickness. So, Ezekiel’s vision of the temple was something completely new as purifying water flowed OUT of the temple.

Ezekiel saw water coming out of the temple—first, a trickle of water that seemed insignificant. But then it transformed into this raging river, deep and uncrossable. Everywhere this river flowed, it brought LIFE and HOPE.

The crazy thing was that this vision seemed to indicate that God’s holiness was now flowing out from the temple, and everywhere it went, it took holiness with it. It was like God was bringing his purity to the world in a river that flowed all the way to the Dead Sea. And as it did, it made the Dead Sea alive.

We really see the implications of all of this when Jesus came on the scene. He broke all kinds of purity rules. He touched sick people, even dead people. And as he touched them, they were healed and brought back to life. It’s incredible.

Sometimes we try to do all these right and good things in hopes that we might be pure. We often carry guilt and shame when we don’t live up to God’s moral demands. We get into the business of managing our sins when what we really need to do is go with the flow. We need to just jump into God’s river of life that brings hope, healing, and holiness to us.

You can live a life of holiness! It sounds pretty overwhelming, but the Bible makes it clear. You should be holy. Your holiness is not dependent on *your* actions but on *God’s* actions. You need only to continually submerge yourself in God, and he will do the rest.

The problem comes when we refuse to submit and submerge. What are you holding onto that keeps you from going with God’s flow? What keeps you on the shore? Is there something in your life you just need to tell the truth about? Confession is not about saying you are sorry; it’s about telling the truth about your life. When you do that, you begin to live into your true identity and refuse to play the game of guilt, shame, and sin management.

Don’t be afraid to jump all the way into the river of life Jesus offers us!

Main Point: *We need to live a life of holiness. Holiness comes from God.*

We believe it's important for students to live a life of holiness. While this seems rather straightforward, it's actually a pretty difficult concept for some students to grasp. What is holiness? What does it look like for students in today's world? Why is it so important?

We believe that God created people "in God's own image." This is huge. The story from Genesis describes a holy God who orders the chaos of the world. To be holy is to be set apart. God is holy. He is set apart from the created order. He is exalted and worthy. He is without sin. Sin is incapable of existing in his holy presence. And this holy God created us to be like him. That's what it means to be fully human.

Engage: Use the following object lesson to teach about holiness. You will need several rolls of aluminum foil and markers. Ask the class: "In what ways should God shape our lives?" Have the students divide into partners, and make sure each student gets a sheet of foil large enough to cover his or her face. Explain, "Each person will put the foil on their partner's face and see if they can make the perfect image of that partner using the marker." Give them each one minute to do so and then spend some time admiring the art.*

Use the following for discussion:

- Describe the way this image was created. Would you say it resulted in a perfect image of you? Why or why not?
- Read the following scriptures: Genesis 1:25–26; Ephesians 2:10; 1 Peter 1:13–16
 - o What do these verses reveal about God's holiness and our calling to be holy?
 - o How did this object lesson look like the process we go through to arrive at holiness?

Isaiah's vision of the burning coal and Ezekiel's vision of the water flowing from the temple are great ways to examine the concept of holiness. BibleProject has an amazing video that helps explain it. Watch this in preparation for this lesson, and perhaps show it to your students: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/holiness/>. Discuss the idea that God's holiness can flow into the world like a river that brings life to dry lands. God's holiness is a river we can jump into.

Teach: Say, "Many people think holiness is just the idea of living a morally good life and trying to stay pure in the way we act. This is certainly part of it. But holiness is just so much bigger than that."

- What do you think it looks like to "be holy" in today's world?
- Do you believe teenagers can live a holy life? Why or why not?

There are at least two important concepts to explore when examining biblical holiness. First is the idea of setting apart your whole life for Jesus (called consecration) and allowing God to

*Adapted from *Faith Metaphors: 50 Interactive Object Lessons for Youth Ministry*, ed. Julie Meiklejohn. (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2002).

shape and form you into a mature Christian (called sanctification). The call to progress into Christian maturity is a really important concept.

Teach: Say, “Many years ago in England a man named John Wesley believed Christians should establish practices that would help them experience God’s grace in the deepest ways. Wesley challenged his students to live lives completely committed to Christ. Wesley taught this total commitment to Christ as something that would impact every aspect of a person’s life. Experiencing God’s grace wasn’t something you just did at church or at youth camp or something like NYC, it was all-encompassing.”

Ask: “What do you think makes this kind of commitment difficult for young people today?”

So we are called by God to make a big, crazy commitment to him, and in turn, God promises to fill us with his Spirit, which allows us to grow and just live like we were supposed to. This process is more than just a one-time thing. It happens continuously in our lives, but it’s a river we need to jump into. We can join Jesus in rescuing the world because we are made “holy” in relationship with him.

Teach: Read Romans 6:19 from *The Message*: “I’m using this freedom language because it’s easy to picture. You can readily recall, can’t you, how at one time, the more you did just what you felt like doing—not caring about others, not caring about God—the worse your life became and the less freedom you had? And how much different is it now as you live in God’s freedom, your lives healed and expansive in holiness?”

Ask:

- What are some ways you see people your age doing just what they feel like doing without caring about others or God?
- Do you ever experience the freedom of God? What does that look and feel like?
- How can a person experience holiness and overflow that holiness to others?”

This river of God’s holiness is flowing into the world and can flow through people into the lives of others. This requires each of us to have crazy and complete commitment. Earlier in Romans 6, Paul wrote that God’s people should basically decide to leave behind the sin that controls them. In Ephesians, Paul called followers to be “filled with the Spirit” (see Ephesians 5:18). This is God’s work in us. How often do we settle for less than complete commitment and complete filling?

Engage: Before the meeting, gather the following things for an object lesson:

- candle
- candle holder
- candle lighter
- two balloons

Blow up one balloon. Fill one balloon with water. Say, “Too many Christians settle for being less than what they could be. God calls us to complete commitment and offers a complete filling

of the Spirit in our lives. We often settle for routine and religion. We look like committed, filled Christians, but we aren't."

Take the air-filled balloon and put it on the flame (it should instantly pop). "The reality is when we just look the part, when the heat is turned up in life, we don't make it." (You could reference Peter—before being filled with the Spirit, he denied Christ.) "But when we're filled with the Holy Spirit . . . [Take the water-filled balloon and put it on the flame. It shouldn't pop.] we can stand strong in the trials and temptations of our generation." (You could reference Peter preaching after Pentecost.)

We hope that NYC 2023 is a time when we will be really challenged to look deeply at our commitments to Christ. We hope that some people will be open to God's call to jump all the way into this amazing river of holiness that's flowing into the world!

Engage: This week, challenge students to participate in BibleProject's holiness Bible study: <https://bibleproject.com/bible-studies/holiness/>. This could be a cool way to really solidify their understanding of holiness.

Let's say Romans 15:13 together:

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

DAILY CHALLENGE

Monday: Read Ephesians 2:10 and spend three minutes in silent prayer. How would your life change if you saw yourself as God's masterpiece?

Tuesday: Read 1 Peter 1:13–16 and spend three minutes in silent prayer. Would Jesus ask people to be holy if he knew they couldn't? What was Jesus trying to say?

Wednesday: Read Romans 12:1 and spend three minutes in silent prayer. What does this verse have to say about how you live a holy life?

Thursday: Read the "Like Springtime" Weekly Summary and spend four minutes in silent prayer.

Friday: Read John 7:37–38 and spend four minutes in silent prayer. What do you think Jesus means when he talks about "living water"?

Saturday: Review the "Like Springtime" Weekly Summary and spend five minutes in silent prayer.



Like Springtime

Sharing the Good News



WEEKLY SUMMARY

On the last day, the climax of the festival, Jesus stood and shouted to the crowds, “Anyone who is thirsty may come to me! Anyone who believes in me may come and drink! For the Scriptures declare, ‘Rivers of living water will flow from his heart.’” —John 7:37–38, NLT

We nicknamed him Beans. It wasn’t because he made a lot of beans, ate a lot of beans, or smelled like he ate a lot of beans. It was because he loved—I mean, *loved*—coffee.

He was exacting about the way coffee beans were to be ground and coffee was to be poured over and poured out. One day, I decided to make myself a cup of coffee, and all of a sudden, Beans showed up. He watched me like a hawk. The first thing I did wrong was to not pre-soak the filter. He scolded me. The second thing I did wrong was to not finely weigh and measure the beans on a digital scale. The third thing I did wrong was to not hand-grind the beans to the perfect consistency. And finally, my method of pouring out the hot water did not adequately open up the grounds, allowing for the perfect blending of flavor.

To him, my coffee cup was a disaster. Frankly, I didn’t know any better. Then he made me the perfect cup of coffee. I would argue that this was the world’s greatest cup of coffee. From that point, I decided that whenever Beans was around, I’d let him make the coffee.

After Jesus told the woman at the well that he was living water, she went back to her friends and family and simply shared the good news with them. They began to believe in Jesus, and new life began to blossom. Their lives of winter turned to springtime!

Jesus left the well in Samaria and journeyed north. He continued healing people. He fed a huge crowd with a small amount of food. He walked on water. He told everyone he was the bread and the water of life.

Then in John 7, we find him in Judea at the Festival of the Tabernacles for a weeklong celebration. The word “tabernacle” is the English version of the Hebrew word *sukkot*, which means “booth” or “tent.” Every September the Jewish people remember how God was with them when they escaped Egypt and had to live as nomads in little “booths” or makeshift tents. This was all they needed to survive because God provided for them. They received quail, bread (manna), and water from a rock. It was miraculous. Moses, as instructed, struck a rock with his staff, and

enough water flowed for the people and their livestock to drink it. Crazy! This is what the Festival of Tabernacles was all about.

The biggest event of the festival was, and still is, the water libation ceremony. On this day, the priest gets a pitcher of water from the Pool of Siloam and pours it out on an altar in the temple. This was happening when Jesus addressed the crowd in John 7:37-38. As the people saw the water flow from the pitcher, they heard Jesus say, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them." Boom. Mic drop.

Like Beans with his coffee, Jesus knew what he had to offer was best: "Don't settle for water that merely quenches your physical thirst! I have the best to offer you. It will flow into your heart and bring it to life, then it will flow out of your heart into the world. It will bring new life, new hope, new seasons to anyone who believes." Nobody can do it like Jesus can.

As students and adults from all over the United States and Canada begin to focus their attention on Tampa, Florida, NYC 2023, I imagine some are coming who desperately need to drink deeply of the living water that Jesus offers. Others need to let this living water flow out of them and not remain still or even stagnant in their lives.

Take time to remember God's faithfulness to you. Let his living water flow through you to others. Share this amazing hope with others. God's love brings new life!

Main Point: *We should allow the living water of Jesus to flow through us into the world. We should share the good news of Jesus with others.*

Engage: Before class, download the game called “Crowd Charades: Spring Edition” from downloadyouthministry.com.^{*} Play it with the class.

After the game, ask:

- “What are the characteristics of springtime?”
- “What are the major differences between winter and springtime?”
- “How is the gospel of Jesus similar to springtime?”

Spring is the time of the year when things come back to life. Rain falls. Flowers bloom. Grass turns green. It is a season of life. Jesus calls us to springtime. Jesus calls us to living water—abundant and eternal living.

We often use the metaphor of water and overflowing when it comes to our walk with Christ because it seems to “flow” throughout the entirety of Scripture. In our lesson today, we see Jesus using this metaphor as he introduced the rather odd concept of “drinking” from him.

Jesus knew that water was essential to human flourishing. Life could not continue without it! So it follows that he would challenge people to view him as the source of real living. He knew if people would come to him and believe, abide, and embrace who he was, they would be filled with eternal purpose, life, and satisfaction. But people settle for less.

Engage: Before the class, recruit someone who makes a great pour-over coffee. If you don’t have anyone in your class, find someone at a local coffee shop. If coffee isn’t a big thing where you are, maybe switch to Dr Pepper.

Ask: “Who here loves a good cup of coffee?” Wait for volunteers. Ask: “What makes a good cup of coffee? Is it the cup? Is it the flavor? Is it the method of brewing?” Have a kind of warm, not very good cup of coffee pre-poured and have the student take a drink. Say, “This is a cup of coffee I made.”

Ask: “What’s the problem with this cup of coffee?” The student should say it’s cold, bad, stale, etc. Explain, “Now, if you want a really good cup of coffee, you need to have a better source.” As you’re talking, have the “barista” start grinding beans and going through the right steps to make a pour-over. (If you’re using Dr Pepper, offer a stale, non-fizzy cup of DP at the beginning. Then pull out a glass bottle and a drinking glass, fill the glass with ice, and pour the soda over slowly.) Offer the cup to the student as the world’s best cup of coffee (or Dr Pepper).

Say, “Today’s lesson is about Jesus offering all people the living water he offered the woman at the well. The source of the water matters. Jesus says we should come to him and drink. Why

^{*}The download costs \$4 for non-members. If that cost is prohibitive, you can easily swap out this game for another of your choosing.

should we come to him? Because he's the best. If you want the best cup of coffee, don't come to me—come to [name of barista]. If you want the best in life, don't settle for imitations—drink deeply from Jesus and your life will continually be made new."

Jesus knew everyone needed to come to him and believe. He knew that what God had to offer through him would be everything anyone would ever need. What if we actually believed that? If Jesus was telling the truth, then we'd need to know the answer to this question, "How do we get to the source? How do we 'drink deeply' from Jesus? What do I need to be or do?" Let's look a little closer at these words from Jesus in John 7.

Teach/Engage: Before the class, put the verse on a slide or a handout for the students. Say, "We're going to spend some time just discussing these two verses in John." Start by showing John 7:37-38 on the screen or handout.

Then, start breaking down the phrases, and teach as you go:

- *What festival is going on here?* To find the answer to this question, invite the students to put this verse into context, and go back to the beginning of the chapter. They should be able to identify it as the Festival of Tabernacles or Booths. Using the Weekly Summary, discuss the significance of this festival. It was basically a celebration of God's faithfulness to the people of Israel after they were released from slavery in Egypt. They spent time each year remembering God's faithfulness. Challenge students to spend time in prayer regularly thanking God for his faithfulness.
- *What makes this the "greatest day" of the festival? What is one thing God provided for the people of Israel when they were in the desert? Water!* God sent enough water to help the people survive. That makes this verse make sense. Talk about the water libation ceremony from the weekly summary.
- *Why do you think it is significant that Jesus stood and said this loudly?* Allow students to answer. Perhaps Jesus was at a point in his ministry when he was ready for all people to know exactly who he was. He obviously knew these were dangerous words. Perhaps he was modeling how we should live and proclaim the truth of his gospel. Are we too often ashamed? We don't want to be obnoxious, but should we maybe think about standing up and speaking out? How could we do this in today's culture?
- *How important are the words "let anyone"?* We believe strongly in the "optimism of grace." This means that anyone can come to Jesus and be saved. We have a free will. All people have the chance to choose Christ.
- *What does a person who is thirsty look like in today's culture?* The word "thirsty" indicates need. The truth is, *everyone* needs water to live. So everyone should come to Jesus. But a person who is thirsty in today's world is someone who may not even recognize his or her thirst. Remember the dehydration illustration. This may also be a good time to identify areas that students struggle with.
- *How can we come to Christ and drink? What does this require from us?* Drinking is easy. We just need to come and do what is natural to us. This may mean we just come and say

we believe and start living the ways of Jesus. It may mean we really focus on our own practices. What do we do on a daily basis that brings us closer to Jesus?

- *What are some of the most important words in this sentence?*
 - “Whoever believes”: What does believing mean?
 - “As Scripture has said”: This is obviously referring to the Old Testament and the prophet Isaiah, but it does place Scripture on a high level.
 - “Rivers of living water will flow from within them.” What’s the difference between a river and a lake? Talk about how we should be a river—that is, God’s love should not only flow into us but also should flow out to others.

As you challenge students to contemplate what Jesus meant by bringing God’s “living water” into the world, turn their attention to John 19.

Teach: Say, “Jesus said he was ‘living water’ and each person should drink from him. This brings some understanding to the testimony about Jesus after he died. Jesus cried out, ‘I am thirsty,’ and shortly thereafter, he died. Instead of breaking the legs of Jesus, the soldier decided to pierce his side with a sword.”

Have a student read John 19:34: “Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water.” Say, “There are a lot of theories as to why water flowed from Jesus’s side, but it seems certain that John would have connected it to the idea that Jesus had declared himself living water. The dead body of Jesus has become the source of *all life*. This is the good news. In his death, and then in his resurrection, Jesus became a river of life to all the world.

“NYC 2023 can be a time when God’s river of life flows into you! Pray that this will happen and that you will continue to allow it to flow through you into the world.”

Engage: Spend some time this week listening to and reflecting on the song “Springtime,” by Chris Renzema.

Let’s say Romans 15:13 together: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Monday: Read John 7:37–38 and spend three minutes in silent prayer. What does Jesus want each person to do? Why?

Tuesday: Read Isaiah 44:1–5 and spend three minutes in silent prayer. What do streams on dry ground mean for the people of Israel? Why is this important when we consider Jesus as the living water?

Wednesday: Read Matthew 28:16–20 and spend three minutes in silent prayer. What do these verses instruct disciples to do?

Thursday: Read the “Living Hope” Weekly Summary and spend four minutes in silent prayer.

Friday: Read Romans 15:13 and spend four minutes in silent prayer. What does Paul say will be overflowing?

Saturday: Review the “Living Hope” Weekly Summary and spend five minutes in silent prayer.



Living Hope

Be the Church



WEEKLY SUMMARY

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. —Romans 15:13

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. —1 Peter 1:3–4

Jennifer brought her baby to the youth group. Only, it wasn't hers, and it wasn't real. It was a digital baby doll, and was part of an assignment she got in her health and wellness class at school. The doll cried when it was uncomfortable or hungry. You could actually feed the doll a bottle, and it would act like it was eating. The purpose of the assignment was to show the kind of responsibility it takes to raise a baby, and the doll recorded all of the interactions. So if Jennifer didn't take the doll to church with her, she would fail the assignment.

Either Jennifer was going to be a terrible mother or her baby doll was malfunctioning because it cried loudly every three minutes. I was explaining the rules to a game, and the baby started crying. Worship moved into a slower song; the baby started crying. A student was praying before the sermon; the baby started crying. I was trying to speak; the baby started crying.

After church, some of the guys took the doll and played ultimate baby doll with it, but it cried the whole time. The baby just wasn't real, and everyone knew it.

Some people have hope in things that are so temporary. Those things only provide false hope. Peter declared that because Jesus died and was resurrected, we have a hope that is real and living. This kind of hope overflows to others! This is the kind of hope Jesus brought, and he taught his disciples to carry it too.

Luke 10 records an amazing story about Jesus sending seventy-two disciples two by two into the world. What did Jesus want them to do? He wanted them to do the things he had been doing and preach the sermon he had been preaching. Jesus's number-one sermon was simply this: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matthew 4:17). So the disciples left with Jesus's instructions to do what he had been doing.

If you think about it, this is crazy. Jesus came to earth with power that nobody had witnessed before. And now he was trusting seventy normal people to do the same thing? Come on! Really? This

is the ultimate act of delegation—thirty-six pairs of regular people walking through first-century Palestine, healing people, preaching the kingdom, overflowing God’s love. Why would Jesus trust such an important mission to ordinary humans? It seems risky, doesn’t it?

So they went out because the harvest was plentiful, but the workers were few. They did as they were instructed, and we can see the result recorded in Luke 10:17-18: “The seventy-two returned with joy, and said, ‘Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.’ He replied, ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.’”

It worked! They came back rejoicing! Jesus was rejoicing! This crazy experiment worked.

In much the same way, when the Holy Spirit showed up on the day of Pentecost, the ordinary people once again received the call to go into the harvest fields. They were empowered by God to boldly proclaim the good news of Jesus. And the church was born.

Today we seem to see a lot of baggage accompanying the word “church.” We have strong evidence that young people are leaving the church at alarming rates. We hear terrible stories of people in the church who have been abusive or dishonest. We see so many people who distrust the church.

But the crazy thing is that the church is God’s plan A to rescue the world—and there is no plan B. The church is God’s ultimate plan of delegation.

So, what do we do with this? How do we, the church, stay true to the mission we’ve been sent to do? How do we build a church that overflows hope into the world?

Well, we totally trust in the Living Hope! This hope is more than emotion or wishful thinking; our Living Hope is a person. His name is Jesus. Yes, sometimes the church is filled with broken people and systems. It’s still God’s plan!

NYC is a movement that God has used for years to build and grow his church! This might be the perfect time for God’s Spirit to refocus a whole generation on the things that really matter. We might realize we have settled for something that looks alive but isn’t. We might finally decide to trust in Jesus, the Living Hope, and allow that hope to deeply affect our churches. We can then start healing those who need healing and offering hope to the marginalized, as we declare the truth that God’s kingdom is drawing near.

Main Point: *We should trust Jesus to give us the power we need to be the church!*

At one point, Jesus said to Peter the apostle the same words he said to the devil in the wilderness: "Get behind me, Satan." Ouch! Peter probably didn't expect that to come from Jesus's mouth! But Jesus also told Peter that he would build the church with Peter and people like him. Peter denied Jesus, but Jesus restored Peter and told him to feed his sheep.

It seems pretty clear that the church God was building and the kingdom he was bringing would depend on fickle, imperfect, and fallen humans. What was God thinking?

Engage: Before the meeting, get a bag of stones that can be stacked together. Give each student a stone. Begin by talking about Simon Peter and his imperfections and failures, but then remind students that Jesus gave Simon a new name, Peter, which in Greek means "rock." Read Matthew 16:18. Jesus basically said that God would build his church on the rock, meaning Peter would be one who would build the church despite his failures.

Have the students think about their own lives. Ask them to think about these questions: What are areas in their lives where they have failed God? What lies have they believed about themselves?

Have them think about their own identities and write their names on the stones.

As you prepare for this lesson, spend some time really reflecting on the church. There are so many things to consider about the church.

Teach:

Ask, "What is the definition of the church?" Allow for answers. Then ask, "What is the purpose of the church?" Allow for answers and discussion. Next, say, "Consider this quote from Anglican bishop N. T. Wright in his book *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*: 'The church exists primarily for two closely correlated purposes: to worship God and to work for his kingdom in the world. You can and must worship, and work for God's kingdom, in private and in ways unique to yourself, but if God's kingdom is to go forward, rather than around and around in circles, we must work together as well as apart.'"

Ask: "What are the two purposes of the church according to this quote?" Allow for answers.

Ask: "How does the church worship God? Define worship. What does it look like?"

Ask: "What do you think 'working for God's kingdom' means?" Allow for answers.

God's kingdom is basically God's vision for the world. It's God's dream. It is what God desires the world to be. It includes both a personal, saving connection to Jesus as well as a community of believers bringing hope to the world.

Wright continues, "The church also exists for a third purpose, which serves the other two: to encourage one another, to build one another up in faith, to pray with and for one another, to learn

from one another and teach one another, and to set one another examples to follow, challenges to take up, and urgent tasks to perform. This is all part of what is known loosely as fellowship.”

Ask: “How would you summarize this third purpose of the church in your own words? Do you think the church does a good job at achieving these purposes? Explain.”

Peter was the character in the Bible who always seemed to make big mistakes. He was passionate, but his faith was incomplete. He walked on the water but lost faith in the process. His motives were good, but he was a mess. Yes, Jesus even saw the same temptation of Satan in Peter at one point in Scripture. He used violence to protect Jesus. He denied him three times. This is the kind of person God uses to build the church.

When Peter was filled to overflowing with the Holy Spirit, he preached the story of Jesus boldly, and many people came to faith. The early church came to be. Amazing growth took place because of his missionary journeys. Later in his life, he reflected on the church and just how it was built. His mind was drawn to Old Testament scripture and symbolism.

Teach: Have a student read 1 Peter 2:4–5: “As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

Ask: Have you ever seen a stone wall or a house built of stone? [It might help to have a few pictures of houses and walls built of stone.] How does this metaphor that Peter uses reflect the church? Let’s break down the phrases.

- **As you come.** This indicates a choice people make. It is a step you take toward something. This means you need to decide to come to him and let him use you.
- **To him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him.** This is Jesus, the one who died but rose again; the foundation of all faith; the reason the church exists; the reason hope can overflow.
- **You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house.** When you decide to come to Jesus and be part of his kingdom, God builds you, us, into a spiritual house or temple. This is the *church!* Yes, we are individuals. But we choose to let God build us together with other people. And as we are built together, we build the kingdom.
- **To be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.** Here we see all the purpose of the church that Wright talks about. We worship God together. We build the kingdom together through sacrificial living. We work together to overflow God’s love to the world.”

Peter obviously had a vivid picture of what this spiritual house looked like. He saw it being built from the beginning. He saw the sacrifices it took to build. But he rejoiced because he saw the church as a place where hope, joy, peace, reconciliation, justice, and faithfulness overflowed into the world, because he knew the living Stone on whom it was built.

Engage: Before class, gather a large plastic crate, a clear plastic or glass bowl, a pitcher of water, and some towels or paper towels. Put the bowl in the crate. Ask the students to look at the stones with their names on them and think again about their own identities. Who have they been up to that point? What have they believed about themselves? What does the world—or the voice in their own head—call them? Where have they had the right motives but done the wrong thing?

Now, read 1 Peter 2:4–5 again and say, “God wants you to live into your *true* identity. This means you need to just submit your life to him and allow God to build you, along with others, into the kind of church God wants: a church that worships, builds his kingdom, and encourages each other.”

Now, ask the students to come to the bowl and symbolically stack the rocks together in the bowl. You could play music during this time or just sit in silence and hear the rocks stack together. When all the students have stacked the stones, say, “When we are built together the way God wants us to be, we are the church God wants us to be.” As you continue speaking, fill the bowl with water. “When God fills us with the Spirit, then, because we are built together, God overflows.” Let the water overflow into the crate.

Ask: “In what ways should the church overflow into the world?” The good news of Jesus should be good news for the marginalized, the poor, and the people in your community who are both physically and spiritually in need.

As NYC 2023 draws closer, we pray that some students will decide that the church is exactly where they need to be. We pray they will allow themselves to be built into the kind of church God envisions—a church where a living hope overflows into the world.

Engage: Have students dig into the bowl and find their stones. Let them use the towels or paper towels to dry off the stones. Then have them take the stones home and tell them to put the stone in a visible place. Remind them to pray for the church and their role in the church every time they see it.

Now, say Romans 15:13 together: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

DAILY CHALLENGE

Monday: Read 1 Peter 2:4–5 and spend three minutes in silent prayer. Contemplate the personal and communal aspects of the church.

Tuesday: Read Romans 15:13 and spend three minutes in silent prayer. How are you seeing hope overflowing in your world?

Wednesday: Read Matthew 16:18 and spend three minutes in silent prayer. How does God choosing to use Peter to help build the church make you feel?

Thursday: Read the “Hammock Heaven” Weekly Summary and spend four minutes in silent prayer.

Friday: Read Revelation 22:1–2 and spend four minutes in silent prayer. What does the kingdom mean to you?

Saturday: Review the “Hammock Heaven” Weekly Summary and spend five minutes in silent prayer.



Hammock Heaven

Where Kingdom Comes



WEEKLY SUMMARY

My heavenly guide brought me to the river of pure living waters, shimmering as brilliantly as crystal. It flowed out from the throne of God and of the Lamb, ² flowing down the middle and dividing the street of the holy city. On each bank of the river stood the tree of life, firmly planted, bearing twelve kinds of fruit and producing its sweet crop every month throughout the year. And the soothing leaves that grew on the tree of life provided precious healing for the nations. —Revelation 22:1–2, VOICE

We were on a mission trip in a Caribbean country, finishing the inside of a church. High school students worked all day installing drywall, taping, and mudding. The church had no air conditioning and the weather was humid. We made sure we took breaks occasionally.

Several students noticed a grove of palm trees near the church that were spaced perfectly. Before we knew it, hammocks were hanging in this shaded oasis. It was “Hammock Heaven”—until we heard a *snap!*

Three students were trying to recline in a hammock built for one. The tree held up fine, but the hammock strap broke, and the students crashed to the ground. Fortunately, they were only a little bruised. Unfortunately, no one got it on video!

Our scripture today tells of a river of pure and living water that John saw in his great Revelation. The river overflowed from the throne of God. The description of this river reflects the imagery used throughout the whole Bible: the river that flowed from the garden God created and brought life wherever it flowed; the river Ezekiel saw flowing from the temple; the river of living water Jesus said he offered to people. Here, at the end of things, we see the same river flowing.

Trees lined the banks of this river. The tree of life had now become two trees of life divided by living water. I’m guessing it would be like hammock heaven! Surely some teenager would stretch out a hammock between them and just rest in the renewal of all things!

In the beginning of the story is a tree and a river. At the end of the story is a tree and a river. We are living between these two trees. So what should we be doing?

Jesus’s primary sermon was simply this: “Repent, because the kingdom of God has come near.” We see this spoken over and over again. The great Sermon on the Mount was basically Jesus laying out the rule and order of this kingdom. We find out that its rules and laws are so differ-

ent from those of the world. The things the kingdom of God values are things that are typically seen as non-valuable: mourning; meekness; poverty; hunger and thirst. Jesus turned the world upside down and redefined what the "good life" actually looks like.

A kingdom may seem abstract to some people since very few actual "kingdoms" are left in the world today. There's a small African nation called Eswatini that is still a kingdom. How do we know this? First, there is a king. Second, the king rules. Third, the king rules the people. Fourth, the king rules the people with laws. Fifth, the king rules the people with laws in a particular place. King Mswati III is the king of Eswatini, and he rules there. He can change laws when he wants to without approval from any congress. He rules over the people who live according to the laws in a small country bordered by South Africa and Mozambique. It's a concrete place.

When Jesus announced his kingdom, he was announcing several things. First, Jesus was sent from God as King incarnate. Jesus was King. His rule extended grace, mercy, and hope to those who were needy, marginalized, and hopeless. His rule seemed upside down in that it favored the humble, the weak, and servants. His rule was gentle, kind, and sacrificial. And his kingdom extended across regional boundaries. *Anyone* could be in this sacred space if he or she would simply believe in Jesus and walk according to his way.

So the people of the kingdom are those who offer hope, grace, and mercy. They don't sit around and wait for Jesus to come again. They get to work. They don't just hold their hammocks and kill time until they reach that last great river and the tree(s) of life. They start tending the soil, they live the message of hope, and they overflow God's love to anyone they come in contact with. They offer rest to a weary world.

NYC 2023 is a kingdom meeting! Thousands of students and adults from around the world who are doing the work of the kingdom will come together to celebrate, to learn, to give, to grow, and to refocus on what it means to build the kingdom. I imagine there will be some hammocks in a grove of palm trees as well.

Main Point: God's kingdom has come and is coming to this world. We get the opportunity to be part of it.

Sometimes we use words in the church and expect everyone to know what they mean. "Kingdom" is one of those words. We think we know what we mean by this, but often we are just repeating what we've heard. As we prepare for NYC 2023, let's look closely at what we mean when we say the word "kingdom."

Engage: Ask: "What do you think Jesus's number-one sermon was? What did he come preaching the most?" Allow for answers. Then say, "Jesus's primary sermon was, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near' (Matthew 4:17). Seriously, that's what he was trying to teach people. But what does that mean? Let's talk about the kingdom."

It might be fun to start by playing a screen game called "King of Kings or Kings of Rap?" (available from Download Youth Ministry).*

After playing the game, transition to teaching.

Teach: Have a student read Matthew 4:17: "From that time on Jesus began to preach, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" What do you think Jesus was saying in this statement? Allow for answers, then discuss the sermon using the questions below.

"Repent." Ask: "What do you think this word means?" For first-century people, to repent was to stop going the direction they were going and following the teaching they used to follow, and instead turn around and start following a new teaching. Repentance is not sorrow for sins as much as it is a decision to go in a different direction than the one you've been going.

- **For the kingdom of heaven.** Ask: "If you were to go to a kingdom that God created, what would you expect to see there? How would people act? What would the military look like? What would the parks and playgrounds look like?" This is a huge phrase. The kingdom of heaven is essentially God's vision for the world. This is God's plan for individuals, people, and creation. It is God's dream for you and for me. It means Jesus is King; we choose to be loyal subjects and live by his laws with people who are also submitted to God. The kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are basically the same thing.
- **Has come near.** Ask: "How can a kingdom come near? What do you think this means?" Jesus was announcing that he had come from God (or heaven), and now he was in the world. This is the pronouncement that Jesus was here as God's Son, and so the kingdom was here. The opportunity to achieve all that God has dreamed for people and for the world is here in the person of Jesus.

It's pretty clear that the kingdom was an important concept to Jesus. When his disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, he taught them by saying what we know today as the Lord's prayer.

*The download costs \$4 for non-members. If this is prohibitive, replace this activity with an alternative of your choosing.

Teach: Have one of your students recite the Lord’s prayer. Unfortunately, this prayer has just become something we’ve memorized, and we don’t even think about it any longer. Jesus wants his followers to remember the kingdom every time they pray. Have another student recite *The Message* version of the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:7–13:

Our Father in heaven,
Reveal who you are.
Set the world right;
Do what’s best—
 as above, so below.
Keep us alive with three square meals.
Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.
Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.
You’re in charge!
You can do anything you want!
You’re ablaze in beauty!
 Yes. Yes. Yes.

How does *The Message* interpret Jesus’s words, “your kingdom come”?

“Set the world right”: What do you think Peterson means by this? What are some practical ways we can set the world right?

Does this help give some insight into what Jesus means by “the kingdom”?

Turn the students’ attention back to the idea of a kingdom. Try to bring up some kingdoms the students would be familiar with (e.g., *The Lion King*, Magic Kingdom, King Arthur’s kingdom).

Teach: Say, “You should have some concept of the details of a kingdom from reading the weekly summary. What do you think are four or five important aspects that all kingdoms have?”

Students should start to identify some things such as a king; a way the king rules; people to be ruled; a place to rule in; a law to uphold; etc.

Now ask students to think of Christianity as a kingdom.

- Who is the King? (Christ.)
- Who are the people to be ruled? (People submitted to Christ.)
- Where do the people live? What are the borders of this kingdom? (The borders are invisible; wherever the church is, there is the kingdom.)
- What is the rule of the land? What rules does this kingdom abide by? (Scripture, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’s example, salvation, hope, etc.)

So what role can we play in the kingdom? How can we bring the kingdom on earth? We are so privileged to be part of this amazing river flowing through the world. Everywhere we go, we

should bring *life!* And we should be willing to go where *life* is needed. Each of us is part of this amazing Jesus story.

The story eventually leads to a place of renewal and restoration. The world is broken and hurting and in need of a savior. Jesus bringing the kingdom of God to earth is the hope for the broken world. Jesus proclaimed the message, but so many people then and now have failed to believe it. Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead, and somehow we can be in relationship with God because of it. We can be builders and growers of the kingdom. But the reality is it is a kingdom that is here, but it is *still coming*. Jesus promises to come and restore all things. This leads us to discuss the vision of John in Revelation 22.

Engage: Before the class, get a hammock. It would be great if you could have a place to hang it, but if you can't find a place to hang it or don't have a hammock stand, you can use it just as an illustration. Say, "This is a hammock. Its basic purpose is to connect to two objects that are somewhat close together and use tension to create an awesome place to just chill." As you're speaking, unroll the hammock and keep it in front of the students.

"We read in Genesis about a perfect garden that God created. I imagine Adam and Eve just chilling in hammocks in the garden—it's not in Scripture, but use your imagination. Tree of Life on one side. Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil on the other. Adam and Eve were deceived into eating fruit from the wrong tree." [This could be a good place to insert your own hammock fail story or just google hammock fail videos—be careful to screen any fail video you show for language.] "When they ate the forbidden fruit, *snap*, the hammock failed.

"Now, this isn't the way the story reads in Scripture, but what we know for sure is the world is broken, and evil is part of the story. Separation from God is part of the story. But restoration is also part of the story. Jesus's death and resurrection makes reconciliation and restoration possible. Divine love overflows to the world! This river winds its way through the whole story. It offers healing in a broken and barren world. It often overflows and brings life.

"And that brings us to the garden at the end. We talked about the idea that God's kingdom is both *now* (Jesus has come near) and *not yet* (Jesus is coming again to establish his eternal kingdom forever). That's the vision we're given in Revelation 22, and it looks a little like Hammock Heaven. [You could strap the hammock to trees or its stand and sit in it as you finish the lesson.]

- "The ultimate kingdom life is God making all things new. A crystal-clear river of life. A heaven promise.
- What are your thoughts about the kingdom that is not yet?
- How does this inform the way we should live in the kingdom that is now?

NYC 2023 will be an opportunity for students to contemplate both the NOW and NOT YET kingdom. We will practice worship, service, giving, and hopefully a renewal of our commitment to Christ.

Connect: Challenge your students this week to spend some time between two trees. (If they have hammocks, have them set the hammocks up and think about the kingdom of God as it *is* and as it *is coming*).

Close with a prayer for NYC and then say Romans 15:13 together: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

DAILY CHALLENGE

Monday: Read Matthew 4:17 and spend three minutes in silent prayer. Pray about ways you can actually repent in your life and live into God's kingdom.

Tuesday: Read Revelation 22:1-5 and spend three minutes in silent prayer. How does this idea of God's kingdom coming make you feel?

Wednesday: Read Matthew 6:9-13 and spend three minutes in silent prayer. What does Jesus mean when he says, "Your kingdom come"?

Thursday: Read Romans 15:13 and spend time praying for this to become real in your own life.

Friday: Read Romans 15:13 and spend time praying for NYC 2023 and the group of students and adults who will be gathering there.

Saturday: Read Romans 15:13 and spend time praying that God overflows from NYC to the church.