

YOUTH GUIDE

# WHICH WAY, LORD?

Exploring Your Life's Purpose in the Journeys of Paul

A wooden boat is shown from a low angle, floating on a body of water. The boat is dark brown and has two wooden oars resting inside it. The water is a deep blue, and the background is a bright, hazy blue sky. The overall scene is serene and evokes a sense of journey and exploration.

Josh Tinley



YOUTH GROUP GUIDE

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the Journeys of Paul

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 UPPER  
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NASHVILLE

WHICH WAY, LORD? EXPLORING YOUR LIFE'S PURPOSE IN THE JOURNEYS OF PAUL

Youth Group Guide

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# INTRODUCTION

The apostle Paul was one of the most influential people in Christian history. He was largely responsible for taking the message of Christ beyond its beginnings in Judea, Galilee, and throughout the Roman Empire, starting churches throughout current-day Greece and Turkey. His letters to churches and other Christian leaders make up about half of the New Testament.

But before Paul became one of Christianity's most important leaders, he was one of its fiercest adversaries. Paul was a well-educated Pharisee who viewed Christianity as a threat and a distortion of Jewish law and tradition. He was present at the execution of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and he actively sought Christians whom he could arrest.

Then something happened. On the way to the city of Damascus to pick up letters authorizing these arrests, Paul (then known as Saul) had an encounter with the risen Christ. Jesus spoke to him in a blinding light and placed him in the care of a disciple named Ananias, who would nurture Paul as he came to terms with his new faith.

As a Pharisee, Paul went out of his way to seek God's approval by adhering to the law. Following his experience of Christ, Paul understood God's acceptance as a starting point. He knew that God loved and accepted him—despite his past, his sins, and his shortcomings. And he knew that God had places for him to go and work for him to do. From this point on, Paul lived in a relationship with God and devoted himself fully to God's direction and purpose. As he encountered adversity, as he had to change his path, and as he grew exhausted and was tempted to give up, he asked, "Which way, Lord?"

This study encourages youth to follow Paul's example—to be assured that God loves them, accepts them, and calls them. It invites them to consider where God is leading them and the purpose God has for their lives. It examines the challenges they will inevitably face and suggests ways to face them faithfully. And it offers examples from scripture and from the church that they can draw on for support and inspiration.

## USING THIS RESOURCE

This Youth Group Guide covers six sessions, one for each session of the study book *Which Way, Lord?* by Rob Fuquay. Through these sessions, youth will explore their purpose and calling as children of God and followers of Christ, and they will examine what scripture has to say on these matters, focusing primarily on the story and writings of the apostle Paul. The six sessions are these:

1. *Preparing for Purpose*: As followers of Christ, we seek God's purpose for our lives and allow it to guide our goals and decisions.
2. *Taking Stock*: We all have ingredients—gifts, talents, abilities, relationships, and resources—that we can use to accomplish God's purposes.
3. *Facing Adversity*: Faithfulness to God's call and purposes isn't always easy. We will all face adversity. When we do, we can rely on God.
4. *Dealing with Detours*: God's path isn't always simple or easy. At times we will make wrong turns or encounter detours. When we do, we can trust God to get us back on track.
5. *Relying on God*: God has chosen to use ordinary, flawed human beings to do works of eternal importance. This responsibility can feel overwhelming, but God assures us that we are up to the task.
6. *Developing Tenacity*: At times we feel as though we cannot go on. Tenacity enables us to press forward and continue pursuing God's purposes.

You and the youth may want to read the study book, *Which Way, Lord?*, but that reading is unnecessary to the series. Every session offers a summary of the key points from the corresponding chapter of *Which Way, Lord?*, as well as information on how that chapter specifically relates to youth. It also offers a list of activities and supplies you'll need to gather as you prepare the lesson.

The sessions open with a gathering ritual involving a road map that you will create in your meeting space. As the youth come together, they will talk about their highs and lows of the preceding week and reflect on their learning from the previous session. Each will then add a road to the map and explain the name for that road.

The session plans provide a variety of learning and discussion activities. Select those activities that best fit your group and setting. The session is designed to last an hour to an hour and a half. Choose the activities you believe will most interest your group and that fit within your time frame. Every session closes by debriefing the key teachings and challenging youth to apply in the week ahead what they've learned.

I hope that as the youth work through these six sessions, they will gain a better understanding of God's will for their lives, allowing this purpose to inform their goals and decisions. Along the way, they will grow in their relationships with God and one another.

You may find articles referenced in this resource at the following website:

**[www.WhichWayLord.UpperRoomBooks.com](http://www.WhichWayLord.UpperRoomBooks.com)**

## SESSION ONE

# Preparing for Purpose

### ABOUT THIS SESSION

The apostle Paul was one of the most influential people in Christian history. He was largely responsible for taking the message of Christ beyond its beginnings in Judea and Galilee throughout the Roman Empire, starting churches throughout current-day Greece and Turkey. His letters to churches and other Christian leaders make up about half of the New Testament.

But before Paul became one of Christianity's most important leaders, he was one of its fiercest adversaries. Paul was a well-educated Pharisee who viewed Christianity as a threat, a distortion of Jewish law and tradition. He was present at the execution of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and he made arrangements with religious authorities to arrest Christians who were worshiping in the Jewish communities and imprison them in Jerusalem.

While Paul was on his way to Damascus to make these arrests, he had an encounter with the risen Christ that changed everything. Days after this experience, Paul—who had gone out of his way to suppress the message of Christ—was preaching the gospel in Damascus.

Paul's spiritual orientation changed almost immediately. Following his encounter on the road to Damascus, his life had a new purpose and destination. But he didn't become an apostle, writer, and church leader right away. Paul tells us in his letters that seventeen years passed after his conversion before he began his work as an evangelist. Aside from spending short periods with Ananias, his mentor, and the apostle Peter,

we don't know a lot about what Paul did during this time. Evidence suggests he prepared himself mentally and spiritually for the work that God had set before him.

In this session, we'll look at Paul's conversion and how he reoriented his life to live into God's direction and purpose for him. We'll consider how to discern God's purposes for our lives and what we can learn from the examples and witnesses of others. As a part of this session's activities, each participant will craft a short mission statement that describes his or her purpose as a follower of Christ.

## YOUTH AND THIS SESSION

Though few people have had a turnaround as dramatic as Paul's, most of us have made poor decisions or behaved in ways we regret. We may have to live with the consequences of past bad decisions, but those choices don't define us. Assure the youth that God takes more interest in who they can become than who they have been. Encourage them to think about their spiritual orientation: Where are they headed? Where is God leading them?

That said, youth need not feel anxious about figuring everything out right now. It took Paul many years to embrace his Christian identity fully. No one can know all that God has in store for him or her.

For young people, perhaps the most significant part of Paul's conversion story is the role of Ananias. Ananias healed and nurtured Paul. He gave Paul an example of Christian discipleship and opened Paul's eyes—literally and figuratively—to Christ's plan for his life. Young Christians need nurture and mentoring; they need Christian role models with a mature (or maturing) faith who can show them what it means to follow Christ. Keep this in mind throughout this study and whenever you work with youth in other settings. Check out the article "What Is a Mentor?" on the website.

Some youth—particularly younger youth—may struggle to write a mission statement. Younger youth tend to be concrete thinkers, and a mission statement is an abstract concept. This session provides some examples, but it may help to search online for mission statements of famous companies and organizations.

## GETTING READY FOR THIS SESSION

Beforehand, gather the following supplies:

- Bible
- Paper
- Note cards
- A dry-erase board or large sheets of paper
- Pens or pencils
- Markers

As you prepare for this session, read and reflect on the following scriptures:

- Luke 4:18-19
- Luke 19:10

- Acts 9:1-20
- Galatians 1:13-24
- 2 Timothy 1:11

## GATHERING

Prior to this first session post a large sheet of paper in your meeting space. Over the course of these sessions, you will create a road map on this paper. Start by drawing seven main roads. They may intersect however you'd like them to. Name one of the main roads "Expectations." Do not name the other roads. You will name these and add to them as you go through the study.

As youth gather, talk with them about their week. Ask them to name some of their highs and lows—their joys and concerns—and list these on a marker board or large sheet of paper.

When most of the youth are present, ask them what they expect to learn from this study. Some may be showing up with no idea of what you'll be studying or discussing, so describe the study. Tell them they'll be taking a look at God's purpose for their lives and the direction in which God is leading them. Explain that they'll look at the challenges they'll face as they strive to be faithful to what God wants them to do. And tell them that much of the study will focus on the story of the apostle Paul.

Invite each person to think of one expectation he or she has for this study and to come up with a street name related to that expectation. For instance, if they expect to learn a lot about the Holy Spirit, they might use the name "Spirit Street." If they think they'll spend a lot of time on God's calling, they might come up with "Calling Boulevard." When they have a street name in mind, they add those streets to the map, connect edto the street labeled "Expectations."

Allow each person to talk about the street name he or she chose and why he or she chose it. Label the second main street on your map with the name of this week's session, "Preparing for Purpose."

Then open your session in prayer, lifting up the highs and lows the youth named, giving thanks for the experiences that brought them to this study, and asking God to open their eyes and ears to what God has in store for them during this lesson.

## SESSION ACTIVITIES

*More activities are included than time allows for. Select the activities that fit your setting, allotted time, and group interest. When moving from one activity to another, pick up and relay information that will smooth the transition from one activity to the next.*

### **Go It Alone**

Think of a time when you performed a difficult task or undertaking all by yourself. Maybe you decided to move a large piece of furniture or equipment. Maybe you took the lead in a school group project because

you didn't trust the team members or because they didn't work at the pace you felt comfortable with. Perhaps you had to take on an extra job at work to cover for a sick coworker.

Allow everyone a few minutes to think. Then give each person an opportunity to name one of his or her examples. After each example, discuss the following:

- Did you have to perform this task alone, or could you have asked for help?
- If you could have asked for help, why didn't you?
- What were the advantages to working on your own?
- What challenges might you have overcome or avoided had you been working with someone else?

You may pursue issues further by raising the following questions:

- In what situations are you reluctant to ask for help? Why?
- When you put items together, do you consult the instructions first? Why?
- Why do we prefer to do things on our own instead of taking advantage of available support?

## Who Is This Guy Paul?

*Supplies:* Large sheet of paper, markers

Throughout this study, you'll be learning about the apostle Paul—gaining wisdom from his story, his teaching, and his example. To begin, discuss what you already know about Paul. (Note: Where possible, correct or clarify the information that the youth give. For instance, they may have learned or gathered that Paul was previously named Saul and received a new name when he became a Christian. But this was not the case. Saul and Paul were both names that he went by. Saul was a Hebrew name that he would have been more likely to use among Jewish people; Paul was a Greek name that he would have been more likely to use elsewhere in the Roman world.)

List on a dry-erase board or a large sheet of paper the facts the youth name about Paul. After you've made your list, invite participants to brainstorm questions they have about Paul. What do they hope to learn about Paul from this study?

## What's the Point?

*Supplies:* Note cards or paper; pens or pencils

Have each person answer the following questions on a note card or a sheet of paper:

- As of today, what career do you hope to pursue when you are older?
- Why did you choose this potential career?
- What are you doing now to work toward that career?
- What challenges may make it difficult for you to pursue this career?

State the following facts:

**According to a 2013 Gallup poll, only about a fifth of adults around the world like what they do for a living and feel motivated to reach their goals. A 2015 survey found that the majority of American adults were actually unhappy at work.**

Discuss the following:

- How important is it to you to pursue a career you enjoy?
- How important is it to you to find meaningful work that will make an impact?
- How much do these two factors—being happy and making an impact—influence the choice of career that you wrote about earlier?

Say the following:

**Throughout scripture God singles out people to do specific types of work. In many cases, God’s decision surprises people. God’s plan for their lives differs from what they were expecting and what they’d prepared for. Often the work they end up doing isn’t enjoyable. The Bible notes many examples of God’s handpicked prophets and leaders who suffered in their work: Moses spent forty years in the desert guiding a large group of people who were frequently tired and hungry and dissatisfied with his leadership; Jeremiah’s colleagues persecuted and conspired to kill him; Mary, despite the ultimate blessing of being the mother of the Christ child, had to endure the shame of being pregnant before she was married; and Paul, the focus of our study, spent a lot of time in prison during his career as an evangelist and early church leader.**

Discuss the following questions:

- Consider these biblical figures and other great people you know from history. How would they have replied to someone who asked, “Do you like your job?”
- What might we miss if our only concern in career choice is doing something we enjoy?
- How can work be fulfilling even if it isn’t always fun?

## **The Moment It All Changed**

*Supplies:* Bibles

Raise the following for consideration:

- Can you identify a moment in your life when your faith—your relationship with God—changed suddenly?
- If not, describe how you became a Christian. If you were raised in the church, what led you to accept your faith as your own? If you came into the church at an older age, who or what introduced you to Christianity?

Say the following:

**Not everyone can identify a single moment when he or she became a Christian or accepted Christ, but Paul certainly could. Paul's early interactions with Christ followers were negative; he was present at the execution of Stephen, a Christian apostle. But then things changed.**

Read aloud Acts 9:1-9. Discuss the following:

- Why was Saul (as Paul is known here) headed to Damascus? What did he intend to do?
- What happened to Saul on the road to Damascus?
- What do you think was going through his mind as this occurred?
- What changed for Saul in this moment?

## My Ananias

*Supplies:* Bibles, paper; pens or pencils

State the following:

**We don't know exactly where Saul's faith stood when Christ spoke to him and struck him blind on the road to Damascus. But we do know a little about how his faith changed over the next several days.**

Read aloud Acts 9:10-20. Discuss the following:

- Who was Ananias?
- How did God work through Ananias to shape Saul's faith?
- What reservations did Ananias have?
- What was the result of Ananias's work with Saul?

Invite participants to spend a couple of minutes thinking about the people in their lives who have nurtured their faith, much as Ananias nurtured Saul's. Suggest that each youth identify one "Ananias" from his or her life and then imagine a conversation between God and his or her "Ananias," in the vein of God's conversation with Ananias in Acts 9:10-16. They will write their transcript of this conversation on paper, taking into consideration the following:

- When and where did God instruct this person to meet with you? (verses 10-12)
- What reservations might the person have had? (verses 13-14)
- How might God have responded to these reservations? (verses 15-16)
- What did this person ultimately do, and how did it shape your faith? (verses 17-20)

After working for several minutes, invite the youth to read aloud what they have written.

## What's Changed?

*Supplies:* Paper; pens or pencils

Say the following:

**The book of Acts doesn't say much about what happens between Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus and the beginning of his career as a missionary and church leader. Paul's letters tell us that seventeen years passed between these events, during which time he met with the apostle Peter in Jerusalem, spent three years in Arabia, and lived for fourteen years in his hometown of Tarsus.**

**We don't know what Paul did during this time. We can guess, based on what Paul says in his letters, that he studied scripture and spent time reflecting on his faith and relationship with Christ. At any rate, Paul changed considerably during this time and emerged from these seventeen years with a new worldview and purpose.**

Have participants make two columns on a sheet of paper labeled "Then" and "Now." Ask them to think about aspects of their lives that have changed, either as a result of their becoming a Christian or as they have grown in their faith. For instance, their faith may have influenced their response to seeing a classmate being bullied. "Then" they may have stood by and watched or even joined in; "now" maybe they intervene on behalf of the person being bullied. Becoming a Christian may have influenced them to take up spiritual practices that they wouldn't have otherwise considered. For example, "then" they may have gotten out of bed fifteen minutes before they left for school; "now" they might get up twenty minutes earlier than before to create time for prayer and devotion.

Give participants a few minutes to make their then-and-now charts. Ask the youth to name some examples from their lists. Compile a master list on a dry-erase board or a large sheet of paper. Then discuss the following:

In addition to the things we have listed, what other aspects of people's lives change when they become a Christian or as they mature in faith? (*Add these items to your list.*)

Say the following:

**Being a follower of Christ and growing in our relationship with Christ will change us. We live into the lives and purposes that God has in store for us.**

## What Got You Here?

*Supplies:* Bibles, dry-erase board or large sheet of paper, markers

Ask participants to identify those things in their lives—other than their family, friends, and faith—that are most significant to them right now. These may include school activities, arts, sports, hobbies, jobs, and so forth. Invite each person to name one activity or interest he or she thought of. Discuss the following:

- How did your life differ before your involvement in this activity or interest?
- What life events led you to commit to this interest or activity?

- If you were to go back in time and talk to your younger self (before your commitment to this interest or activity), do you think your past self would be surprised by your current involvement? Why or why not?

Read aloud Galatians 1:13-24. What aspects of Paul's life do these verses tell us about? Include aspects before conversion to Christianity and after his conversion. List these on a dry-erase board or a large sheet of paper. Read aloud each item on your list and discuss the following:

- How do you think this event affected Paul's ministry later in life?
- How might God have been at work through this event in Paul's life?

Pair off. Each pair will act out a conversation between Paul's postconversion self and Paul's earlier, preconversion self. The conversation begins with the older Paul telling his younger counterpart about what he's been up to. Young Paul responds with questions about who and what he's become. As they play these roles, encourage the pairs to consider what would particularly surprise or shock young Paul. Afterward, discuss the following:

What new insight did you gain about Paul through this activity?

## Your Personal Mission Statement

Ask the following:

- What comes to mind when you hear the term "mission statement"?
- What groups or organizations have you been part of that have crafted mission statements? (If your church's youth ministry has a mission statement, go over what it says; if possible, talk about how this statement was developed.)

Look at a few biblical mission statements. Ask volunteers to read the following scriptures aloud:

- Luke 4:18-19 (Jesus)
- Luke 19:10 (Jesus)
- 2 Timothy 1:11 (Paul)

Discuss what each of these statements in scripture says about the person taking on the mission.

Challenge participants to write personal mission statements based on their understanding of who they are as followers of Christ. The statement would be a single sentence or phrase that takes into consideration the following considerations:

- Make it timeless as much as possible. In other words, it would still be relevant ten or twenty years from now, even as the person's life and circumstances have changed.
- Focus not only on the person writing the statement but also on how that person relates to God and others.
- Reflect in some way the gifts and/or personality of the person making the statement.

Sample personal mission statements could include the following:

- “To serve God’s people with joy and compassion.”
- “To reflect God’s hope to a broken world.”
- “To be God’s hands and feet for the good of all God’s children.”

Have participants spend a few minutes working on their statements. Then invite each person to read his or her statement aloud. Keep these mission statements in a safe place or post them in your room so you can return to them in future sessions.

## CLOSING

Raise these questions:

- What one thing we talked about or learned stood out to you?
- What one thing will you do or think about in the coming week as a result of our learning and discussion?

Review these key points from this session:

- God identifies people to do specific work; God has work for each of us to do.
- The apostle Paul arrested and persecuted Christians before encountering Christ on the road to Damascus.
- Paul was also known as Saul. Though scripture refers to him as Saul when he persecutes Christians and Paul when he leads the church, he didn’t change his name when he became a Christian. It is likely that he went by “Saul” when he lived and worked in the Jewish-speaking world and by “Paul” when he lived and worked among Greek-speaking people.
- Faith is not something we do on our own. God uses other people to guide and support us as we grow in our relationships with Christ.

### Closing Prayer

**God of grace and growth, thank you for the story and example of Paul, and thank you for this time we’ve had together today to study your word and teachings. Open our eyes in the coming week to the ways that you are at work in our lives and in the world around us and to the work that you are calling us to do. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.**

## SESSION TWO

# Taking Stock

### ABOUT THIS SESSION

Paul—also known as Saul—was notorious for his mistreatment of Christians. He was present at the execution of the Christian apostle Stephen and received permission from the Romans to arrest and imprison Christians. As such, he seemed an unusual choice for the job of “Christian leader and evangelist.” Ananias certainly thought so. (See Acts 9:13-14.)

Despite his liabilities, Paul had a lot going for him. He was well educated in the scriptures and the Jewish law. At the time, Christianity was largely a Jewish movement. Yet Paul was also a Roman citizen and could relate to non-Jewish people throughout the Roman world. And evidence attests to Paul’s being a gifted writer and speaker, enabling him to communicate the gospel effectively to all sorts of people.

Paul uses all these *ingredients* (to borrow a word that you’ll be using in this session) to serve God and God’s people in unique and amazing ways. He understood the importance of followers of Christ making faithful use of God’s gifts and resources. We see this throughout his writings. Paul frequently mentioned spiritual gifts (see, for instance, Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:8-10). He compared the church—Christ’s body—to a human body made up of many parts. He stressed that the Holy Spirit has given different people different gifts and that each person has a part to play based on the gifts he or she has been given. The health of the body—the church—depends on each part performing its unique function.

In this session, youth will identify the talents, abilities, experiences, opportunities, and other resources that God has blessed them with; they will consider how God may be calling them to use these gifts in the service of others. They will study Paul’s teaching and example and the witness of other people of faith.

## YOUTH AND THIS SESSION

While some youth will eagerly identify their talents and talk about their experiences, others may struggle to name their God-given gifts. As much as possible, help youth see the ways God has blessed them. Lift up the talents and abilities you have seen in them, as well as traits that people might not identify as gifts or talents, such as patience, a willingness to listen, compassion, and wisdom in times of crisis.

Youth will discover new gifts and talents as they grow, but they need to realize they are already essential parts of the body of Christ. God has work for them to do right now. As participants consider how they can use their talents in the service of God and others, help them identify ministries and groups in your congregation or community that would benefit from their gifts.

## GETTING READY FOR THIS SESSION

Beforehand, gather the following supplies:

- Bible
- Paper (including slips of paper and/or note cards)
- A dry-erase board or large sheets of paper
- Pens or pencils
- Markers
- A large sheet of butcher paper or bulletin-board paper for “Play Your Part”

As you prepare for this session, read and reflect on the following scriptures:

- Acts 22:1-5
- Romans 12:6-8
- 1 Corinthians 12:8-10
- 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

## GATHERING

As youth gather, talk with them about their week. Ask them to name some of their highs and lows—their joys and concerns—and list these on a marker board or large sheet of paper.

When most youth are present, ask them to reflect on how God has been present in their lives in the past week, particularly on how they might have experienced God calling them or leading them. Also discuss how faithful they were to the personal mission statements they wrote as a part of the first session.

Then challenge each person to come up with a street name related to their experience of God in the past week and to add a street to your road map with that name. For instance, a youth might add “Introduction Avenue” to the map if she feels like God guided her toward getting to know someone new. A youth might draw “Tutoring Road” if God gave him an opportunity to serve by tutoring elementary school children.

These streets will connect to the main street labeled “Preparing for Purpose.” Allow each person to talk about the street name he or she chose and why he or she chose it. Label the third main street with the name of this session, “Taking Stock.”

Then open your session in prayer, lifting up the highs and lows the youth named, giving thanks for their experiences of God in the past week, and asking God to open their eyes and ears to what God has in store for them during this lesson

## SESSION ACTIVITIES

*More activities are included than time allows for. Select the activities that fit your setting, allotted time, and group interest. When moving from one activity to another, pick up and relay information that will smooth the transition from one activity to the next.*

### Remember Your Mission

Invite participants to summarize what they learned from the previous session. Be sure to mention the study focus (Paul) and the key parts of Paul’s life that you covered. After a few people have given summaries, ask those youth who were present for the previous session if they recall their mission statements. Take a couple of minutes to go over these mission statements. Discuss the following:

- Did you give any thought to your mission statement during the week? If so, how did it influence your words and actions?
- In what other ways were you able to apply, in the past week, what we learned and discussed during our last session?

### List Your Ingredients

*Supplies:* Paper, pens or pencils

Discuss the following:

- Have you ever wanted to make something in the kitchen and then discovered that you didn’t have the right ingredients? (Maybe you wanted a peanut butter and jelly sandwich but didn’t have any jelly; maybe you hoped to have spaghetti for dinner but didn’t have any sauce.)
- What did you do? Did you improvise? Make something else? Give up in frustration?

Say the following:

**The snacks or meals we can make largely depend on the ingredients available. Our activities, interests, and life choices may also depend on available ingredients.**

Have each person identify the “life ingredients” available to him or her. These ingredients could include experiences, skills, talents, accomplishments, or passions. Examples: being a skilled writer, being a patient

listener, having participated in service projects, or having a love of animals. Encourage each person to jot these ingredients down on a sheet of paper.

Challenge each person to come up with “recipes” based on these ingredients. For instance, a recipe for “elementary school teacher” might include the ingredients “works well with children,” “does well in school,” “is creative,” and “has experience working with the children’s ministry at church.” A recipe for “medical missionary” might include the ingredients “interest in going into a health-related field,” “does well in foreign language classes,” “enjoys meeting new people,” and “has a deep sense of empathy and compassion.”

Participants are to come up with two recipes: one recipe for a role or career they’ve considered; another for a career or path that they’ve not given thought to. Consider allowing participants to research different jobs and opportunities on phones or other devices.

Give participants plenty of time to write their recipes, then invite each person to talk about what he or she came up with. Encourage youth not to see these recipes as limiting but to look at them as some available options that use the ingredients they’ve acquired. Also remind them that as they grow older, they will acquire even more ingredients, which will give them more opportunities.

## Gifts of the Spirit

*Supplies:* Bibles, dry-erase board or large sheet of paper, markers

Say the following:

**Among the many topics that Paul (the focus of this study) addressed was spiritual gifts. Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit blesses God’s people with various talents, abilities, and roles for use to do God’s work here on earth.**

Read aloud Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:8-10. Have participants identify all the spiritual gifts that Paul identifies in these verses. List these on a dry-erase board or a large sheet of paper. After you’ve listed as many gifts as you can find, ask the following questions:

- Which of these gifts do you wonder about? (“Distinguishing between spirits” or “discernment of spirits” may involve an ability to determine whether a message or a prophecy comes from God; “tongues” may involve being able to speak and/or interpret unintelligible sounds from the Holy Spirit—what we usually call “speaking in tongues”—or being able to understand and teach in other languages.)
- Whom do you know who exhibits one of the specific gifts Paul mentions? How has the person employed this gift to do God’s work?
- If Paul were writing to an audience in twenty-first-century North America, what additional gifts would he add to his lists? What gifts might he name or describe differently?

## Take Inventory

*Supplies:* A spiritual gifts inventory, pens or pencils

Have each person in the group take a spiritual gifts inventory. One of these is available through Youth Ministry Partners. To find the link go to [www.WhichWayLord.UpperRoomBooks.com](http://www.WhichWayLord.UpperRoomBooks.com). You can find similar inventories online. After everyone has completed his or her inventory, discuss the following questions:

- According to the inventory, what are your spiritual gifts?
- Do you agree with the inventory results? If not, with what do you disagree? What surprised you?

Allow each person a few minutes to reflect on and write about the following:

- According to the spiritual gifts inventory, what are your gifts or strengths?
- How have you already put these gifts and strengths to use in the service of God and others?
- What could you do in the near future (the next two or three years) to make good use of these gifts and strengths?
- How could you put these gifts and strengths to use in the long term, such as in a career?
- What is your responsibility to put this gift to good use?

## What Do You Know?

*Supplies:* Bibles

Ask participants to reflect on the following question:

**What do you wish you knew about your family's history that you don't know already?**

Each person develops three questions to ask to find out these facts. Then ask participants to reflect on a more specific question:

**What do you wish you knew about your family's faith story?**

They might consider when and why their family decided to join a particular congregation or denomination, when or how a particular family member or ancestor became a Christian, and so forth. Encourage each person to come up with at least one question that would help him or her gain information. Allow volunteers to talk about the questions they came up with. Discuss the following:

- How would understanding your family's story better—particularly their faith story—help you know and appreciate your own story?
- Based on what you know already, how have the faith, lives, and examples of your family and ancestors had an impact on your faith?

Then read aloud Acts 22:1-5. Discuss the following:

- We don't know much about Paul's early life and upbringing, but what do these verses teach us about Paul's background?
- How did Paul's background shape his career and calling?

## Play Your Part

*Supplies:* Bibles, large sheet of paper, markers

Say the following:

**Paul often spoke of the “ingredients” that made him an apostle to much of the Roman world. He was Jewish and well educated in Jewish law, so he could relate and work with Jewish church leaders such as Peter and James; as a Roman citizen he was familiar with many cultures and customs. Paul had persecuted Christians and knew firsthand the opposition and struggles Christians faced; he’d also had a personal encounter with Christ.**

Paul realized that not everyone could relate to his story or play the same role in the church. Other people had different experiences and backgrounds and were better suited to other kinds of work. Paul addressed this on several occasions. Read aloud 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. Discuss the following:

- What metaphor does Paul use for the church and the different roles people play based on their gifts?
- Why did he choose this metaphor?
- What does this metaphor tell us about the roles we play in the church?

Give participants a few minutes to reread the scripture and to reflect on the body part that best describes them. It doesn’t have to be a part that Paul names; it can be any body part that corresponds to their gifts and the roles they play. For instance, someone who is patient and a good listener might describe himself as the “ears” of the church. Someone who is always ready to get involved with the work of the church may refer to herself as the “hands” of the church. Others might refer to themselves as the “eyes,” the “feet,” or the “stomach,” depending on their talents and their activities and involvement.

Tell the youth to raise their hands when they have an idea of which body part best describes them. Ask the first two people who finish to trace the outline of a human body on a large sheet of paper (such as butcher paper or bulletin-board paper). The easiest way to do this would be for one person to lie flat on the paper while the other traces the outline of his or her body.

After fashioning the body outline, have each person name the body part he or she selected and write his or her name on that part of the outline. Participants then explain their identification with the body parts.

## A Servant’s Heart

Say the following:

**As Paul’s metaphor suggests, God does not intend that we use our gifts for ourselves. We are part of a larger body, and the other parts rely on us to function. We have an obligation to give of ourselves for God’s people.**

Invite participants to spend a few minutes thinking about people they know who go out of their way to use their gifts in service for others. Encourage each youth to select one person who exemplifies humble service. Guide youth to think specifically about *how* these people use their particular gifts and talents to help and

support others. Ask each participant to talk about the person he or she selected and explain how this person uses his or her gifts to serve. Then discuss the following:

**How can you follow the example of these servants?** (Encourage youth to be as specific as possible.)

## CLOSING

Ask the following questions:

- What one thing we talked about or learned stood out to you?
- What one thing will you do or think about in the coming week as a result of our learning and discussion?

Review these key takeaways from this session:

- We all have a variety of “ingredients” at our disposal—including experiences, opportunities, gifts, and talents.
- God calls us to combine these ingredients in unique ways to do Christ’s work.
- The Holy Spirit equips each of us with particular spiritual gifts.
- Paul compared the church to a human body; each person is a different part and plays a different role that is essential for the well-being of the whole body.
- God calls us to live as humble servants rather than using our gifts for personal gain.

### Closing Prayer

**God, you are the source of all our gifts. Thank you for the talents and abilities you have blessed us with and for the opportunities and experiences you have placed before us. Show us how we can use these blessings in unique ways as part of the body of Christ. Thank you for the example of others who have humbly used their blessings in service to you and your people. In the name of the Holy Spirit, giver of gifts, we pray. Amen.**

## SESSION THREE

# Facing Adversity

### ABOUT THIS SESSION

Responding to Christ and becoming part of the new Christian movement didn't make Paul's life easier. It took him years to discover where and how he fit into God's plan. And even after that discovery, he had to contend with opposition (from inside and outside the church), imprisonment, persecution, division in the communities he served, and even a shipwreck. Paul managed all this adversity because he lived in the assurance that God had called him and equipped him. He also had the support of other believers.

When the apostle Paul began his ministry of spreading the gospel to non-Jewish people in the Roman world, he had a partner. An apostle named Barnabas stood up for Paul when other Christians—especially those who remembered Paul's history of persecuting followers of Christ—expressed skepticism about his conversion. Barnabas sought out Paul and brought him to Antioch, where the pair would receive their first assignment (taking a "love" offering to church leaders in Judea).

Seventeen years had passed between Paul's conversion and Barnabas's invitation to come to Antioch. Before he met Barnabas, Paul seemingly lacked a clear purpose. He'd had a dramatic conversion and a new and vibrant faith, but what was next? Through Barnabas, Paul found his calling.

"Calling" is an essential concept for Christians. While we most often associate the idea of "answering a call" with those who decide to become clergy or pursue leadership positions in the church, all Christ followers must consider how God is calling us to serve. This call may involve a feeling of assurance, encouragement from another person, an opportunity opening before us, or circumstances pointing us in a certain direction.

For Paul, answering God's call did not spare him from adversity. Responding to God's call made his life much more challenging and sometimes even put his life at risk. Like Paul, we will face challenges and struggles, but God doesn't abandon us to adversity. We have the assurance that God loves us and has work for us to do. We know that God calls out to us and guides us. And we are part of a community of faith that loves us, supports us, and—at its best—offers a model of God's hope and love.

## YOUTH AND THIS SESSION

For youth, adversity comes in all shapes and sizes. Plenty of young people have experienced hardships that the average person would struggle to imagine. Others may act as though their world is falling apart as a result of circumstances that seem minor to many of us (such as an argument with a friend or a B on a report card). Adults who work with youth need to understand that we don't have to have the answers for all issues youth face. We also need not dismiss the challenges youth face, no matter how insignificant they seem to us.

Youth need to know they are part of God's reign and mission on earth. They may struggle to hear God's call or to discern their purpose, but they need to understand and be reminded of God's love and investment in them. We encourage them as they discover where God is leading them, and we provide support when they respond to God's call.

As mentioned above, we also have a responsibility to surround youth with a community of faith that resembles the early Christian community in Acts. We show them a church that welcomes and displays hospitality to all people—one that challenges people to reach beyond the cliques they'd normally associate with. We expect youth to show Christ's love to all their peers. We support this effort when we do the same.

No adult, no matter how well trained or intentioned, can save youth from adversity. But we can show them how God is at work through them and around them. And we can teach them stories about Christians, such as Paul, who navigated significant obstacles while serving God's purpose.

## GETTING READY FOR THIS SESSION

Beforehand, gather the following supplies:

- Bible
- Dictionaries (optional)
- Pairs of items (see "Find Your Partner")
- Paper
- Note cards
- A dry-erase board or large sheets of paper
- Pens or pencils
- Markers or colored pencils

As you prepare for this session, read and reflect on scriptures in the “Listen for the Call” activity, as well on the following:

- Acts 11:19-30
- Acts 14:8-20
- Acts 16:16-34
- 2 Corinthians 1:8-11

## GATHERING

As youth gather, talk with them about their weeks. Ask them to name some of their highs and lows—their joys and concerns—and list these on a marker board or large sheet of paper.

When most youth are present, ask them to reflect on how God has been present in their lives in the past week, especially on how they might have identified or used particular spiritual gifts or talents. Also discuss their faithfulness to the personal mission statements they wrote as part of session one.

Then challenge each person to come up with a street name related to his or her experience of God in the past week and to add a street to your road map with that name. For instance, a youth might add “Communication Way” to the map if he feels as though God gave him an opportunity and ability to communicate something about his faith or a ministry of the church. A youth might draw “Hands Road,” if she had a chance to serve God in a hands-on way. These streets connect to the main street labeled “Taking Stock.” Allow each person to talk about the street name he or she chose and why he or she chose it. Then label the fourth main street with the name of this session, “Facing Adversity.”

Then open your session in prayer, lifting up the highs and lows the youth named, giving thanks for their experiences of God in the past week, and asking God to open their eyes and ears to what God has in store for them during this lesson.

## SESSION ACTIVITIES

*More activities are included than you will have time for. Select the activities that fit your setting, allotted time, and appropriateness for your group. When moving from one activity to another, pick up and relay information that will smooth the transition from one activity to the next.*

### **Adversity**

*Supplies:* Bibles.

Discuss the following question:

What comes to mind when you hear the word *adversity*?

Have participants look up the definition of *adversity* in dictionaries. (Perhaps use online dictionaries on their phones or other devices.) Then ask the following questions:

- What situations have you faced that involved adversity?
- How do you typically respond to adversity? (Do you get stressed out? Do you embrace the challenge? Do you seek out help from others? Do you try to handle everything on your own?)

Say the following:

**Paul, the subject of our study, knew all about adversity. During his career, he faced rejection, arrest, imprisonment, and self-doubt. He was able to deal with this adversity because he felt confident that God had called him to spread the message of Christ throughout the Roman world and because he learned to rely fully on God.**

## Find Your Partner

*Supplies:* Bibles, pairs of items (see instructions)

Beforehand, gather several pairs of items (one item per participant). Examples of paired items include the following: a pencil and an eraser, an electronic device and a charger, a container of applesauce and a spoon, and a toothbrush and toothpaste. Give one item to each person. Then play music while the youth search for the person who has the object that fits with their own. When every person has found his or her pair, have the pair briefly discuss the following questions:

- How do these two items go together?
- Could you use one of these items without the other? If so, what modifications would you have to make?
- How does one item make the other item better, more effective, or easier to use?

Allow each pair to name their items and explain their answers to the questions. After every pair has had a chance to talk, discuss the following questions:

- Who completes your life?
- How is this relationship mutual? In other words, how do these people benefit from their relationship with you?

God created us to be in relationship with one another and doesn't intend us to work alone. Paul knew this truth well. Though Paul is best known for being a leader of the early church and the apostle to the Gentiles (non-Jewish people) living throughout the Roman Empire, he didn't step into this role as soon as he became a Christian. In fact, seventeen years passed between when Paul (also known as Saul) first experienced Christ and when he finally assumed the role God had prepared for him. And for Paul to become the leader God had called him to be, he'd need a partner.

Read aloud Acts 11:19-30. This scripture begins by looking at the situation the church found itself in after Stephen—an early Christian apostle—was executed for his faith. Discuss the following questions:

- What challenges did the early Christians face?
- What successes did they have?
- What do these verses tell us about Barnabas?

- What was Barnabas's relationship to Paul (known in these verses as Saul)?
- What work did Barnabas and Paul do for the church?

## Listen for the Call

*Supplies:* Bibles

Say the following:

**God has all sorts of ways to communicate with us and call us into ministry.**

Ask participants to read aloud some of the Bible's more fantastic examples of God calling people. (Read as many as time permits.)

- Moses: Exodus 3:1-12
- Samuel: 1 Samuel 3:1-18
- Ezekiel: Ezekiel 2:1-10
- Mary: Luke 1:26-38

Form teams of three or four, and challenge each team to create a story of God calling someone—a story as incredible as some of those recorded in scripture. Include the following:

- A description of the person being called. (Many of the people God called in scripture were unlikely choices according to the standards of the day.)
- A way that God gets the person's attention. (This part should be as outlandish as possible.)
- A task that God calls the person to do. (Encourage youth not to get too crazy with this part but to think seriously about tasks God might ask a person to do.)

Allow the teams a few minutes to work before inviting each team to present its call story. Then discuss the following questions:

- When have you experienced a call from God? How did God call out to you?
- What did God call you to do? How did you respond?

Explain that God has many different ways of calling out to people. Some are obvious; some are subtle. A call may take the form of a feeling of assurance, an opportunity's becoming available, or a word from a Christian friend or mentor. Discuss the following:

How do we know if a call is from God? (Answers include these possibilities: As we grow in our relationship with God, we will have more clarity about whether a message comes from God. God was revealed most fully to us in the person of Jesus, so God's call likely will be consistent with Jesus' message and mission; God has given us scripture and the witness of other Christians to help us discern which messages come from God and which come from other sources.)

Say the following:

**Paul became a Christian after a crazy encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. But his call to ministry came more subtly. His career as a missionary to the Roman world**

**began with an invitation from Barnabas seventeen years after Paul's conversion. This invitation began a career that would play a major role in spreading Christianity throughout the Roman Empire and in the writing of the books of the New Testament.**

## Good Deeds Gone Bad

*Supplies:* Bibles

Discuss the following:

When have you made an honest effort to do something good only to have it backfire or blow up in your face? (Examples: helping someone who didn't appreciate your help, offending someone while trying to do something nice, or trying to clean or improve something but making things worse.)

Say the following:

**When Paul and Barnabas were in the city of Lystra, their good work prompted an unexpected negative response.**

Read Acts 14:8-20 aloud. Select two or three volunteers to play the roles of apostles who have performed a miraculous healing: A person paralyzed from the waist down can walk again. The rest of the participants will play the roles of reporters, questioning the apostles after the healing.

Stage a press conference about the healing in which reporters presume the apostles are gods. For example: "Why did gods like you choose to heal a person in my town?" or "Do you plan to use your godly powers to heal more people, or do gods like you have more important things to move on to?" The apostles insist they are not gods. The reporters do not choose to believe them and keep pressing. Continue for five minutes or until the reporters run out of questions. Say the following:

**Despite performing a miracle in Christ's name, Paul ended up running for his life, leaving behind people who had completely misunderstood what he had done.**

Discuss the following:

- How would you have responded if you'd been in Paul's situation? How difficult would it have been to keep going?
- How did Paul find the strength to keep going despite this failure?

## Singing Songs in Prison

*Supplies:* Bibles

Read Acts 16:16-24, which describes another situation where Paul and his companions faced adversity.

Discuss the following:

- What got Paul and Silas into trouble with the people in Philippi? (See 16:12.)
- What happened as a result?

Then read Acts 16:25-34. Discuss the following:

- How did Paul and Silas respond to adversity in this situation?
- What happened as a result?
- How did their response affect others?

Say the following:

**How we respond to adversity not only affects us but also those with whom we interact. We are Christ's witnesses, and we give people a glimpse of Christ when we respond to adversity with faith, hope, love, and courage.**

Ask the following:

If you were imprisoned, like Paul and Silas were, and you were going to sing a song to pass the time and express your hope in God, what song would you sing? (Encourage the youth to answer this question in song.)

Say the following:

**Remember the song you named. When you encounter adversity, hum or sing this song to yourself as a sign of hope and a reminder of what God's abilities.**

## Rely on God

*Supplies:* Bibles, note cards or paper, pens or pencils, markers or colored pencils

Read aloud 2 Corinthians 1:8-11. Ask the following:

- What is Paul's response to adversity in these verses?
- How could Paul's message in this scripture passage apply to difficult situations you've faced?

Say the following:

**Sometimes people with good intentions can offer unhelpful advice about God when we are experiencing difficult times. Sayings like, "God never gives us more than we can handle," or "Everything happens according to God's plan" can give the impression that people of faith never experience anxiety or question the direction of their lives. Scripture shows us this is not the case. God's servants often found themselves in dangerous, overwhelming, and seemingly impossible situations. The good news is that scripture also shows us that no matter how hard things get, God never abandons us.**

Hand out note cards or sheets of paper. Tell youth to write on their cards or papers the text of 2 Corinthians 1:10 and to illustrate their cards or papers with pictures and/or symbols that represent the hope they have in God or situations they've faced where they've had to rely on God. Invite volunteers to show their work. Encourage youth to keep these cards or papers in a place where they will see them often (such as in a school

folder or locker, on a bedroom mirror, in a purse or wallet or backpack, and so forth). The text of 2 Corinthians 1:10 will remind them to rely on God in all circumstances.

## CLOSING

Raise these questions:

- What one thing we talked about or learned stood out to you?
- What one thing will you do or think about in the coming week as a result of our learning and discussion?

Review these key takeaways from the session:

- God calls us to do the work of God in the world. People hear this call in different ways, some obvious and some subtle.
- God may call us to tasks and settings where we will face adversity.
- God does not promise to make our lives easy or to shield us from hardship. God does, however, promise to be present with us always.
- We can rely on God in all situations.

### Closing Prayer

**Lord, thank you again for the story and example of Paul and for the time we've had together. Open our ears to the ways you are calling to us. Remind us of your presence when we face adversity. Give us the strength and courage to keep responding to your call. Amen.**

## SESSION FOUR

# Dealing with Detours

### ABOUT THIS SESSION

Think back to when you were in middle school. What expectations did you have for your life then? What were your plans? Where did you see yourself being in ten or twenty (or thirty or forty) years? Then think about what parts of your life fell in line with that plan and which did not. What parts of your life today would you never have imagined when you were a teenager?

An activity in the first session asked participants to imagine a conversation between Paul—the seasoned apostle, writer, and church leader—and his younger self. As a young man Paul would not have entertained the idea that he'd even join the upstart group of Jesus followers that had popped up in Jerusalem, let alone end up as one of its most influential teachers and leaders. But even after serving in his role as a missionary, unforeseen circumstances would affect his life and work.

Paul and his partner, Barnabas, were successful from the beginning. Their first missionary journey brought lots of new people into the church. Some other disciples were unhappy with their success because Paul and Barnabas were bringing in Gentiles. The early church was a Jewish movement, and Judaism involved many laws and regulations that would be hard for non-Jewish people to follow. (You can decide how much you want to talk to your youth about circumcision and dietary laws.)

Paul and Barnabas had to defend their success before other apostles. They made a compelling case to the Christian council in Jerusalem and continued their work with the church's blessing. But prior to their next mission, Paul and Barnabas argued about Barnabas's cousin joining them. As a result, the pair split up. Now Paul could decide where *he* wanted to travel; he wanted to go to Bithynia, a densely populated Roman

province in what is now northern Turkey. Paul believed many people there would be interested in the Christian message. God had another idea for Paul's travels. After the "Spirit of Jesus" kept him from going to Bithynia, Paul had a vision of a Macedonian man calling him to come to Macedonia. Paul heeded the man's instructions. That obedience would strongly affect the Christian community in Philippi (the church Paul wrote to in his letter to the Philippians).

Paul would take many more detours during his career. Some were inconvenient; some led him into danger. But each change of plans was consistent with God's purpose for his life and beneficial to the growth of the church. In this session you'll learn from Paul's example how detours and roadblocks can play a significant role in God's working through the lives of God's people.

## YOUTH AND THIS SESSION

Young people need to feel confident that their lives have purpose and that they have roles to play in God's reign. They also need to understand that a purpose or calling differs from having a clear direction or destination. God has work for them to do and will provide opportunities for them to use their gifts, talents, and other resources. However, God does not always lay out a clear, easy-to-follow plan for their whole lives.

We live in a messy world. Many young people already have firsthand experience of this messiness. Despite our certainty of our lives' direction, a single event or experience can change everything. Being a faithful follower of Christ will not spare us from illnesses, natural disasters, broken relationships, financial problems, or the death of loved ones. Any of these experiences could force us to make an unexpected detour. Youth need to understand that detours happen, and some will be painful and trying. They also need to know that God travels with them on these detours, and these detours do not invalidate their purpose or calling.

While "detour" is a good metaphor for the changes in plans we may encounter, the detours we face may not come with bright orange signs or flashing arrows. Sometimes the best route to take isn't clear. God gives us tools—scripture, the wisdom of other Christians today and throughout history, past experiences, and our God-given ability to reason and think critically—to discern the best path. Even so, we will make wrong turns. Youth who drive may be familiar with the anxiety that accompanies making a wrong turn (which then becomes a detour). The good news for them is that they live in an age with GPS technology. A voice from the car or a quick glance at the Maps app on their phone can get them back on track. The same is true for their faith journey. God doesn't give up on them when they make a wrong turn. God works to correct the course so they can fulfill their purpose.

## GETTING READY FOR THIS SESSION

As you prepare for this session, read and reflect on the list of scriptures under "Case Study: Peter," as well as the following:

- Acts 15:1-21
- Acts 16:6-10

## GATHERING

As youth gather, talk with them about their lives over the past week. Ask them to name some of their highs and lows—their joys and concerns—and list these on a dry-erase board or a large sheet of paper.

Ask group members to reflect on God’s presence in their lives in the past week and particularly on how they have experienced God during adversity (or how they have seen God at work in the lives of others experiencing adversity). Also discuss their faithfulness to the personal mission statements they wrote as part of the first session.

Then challenge each person to come up with a street name related to his or her experience of God in the past week and to add a street to the road map with that name. For instance, a youth might add “Patience Place” to the map if she feels that God gave her the patience to handle a particular situation. A youth might draw in “Courage Drive” if he feels as though God gave him the courage to face a situation he’d been dreading. Allow each person to talk about the street name he or she chose and the reason for that choice. Label the fifth main street with the name of this session “Dealing with Detours.”

Open your session in prayer, lifting up the highs and the lows the youth named, giving thanks for their experiences of God in the past week, and asking God to open their eyes and ears to what God has in store for them during this lesson.

## SESSION ACTIVITIES

*More activities are included than you will have time for. Select the activities that fit your setting, allotted time, and appropriateness for your group. When moving from one activity to another, pick up and relay information that will smooth the transition from one activity to the next.*

### **Draw Four and Return to “Start”**

*Supplies:* Several games in which a player’s forward progress might suddenly be lost

Beforehand, gather some board games or card games in which a player could be doing well one moment and poorly the next. This could include games such as Sorry!, Chutes and Ladders, and Candyland, in which a player may have to move a piece backward or return to start. It could also include a game such as UNO or Crazy Eights where a player can draw several cards before finding one he or she can play. Try to have one game for every four participants.

Have the youth play these games for five minutes. (Make them aware of the time so that they feel a sense of urgency.) Then ask the following:

- What frustrated you about these games?
- When have you made a lot of progress that suddenly disappeared or suffered an enormous setback? How did you deal with the frustration? How did you move forward after this experience?
- Where do you find strength or guidance during times of frustration?

Say the following:

**Following God’s direction and fulfilling God’s purpose for our lives won’t always lead us on a clear, easy-to-follow path. We will experience setbacks; we will mess up and veer off course; and we will experience circumstances beyond our control that force us to make tough choices. But God always has a way to get us heading in the right direction.**

## Unity, Liberty, Charity

State the following:

**A well-known saying about the church goes like this: “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” This quote is usually attributed to John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, but it isn’t clear that he ever said or wrote such a thing.**

Discuss the following question:

What do you think this saying—“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity”—means?

Explain that the saying suggests that there are some essential beliefs and practices on which all Christians agree. Christians may disagree on other matters. As long as they are not essential to the faith, we are free to disagree (according to the saying). The third part of the saying reminds us that regardless of what we agree or disagree on, we must do so in a spirit of love. Ask the following:

Do you agree with this statement? Why, or why not?

Brainstorm some “essentials” that all Christians should agree on. List these on a dry-erase board or a large sheet of paper. These might include a belief that God became human in the person of Jesus Christ, that Jesus died and rose from the dead for the forgiveness of our sins, and that God is present with us always in the person of the Holy Spirit. Then discuss the following:

Why are these beliefs essential? Why is it important that Christians agree on these things?

Then brainstorm some “nonessentials”—things that aren’t really crucial to our faith but that Christians often disagree about. List these on a dry-erase board or a large sheet of paper. Discuss the following:

- Which of the items on our list do Christians seem to disagree about most passionately? Why do these issues get people so fired up?
- Do you believe Christians should feel free to disagree on these issues? How important is it that we hold certain views on issues we deem nonessential? Explain your reasoning.

Say the following:

**The early church had to weigh what was essential and nonessential and deal with this dispute in a loving way. Thanks to Paul and Barnabas, many Gentile, or non-Jewish, people were joining the church. This posed a problem for church leaders who considered**

**Christianity a movement within Judaism and felt that Christians had an obligation to follow Jewish law. Paul believed that insisting Gentiles follow Jewish law would put an unfair burden on them and push them away from the church. Paul and the other apostles resolved this conflict through meeting as a council and discussing the issues.**

Read Acts 15:1-21. Discuss the following:

- What case did Paul and Barnabas present to the council?
- How did the council respond?

State the following:

**The council, in a spirit of love, came to a compromise. If they hadn't, Paul's ministry would have been undermined.**

Discuss the following:

- In what areas is the church today excluding people for “nonessential” reasons? How may this exclusion negatively affect the church as a whole?
- What can we do, as a group and as a congregation, to welcome people who may otherwise be excluded?

Close this discussion by asking this question:

How does the saying about unity, liberty, and charity apply to what we have discussed about God's direction and purpose for our lives?

## Change of Plans

*Supplies:* Bibles

Say the following:

**Barnabas and Paul were a team, and God worked through Barnabas to call Paul into ministry. But a disagreement over whether Barnabas's cousin would join them on their journey caused the two to go separate ways. Paul planned to travel north to Bithynia, a densely populated Roman province where people seemed receptive to the Christian message. But he didn't get there.**

Read Acts 16:6-10. Discuss the following:

How and why did Paul and his companions end up changing their plans?

Form teams of three or four. Give the teams about five minutes to come up with a situation in which someone makes a sudden change of plans. Encourage them to be ridiculous and over the top with their ideas. Tell them to present their situations in the form of skits. The skits need to make clear the original plan, why

the plan had to change, and what the new plan involved. Have each team present its skit. Then discuss the following questions:

- When have you had to change your plans quickly?
- When has a change of plans resulted in a good experience that you never expected?
- How do you react when you have to let go of an activity you'd been planning to do something entirely different? Do you respond with stress or frustration? Or can you see God at work in these changes?

Say the following:

**God has a purpose for each of us. But having a purpose doesn't always make following a clear, obvious path. Sometimes our plans—even plans that we make cautiously and in a spirit of love—don't line up with God's plans. In these situations we have to trust God, even if we aren't sure where God may be leading.**

## Wrong Turn? No Big Deal

*Supplies:* Electronic devices with a map application (optional)

Say the following:

**Now that many people carry a device with them that can instantly pull up a map of wherever they are, people don't worry so much about making wrong turns. But before such devices, a wrong turn could place someone in serious trouble.**

Ask the following:

- When have you been lost and had no idea where to go?
- What did you do in this situation? To whom or what did you turn?

Say the following:

**Fear of getting lost may keep someone from setting out, especially if that person didn't have the GPS technology that is available to us today. Likewise, fear of getting lost or off track in a figurative sense can keep us from answering God's call.**

Ask the following:

- Have you ever turned down or passed up an opportunity because you feared where it might lead?

If youth have phones or other electronic devices with a map application, ask them to select a destination within a one-hour drive of their home or the church. Give everyone time to map out the trip. Then invite volunteers to talk about the routes provided by their devices. Ask the following:

- How many different routes does the application provide? What are the differences in time and distance?

- Have you been to this destination before? If so, did you take one of these routes? If not, can you tell from the map what would make each route a good choice or a poor choice?
- Have you taken any of the alternate routes to this destination? If so, what were the advantages or disadvantages of taking these routes?
- Have you or your family ever consulted a map or GPS application in the middle of a trip to avoid traffic, construction, or closed roads?

Say the following:

**Often, if one route becomes unavailable to us, we can take other routes. This is true both when we travel and when we live into God's purposes for our lives. Like GPS devices and map applications, God gives us alternate paths.**

## Case Study: Peter

*Supplies:* Bibles

Say the following:

**One prominent example of God offering a new path to someone who'd gone off course is the story of the apostle Peter.**

Invite volunteers to aloud each of the following scripture passages:

- Matthew 16:13-19 (Peter declares that Jesus is the Christ; Jesus calls Peter the rock on which he'll build the church.)
- John 18:15-18 (Peter denies Jesus.)
- John 21:15-19 (The risen Jesus restores Peter.)
- Acts 4:8-22 (Peter boldly defends his work for Christ.)

After reading these scriptures, discuss the following:

- What did Jesus say in Matthew 16:13-19 about Peter's purpose?
- How did Peter veer off course?
- How did God get Peter headed in the right direction?
- How did Peter grow and fulfill his purpose as a result?
- What can we learn from Peter's story and example?

## Guest Speakers

Arrange for two or three older adults in your congregation to come and talk with the youth. The only criterion for the adults you choose is that they be people who are confident about God's work in their lives. They will talk about what God has called them to do and the journey they took to answer that call. You may consider having them discuss the following:

- When they were young, what did they imagine they would be doing later in life? To what extent did these plans change, and how did they change?
- What do you feel God has called you to do? How did you hear this call?
- How are you living out God's call through your current vocation or avocation?
- What circumstances brought you to the work that you do today? How was God at work through these circumstances?
- When have you felt as though you got off track or strayed from God's purpose for your life? Who or what helped you get back on course?

The adult speakers don't need to stick to this script as long as they talk about their calling and how God has worked in their lives. Allow the youth to ask questions of the speakers; encourage them to stay on topic.

After the speakers have left, ask each youth to name one thing that the speakers mentioned that he or she will remember or will apply to life.

## CLOSING

Raise these questions:

- What one thing we talked about or learned stood out to you?
- What one thing will you do or think about in the coming week as a result of our learning and discussion?

Review these key takeaways from this session:

- Though God has a purpose and direction for us, we cannot always know the route we will take.
- Fear of getting lost or going off track can keep us from answering God's call and fulfilling our purposes.
- Even if we head in the wrong direction or fail to do what God has called us to do, God provides alternate routes to get us back on track.
- We can find strength and wisdom in the witness and stories of other Christians, past and present, who have taken detours along their faith journey.

### Closing Prayer

**God of grace and growth, thank you for the story and example of Paul and for the time we've had together today to study your word and teachings. Open our eyes in the coming week to the ways that you are working in our lives and in the world around us. May we be aware of the work you are calling us to do. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

## SESSION FIVE

# Relying on God

### ABOUT THIS SESSION

Successful people in most walks of life credit their success to people who believed in them. When someone believes in us, it gives us confidence and validation.

Christians (and others who follow the God of Abraham) believe, on one hand, that God is the almighty Creator of everything and, on the other hand, that this God relies on ordinary people to do the important work of God's reign on earth. God often chooses to work through us.

This truth—that God entrusts us with jobs that will transform the entire world—may leave us feeling honored and humbled. It may inspire confidence, encouraging us to be our best at all times. But it also can be intimidating. The idea that God relies on us to carry out world-changing work may leave us feeling inadequate. We might doubt our abilities or whether we are on the correct path. When we face challenges, we may feel as though we've let God down; we may question whether God actually called us in the first place.

When self-doubt overwhelms us, we get stuck. God's gifts don't seem good enough; we aren't sure what to do next. Throughout scripture we encounter leaders and prophets who find themselves trapped by self-doubt. God didn't give up on these people, and God doesn't give up on us. We move through the barrier of self-doubt by surrendering to God's will and trusting the Holy Spirit to lead us forward.

## YOUTH AND THIS SESSION

Young people frequently struggle with self-doubt. Their work is graded, judged, and scored; they are constantly compared with their peers. Some may conclude that they don't stack up and stop putting in the effort required to continue growing. Others may become overconfident, taking pride in grades and accomplishments and losing sight of what still needs improvement.

Youth require adults who will acknowledge their own gifts and inspire them to grow in faith. They need to know that their value does not come from their standing among their friends and classmates; their value comes from God. God has equipped them and has a purpose for them, no matter how their talents and accomplishments stack up to those of others.

Encourage the youth you work with to trust and rely on God fully. Affirm their gifts, especially when they struggle with self-doubt or feel inadequate. And challenge them to grow in their relationship with God so they will have faith that can overcome doubt and insecurity.

## GETTING READY FOR THIS SESSION

Beforehand, gather the following supplies:

- Bible
- A dry-erase board or large sheets of paper
- Markers
- A deck of cards (optional)

As you prepare for this session, read and reflect on the following scriptures:

- Genesis 12:10-20
- Exodus 3:1-12; 4:10-17
- Judges 6:11-24
- Jeremiah 1:4-10
- Acts 17:16–18:1
- 1 Corinthians 2:1-5
- Galatians 5:25-26; 6:4

## GATHERING

As youth gather, talk with them about their week. Ask them to name some of their highs and lows—their joys and concerns—and list these on a dry-erase board or a large sheet of paper.

When most youth are present, ask them to reflect on how God has been present in their lives in the past week. In particular, discuss whether they encountered any obstacles or interruptions. How did God guide them through (or around) these situations? Also discuss their faithfulness to the personal mission statements they wrote as part of the first session. What obstacles or change in plans got in the way of their faithfulness?

Then challenge each person to come up with a street name related to their experience of God in the past week and to add a street with that name to the group's road map. For instance, a youth who benefited from the wisdom or presence of a close friend might add "Best Friend Bypass" to the map. A youth who had a sudden change of plans because of circumstances beyond his or her control could draw in "Divine Detour." Allow each person to talk about the street name he or she chose and why he or she chose it. Label the sixth main road the title of this session "Relying on God."

Open the session in prayer, lifting up the highs and lows the youth named, giving thanks for their experiences of God in the past week, and asking God to open their eyes and ears to what God has in store for them during this lesson.

## SESSION ACTIVITIES

*More activities are included than you will have time for. Select the activities that fit your setting, allotted time, and appropriateness for your group. When moving from one activity to another, pick up and relay information that will smooth the transition from one activity to the next.*

### **I Think You've Got the Wrong Person**

*Supplies:* Bibles

Form teams of three or four; assign each group one scripture below. It is fine for several teams to have the same scripture. Each team will read its scripture and answer the following questions:

Scriptures:

- Exodus 3:1-12; 4:10-17 (Moses)
- Judges 6:11-24 (Gideon)
- Jeremiah 1:4-10 (Jeremiah)

Ask the teams to answer the following questions:

- Whom is God calling in this scripture?
- How does the person respond?
- How does God react to the person's self-doubt?

Invite each team to summarize its scripture and answers to the questions. (If two teams work with the same scripture, have one team summarize the scripture and the other answer the questions.) Say the following:

**Moses, Gideon, and Jeremiah all led God's people during hard and challenging times. All three had been called and equipped by God; yet each had doubts about his abilities and where God was leading him. In this session, we're going to look at how we can work through self-doubt and live into the purposes that God has for our lives.**

## Stuck

*Supplies:* Bibles

Discuss these questions:

- When have you felt as though you were stuck and didn't know what to do next?
- What did you do in this situation? What got you unstuck?

Remind the learners of this fact:

**Even though the apostle Paul is famous for being constantly on the move, he also had times when he got stuck.**

Read aloud Acts 17:16–18:1. You may choose to break up this long scripture passage, having each of several volunteers read a paragraph. As needed, debrief after each paragraph with some of these questions:

- What is Paul's physical location in this scripture?
- How do the people there respond to Paul's teaching?
- How does he try to introduce them to Jesus?
- In what ways is he successful? In what ways does he fail?
- Where does Paul go next? (See 18:1.)

Discuss the tools that Paul used to make his case to the people of Athens. He knew by the number of altars and shrines in the city that the Athenians were open to a wide variety of religious ideas and perspectives and noticed an altar dedicated to an "unknown god." Paul suggested that this unknown deity was the God of Christ. In making his case, Paul quoted Greek poets his listeners would have known.

Also notice that the part of Paul's talk ridiculed by the Athenians was the part about the resurrection of the dead. Many of the Athenians were open to learning about a God who created and ruled over all things and who was intimately close to the people. They drew the line at believing God would raise people from the dead.

Say the following:

**After his struggles in Athens, Paul went to the Greek city of Corinth. Paul wrote multiple letters to the Christians in Corinth. In one of these letters Paul may address the frustration he faced in Athens.**

Read aloud 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. Discuss the following:

- How does Paul describe his mood and attitude when he first came to Corinth?
- What enabled Paul to overcome his weakness and fear?

Say the following:

**Though God calls each of us and equips us with gifts, we may find ourselves in situations where our personal talents and abilities fall short. Paul found himself in such a situation**

**in Athens. But God doesn't abandon us. When our abilities are not enough, we—like Paul—can rely on God's power through the Holy Spirit.**

## Taking Matters into Our Own Hands

*Supplies:* Bibles, a deck of cards

Read aloud Genesis 12:10-20. (*Note:* A similar story in Genesis 20:1-18 involves the same couple and the same plan.) Discuss the following:

- What plan do Abram and Sarai make before they arrive in Egypt?
- Why do they make this plan?
- How and why does their plan go wrong?

Ask the youth to think of a time when they tried to take matters into their own hands: a situation where they rushed in or took over instead of waiting or allowing other people to do their part. Examples may involve a group project at school, a team sports competition, or work done with a Scouting group or the church's youth ministry. Ask the following:

- In the situations you've described, what caused you to grow impatient and to take things into your own hands?
- Why were you reluctant to ask for help or to allow others to contribute?
- What were the negative effects of your taking control or doing too much?
- How would the results have changed if you'd trusted other people to do their part?

Select a volunteer. Hand this person a well-shuffled standard deck of cards. Challenge the volunteer to sort the deck of cards in thirty seconds. For this activity, "sorting" involves separating the cards into four stacks by suit—hearts, diamonds, clubs, and spades—so that the Ace is on top, the King is on the bottom, and the cards in between go in order from 2 to Queen.

When the thirty seconds is up, see how far your volunteer got. (It is unlikely that he or she could have completed the task in thirty seconds.) Then select a second volunteer to assist the first. Split the deck in half between the two volunteers and see if together they can complete the task in thirty seconds (or at least come closer than the first person did alone).

Add a third volunteer to the mix. This person's job is to order the cards in each suit as the other two volunteers set them down. See how fast the three-person team can sort the deck. Then ask the youth to think of ways to bring more volunteers into the mix so they can complete the task even more quickly. See how much they can improve their time. Discuss the following:

- What does this activity teach us about taking matters into our own hands?
- In what ways does God assist us when we face a task that we cannot do on our own? (*Note that God often works through other people, but God also may intervene in other ways.*)

## Know Your Type

Ask the following:

When have you heard someone described as a “Type A” personality? What does it mean to be “Type A”?

Say the following:

**You may have heard someone described as Type A or Type B. These are only two of four personality types.**

Discuss the four types:

- *Type A:* People who are Type A like to take charge and be in control of their environment. They are self-motivated and goal-oriented. People of this type may get stuck because they are inclined to take matters into their own hands instead of making time for prayer and relying on God.
- *Type B:* Those who are Type B are primarily concerned with relationships and connecting with people. They aren’t motivated by taking control or meeting deadlines. Type B persons might get stuck if they find themselves in situations where they are on their own and cannot rely upon others.
- *Type C:* Like Type A people, those who are Type C appreciate having control. But Type C people are introverts. They prefer to work with facts and figures and to focus on details rather than to work with people. People of this type get stuck when they come across problems with no logical solutions.
- *Type D:* Type D people like to stick with what they know. They become easily stressed and overwhelmed by instability and change. Persons who are Type D get stuck in situations that involve taking risks.

Remind the learners of the following:

**All four personality types have strengths and weaknesses.**

Ask the following questions:

- Based on these descriptions, which personality type best fits you?
- What strengths or advantages does your personality type give you?
- What challenges do you face as a result of your personality type?

Form four teams. Assign each group one of the four personality types—A, B, C, and D. Ask each team to come up with a situation in which a person of that type might feel stuck and unsure of what to do. Allow the teams three or four minutes to develop a situation. Then invite each team to present its situation. For each situation, discuss the following:

- What makes this situation so hard for a person of this personality type?
- How could a person of this personality type experience personal growth from being in such a situation?

Say the following:

**God equips each of us with unique gifts, and God calls each of us to tasks that make God's reign on earth a reality. Sometimes these tasks require us to do things that make us uncomfortable or that force us to try new things. In these situations we cannot use our personality types as an excuse. Instead, we must trust God to guide us and nudge us forward so we don't get stuck.**

## That Was Pretty Good, but . . .

*Supplies:* Bibles

Form groups of three or four. Ask each group to come up with a skit in which a person of great accomplishment can't feel good about himself or herself because of knowing that someone else has done greater things. For example, the skit could involve an interviewer talking to a basketball player who hit the winning shot in a championship game but who couldn't enjoy the accomplishment because she knew that LeBron James had won three high school state titles and had been on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* when he was her age. Another example might involve a high school valedictorian who can't help but compare himself to a child prodigy who graduated from college at the age of seventeen. Allow each team to present its skit. Then discuss the following:

What danger do we face in comparing ourselves with others or judging our accomplishments based on those of others?

Read aloud Galatians 5:25-26 and 6:4. Say the following:

**In these verses Paul warns the Christians in Galatia not to compare themselves with others so they don't fall prey to arrogance or jealousy. Paul tells them to focus instead on the Spirit and on the work that God has set before them.**

Ask the following:

- When has arrogance—the belief that you are good enough because you are better or more successful than other people—kept you from doing your best work? (For example, a student who has always gotten good grades and always gets selected for advanced classes may do just enough to maintain good grades and not do what it takes to grow academically.)
- When has jealousy or a belief that no matter what you do, you'll never be as good as someone else, kept you from doing your best work? (For example, an athlete who gets beaten badly by a superior opponent may get frustrated, assume that he or she will never get to that level, and stop putting his or her best effort into the sport.)

Say the following:

**As followers of Christ, our first concern is not how we stack up against other people. Rather, we focus on God's will for us and the Holy Spirit's leading.**

## CLOSING

Raise these questions:

- What one thing we talked about or learned stood out to you?
- What one thing will you do or think about in the coming week as a result of our learning and discussion?

Review these key takeaways from this session:

- God has called us and equipped us to do God's work. Like other great people of faith before us, we will face situations in which we doubt our purposes and abilities. When doubt arises we will put our trust in God.
- Paul didn't have the level of success in Athens he'd grown accustomed to. The gifts and abilities that he'd used so successfully in the past didn't have the same impact. But God didn't abandon Paul, and Paul moved forward and continued his ministry to the Greeks.
- We all have different personality types. These personality types can be strengths, but they can also pose unique challenges that require us to trust and rely on God.
- Instead of comparing ourselves with others, we focus on God's will and the Holy Spirit's guidance.

### Closing Prayer

**God of grace and growth, thank you for calling and equipping us. When we struggle with doubt, remind us of the ways you have blessed us and of the work you have set before us. When we get stuck, guide us so we can find our way forward and continue growing in faith. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.**

## SESSION SIX

# Developing Tenacity

### ABOUT THIS SESSION

Human beings are a tenacious species. Whether individually or as communities and nations, we can overcome and outlast injury and disease, wars and natural disasters, as well as rapid changes in culture and technology. Despite this tenacity and our ability to respond and adapt to challenges and developments, however, we often find ourselves in situations where we'd rather give up.

We see this in scripture. Psalm 13, attributed to King David, opens by asking, "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me, forever?" (v. 1). He later cries out, "Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!" (v. 3). When Paul informed some of the other apostles and believers that he must go to Jerusalem where he would face certain arrest or death, they tried to talk him out of it. They knew the Holy Spirit had given Paul these instructions, but they encouraged him to give up and avoid certain doom. Paul insisted on doing what he'd been called to do.

Paul sets an example of ongoing tenacity even when common sense and the advice of peers tell him to give up. Scripture offers other examples—such as Hannah maintaining her belief that she'd give birth to a child (1 Samuel 1:1-18); and from history—such as South African president Nelson Mandela, who spent twenty-six years in prison before becoming the leader of the country that had oppressed him and millions of other nonwhite people for decades. In all these examples, the people drew the strength and tenacity to carry on from their faith. They had faith not only in God but in what was possible through God and what God had in store for their future.

## YOUTH AND THIS SESSION

Youth haven't lived long enough to relate to the decades-long struggles experienced by some adults, let alone the long-term trials faced by a historical figure such as Nelson Mandela. Nonetheless, many youth have known the feeling of being so overwhelmed or exhausted that they wanted to give up. Sometimes this desire to give up causes them to stop caring about their schoolwork or to quit activities that they'd previously cared about. Sometimes it causes youth to let go of what they have prepared or have been called to do in favor of something easier.

This feeling of wanting to give up can also lead to thoughts of suicide. According to the Centers for Disease Control, suicide is the third-leading cause of death among young people ages ten to twenty-four; about 16 percent of American high school students report having considered taking their own lives. Many young people who attempt suicide do not want to die; rather, they want to escape a situation that feels impossible or they want relief from bad feelings that won't go away.

Youth who are tempted to give up—whether by letting go of their studies, dropping out of an activity they'd cared about, giving up on a goal, or taking a more drastic action—need people who have demonstrated tenacity amid seemingly impossible situations as role models. They need to read stories from scripture in which people of faith persevere through periods of struggle and waiting; they need to hear stories of people from history who have demonstrated strength and courage; and they need to know people in their families, churches, and communities who have refused to give up.

Those of us who work with young people also need to take seriously young people's feelings of despair, exhaustion, and fear when they feel tempted to give up. Even as we lift up examples of people who persevered through extraordinary circumstances, we don't want to convey the impression that the youth are failures if they have given up. Instead, we want to build up their faith and surround them with examples of perseverance and tenacity so they can push through when they encounter despair, exhaustion, and seemingly impossible situations in the future.

## GETTING READY FOR THIS SESSION

Beforehand, gather the following supplies:

- Bible
- A dry-erase board or large sheets of paper
- Markers
- At least one quarter or one same-sized coin for each person

As you prepare for this session, read and reflect on the following scriptures:

- Psalm 13
- Acts 21:7-14
- Hebrews 11:4-20; 12:1-3

## GATHERING

As youth gather, talk with them about the preceding week. Ask them to name some of their highs and lows—their joys and concerns—and list these on a dry-erase board or a large sheet of paper.

Ask group members to reflect on God’s presence in their lives in the past week. In particular, discuss how the youth dealt with self-doubt. How did God assure them when they doubted their capabilities and identities as followers of Christ? Also discuss their faithfulness to the personal mission statements they wrote as a part of the first session.

Then challenge participants to come up with a street name related to their experience of God in the past week and to add a street to the road map with that name. These roads connect to the main street labeled “Relying on God.” For instance, a youth who felt assurance from God might add “Assurance Avenue”; someone who felt that God gave him or her a burst of confidence might draw in “Confidence Court.” Allow each person to talk about the street name he or she chose and why he or she chose it. Label your seventh and final street with the name of this session, “Developing Tenacity.”

## SESSION ACTIVITIES

*More activities are included than time allows for. Select the activities that fit your setting, allotted time, and group interest. When moving from one activity to another, pick up and relay information that will smooth the transition from one activity to the next.*

### Opening Prayer

Open your session in prayer, lifting up the highs and lows the youth named, giving thanks for their experiences of God in the past week, and asking God to open their eyes and ears to what God has in store for them during this lesson.

### I Give Up

*Supplies:* One quarter (or other coin) for each person

Give each person a quarter or other coin (such as dollar coins or game tokens). Establish which side of the coins are heads and which are tails. Announce that you’ll award a prize to the first person who can flip tails seven consecutive times. (Have a small prize ready in case someone successfully flips seven consecutive tails. While doing so is possible, the likelihood of any one person doing so is only 1 in 128.)

Watch the youth flip the coins and see how long it takes before they start getting frustrated or giving up. It is likely that no one will succeed, but some youth will have streaks of flipping three, four, or five tails before flipping heads. After about five minutes, discuss the following:

- How long would you have been willing to flip the coin?
- If you gave up, why did you give up?

Then move into a broader discussion of giving up:

- When have you given up on something? Why did you decide to give up? Looking back, do you think that you made a wise decision?
- Our culture tends to look favorably on people who never give up. In what situations is giving up the best thing to do?
- When have you overcome the temptation to give up? Where did you find the strength and courage to persevere in these situations?

Ask the youth if they are familiar with the word *tenacious*. If they are, invite them to offer definitions.

Say the following:

**Tenacity means being determined and persisting toward a goal or task no matter what happens. A tenacious person remains focused and is not easily distracted or discouraged.**

## Don't Go There

*Supplies:* Bibles

Say the following:

**As we've seen in previous sessions, following God's direction and living into God's purpose for us isn't always easy. We'll encounter challenges and struggles; we'll be forced out of our comfort zones; our gifts and abilities will be pushed to their limits. Many of us will face situations where we want to give up. In some cases, giving up seems like the only or best choice.**

Ask the following:

Have you ever felt as though you *had* to do something that you really didn't want to do?

Brainstorm some examples of fictional stories in which a character must go on a difficult journey or complete an especially hard task. Once you have several examples, select one that most of the youth are familiar with (perhaps Harry Potter having to track down and destroy Voldemort's horcruxes, Katniss volunteering as tribute for the Hunger Games, or even SpongeBob going to Shell City to find Neptune's crown).

Select one volunteer to play the role of the character who has to complete the task or go on the journey. The other youth will try to convince the volunteer not to go through with the task or journey. The volunteer responds to each concern with a reason to complete the task or go on the journey. Continue this activity for a few minutes. If time permits, you might select a different character and a different volunteer and repeat the activity. Then ask youth to read aloud Acts 21:7-14. Explain the context. Say the following:

**After years of traveling throughout the Roman Empire, Paul and his companions arrived in Caesarea and Galilee. From there, Paul planned to go south to Jerusalem in Judea. Jerusalem was where the church got its start, but it was also home to some religious leaders**

**who were eager to have Paul arrested.** (Note: “The Jews” in verse 11 doesn’t refer to all Jewish people—only to particular Jewish leaders.)

Discuss the following:

- What happened to Paul while he and his companions were in Caesarea? (A prophet named Agabus from Judea warned Paul that religious leaders would have him arrested.)
- How did Paul’s companions respond to this news?
- How did Paul respond to their concerns?
- What do these verses tell us about Paul? What can we learn from his example?

Say the following:

**Scripture doesn’t tell us how Paul died, but tradition holds that he was killed because of his faith. Probably his trip to Jerusalem mentioned in these verses set off a chain of events that led to Paul’s execution. Paul was aware that he would be risking his life, but he felt confident of the Holy Spirit’s leading and had the tenacity to keep going.**

## Case Study: Nelson Mandela

Ask the youth what they know about former South African president and civil rights leader, Nelson Mandela. As needed, use the following information to fill in gaps in their knowledge.

Nelson Mandela was born into a noble family as part of the Thembu nation, one of several people groups in the Republic of South Africa. Mandela was well educated and began working as a lawyer in the 1940s. In 1948 the dominant party in the South African government established apartheid, a system of racial segregation in which the white ruling minority placed restrictions on the black majority and other ethnic groups.

Black South Africans under apartheid had no political power and faced limitations when it came to work and housing. Many were removed from their homes and placed in segregated areas. As the leader of a group called the African National Congress, Mandela protested the ruling party’s policies and eventually received a lifetime prison sentence for trying to overthrow the government. Mandela spent twenty-six years in prison, including eighteen years on Robben Island, an isolated facility for political prisoners.

By the late 1980s international opposition to apartheid policies had hurt South Africa economically. And clashes between the South African government and anti-apartheid protesters had turned violent. Facing pressure from inside and outside the country, the ruling party decided to dismantle apartheid and to release Nelson Mandela from prison. Adjusting to life out of jail was hard. Mandela’s relationship with his wife, Winnie, had become strained by his years in prison, and there were disputes within the leadership of the African National Congress. Despite this, Mandela committed himself to the effort of building a new South Africa. He never allowed his anger and resentment to keep him from doing what was necessary to heal his country.

In 1994 South Africa held free elections for the first time in its history. Mandela was elected president. As the elected leader of the entire nation, he had to work alongside those who had just a few years earlier supported and enforced segregation and discrimination. As the symbolic leader of South Africans who'd been oppressed for decades, he had to honor their pain and struggle while showing them a way forward built on reconciliation rather than revenge against their oppressors.

Faith enabled Mandela to keep going when he was in prison and through the challenges of leading a deeply wounded nation. He had faith in a future where people of all backgrounds and ethnicities could live together peacefully and where all people would be free and have opportunities to grow and flourish. His belief that this future was possible gave him the will to persevere in all circumstances.

Discuss the following:

- Who else do you know who has shown this kind of faith and tenacity, who kept going even in harsh circumstances?
- Nelson Mandela's strength and tenacity came from his faith that a future built on freedom and equality was possible. What values and beliefs keep you going and give you strength? (Examples might include a belief that all people are valuable and worthy of love.)

## How Long?

*Supplies:* Bibles, supplies for posters

Read aloud Psalm 13:1-6. Discuss the following:

- How would you describe the psalmist's mood in this scripture?
- Why does the psalmist seem so distraught in these verses?
- How does his mood change in the last two verses?
- When have you felt the way the psalmist seems to feel? How did you eventually find help or relief?
- What hope does the psalmist give us in verses 5 and 6?

Form teams of three or four, and instruct each team to create a poster featuring verses from Psalm 13. The poster is to convey both the despair of the psalmist *and* the hope he expresses in the final verses. Include illustrations depicting both sides of the psalmist's emotions. (These can be any pictures or symbols that show despair as well as faith in God.) The youth can continue working on these posters while you progress to other activities and discussions. Display the completed posters in your meeting space or elsewhere in the church building.

## Spiritual DNA

*Supplies:* Bibles, a large sheet of paper, markers

Give the youth two minutes to read through Hebrews 11:4-40 and to write down any names they come across. After two minutes, see who found the most names. Then go around the room and have the youth,

one at a time, name one of the people on his or her list. For each person named, talk about what Hebrews 11:4-40 has to say about this person and his or her faith. Go through as many names as time permits.

Say the following:

**In this chapter, the author of the book of Hebrews names many people from throughout the history of God’s people who demonstrated what it means to live by faith.**

Ask a youth to read aloud the opening verses of the next chapter, Hebrews 12:1-3. Discuss the following:

In addition to the people named in Hebrews 11, who are other “witnesses” we can look to for courage and inspiration?

Say the following:

**In addition to living on earth as Jesus Christ—our premier example of how to live—and being present with us always in the person of the Holy Spirit, God has been present in the lives of countless people of faith, past and present. Much as our biological ancestors are responsible for our physical DNA, our spiritual ancestors give us spiritual DNA.**

Youth who have learned about DNA in biology classes will know that it resembles a ladder that twists. The rungs of the ladder are combinations of adenine, thymine, guanine, and cytosine. They can think of the rungs on their spiritual DNA ladder as being made up of people who have inspired them by their influence and example.

Draw or have one of the youth draw a rough outline of a double helix. (Pictures are easy to come by on the Internet.) Then have the youth fill in the “rungs” on the double helix with the names of the people who have provided their spiritual DNA. This may include people who have directly affected their lives, such as parents, grandparents, mentors, teachers, pastors and youth ministers, Scout leaders, and so on. It may also include people from history or news or scripture (such as those from Hebrews 11). You may extend your double helix to make room for all the rungs.

Post the completed spiritual DNA in the meeting space as a reminder of all the “witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1) who surround your youth and to whom they can turn for inspiration when they feel tempted to give up. Say the following:

**We all will face situations where we feel frustrated and overwhelmed and are ready to give up. At these times we can look toward the many people who created our spiritual DNA and draw wisdom and strength from their stories and example.**

## Your “Spiritual Name”

Tell the youth this story about how the great Australian tennis player Rod Laver got his nickname, “the Rocket.”

Rod Laver was an Australian tennis player who won two hundred tournaments in the 1960s and 1970s and is regarded as one of the greatest players in history. Many tennis fans knew

Laver as “the Rocket.” He didn’t get this name because of his speed on the court or the power with which he hit the ball (though both were impressive). He actually picked up the nickname when he was fifteen and attending a clinic hosted by Harry Hopman, a great Australian player and coach. Hopman recognized Laver’s potential but also noticed that he was one of the slowest players on the court. He knew that Laver was from the city of Rockhampton. So Hopman dubbed Laver “the Rockhampton Rocket.” The nickname was meant to be ironic, but Laver worked with Hopman and improved his strength and speed considerably. Within a few years he was competing in the best tournaments in the world, and his speed and agility were among his greatest assets. The slow kid from Rockhampton grew into his nickname and became “the Rocket.”

Then say the following:

**Giving people nicknames based on their shortcomings doesn’t always work out. Oftentimes nicknames can be hurtful. But people may take on a name that represents what they aspire to become. Rod Laver worked to develop a tennis game worthy of his nickname. What nicknames do we strive to live up to?**

Challenge the youth to each come up with a nickname in the spirit of “the Rocket” that they would aspire to live up to. This name doesn’t have to reflect a shortcoming (though it could), as long as it identifies a quality that the youth would like to grow into. Examples could include “the Big Sacrifice” (if a youth aspires to give of himself or herself for others) or “Devoted Danny” (if a youth aims to set aside time each day to spend with God in prayer and studying scripture).

Give the youth a couple of minutes to come up with a nickname. Then go around the room and invite each person to say his or her nickname and explain why he or she chose it. Ask the following:

- How does your nickname relate to the mission statement that you wrote in the first session? In what ways has your mission statement changed over these weeks? Would you consider rewriting it to reflect your new understandings? (Encourage youth to do so and repost if so inclined.) Invite volunteers to share any changes in understanding they’ve come to in the course of this study.
- What can you do in the coming days and weeks to live into your nickname?
- How may adopting this nickname inspire you when you’re tempted to give up?

Say the following:

**Throughout this study, we’ve looked at our God-given purposes and the direction in which God is leading us. We’ve considered how we respond to adversity and changes in plans. And we’ve talked about being tenacious when circumstances seem impossible and overwhelming. At the heart of all these things is our identity as children of God and followers of Christ. When we remember who we are and to whom we belong, we can find the strength and tenacity within ourselves to fulfill our purposes and follow God’s direction no matter what happens along the way.**

## CLOSING

Raise these questions:

- What one thing we talked about or learned stood out to you?
- What one thing will you do or think about in the coming week as a result of our learning and discussion?

Review these key takeaways from this session:

- As we follow God's direction, we will encounter situations that seem impossible, overwhelming, or dangerous. At times, we will be tempted to give up.
- Following Christ and answering God's call requires us to be tenacious, to keep pushing forward despite the circumstances.
- When Paul was in Caesarea, the Holy Spirit called him to go to Jerusalem. He knew that he would face arrest or worse, and his companions urged him not to go. But Paul was tenacious and would not be deterred.
- Paul is a person of faith who exemplifies tenacity. People like Paul can inspire, encourage, and guide us when we're tempted to give up.
- We place our faith in our understanding of who God is and what is possible with God. Our identity as children of God and followers of Christ will give us the focus necessary to be tenacious.

### Closing Prayer

**God of faith and purpose, thank you for calling us to do your will and to do the difficult work of building your community on earth. Thank you for the strength and wisdom you give us and for the examples that surround us. Thank you for blessing us with the time we've had together over these past several weeks. Remind us as we go forward of what we've learned and how we've grown so that we can apply these lessons to the tasks and challenges we'll face in the future. Amen.**