



First Thing's First

December 2011 | Quiet time starter series

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Building Deep Spiritual Relationships

It takes effort

Theme: Love

In order to build great relationships, we must be willing to exert maximal effort. **In this short study, we'll examine** what the bible says about building deep spiritual relationships. The holidays can tend to be a time we look forward to be given a lot to. Make this holiday matter the most by giving to someone else!

Scripture

Colossians 2:1-2

*I want you to know **how much I have agonized for you** and for the church at Laodicea, and for many other believers who have never met me personally. **I want them to be encouraged** and **knit together by strong ties of love**. I want them to have complete confidence that they understand God's mysterious plan, which is Christ himself.*

Questions

When was the last time you agonized for someone?

To agonize for someone means to make a great effort for someone, to undergo great mental anguish through worrying about someone. Often times we have no problem putting ourselves through agony for ourselves, but this scripture calls us to make intense efforts to be close to others. Take time to reflect on the relationships in your life and think about how God is calling you to make maximal effort in your relationships around you, and what prevents you from agonizing for others.

When was the last time someone agonized for you?

What did that person do for you? How did they agonize for you? Take time to remember how people throughout your life have sacrificed and loved you. Think about the agony Jesus went through on the cross for you. Allow it to challenge and inspire you to do the same for someone else over the holidays.

Additional Thoughts

Additional Scriptures:

Colossians 1:28-29 (NLT)

*So we tell others about Christ, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all the wisdom God has given us. We want to present them to God, perfect^[a] in their relationship to Christ. That's why **I work and struggle so hard**, depending on Christ's mighty power that works within me.*

Colossians 2:13-15 (NLT) (consider the agony Jesus went through for us)

*You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. **He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross.***

Colossians 4:12-13 (NLT)

*Epaphras, a member of your own fellowship and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends you his greetings. **He always prays earnestly for you**, asking God to make you strong and perfect, fully confident that you are following the whole will of God. I can assure you that **he prays hard for you** and also for the believers in Laodicea and Hierapolis.*



Building Faith for All

What it means to please God

○ Theme - Faith

The scriptures teach us that it impossible to please God without faith, but furthermore it teaches us that believing in God is more than simply acknowledging his existence. It's believing that God rewards us when we look for a relationship with him with all of our hearts.

○ Scripture

Hebrews 11:6

And without Faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

○ Questions

Where is your faith?

Do you believe God has your best interest and wants to reward you when you seek a relationship with him wholeheartedly?

Is your relationship with God duty driven or faith driven?

Do you believe God cares more about your performance or your level of faith?

○ Additional Thoughts

The difference between those that have a stimulating, passionate and powerful relationship with God and those that don't is simple: those that fundamentally Believe and have faith that God is on their side have immeasurably more confidence, trust and perseverance through challenges than any others throughout history.

Study out these men and women of faith to learn more about having faith:

Joseph: It's never too late to Dream big for God.
Genesis 37-47

David: See the difference between David and Saul. Notice the fundamental root of faith David possessed that led to his triumph and the root of doubt and fear in Saul that led to his demise. Be like David "Sling for the fences."
1 Samuel 15-17

Daniel: False humility is not humility; Daniel knew he was talented and that his gifts were from God. His faith allowed him to use his talents to influence great leaders while leading his friends.
Daniel 1-3

The Canaanite Woman: Faith isn't about being put together, or being deserving. Jesus responded to this woman's faith.
Matthew 15:21-28

Ananias: The faith to be a friend when nobody else will.
Acts 9:10-19

Peter: The faith to stop being religious
Acts 10-11:18

The Hall of Faith: The faith to live for God
Hebrews 11



Everything is Yours

Building your faith by understanding God's heart

○ Faith

Understanding God's heart will build our faith over the holiday season. 'Tis the season to go out and get everything you could ever want and more – and don't worry about paying for it until next year. It is easy to forget about God in the rushing around to get the best deals, but only with our faith in God can we really gain everything.

○ Scripture

Luke 15:28-31

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' ""My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.

○ Questions

Do you believe God is always with you?

The older son in this story was so focused on himself that he didn't value the relationship he had with God - he referred to himself as a slave and not as a son. The older son had the same heart of selfishness, bad attitudes, and doubts that the younger son had because he didn't see God's heart. God wants to be with us all of the time and he knows that a close relationship with him will satisfy us like nothing else will.

Do you believe God wants to share everything he has with you?

The older son was jealous of the love, compassion and kindness that his father was showing his younger brother. Competing and comparing ourselves to others will lead to emptiness and discouragement. When we are focused on others we will miss out on the inheritance and on the celebration God has for us. Our faith will grow when we believe the scriptures that tell us everything God has is ours!

○ Additional Thoughts

God wants to be with us and he wants to share all he has with us – who could ask for more in a relationship. Over this holiday season, God wants us to celebrate his relationship with us and our inheritance that we will receive.

Scriptures for further study:

- Luke 15: 1-31
- Matt 28: 18-20
- Psalms 139
- James 4:8
- Psalms 73: 23-29



The Faith to Cause Miracles

Spirituality not Strategy

Theme

Faith – God

Miracles are events that go beyond the order of the course of nature. The blind receiving the ability to see, the dead being raised to life, those with incurable diseases or disorders healed. The less spiritual we become, the more rely on wisdom and strategy that have the appearance of faith. But true faith comes when we chose the God option, belief. Jesus came to re-establish true faith.

Scripture

Luke 7:6-7, 9

*He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. **But say the word, and my servant will be healed.***

*...When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, **I have not found such great faith even in Israel.**"*

Questions

How much faith do you need to cause a miracle?

We often think we have to be perfect and sin free for a miracle to happen, yet Jesus teach in Luke 17:6 that you need only a mustard seed size faith to verbally command a tree to be uprooted or in Matthew 17:20 to move a mountain.

What mountain stands before you that you need to God to move?

Sometimes the biggest mountain we need moved is our heart – pride, unbelief, selfishness, etc.

Additional Thoughts

To live life accepting whatever life gives you is to live average. But to have faith that causes miracles is to live an extraordinary life. The miracle of sick friends get well, those who are infertile give birth or adopt or a closed heart open. We have to pray for miracles to happen all the time. That takes creating a culture of faith in our home, friendship and church.

Study out the miracles did in the book of Luke. Take note of the relationship that faith and miracles have. Let the scriptures give you the confidence that God is a God of miracles and take courage to get a faith that causes miracles.



Hope to Believe

How to get through tough times

○ Theme: Hope

When hard times come, and they come for everyone, it can be difficult to believe that God is still there and that he is working. Our faith is shaken very quickly when the circumstances around us are not the way we hoped they would be. We need to go to the Bible to get faith and hope.

○ Scripture

Corinthians 13:12-13

We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!

But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love.

○ Questions

What are the things that you feel hopeless about?

We all have things that we lose faith about whether that be challenging family circumstances, relationship difficulties or health challenges.

What are specific things to I can do to overcome the hopelessness that I feel?

The Bible says that when we focus on loving others, trusting God and fighting to keep our faith, we will be able to overcome any hard time we are facing.

○ Additional Thoughts

1. Choose one person you can focus on encouraging every day. Even if it is small, when we focus on other people we are less likely to feel down about our own circumstances
2. Read the book of 2 Corinthians to get faith and encouragement during the Holidays.
3. Pray specifically about any fears, disappointments and discouragements and decide to trust God with them.



Long Ranger or Faithful Friend?

Developing peer relationships that keep you strong

Love

God never intended for us to fight our spiritual battles alone. However, one of the biggest temptations we face during the holidays is to become a “lone ranger,” and get distant from the friends God has put in our lives to help us spiritually. Feeling stressed, guilty, frustrated and alone are all signs that we have become a spiritual lone ranger.

To become a faithful friend, or to have faithful friends, we need to identify and repent of sins like pride, jealousy and selfishness. These sins keep us lonely and more vulnerable to attacks on our faith. Choosing to be close to our peers and letting them help us spiritually over the holidays will help us be faithful, powerful enough to overcome sin, and able to start off the new year right.

Scripture

Romans 1:11-12

For I am yearning to see you, that I may impart and share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen and establish you; That is, that we may be mutually strengthened and encouraged and comforted by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

Questions

Which peer relationships has God put in your life to help strengthen your faith?

Relationships with other Christians should be mutually strengthening. That means that we have peers who know our sins and weaknesses and who call us to grow stronger.

A peer is someone in the same life stage as you are, not someone you consider “ahead” of you spiritually or in life. It is easy to only want to be open and honest about our sins and weaknesses with those we consider “wiser” or more mature. It is more humbling to be honest with our peers, but God’s plan is for us to mutually encourage each other as we fight similar battles.

What sins in your life stop you from being close to friends who help you spiritually?

If we are going to have close friends who help us spiritually, we need to identify and repent of certain sins in our lives, such as:

- **Pride** (I don’t want to be honest with him about my sins because I don’t want him to think he is better than me...I don’t think that person can really help me anyway ... look at all the sins in their life!)
- **Jealousy and envy** (I hate that she has what I want, and I don’t even like talking to her.)
- **Selfishness** (It feels hard and tiring to care about someone else’s life, and I mostly think about me.)

Additional Thoughts

Choose 5 peers that you are going to be spend time with, be open with, and make a commitment to helping stay strong spiritually going into the new year.

Additional scriptures for further study:

- James 3:13-17
- Ecclesiastes 4:9-12
- Ephesians 6:10-18
- James 5:16



Love Inspires Faith

How love from God can give you faith, no matter what

Theme

Love inspires faith. Why is that? Faith is expressed in love (Gal 5:6). Faith in God is priceless and powerful. It's like a precious jewel that can be found by all, but it is only valued by some. It gives us the ability to overcome some of the direst circumstances while providing us with inexplicable joy.

Scripture

Psalm 44:22

So what should we say about this? If God is for us, no one can defeat us. He did not spare his own Son but gave him for us all. So with Jesus, God will surely give us all things. Who can accuse the people God has chosen? No one, because God is the One who makes them right. Who can say God's people are guilty? No one, because Christ Jesus died, but he was also raised from the dead, and now he is on God's right side, appealing to God for us. Can anything separate us from the love Christ has for us? Can troubles or problems or sufferings or hunger or nakedness or danger or violent death? As it is written in the Scriptures: "For you we are in danger of death all the time. People think we are worth no more than sheep to be killed."

Romans 8:31-39 (NCV)

But in all these things we are completely victorious through God who showed his love for us. Yes, I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor ruling spirits, nothing now, nothing in the future, no powers, nothing above us, nothing below us, nor anything else in the whole world will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Questions

Do you think about the extent God has gone to assure you of his love and allowed that to secure your faith?

Our minds can be filled with doubt if God will come through or unbelief about what we think He has not done. Unknowingly we can feed our unbelief by allowing these thoughts to consume our minds and hearts. Then in those tough moments when you really need faith in God, you have so much unbelief stored up that its difficult to have confidence in God. How often do you reflect on God's love, his willingness is to help us succeed, and how He enriched our lives? This would make our confidence and faith in him grow. Our faith increases when we believe God will and wants to help us overcome.

Have the challenges of life affected your faith and caused you to doubt God's love?

It is easy lose our faith and doubt God's care especially when life is challenging. We must be reminded from the scriptures of a Biblical truth that will never change...nothing can separate us from God's love. During these challenging times we need to rivet our thoughts on the depths of his love to protect our faith. This helps our feeling about our circumstances not redefine a distorted view of God and cause us to distrust Him.

Additional Thoughts

Consider how much you mean to God for him to allow his son to die to free you of guilt and place you in a right relationship with Him. He is invested in the relationship and wants us to have all things, according to His will. Consider if you are equally invested. Clearly from the scriptures God is willing to go to any length to show his love and to build our confidence in Him.

What distorted view of God must be uprooted and replaced with the Bible? What decision do you need to make in order to free your heart to rely on him? What do you need change in order to allow your heart to grasp a deeper understanding of His love that builds your faith? Faith in God helps us to know that complete victory (whatever that may look like) awaits each of who rely on his love!

Additional scriptures: Exodus 1-20, Psalms 33-34, Romans 5



Love That Inspires Hope

A new take on relationships

○ Hope

- Too often when we read about Jesus, we try to relate to the person who Jesus helped, heard or healed, rather than imitate his example of giving others hope.
- **The Bible defines genuine love by the hope it inspires in others; the world's love is limited to an emotion or incident, but biblical love leaves others more hope-filled**
- Do you build relationships in a way that inspires others to find hope in the face of seemingly impossible circumstances and odds?

○ Scripture

Luke 7:12-16

*As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out—the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. And **a large crowd** from the town was with her. **When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her** and he said, "Don't cry." Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still. He said, "Young man, I say to you, get up!" The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. 16They were all filled with awe and praised God. "A great prophet has appeared among us," they said. **"God has come to help his people."***

○ Questions

Does your heart go out to those whose hearts and lives are broken?

Think of what this widow experienced in her life:

- Early on in her life, she must have imagined being married one day, imagined building a family, having a happy and fulfilling life!
- Yet all her hopes and vision had now literally died! And she had nothing that could explain why this happened to her!
- She no longer had a marriage or family, all her hopes had been lost; her future was seemingly gone!

Do you have love and compassion for those who have lost their dreams, their hopes?

So many women are experiencing this today!

- **Yet, Jesus' heart went out to this woman who had a broken heart**
- Even though there was a large crowd with her, Jesus was the one who really SAW her
- He saw her pain, saw her struggle, saw the Possibilities that God still imagined for her life!

○ Additional Thoughts

Jesus' heart and love for the widow, helped make the Unimaginable Happen for the Widow!

- Raising her dead son back to life!

We must love people enough to help them see God do the Unimaginable:

- Raising a dead marriage, a dead heart, a dead life, a dead family

Genuine love takes the initiative, just as Jesus does, to help the hopeless renew their hope in God, and believe that "God has come to help..."



Shared Life

Light Brings Love to Relationships

○ Love in Relationships

Everyone wants friends. **However, we don't always know how to build deep relationships.** Deep relationships require a deep love, and this kind of love only comes from God. If we are loaded down with guilt and sin, we will be disconnected from God and distant from relationships around us.



1 John 1:17

But if we walk in the light, God himself being the light, we also experience a shared life with one another, as the sacrificed blood of Jesus, God's Son, purges all our sin.

○ Questions

Do people around me know what is going on in my life (things I feel guilty, sad, angry, etc. about)?

If we are not real with God about what is going on in our lives, we won't be real with people around us. To have a "shared life" with friends, in our dating relationship, or with our spouse we have to choose to be open about our daily struggles.

What are the things in my life that are keeping me in the darkness?

When we remain in guilt, bitterness, anger, or jealousy when we become isolated from God and people. We need to decide to pray about these things and let others know what sins we are struggling with.

○ Additional Thoughts

Decide to share your life with God and others so that you can have spiritual friendships based on love.

Additional Scriptures:

1. Book of 1 John – Loving others
2. Matthew 26: 36-44 – Jesus shared his feelings with God and his friends
3. 1 Samuel 18-20 – **Jonathan and David's friendship**
4. Proverbs 24:26 – Honesty brings friendship



Survival Tips for the Holidays

How to stay close during a frantic season

○ Hope: Vision

The holidays are an exciting time full of parties, warm family traditions and time spent with friends. As much as we look forward to this time of the year it can be a time full of stress, worries, and anxieties. Trying to juggle family and extended family, traveling, managing the finances and shopping, traffic, Christmas parties, etc.

The month of December can be so full, our anxieties can get the best of us and it affects our relationship with God and those close to us. How do we stay close to God and others during the Holidays? How do we turn our anxieties into opportunities?

○ Scripture

Psalm 94:19 (Amp)

"In the multitude of my anxious thoughts within me, your comforts cheer and delight my soul."

○ Questions

How can we stay close to God and others during the holidays?

Deuteronomy 8:11-16 (Message)*Make sure you don't become so full of yourself and your things that you forget God, your God, the God who delivered you...*

Make a decision to not miss a quiet time during the holidays. Pair up with a friend and talk about what you are learning, decisions you are making, as well as being open about your struggles and emotions.

The holidays are a perfect time to pull others into your family and make relationships a priority. Having conversations, shopping and cooking together, looking at Christmas lights are all a way to grow close through the holidays.

How do we turn our anxieties into opportunities?

1.) It is an Opportunity to Pray:

Philippians 4:6-7 (message) *"Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces the worry at the center of your life."*

2.) An Opportunity to Think of Others: Often times our anxiety is a result of thinking too much of self. Take the focus off of yourself and focus on others. The holidays can be a lonely time for some, and for those who do not know God it is an opportunity to be aware of their needs.

Acts 20:24 *"But my life is worth nothing unless I use it for doing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus-the work of telling others the Good News about God's wonderful kindness and love."*

3.) An Opportunity to be Open: It is a known fact that talking about the things that weigh us down and burden us actually ease our anxiety and help us have perspective. Being open helps us be close in our relationships.

1 John 1:7 (God's Word) *"But if we live in the light in the same way that God is in the light, we have a relationship with each other. And the blood of his Son Jesus cleanses us from every sin."*



When Loving Isn't Easy

Finding The Right Motivation

○ Love - Relationships

More often than not we come home tired from work or school and the only energy we feel like expending is to click the tv remote. **But there are friends and family that usually need help when we don't feel like giving it.** Yet we want to make a difference and have close friendships. **We need to find the right motivation to love when it isn't easy.** And when it comes to Love, there is no better person than Jesus to relate to and learn from.

○ Scripture

Mark 6:30-34

The apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place. But many who saw them leaving recognized them and ran on foot from all the towns and got there ahead of them. When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began teaching them many things.

○ Questions

When is it hardest for you to love? Why?

Imagine how tired Jesus and his apostles were. They didn't even have time to eat, because they were helping so many people. They probably didn't feel like giving any more. I'm sure you can relate.

What motivated Jesus to love even when he was tired?

We often are called to love when it isn't convenient or easy. Yet these are the times we can make the biggest difference in someone's life, lead them to change and build a meaningful friendship.

○ Additional Thoughts

Read the book of Mark for at least 30min every morning. Focus on learning how to love God and people from Jesus. Model how you live after his example. How did he love? What was his focus? Where and how did he get his strength and motivation to love?



Why We Go Through Challenges

How hoping in God can make us stronger

○ Theme - Hope

The Bible is filled with examples of men and women who entered times of adversity and challenges and became stronger because of it. Most of these stories shows how they went from comfortable life situations to difficult ones, and how crying out **to God for help changed their lives in ways they didn't expect.**

Hope is something that comes when we see how God can make things different. Without many challenges in life, it would be tough for us to feel like we ever would need to ask for assistance (from God or anyone), which would render us helpless when we do in fact get hit hard by life. The more we grow in our character and learn from hard situations in life, the more hopeful we become that God is real and makes a difference in our lives.

○ Scripture

Romans 5:1-2 (NCV)

Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory.

Romans 5:3-5 (NLT)

We also have joy with our troubles, because we know that these troubles produce patience. And patience produces character, and character produces hope.5 And this hope will never disappoint us, because God has poured out his love to fill our hearts. He gave us his love through the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to us.

○ Questions

What does it mean to hope in God?

The book of Psalms is filled with verses that talk about hoping in God. Psalmists such as David on many occasions made it obvious that they needed hope and a vision for things to get better, as they were often facing extremely challenging circumstances.

We get hope by remembering God's promises...the things He said he'd come through with for us. Think about the things you feel grateful for and the ways that God has come through in the past, and think about how He can help again.

What area in your life do you need hope in? What is God trying to teach you through your experiences?

Whether it's finances, kids or marriage, all of us have areas in our lives that we feel are so difficult we doubt that we stop believing they can be any different.

Take some time to write out the areas in your life you feel most burdened by, and then write out what you think God is trying to teach you through them. **It's usually an area in your character that has an opportunity to grow.**

○ Additional Thoughts

After you've thought through the challenges you're facing in life this holiday season, the next step is to get a vision for possibilities of what God can do with your life as you face adversity. Take time in your Quiet Times to read through these stories of men and women in the Bible who faced insurmountable odds, and ended up in situations that were better than before things got rough:

- **Joseph** (Genesis 37-45)
- **Ruth** (Book of Ruth)
- **David** (1 Samuel 17, 23)
- **Paul** (2 Corinthians 6)