

LIVING WHOLEHEARTEDLY AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE WORLD

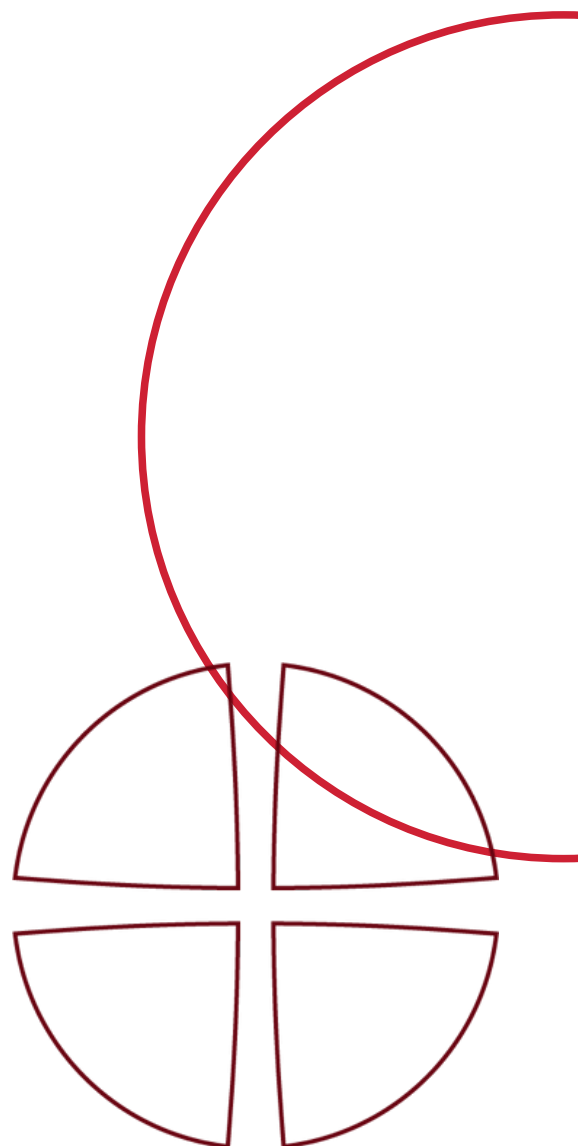
Small Group Studies

AUTUMN/WINTER RESOURCE PACK 2022-23

Small Group Studies

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Encounters 1

The Love of the Father



CONTRIBUTOR
Rev David Nixon
President of the Methodist Church in Ireland

 [Contributor Notes](#)



FOCUS

Read this as an introduction to the session.

In a world of brokenness, amidst pain, angst and despair, God's love endures and is always available. This lavish love of God is evident in the story of the Prodigal Son. The story illustrates the wholehearted love of the Father through encounters with the son who left and the son who stayed. These encounters invite us to wholeheartedly accept God's lavish love and to share it freely with others.



OPENING PRAYER

You may wish to invite someone else to read this prayer or have it displayed on screen to read together.

Loving God,
[as we gather together,]
it is our prayer that we will encounter you so that our hearts may be aligned with yours.
Still our hearts that we might be open to your Spirit,
Give us eyes to see the world as you do,
Tune our ears to hear your gentle whisper.
Amen.

Encounters 1

The Love of the Father



OPENING DISCUSSION

15 Minutes

Bible Passage

Luke 15:11-32

Ask others in the group to read the passages so different voices are heard, or if time allows you could invite people to read 2 different translations of the story.

Questions

Take some time to answer these questions as a large group or in 2/3s.

1. What stands out to you about the prodigal son's encounter with his father in these verses?
2. The youngest son returned feeling undeserving of his father's love and undeserving of a place with his father. Describe a time when you felt undeserving of God's wholehearted love?
3. The oldest son struggled to understand the response of the father to the prodigal son. Describe a circumstance when you have struggled to show wholehearted grace?

Encounters 1

The Love of the Father



INPUT

10 Minutes

Use these notes to help you give some short background to the passage. Read it word for word or use your own words.

You will also find further background information in the [Contributor's Notes](#).

God brought the Israelites out of their slavery in Egypt (Exodus 32:1-4, 34:4-7). God was obviously looking after them. Yet, they grew impatient, turned their backs on God and shaped a golden calf. God was angry but when Moses pleaded with him on their behalf, he relented.

"The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin...."

This was one of many examples where God's people rejected him, but he continued with his wholehearted love for them.

At the beginning of Luke 15, Luke explains:

"Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering round to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners, and eats with them."

Jesus told three parables; The Parable of the Lost Sheep, The Parable of the Lost Coin and The Parable of the Lost Son. Notice the wholehearted concern for the lost in all three parables. In the first two a lost sheep and a lost coin. If one can rejoice when a sheep or a coin is recovered, how much more rejoicing there will be when a person who is lost is recovered?!

In Luke 15: 11-32 there are three characters; The father, the younger son and the elder son. Imagine the pain of the father as his younger son walked out of their relationship. It was devastating to the entire family as this son walked away from his family responsibilities and they lost one third of their wealth. The father wholeheartedly loved his sons but he knew he could not forcefully maintain their relationship and so he allowed his younger son to make his own decision. The father grants freedom, even the freedom to reject his love.

Yet this initial unexpected reaction to his young son's request later enabled the relationship to be restored. His wholehearted lavish love was rejected by his son, but the

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actions of his son could destroy it. God the Father's deep and persistent longing for his son did not diminish. When the father saw his son he "...was filled with compassion for him; he RAN to his son..."

Culturally, this was totally undignified, a man of his age would never run, and to do so he would have had to lift his robes, revealing his legs which was humiliating. But he races towards his son, getting to him before the rest of the village had time to vent their anger, disapproval and disappointment on his son, taking that humiliation on himself. What an amazing picture of God the Father, not staying aloof in heaven, but coming towards us in Jesus.

The older son refuses to enter the banquet hall. Failure to fulfil this courtesy is a personal insult to the guests and to the father, as host. Normal justice would dictate that the older son would be punished immediately or ignored until the guests are gone and then dealt with harshly. But again, we see lavish loving mercy rather than harsh judgement from the father who clearly loves both his sons. He is prepared to dispense with traditional, expected customs where wrong actions deserve appropriate punishments. Love and mercy are at the very heart of his being and his actions and responses are shaped by that wholehearted love and mercy. So, he goes out to plead or entreat rather than punish or condemn. Here is love, vast as the ocean, loving kindness as a stream...

It seems there is no limit to the humiliation or lowering of himself with this Father. Those who posed the question which prompted the three parables were the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. They were/are the law abiding, obedient elder son who stayed at home but their love for their Father was absent. Now the challenge comes to them, your Father has come out and down to plead with you, to come to the party, to the family meal, to enter into the joy of welcoming 'your brother', to LOVE your father and brother, WHAT are you going to do?! In Jesus, God the Father came down, lowered himself, pleads with them - WHAT are they going to do? Will they enter the party? What were they wholeheartedly focussing on?

This elder son may have believed that he had to earn his father's love through his obedience. His younger brother clearly did not earn it, so it was clearly unfair that he did! Without any effort!! - this was CRAZY! Indeed, Jesus was using this very parable to open the Father's heart to the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Their question or muttering about Jesus welcoming sinners and even eating with them prompted the three parables. This boy is saying to the elder son: 'your father has received a sinner and is going to sit and eat with him', even worse - He has thrown a huge party and is providing the best meat on the farm for this sinner!

This is God's heart! In his book, 'Surrender to Love', David Benner has put it like this:

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"When God thinks of us, he feels a deep, persistent longing – not simply for our wholeness but, more basically, for our friendship." P27

Yet even the elder son who was working for his father on the farm, did not know his father's heart... - 'Open the eyes of my heart, Lord...'



FURTHER DISCUSSION

20 Minutes

Questions

This is the main discussion time. Take some time to answer these questions as a large group or in 2/3s.

1. As well as the example of God's wholehearted love for the Israelites, can you give further examples of God's wholehearted love for his people even when they rejected him?
2. Jesus came to us, humbled himself, became one of us. Is it any wonder so many struggled that this 'son of Joseph' 'from Nazareth' could be the Son of God? How could God the Father lower himself to this level?! How does God sending Jesus to live among us give us a picture of what wholehearted love looks like?
3. If you were to place yourself into the 2 son's positions in this story, how do you think each would shape your wholehearted living as you encounter the love of the Father?



STORY

Our contributor to this resource, Rev David Nixon, President of the Methodist Church in Ireland shares this story:

Now, let's take note of the reality here; the son was leaving his father, but he was also leaving his home, his family and his village. It's difficult to imagine the pain and the disappointment of this loss to everyone. At this point the younger son hadn't realised the value, the security and the love which was automatically his in his family and community. Was he wholeheartedly selfish?!

Encounters 1

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STORY CONTINUED...

Rhoda and I gained a new realisation of what it means to have a church community as family and home when Rhoda was diagnosed with her cancer in September 2018. One of my family asked me if they could do anything for us at the time, and I was able to reply saying that our new church family were doing absolutely everything possible to love and support us at that time. We had just moved to DunLaoghaire in July, we were strangers, but we were 'home', we were with 'family', 'family' who have the same Heavenly Father.

4. What can you do to create a sense of 'family' or caring community which people will miss when they are absent from it? And the challenge which comes to us as we look at this parable is this; Are we as a church family and home as wholehearted in welcoming our brothers and sisters as our father in heaven is to us? 'Am I helping my congregation to be like the Father?'

Encounters 1

The Love of the Father



RESPONSE

5-10 Minutes

Include a time of response to give those in the room the opportunity to reflect on what God might be saying to them and consider what actions to take in response.

Read the following (as appropriate) and allow silence for personal response:

Do you ever move away from God by neglecting to talk to him in prayer, by neglecting to listen to his word in the Bible, by simply keeping him at a distance? In your imagination, can you see him smiling lovingly at you, longing for you to talk to him?

Consider the older son: “All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders...” Are you wholeheartedly serving God out of love and appreciation or are you serving from a sense of duty or fear of judgment?

Do you feel undervalued, unappreciated? Are there people around you who may feel undervalued or unappreciated? Who comes to mind? Commit to send them a message of encouragement.

David Benner writes: “What a different relationship begins to develop when you realize that God is head-over-heels in love with you. God is simply giddy about you. He just can’t help loving you. And he loves you deeply, recklessly and extravagantly—just as you are. God knows you are a sinner, but your sins do not surprise him. Nor do they reduce in the slightest his love for you” (Surrender to Love, David Benner, pg. 22.) Does this sense of God’s personal love for you help you to live wholeheartedly as a follower of Jesus? What would it look like for you to respond wholeheartedly to God’s love for you today?



You may wish to play this song during the response time:

I Am Your Beloved – Jonathan David Helsler, Melissa Helsler

<https://youtu.be/lcSqRkpeQyM>

OR Ask the following question and allow a time of silent reflection:

How would it shape who you are and how you serve and love others, if you were to put yourself into the place of the Father? The welcoming, forgiving, celebrating the return of the lost, loving father?

How could you, in the week ahead, be more intentional about being welcoming and forgiving? What will you commit to?

Encounters 1

The Love of the Father



CLOSING PRAYER

If appropriate give people an opportunity to kneel here to offer themselves wholeheartedly to God and to others - in response to God's lavish love.

Pray a prayer of blessing over the group or invite your prayer ministry team to pray for those present.

Encounters 2

Timothy



CONTRIBUTOR

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Probationer Minister, Omagh & Fintona



[Contributor Notes](#)



FOCUS

Read this as an introduction to the session.

Not all wholehearted encounters with God involve one identifiable life changing moment. Timothy was a young and likely timid man, who encountered Jesus and developed a sincere and steady faith through the continued support and encouragement of his family, friends and the church. He encountered the Holy Spirit through the church and was set apart for ministry in Ephesus. It wasn't always easy, but Paul wrote to him and reminded him that, through the Spirit, he was gifted for this task.



OPENING PRAYER

You may wish to invite someone else to read this prayer or have it displayed on screen to read together.

Loving God,
[as we gather together,]
it is our prayer that we will encounter you so that our hearts may be aligned with yours.
Still our hearts that we might be open to your Spirit,
Give us eyes to see the world as you do,
Tune our ears to hear your gentle whisper.
Amen.

Encounters 2

Timothy



OPENING DISCUSSION

15 Minutes

Bible Passages

1 Timothy 4:12-16; 2 Timothy 1:3-14; 3:14-17; 4:1-5

Ask others in the group to read the passages so different voices are heard, or if time allows you could invite people to read 2 different translations of the story.

Questions

Take some time to answer these questions as a large group or in 2/3s.

1. What stands out to you about Timothy's encounter in these verses? How was Timothy encouraged and supported to follow wholeheartedly?
2. It is obvious that Paul wanted Timothy to live as a wholehearted follower of Jesus, living out his call and using the gift God had given him. Why was it important for Timothy to do this?
3. How did Timothy's response to his encounter with God shape how he lived and what impact did that have on those around him?

Encounters 2

Timothy



INPUT

10 Minutes

Use these notes to help you give some short background to the passage. Read it word for word or use your own words.

You will also find further background information in the [Contributor's Notes](#).

Timothy was a disciple, he had a sincere faith, and he was well thought of by other believers. We see that Timothy travelled with Paul, worked with him, wrote with him, and was sent by him. It was while he was living in Ephesus, where Paul had sent him as a delegate, that he received letters to encourage him in his ministry.

Paul loved Timothy and what we see in these letters is a personal correspondence and a loving encouragement for Timothy in his ministry.

So, what do Paul's letters reveal to us about Timothy? He was young, timid, and had issues with his stomach. But, while these may be seen as negative or limiting characteristics, we see a believer who was sincere in faith, who was called and gifted by the Holy Spirit, and who was living and working where God had placed him. Paul shows us that Timothy's life of faith was rooted in his encounter with God.

Timothy encountered God in different ways: through his family, his friends and his church.

Timothy had a mixed family background – his father was Greek, and his mother was Jewish. From infancy he was taught from the Jewish Scripture, and we can presume that this teaching came from his mother, Eunice, and his grandmother, Lois. Paul reflected nostalgically and fondly on the faith he witnessed in this family and is keen to remind Timothy to remember these roots and how this learning impacted his life.

An encounter with Christ followed this foundation of learning, when this family was converted to Christianity. Timothy and his family encountered Christ through the sharing of the gospel and so decided to follow him. When Paul met Timothy, he was referred to as a disciple. Timothy's faith had developed from those infancy teachings, and as his friendship with Paul developed, he then learnt from his example and continued on his discipleship journey.

Timothy encountered the Holy Spirit through the church. Timothy was set apart for ministry and Paul reminds him that through the Spirit he was gifted for this task. The

Encounters 2

Timothy



Spirit was working in Timothy's life through other believers – those who spoke out a word of prophecy, and those elders who laid hands on him, confirming his call and gift, and authorizing him to exercise it.

An encounter doesn't have to have the emotional stirrings like that of the Father's outstretched arms welcoming the prodigal son home; nor does it have the brutal honesty and accepting grace of Jesus' words to the woman at the well... These encounters with God, through family, friends and church, seem somewhat dull in comparison. There's no grand conversation to hear, or spectacular action to witness; instead, we see a mum teaching her child, day-to-day life with a friend, and the prayers and support of a church. Yet through all of these, an encounter with God happened, and we see the life of Timothy changed and the community around him impacted.

Timothy was in Ephesus, a trading hub, a mixed population, so a range of religions and philosophies. Many people went to the huge temple at the centre of the city to worship the goddess of women, fertility, childbirth and hunting. There was opposition to the new Christian church, and Paul identified that there were many issues with false teachers, with heresy and with believers being led astray. Into this context Paul commissioned Timothy to be a leader in the church.

Ephesus was not an easy place to be. Paul wanted Timothy to stick with it, not to run away, but remain and carry out his calling. Paul recognised the difficulties Timothy had with this. He encouraged him to be wholehearted in his calling, to remember how he encountered Christ and to use that to spur him on in his ministry.

Timothy perhaps, and understandably, felt inexperienced for the mission Paul had given him. From time to time, he needed affirmation and reassurance. Timothy's characteristics, and the context of Ephesus, may have made it hard to be wholehearted in serving God.

But Paul reminded Timothy that the grace of God was sufficient for his need. He had encountered God and had been given a gift... and so Paul urged him to use it! For someone who had a sincere faith – a faith that was strong, unhypocritical, authentic – his unwavering belief in Christ, and the equipping of his Spirit could help him to fan into flames the gift he had been given. Although Timothy was young and timid, and was working in a difficult context, he could live wholeheartedly as a follower of Jesus for the transformation of the world.

Encounters 2

Timothy



FURTHER DISCUSSION

20 Minutes

Questions

1. Can you identify times when, through family, friends or the church, you have encountered God in a way that has changed your heart?
2. Timothy was young and perhaps timid. His personality, combined with the context that he found himself in made it challenging for him to serve God. Do you have any characteristics or personality traits that you feel could make it difficult for you to serve God wholeheartedly?
3. What is challenging about serving God in your context? Can you see any similarities with the context of Ephesus where Timothy was living?
4. Paul recognises Timothy's difficulties and gives him instructions to help. Look at the following passages and reflect on what could help you live wholeheartedly and keep growing as a disciple: 1 Tim 4:14; 1 Tim 6:11-16; 1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:8-10; 2 Tim 1:13-14; 2 Tim 3:10-17.



RESPONSE

5-10 Minutes

Include a time of response to give those in the room the opportunity to reflect on what God might be saying to them and consider what actions to take in response.

Read the words of the verses:

1 Tim 4:14; 1 Tim 6:11-16; 1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:8-10; 2 Tim 1:13-14; 2 Tim 3:10-17 over the group prayerfully.

Have post-it notes available and ask each individual to write down one practice to commit to for the week ahead that will help them to live wholeheartedly as followers of Jesus.

Encounters 2

Timothy



CLOSING PRAYER

Read the words from 2 Timothy 1: 6-7

For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.

Pray for God's power to fill those present that in the week ahead they would live "wholeheartedly as followers of Jesus for the transformation of the world."
Pray that fear would not hold them back.

OR

If time allows – split into groups of 2/3. Share some of your characteristics and challenges and lay hands on each other inviting the Spirit's power to bring courage in the week ahead.

Encounters 3

Caleb



CONTRIBUTOR

Jonny Best
Lay Person



[Contributor Notes](#)



FOCUS

Read this as an introduction to the session.

There is not much written down about Caleb's encounters with God, but his actions and attitudes leave us with an impression of a man whose heart had been consistently aligned with God. His life was marked as someone who had received and believed in a God-given vision of what had been promised, and he lived his life in belief and pursuit of that vision. Caleb's instinct was to believe that all things were possible. His heart was bold and alert with a wholehearted vision and he made choices for Kingdom possibilities.



OPENING PRAYER

You may wish to invite someone else to read this prayer or have it displayed on screen to read together.

Loving God,
[as we gather together,]
it is our prayer that we will encounter you so that our hearts may be aligned with yours.
Still our hearts that we might be open to your Spirit,
Give us eyes to see the world as you do,
Tune our ears to hear your gentle whisper.
Amen.

Encounters 3

Caleb



OPENING DISCUSSION

15 Minutes

Bible Passages

Numbers 13:1-3; 17-32, Joshua 14:6-15

Ask others in the group to read the passages so different voices are heard, or if time allows you could invite people to read 2 different translations of the story.

Questions

Take some time to answer these questions as a large group or in 2/3s.

1. What stands out to you about Caleb's encounter with God in these passages?
2. Caleb knew and believed that with God all things were possible, even if it was risky. Where and how have you seen amazing possibilities, big and small, happen in your context?
3. Caleb was surrounded by those who were focusing on the difficulties, the giants. Fear was stopping them from living wholeheartedly. What are some of the fears that stop you?

Encounters 3

Caleb



INPUT

10 Minutes

Use these notes to help you give some short background to the passage. Read it word for word or use your own words.

You will also find further background information in the [Contributor's Notes](#).

We meet Caleb at a time when the Israelites had been miraculously delivered from Egypt already, and it is within the first few years of their time in the desert. Their known reality of God was of One who could split the sea to deliver them, to feed them with manna from heaven, and to guide them with cloud by day, and fire by night.

From the start, they were assured that the God who had led them out of Egypt and sustained them through miracles, signs and wonders was giving them the territory and called them to be of good courage (Num 13:2, 20b). For Caleb, that was all he needed to know - his wholehearted faith told him that God knew what they needed, and that He would give them what He promised.

Caleb's life was marked as someone who had received and believed in a God-given vision of what had been promised, and he lived his life in belief and pursuit of that vision. This meant ongoing, sacrificial and intentional choices to partner with the promises of God. Caleb saw beyond the challenges, the obstacles and the reasons to fear. Caleb saw beyond the giants with a heart that believes God is greater. He was shaped by being assured of who his God was and what his God would do.

Caleb was consistent in his lived-out encounter with God. This led to action that transformed his entire nation. The amazing thing is that his attitude and the way he approached times of crisis gave voice to a prophetic vision from God; that more was possible, that there was a different way, and that when God was given space to act, that He could, and He would.

Our foundation as Methodists is one that chooses an inconvenient, sacrificial and intentional way of being the body of Christ, so that the world will be changed as a result. Living wholeheartedly is not a call to 'do better' or 'try harder'. It's an invitation to see and to lead with heavenly eyes by living in submission to God.

There's a story told from about 350 years ago. A shipload of travellers landed on the northeast coast of America. In the first year they established a town site. The next year they elected a town government. The third year the town government planned to build a

Encounters 3

Caleb



road five miles westward into the wilderness. In the fourth year the people tried to impeach their town government because they thought it was a waste of public funds to build a road five miles westward into a wilderness. Who needed to go there anyway?

Here were people who had the vision to see three thousand miles across an ocean and overcome great hardships to get there. But in just a few years they were not able to see even five miles out of town. With a clear vision of what we can become in Christ, no ocean or difficulty is too great. Without it, we rarely move beyond our current boundaries.

We read that Caleb's choosing to follow God wholeheartedly meant that he got to enter and see the Promised Land, whilst all the others died before that happened. His character and his choices meant that he got to partner with God in the fulfilment the vision of his promise.

Scripture doesn't explicitly say so, but it's clear from the fruit in his life that Caleb had continued walking with the same vision and zeal for God. As we get older and more tired, it is tempting to step down from responsibilities, slow down and 'pass the baton' on to the next generation. Caleb kept going and chose the difficult territory that others feared, because he wholeheartedly believed that the promise God, made all those years ago, was still true.

Wholeheartedness is a calling for ALL of us, and will mean making decisions that with human eyes, seem strange, even reckless. Caleb's request was ridiculous in many ways, and there were surely those who quietly rolled their eyes or outwardly mocked him. If we are to pursue God wholeheartedly, we surely should expect no less, both from within the Church and from without. But his persistent and persevering vision led him to make wholehearted choices to seek first the Kingdom of God in his context as best he could.

The final line in the last verse shows the fruit of his choices - "then the land had rest from war (v15b)".

If Caleb hadn't asked for that inheritance, maybe it would have passed on to someone else who would have overcome, or maybe God would have chosen a different path, and that land may never have had rest from war. We can only speculate, but it was his intentional, wholehearted choices that resulted in the blessing that he received, and the peace that came to his land.

The choices we make have lasting impacts for the people and places around us. Are we willing to prioritise the things God puts on our hearts, even if it means sacrifice and discomfort?

Encounters 3

Caleb



FURTHER DISCUSSION

20 Minutes

Questions

1. When Caleb shared his heart, the people did not listen to him, and instead chose to focus on the giants. What are some of the giants in your context?
2. Have you ever felt inspired, excited and passionate for a calling or vision from God for yourself or your context, but others haven't caught that vision or have only seen problems? How did you feel? Were you able to step into the calling or vision or, did it stop you?
3. Caleb saw beyond the giants with a heart that believes God is greater. How would it shape who you are and how you serve and love others, if you chose to live how Caleb lived, believing that with and through God amazing things could happen? What sort of impact would that belief have on those around you? Where might you see transformation?
4. As Methodists, our heritage is that of a people who choose to live wholehearted, sacrificial lives by looking the giants of the day in the eye and prioritising the lost, the poor and the marginalised above our own comfort or agenda. Where do you see examples of how you are living out that heritage in your context?



RESPONSE

5-10 Minutes

Include a time of response to give those in the room the opportunity to reflect on what God might be saying to them and consider what actions to take in response.

This response will give individuals an opportunity to think about what God might be saying to them about the giants/fears that they have identified in the questions. Invite them to write down those fears/giants and hand them over to God. You could have an actual cross in the room and invite people to lay their pieces of paper at the foot of the cross or you could ask them to rip up their paper and place in a bin.

AND/OR

Are there promises, challenges and calls in your own life from years gone by that perhaps remain unfulfilled, unexplored or incomplete? This passage shows that our God is one

Encounters 3

Caleb

whose promises and purposes remain true decades later. Might God be stirring something in you or in your local community? Invite them to write down these stirrings, to place the paper within the pages of their Bibles and to intentionally read it and pray about it each day.



CLOSING PRAYER

You may wish to use this poem as a closing prayer.

Disturb us, Lord, when
We are too well pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true
Because we have dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely
Because we sailed too close to the shore.

Disturb us, Lord, when
With the abundance of things we possess
We have lost our thirst
For the waters of life;
Having fallen in love with life,
We have ceased to dream of eternity
And in our efforts to build a new earth,
We have allowed our vision
Of the new Heaven to dim.

Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wider seas
Where storms will show your mastery;
Where losing sight of land,
We shall find the stars.

We ask You to push back
The horizons of our hopes;
And to push into the future
In strength, courage, hope, and love.

[Attributed to Sir Francis Drake - 1577]

Encounters 4

The Woman at the Well & the Rich Young Ruler



CONTRIBUTOR

Melissa Newell

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 [Contributor Notes](#)



FOCUS

Read this as an introduction to the session.

Not all encounters with God have the outcome that is expected. With each personal encounter, responses can be very different. A woman who was an outcast and judged for her life choices, offered and accepted the living water of Salvation and told others all about it. A rich young ruler questioning what more he can do to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, left sad and despondent choosing his wealth over the life that Jesus offered.



OPENING PRAYER

You may wish to invite someone else to read this prayer or have it displayed on screen to read together.

Loving God,
[as we gather together,]
it is our prayer that we will encounter you so that our hearts may be aligned with yours.
Still our hearts that we might be open to your Spirit,
Give us eyes to see the world as you do,
Tune our ears to hear your gentle whisper.
Amen.

Encounters 4

The Woman at the Well & the Rich Young Ruler



OPENING DISCUSSION

15 Minutes

Bible Passages

Matthew 19:16-26 and John 4:4-30

Ask others in the group to read the passages so different voices are heard, or if time allows you could invite people to read 2 different translations of the story.

You could ask different people to read the different parts of the story.
E.g. narrator Jesus, woman, rich man.



You could show the woman at the well monologue.

A script is available here:

<https://youtu.be/Q49BbfgJbto>

Questions

Take some time to answer these questions as a large group or in 2/3s.

1. What stands out to you in these two encounters and how they differ?
2. Where do you see wholeheartedness in the response of the woman at the well?
3. How do you think the rich young ruler felt about the decision he had made?

Encounters 4

The Woman at the Well & the Rich Young Ruler



INPUT

10 Minutes

Use these notes to help you give some short background to the passage. Read it word for word or use your own words.

You will also find further background information in the [Contributor's Notes](#).

The rich young ruler approaches Jesus with a question, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16 NIV). For the woman, Jesus approaches her with a question: "Will you give me a drink?" (John 4:7 NIV). The response in these two stories, after their encounters with Jesus, was very different.

When Jesus promises the woman that if she drinks the living water he offers, she will never thirst again, what is her response to her discussion with Jesus and His declaration of being the Messiah? She listens to Him, believes Him and runs back to the village to tell everyone. In fact, she doesn't just tell them about Jesus, she courageously makes herself vulnerable, saying that Jesus told her everything she had ever done; her sins, weaknesses and failures; encouraging everyone else to listen to the message she heard from the man she encountered at the well.



STORY

Our contributor to this resource, Melissa Newell, Irish Methodist mission partner serving with the Methodist Church in Ecuador, shares this story:

The lack of water is a concern for billions of people around the world. Every fortnight, or so, I wait in my house for drinking water I have ordered to be delivered. Sometimes the delivery comes within a few hours, and other times, I am waiting until the afternoon. The community in which we have a church plant only had water pipes installed during the summer, the water coming to their houses from a nearby waterfall, which previously the ladies walked to, or relied on a nearby, sometimes contaminated river. I asked one of the members, a lady named Marisol, aged 25, what Jesus means to her and how she was getting to know him better.

Encounters 4

The Woman at the Well & the Rich Young Ruler



STORY CONTINUED...

"I am getting to know God through His word, His teachings, and also through prayer. When we were baptised, we felt closer to Him. He listens to us and helps us to keep going and remain in His word. In my everyday life, God helps me, He blesses me in each step that I take, He looks after me and my family always."



As a result of the Samaritan woman's response and her enthusiasm overflowing in wanting to tell others what she had heard, the villagers believed the woman's testimony, and they encounter Jesus for themselves. Our testimony, and how that is reflected in how we live our lives, may be the first encounter with Jesus that people have. The people heard and saw something in the woman that made them desire to know more about Jesus. They asked him to stay with them, and he delayed his journey by two more days. Imagine how different it would have been if the woman hadn't shared her encounter or if they had ignored the woman, if Jesus had just carried on his journey. However, it seems she was so overflowing in her desire to share her encounter that her testimony was impossible to ignore – a challenge to us in our daily lives.

The Rich Young Ruler asks Jesus what "good thing" (Matthew 19:16 NIV) he must do to inherit eternal life. He has come to the right person, the giver of Life, but his question is wrong, for there is nothing he can do to earn eternal life. Why then does Jesus tell him what to do (sell all his possessions and give to the poor)? This action will be the evidence, the manifestation of his belief and faith. The Bible says he went away sad because he was extremely wealthy. His response is very poignant – he went away already sad. He did not make his choices and then later come to regret it, he was 'sorrowful' (v22) right from the moment Jesus answered him and he made his choice. Despite knowing he would be sad, he chose his wealth.

A 16th century poem by James Shirley brings the message that death is the great leveller, regardless of our wealth or position. We know wealth cannot buy health, longer life or happiness. But as believers of Jesus, in fact, it is the death of Jesus which is the great leveller; the gospel, not death, makes us equal in the sight of God.

Encounters 4

The Woman at the Well & the Rich Young Ruler



*The glories of our blood and state
Are shadows, not substantial things;
There is no armour against Fate;
Death lays his icy hand on kings:
Sceptre and Crown
Must tumble down,
And in the dust be equal made
With the poor crookèd scythe and spade.*

- 'Death the Leveller' (James Shirley)

The kingdom of God is one which the rich struggle to enter, but the outcast is welcomed like a king, where the first are last and the last are first. A kingdom where the most learned and qualified must become like little children.

Read out 1 Corinthians 1:18-30.

This passage speaks of how God uses the weak, lowly and foolish for His glory. Yet, Jesus says that what is impossible for man is possible for God.

These two encounters with two very different responses showed a level of vulnerability in both. A woman, as an outcast who felt she was not worthy of forgiveness because of the life she led, was vulnerable as Jesus told her exactly what he knew about her and still offered her eternal life despite that knowledge. A rich young ruler's vulnerability in asking the question of what more he could do was met with what he believed to be an impossible request. Jesus wanted to direct him away from the works or the earthly minded attitude and point him towards a heavenly mind in a true relationship with God and other people.

Encounters 4

The Woman at the Well & the Rich Young Ruler



FURTHER DISCUSSION

20 Minutes

Questions

1. The vulnerability that was displayed in these two stories, is both to do with choices made (the woman at the well) and to be made (the rich young ruler). How does that challenge us as individuals, in how we present ourselves before our Father?
2. At times we can be challenged by our presuppositions/opinions/views of people. How do these stories challenge those?
3. The rich young ruler was sad about what he would have to give up, he felt it was too much. In what areas do we feel most challenged to have more faith in God and less dependence on material possessions.
4. Having encountered God for ourselves, how would we compare our response to God's saving Grace to that of the women at the well and the rich young ruler?
5. Wholeheartedly, the women at the well responded to the love that Jesus offered her. In your context, what wholehearted response is God requiring from you individually and as a church?



RESPONSE

5-10 Minutes

Include a time of response to give those in the room the opportunity to reflect on what God might be saying to them and consider what actions to take in response.

Are there things in one or both of these stories that resonate with you?
Are there choices that you have made, or not made, that perhaps give you a sense of guilt, shame or regret?
Use this time to bring them before God and leave them there.

Encounters 4

The Woman at the Well & the Rich Young Ruler



CLOSING PRAYER

Sing these words together before closing in prayer using the words of the prayer from 50 Days or wholehearted prayer.

I Love You, Lord

*I love You Lord
And I lift my voice
To worship You
O my soul rejoice
Take joy my King
In what You hear
May it be a sweet sweet sound
In Your ear*

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The Daily Prayer

*God, whose wholehearted unlimited love
extends to the whole of creation,
to us,
and to me!
Root us deep in you.
Set your passion in our hearts.
Awaken us by your Spirit,
that we might live joyfully and hopefully
as followers of Jesus,
offering all that we are to you,
for the transformation of the world. Amen.*

OR

Have an open time of prayer as a group.

FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE WORLD • LIVING WHOLEHEARTEDLY AS FOLLOWERS