

8



FAITHFULNESS

LIFE ON THE VINE

PREPARE

Read all the Scriptures listed above. Read the Old Testament verses listed in the last paragraph on page 181 in Kenneson's book. Be alert to connections between God's covenant love and God's faithfulness. Recall stories throughout the Hebrew Scriptures depicting God as the faithful covenant-keeper. Keep in mind the meaning of the Hebrew *hesed* as you read God proclaiming his faithfulness in Deuteronomy 7:6-11.

Read Hosea 1-3 and consider what it means that God's faithfulness is not diminished by any degree of the unfaithfulness of God's people.

As you read Jesus' parable of the talents, think about the connections between faithfulness and stewardship. As you read Hebrews 3, consider what the writer means by calling Christ's followers "his house."

Read Chapter 8 in Kenneson's book.



Invite a group member to supply the fruit to share during the meeting time. This week's suggestion is cantaloupe.

Set up the room: Have the items ready for the welcome table as well as Bibles and copies of the participant guide for group members. Have paper and pencils on hand for one of the discussion activities. To close the lesson, have copies of a hymnal available for singing "Great Is Thy Faithfulness."

PRAY

As part of your discipline of preparation this week, pray Psalm 92.

GATHERING AT THE TABLE OF FAITHFULNESS

In Advance

Prepare the welcome table by arranging the bowl(s) or tray(s) of fruit brought in to share. Open the Bible to Galatians 5 and place the white pillar candle or taper nearby. Be sure to have matches or a lighter handy for the person designated to light the candle.

As People Arrive

Greet everyone. Introduce newcomers and visitors to other class members. Keep in mind that bearing the fruit of the Spirit begins the moment the first person walks in the door.

To Open

Just prior to getting started, pass around the fruit so those who've arrived can enjoy it. Reserve a portion of the fruit as a display on the worship table. Once it's time to start, call attention to the worship table. Invite everyone to focus on the fruit on the table as you read aloud Galatians 5:22-23. Light (or have someone else light) the Christ candle on the worship table.

Conclude the gathering time with prayer. Consider using Psalm 92:1-4 as the starting point.

EXPLORING THE ROOTS OF FAITHFULNESS

As Kenneson makes clear, any conversation about what faithfulness entails should begin with a discussion about God's faithfulness. To begin that discussion, have the group scan the word *faithfulness* and its various synonyms printed on page 2 of the participant guide. Talk as a total group about which synonym best captures the meaning of God's faithfulness. It may help to invite group members to recall an occasion or experience that demonstrated God's faithfulness toward them. In other words, what evidence do you have that God is (or has been) faithful to you?

Hear Deuteronomy 7:6-11 read aloud.

- ◆ What evidence did the Hebrew people have that God was "the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty"?
- ◆ What was God's purpose in proclaiming his faithfulness to the people?
- ◆ What Old Testament stories of God's relationship with particular people (for example, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, etc.) depict most vividly for you God's faithfulness?

Hear Hosea 1-3 read aloud. While the passage is being read, encourage the group to imagine themselves in the place of the prophet Hosea. Imagine what it was like for Hosea to live out his own prophetic word. Also, listen for the moving, compassionate voice of God proclaiming faithfulness and promising restoration. Then discuss these questions:

- ◆ How does the image of adultery (or harlotry) describe the nature of Israel's unfaithfulness to God?
- ◆ What attributes of God are emphasized in Hosea 2:16-23?
- ◆ What does Hosea's act in Chapter 3 signify?
- ◆ Since this relationship between Hosea and Gomer, including the naming of their children, is a prophetic enactment, what is God's message to his people? To us today?

EXAMINING THE FRUIT OF FAITHFULNESS

Character of the Fruit

To explore the character of Christian faithfulness, look together at two New Testament texts: Hebrews 3 and Jesus' parable of the talents in Matthew 25.

First, hear [Hebrews 3](#) read. Then discuss these questions:

- ◆ What does the writer mean by saying Jesus "was faithful to the one who appointed him" (verse 2)?
- ◆ What does the writer mean by saying Jesus "was faithful over God's house as a son" (verse 6)?
- ◆ What does the phrase "we are his house" (verse 6) say about the Christian's faithfulness to God?
- ◆ What is it that has the potential to cause you to be unfaithful, to turn away from God?

Hear Jesus' parable of the talents in [Matthew 25:14-30](#) read aloud. Then discuss these questions:

- ◆ What does Jesus' parable say about the connection between stewardship and faithfulness?
- ◆ Why are the first two slaves (or servants) praised as being trustworthy (or faithful)?
- ◆ What is the mistake of the servant with the one talent?

Obstacles to Bearing the Fruit

Recall Kenneson's observation that "we are, in short, encouraged to be deeply committed to being uncommitted" (p. 185). Talk about what the statement means. Where in our lives and in our culture do we see evidence of the truth in that statement?

Ask the group to come up with examples of the value our culture puts on disposability (paper plates and cups, for example), planned obsolescence (computers, for example), and lack of commitment (live-in relationships, for example).

- ◆ In what ways do you see the values of disposability, obsolescence, and impermanence affecting your capacity for faithfulness toward God? Your faithfulness as part of a congregation?
- ◆ Where do you see examples of genuine faithfulness among Christians in the world today?

BEARING THE FRUIT OF FAITHFULNESS IN THE WORLD

Cultivating the Fruit

Kenneson suggests several resources for cultivating faithfulness as Christians, including:

- (1) celebrating God's faithful presence in worship; and
- (2) making and keeping promises to one another.

Consider these reflection and discussion activities to address each of the above points.

- ◆ Make an effort today in worship to hear in the Scriptures read and hymns sung and words spoken, a reminder of a God who is faithful to us and who calls us to be faithful.
—Repeat several times in unison Psalm 100:5: “For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.”

Try calling that verse to mind during worship today.

- ◆ Provide each group member with a sheet of paper and a pen or pencil. Have group members list on one side of the paper people to whom they have made significant promises or commitments. On the other side of the paper, list people on whom they could rely no matter what. Then discuss:
—What would your life be like if the people on your two lists were not involved in your life and you were not involved in theirs?
—How has your faithfulness in relationship to others nourished or been nourished by your faithfulness to God?

Close your group time by joining in singing a verse of the hymn, “Great Is Thy Faithfulness.”