

LAUNCH

What if I doubt God sometimes?

Description

Every relationship will have ups and downs, even a close relationship with God. How can God help when you are feeling distant, or disappointed, or question his part in your life? Prepare for times of uncertainty by studying how Jesus guides you through them and how he wants you to respond.

Goals

1. Help participants feel accepted, safe, and able to ask questions and grow spiritually.
2. Introduce participants to the idea that experiencing doubt or feeling distant in their journey with Jesus is inevitable and to be expected.
3. Explore how Jesus will guide participants through difficult times and how he wants them to respond.
4. Challenge participants to prepare for rough patches by focusing on God's goodness and faithfulness.

Outline

Starter: "Perspective Scene - Soul Surfer Movie"

Story Part 1: Jamie (written story only, video not yet available)

Bible Encounter: John 11:1-45 (excerpts)

Story Part 2: Jamie (written story only, video not yet available)

Experience: "Desert Song," Milestone Graph

Opening

Give a sincere and warm welcome to each person, letting them know you are glad they chose to come to the session. Share the vision for the group, then feel free to use the following language to open the session:

As you may have discovered so far, following Jesus is an exciting journey...and it's a bit like falling in love. But just as in personal romance, our relationship with God will undoubtedly hit a rough patch, when something happens that makes you question whether you can trust and depend on God anymore. What do you do then?

In this session, we're going to explore how God can help you when you're unhappy and have doubts. Together, we'll hear stories of people who struggled through rough patches with Jesus—both in modern and biblical times. We'll respond by looking at some concrete ways to prepare ourselves for those inevitable moments.

Starter: “Perspective Scene - Soul Surfer Movie”

Think of a time when you were disappointed or hurt by someone or something. Briefly describe how you felt when this incident happened and what, if anything, you did to move past that rough patch.

Story Part 1: Jamie

In your relationship with Jesus so far, what, if anything, has caused you to doubt whether he really cares? What happened?

This question may be difficult for participants to answer, since they are brand-new Christians. Be ready to share vulnerably from your own life. As you lead the discussion, look for points of resistance or roadblocks—they may not believe that this could ever happen to them. If you sense this is the case, you may want to ask the group to suspend its disbelief temporarily during the study.

Bible Encounter: John 11:1-45 (excerpts)

Context: Sometimes people think of the Bible as a book of faith heroes but, upon closer inspection, there are many stories of doubt and disappointment in God. By the time of this story, Jesus had become a well-known miracle worker. Martha, Mary and Lazarus were among his closest friends and devoted followers.

1. How do you think Martha and Mary were feeling when they approached Jesus after his delayed arrival?
 - Verse 21 and verse 32 are loaded indirect statements (note the repetition). Be sure to help the group sense the accusation and the disappointment within the plaintive cries of Martha and Mary.
 - If the group isn't grasping the emotion here, try rephrasing the question as "How would you feel if your close friend decided not to come immediately when you told them you needed their support?"
 - Your notes:
2. Based on verses 22 and 39, what do you think Martha believed Jesus could and could not do?
 - Based on verse 39, Martha did not think Jesus could raise Lazarus from the dead, so Martha and Mary were disappointed that Jesus did not come earlier and heal Lazarus, which could have prevented his death.
 - In verses 23-24, Martha may have expected Jesus' assurance that Lazarus would end up in the presence of God after his death and would rise again at the end of time.
 - Your notes:

3. Besides Martha and Mary, the author John also includes other people's reactions to Jesus' visit to the tomb. In verses 36-37, how would you describe the two types of reactions the Jews had to Jesus?
 - Some people noted Jesus' weeping (your group may find it intriguing that Jesus expressed such heartfelt emotion) while others expressed their disappointment in Jesus, just as Martha and Mary did.
 - Combined, these two reactions probably illustrate the tumult within the women's hearts: "Jesus seems like he cares...but why didn't he come sooner and prevent this?" This tension captures the kind of doubt being discussed in this session.
 - Your notes:

4. According to Jesus, he waited to come to Bethany so that God would be glorified. How did Martha, Mary, and the Jews each "see the glory of God" by the end of the story (verse 40)?
 - Martha and Mary received Lazarus back—Martha, in particular, saw a literal resurrection that she would not have expected. They gained a bigger picture of what Jesus could do—he could triumph even over death, the ultimate enemy!
 - Likewise, the Jews put their faith in Jesus. The outpouring of Jesus' power was so convincing that those who came to mourn Lazarus' death ended up following Jesus. That's an amazing demonstration of God's glory, don't you think?
 - Your notes:

5. John mentioned Jesus' love for Lazarus multiple times in this passage, directly and indirectly. But everyone else seemed to be thinking, "If Jesus loved Lazarus, how could he have let him die?" How would you describe the kind of love that Jesus had toward Lazarus?
 - It's interesting that Jesus' love transcends death. But, more concretely, his love goes beyond our limited understanding. When we think of love, we think of someone who genuinely cares and serves us personally—and Jesus displayed the fullness of his love with the intensity of his emotions toward Lazarus' death. Beyond that, Jesus' love for Lazarus was so strong that he "allowed" Lazarus' death in order to give his whole family life. That is creative love; it creates possibilities we could not have even dared to dream.
 - Don't worry if your group doesn't get all of the above reflections. Make sure they somehow reconcile the crowd's definition of love and Jesus' actions.
 - Your notes:

6. Our doubts about God often emerge from two kinds of feelings: God is distant or God does not care. Martha, Mary, and the Jews all experienced these feelings toward Jesus in this story. What can we learn from this passage about how to respond when we have these feelings?
 - First, the story reassures us that God does care, even when it's hard to see. When these feelings arise, we need to hold on to what we know to be true: God is faithful and loving.
 - Second, the story illustrates that God has a much bigger vision than we can grasp; thus, we can believe God actually has a good plan even if we experience disappointment or hurt within it.
 - Third, Jesus never condemned Martha, Mary, or the Jews for their doubts. In the same way, it is okay for us to express our doubts and disappointments to God—that's the substance of genuine relationships.
 - Your notes:

Story Part 2: Jamie

Experience: “Desert Song,” Milestone Graph

“Desert Song” Watch the video and encourage participants to reflect on the lyrics.

Milestone Graph Give each participant a blank Milestone Graph handout. Using the Milestone Graph Example handout or your own Milestone Graph, walk participants through the steps of creating their graph. Start by saying the following:

In our discussion today we learned that, even when circumstances seem to indicate otherwise, God really does care about us and weeps with us through our sorrows. But in the midst of struggles and doubts, we often have a difficult time thinking clearly about God. In those times, we can only draw from what we already know deep down to be true. That is why it is critical for us to root ourselves firmly in the belief that God is always good and faithful.

To help us reflect on this, we’re going to spend a few minutes creating a graph detailing our relationship with God. First, make a short list of milestones, whether positive or negative, in your relationship with God—think as far back as you’d like. Next, transfer these chronologically onto the graph handout. At the end of our time together, we’ll share our graphs with each other as a way to collectively remember God’s goodness to us.

You may want to keep this graph in a safe place and add to it every so often as another memento of God’s goodness in your life. As you do this in the future, you will likely add points of doubt and frustration with God as well. As a result, you’ll be able to look back and remember what God has done in the past.