

firsthand *experience*

A CHURCH-WIDE CHALLENGE

SMALL GROUP
INTERACTIVE GUIDE

IT ALL COMES DOWN TO A LOVE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GOD WHO CREATED US.



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USING YOUR SMALL GROUP INTERACTIVE GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

The main concept that serves as the focal point of each session.

BE THE MESSAGE

Each week your group will gather around a story from the Bible. While one member of the group reads, the others will visualize themselves there in that time and place asking key questions like “which character do you see yourself as” or “what part of the story did you like”.

We encourage you to engage the Bible firsthand.

GROUP DISCUSSION

This section includes thought-provoking questions that relate to teaching for each session. Because of the dynamics of your group, there may be some weeks when you only discuss a few of the questions. It is more important that you discuss the main concept of the session rather than rushing through all the questions in order to complete the entire curriculum.

PRAYER

We encourage groups to end each session in prayer. Don't feel pressured to pray out loud. If you pray out loud, try to use simple, everyday language so group members at various points in their spiritual walk are able to understand you.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

This section appears at the end of each session. It is an optional personal growth challenge for you to do on your own during your devotional times throughout the week.

CONTACT INFORMATION & PRAYER JOURNAL

Pages are provided in the back of this guide to enter contact information and to record the things you will pray about in your group.

SMALL GROUP AGREEMENT

It is important for everyone to read and agree on the guidelines located in the back of this guide. This will help to clarify expectations and enable everyone to experience a healthy group environment.

1

SESSION ONE

authentic faith

BEFORE YOU MEET ...

- Read Chapter 1 from **Firsthand – Ditching Secondhand Religion for a Faith of Your Own**.
- Read Mark 10:46-52
- Pray for others that you would like to invite to be a part of this six-week study.

“What do you want me to do for you?’ Jesus asked him. The blind man said, ‘Rabbi, I want to see.’ ‘Go,’ said Jesus, ‘your faith has healed you.’”

Mark 10:51-52 (NIV)

SESSION ONE OVERVIEW

Situations surface in each of our lives that cause us to question and sometimes doubt God's love for us. A firsthand faith doesn't shy away from those feelings and pretend they do not exist. Instead, it does the opposite. A firsthand faith embraces our biggest doubts and fears and uses them as the building blocks for an authentic faith in God.

BE THE MESSAGE

Ask someone from the group to read Mark 10:46-52 out loud. After, have the group take a moment to form a mental picture of what was heard.

Have one person briefly retell the story in his/her own words.

What stands out to you? Who could you be in the story? What do you think God is saying in the story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What stood out most in the first chapter of First Hand?
2. What is the difference between firsthand faith and second hand religion?
3. In Mark 10, blind Bartimaeus was overlooked and pushed to the side by the crowd.

In what circumstances have you ever felt like an outcast, a nobody or invisible to others in the past?

CHALLENGE PRAYER

Pray that God would work a miracle in the life of every member of your group and meet their greatest need. Encourage your group members to never give up on expecting God to move on their behalf.

PERSONAL APPLICATION COMPLETE THIS SECTION ON YOUR OWN THIS WEEK

1. Read the story of the Bartimaeus again in Mark 10. Jesus asked him a very simple question: *"What do you want me to do for you?"*

Authentic faith means believing that God can work a miracle in your life. Firsthand faith always springs up when we allow Jesus to work in our lives.

However, relationships are two-way. An authentic relationship means you both give and receive. Jesus asks us the question: *"What do you want me to do for you?"*

Have you ever asked Him the same question? What is Jesus calling you to do for Him today?

2. Why do you think it is easy for us to become like the crowd and overlook people in need of a miracle from God like Bartimaeus?

Take some time to pray and ask God if there is someone that you may have overlooked or treated as invisible. If there is, what can you do to reach out to them and demonstrate the love of God this week?

3. Philip Yancey recalls a story about Mother Teresa:

When the brilliant ethicist John Kavanaugh went to work for three months at "the house of the dying" in Calcutta, he was seeking a clear answer as to how best to spend the rest of his life. On the first morning there he met Mother Teresa. She asked, "And what can I do for you?"

Kavanaugh asked her to pray for him. "What do you want me to pray for?" she asked.

He voiced the request that he had borne thousands of miles from the United States: "Pray that I have clarity."

She said firmly, "No, I will not do that."

When he asked her why, she said, "Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of."

When Kavanaugh commented that she always seemed to have the clarity he longed for, she laughed and said, "I have never had clarity; what I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God."

Sometimes the problems and uncertainties in our lives cause us to question God's goodness and reliability. It seems easier to put our faith and trust in something that can be seen rather than in what is unseen.

What is a current situation in your life in which you could choose to trust God more instead of searching for clarity?

4. Let's take an honest assessment. If you were to describe your faith in God right now, would it be:

- A. Firsthand Faith
- B. Secondhand Faith

Write down why you made your choice.

PERSONAL PRAYER

Take a moment to pray and remember that God's love for you is firsthand. He is bigger than any situation you might face or doubt you might have. We serve a God who is able and willing to meet your every need.



2

SESSION TWO

a faith that fills the emptiness

BEFORE YOU MEET ...

- Read Chapter 2 from **Firsthand – Ditching Secondhand Religion for a Faith of Your Own**.
- Ask God to help fill any empty areas of your life that you have been trying to fill with other sources outside of God.
- Begin to look for creative ways to help address some of the needs of your small group members who may be running on empty.

“But whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

John 4:14 (NIV)

SESSION TWO OVERVIEW

We were all created with a God-shaped hole in our lives; and until we experience a firsthand faith of our own, we will always feel empty. Our hearts are thirsty and desperately in need of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. In this session, we will discover that the emptiness is a divine gift given to us by God.

BE THE MESSAGE

Ask someone from the group to read John 4:1-30 out loud. After, have the group take a moment to form a mental picture of what was heard.

Take a moment to think about the elements of the story and answer the following with your group: What stands out to you? Who could you be in the story? What do you think God is saying in the story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you ever thought of emptiness as being a good thing or a divine gift from God?

How would you explain this idea to someone that you felt was desperately searching for something to fill a void in his or her life?

2. Sometimes, emptiness drives us back to the only source that can truly fill us.

What are some things we commonly try to use to fill the emptiness in our lives outside of Christ?

Why do you think we often work so hard to avoid the feeling of emptiness rather than seeing it as an opportunity to run back to God to be refilled by Him everyday?

3. Regardless of her past, God was able to use the woman at the well in a tremendous way to influence others. She clearly did not have her life together, but she encountered Jesus firsthand; and it changed everything and impacted those around her.

How is that even though we have made mistakes and fallen short in many ways, God still wants to use our scars and trials to influence and bless others?

4. The woman at the well made a decision to share her experience with Christ with others in her community. Her decision to share this experience resulted in many others discovering their own firsthand faith in God.

Write down a list of people in your life that you believe need to hear, firsthand, about God's love and kindness.

Begin to pray for them by name each week.

PERSONAL PRAYER

Thank God that when we are at the end of our rope, He is always nearby and wants to protect us. Ask God to help you to be reminded that when you feel a sense of emptiness, God is the only source that can fill your every need. He is more than enough.

A large rectangular area filled with a grid of small, light gray dots, intended for personal prayer notes or reflections.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

COMPLETE THIS SECTION ON YOUR OWN THIS WEEK

1. What comes to mind when you think of emptiness?
2. One of the best ways to experience God's love and hear what He wants to say to you is by meditating on His word. Below are a few simple steps on how to practice filling your mind with God's thoughts and silencing your heart to invite God's presence and direction into your life. Here's what to do:
 - First, pray and ask God to renew your mind with His truth.
 - Next, read a verse out loud, slowly.
 - Then, read the verse a second time and ask: "What in this verse speaks to my life?"
 - Read the verse a third time and ask: "God, what do you want me to do differently today?"
 - Finally, read the verse a fourth time. This time rest in God's presence, be silent for a few minutes and let His Word refresh you.

Today, meditate on the following verse:

"But whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." John 4:14 (NIV)

3. Take a moment to write down a truth you learned in this week's study.

How will this truth impact your life?

4. The woman at the well made a decision to share her experience with Christ with others in her community. Her decision to share this experience resulted in many others discovering their own firsthand faith in God.

Write down a list of people in your life that you believe need to hear, firsthand, about God's love and kindness.

Begin to pray for them by name each week.

PERSONAL PRAYER

Thank God that when we are at the end of our rope, He is always nearby and wants to protect us. Ask God to help you to be reminded that when you feel a sense of emptiness, God is the only source that can fill your every need. He is more than enough.



3

SESSION THREE

imperfect faith

BEFORE YOU MEET ...

- Read Chapters 3–5 from **Firsthand – Ditching Secondhand Religion for a Faith of Your Own**.
- Continue to pray about what it means to have a firsthand faith in your relationship with God.
- In your personal time begin to look for new ways to “Be The Message” with your friends and family. familyandfamilynew and unique ways to connect with God in your personal time with Him.

“He replied, ‘Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.’”

Matthew 17:20 (NIV)

SESSION THREE OVERVIEW

In this session, we will discover why Jesus is more concerned with the object of our faith rather than its size or perfection. Our identity is not found in our ability to have perfect faith but in knowing a perfect Savior.

BE THE MESSAGE

Ask someone from the group to read Matthew 17:14-20 out loud. After, have the group take a moment to form a mental picture of what was heard.

Take a moment to think about the elements of the story and answer the following with your group: What stands out to you? Who could you be in the story? What do you think God is saying in the story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Hebrews 11: 17a (NIV) notes, *“By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice.”* We all face trying times when we feel like our faith is being tested.

Why do you think God allows our faith to be tested?

2. Mustard seed faith is not about the amount of faith you have; it's about how alive and real your faith is.

What are some ways we can nurture and help keep our faith alive?

3. We often create a spiritual checklist of Christianity:

- Go to church
- Read the Bible
- Witness to a friend
- Etc.

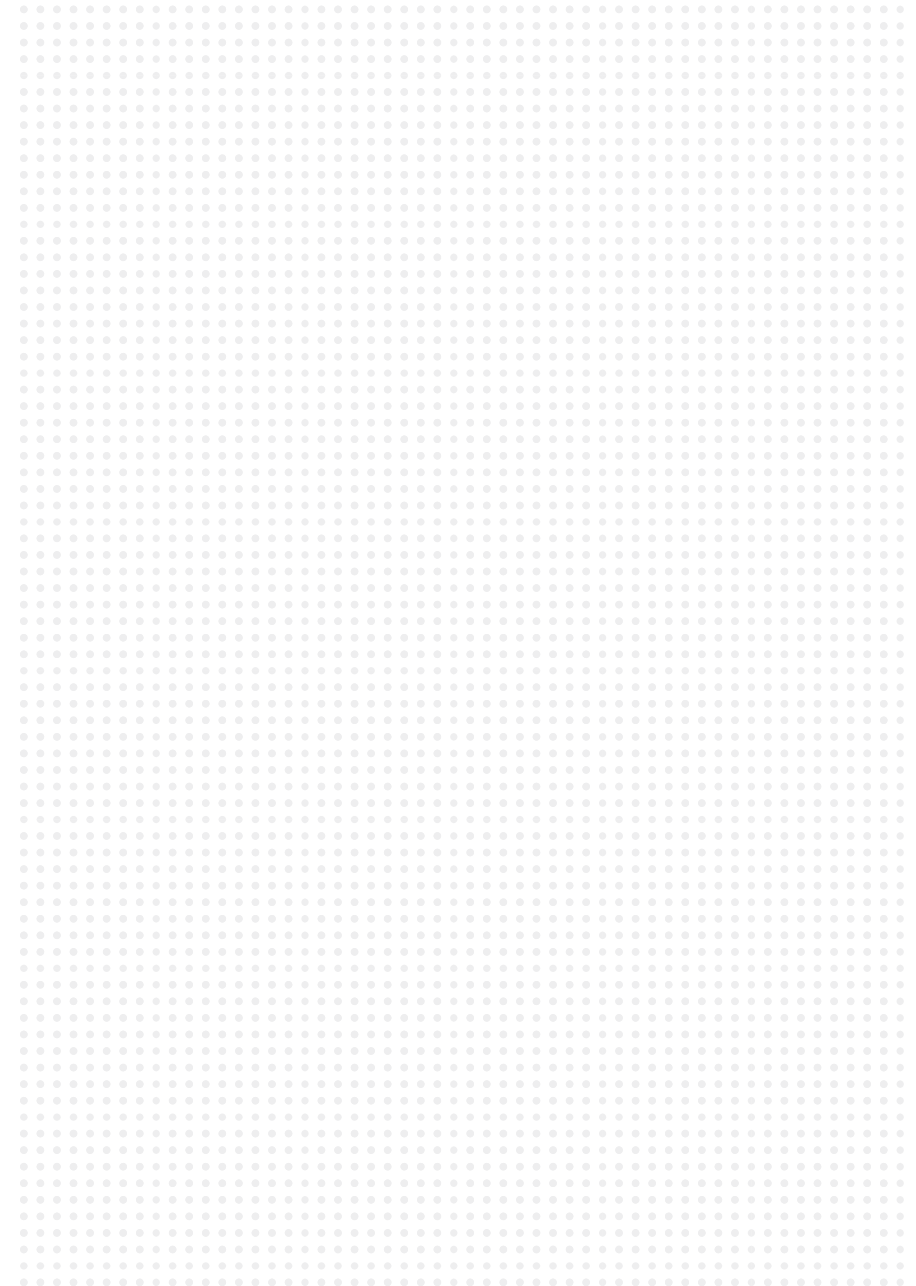
Even though these actions are important in helping us grow stronger spiritually, what are some other practical ways of connecting with God that have been effective for you (i.e. being in a small group, serving the less fortunate)?

4. Faith and emotions are not synonymous, but they are not mutually exclusive either. We need to practice our faith even when we don't feel like it.

How is your faith often influenced by your feelings?

CHALLENGE PRAYER

Pray that we would learn to put our little and imperfect faith into the hands of a perfect Savior.



PERSONAL APPLICATION

COMPLETE THIS SECTION ON YOUR OWN THIS WEEK

1. Our faith comes alive when we do something, when it has been put into the soil and we nurture it.

This week, practice connecting with God through either one of the following spiritual disciplines:

- Fasting— withholding something from yourself (Facebook, television, food, etc.) for a specific amount of time and focusing your attention on connecting and listening to God instead.
- Service— find a way to serve someone in need or consider volunteering at your church. Give yourself to a greater cause this week.

Reflect on how this experience nurtured your faith.

2. Have you ever thought of faith as being like a mustard seed? It starts out tiny but grows very quickly into something strong and vibrant.

How would you describe your faith right now?

3. Who do you know who has a tiny seed of faith? Maybe they just became a Christian or re-established a relationship with God recently.

How can you encourage them this week?

4. Asking God for a miracle expresses our faith and complete dependence on Him.

What miracle are you asking and depending on God to meet today?

PERSONAL PRAYER

Pray for the specific areas of your life that you have little or no faith in, and ask God to help your unbelief.

4

SESSION FOUR

a tested faith

BEFORE YOU MEET ...

- Read Chapter 6 from **Firsthand - Ditching Secondhand Religion for a Faith of Your Own**.
- Remind everyone in the group that this week's topic will require understanding and patience. Everything that is said in the group must stay within the group.

“ ... blessed are those
who have not seen and
yet have believed.”

John 20:29b (NIV)

SESSION FOUR OVERVIEW

This week we will discuss why doubting is part of the faith process. Thankfully, God is big enough to handle our deepest fears, worries and concerns.

BE THE MESSAGE

Ask someone from the group to read John 20:24-29 out loud. After, have the group take a moment to form a mental picture of what was heard.

Take a moment to think about the elements of the story and answer the following with your group: What stands out to you? Who could you be in the story? What do you think God is saying in the story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The scripture explained that Thomas wasn't in the room when Jesus reappeared to His disciples. This may have been a leading factor in Thomas' doubts.

How does doubt often stem from a lack of personal knowledge of who Jesus is?
(Not having a firsthand experience of your own.)

2. If you are comfortable sharing with your group, please describe a time in your life when your faith was tested and doubt crept into your thinking.
3. Thomas didn't run away and leave the faith community after he expressed his doubts about Christianity.

What does this say about the community of believers Thomas was surrounded by?

How would you and the believers in your community of faith react to others if they freely expressed their doubts?

4. How might God use our personal struggle with doubts to help encourage someone else that is struggling with a similar problem?
5. *"The power of the tongue is life and death—those who love to talk will eat what it produces."* Proverbs 18:21 (ISV)

How does speaking the truth of God's word from our own mouths help us combat our doubts and fears?

CHALLENGE PRAYER

Ask God to help you be transparent with your doubts, worries and concerns with those in your small group. Risk the feeling of awkwardness for the assurance of acceptance by the group.

A large rectangular area filled with a grid of small, light gray dots, intended for participants to write their reflections or notes during the challenge prayer.

PERSONAL APPLICATION COMPLETE THIS SECTION ON YOUR OWN THIS WEEK

1. If we are honest, everyone of us could replace our name for Thomas.
The story could read doubting _____.

God is big enough to handle your doubts and fears. Take a moment and write down any doubts you might have and need to give to God.

2. It would be a mistake to only focus our attention on the questions or concerns we might have about our faith in God.

Take a few moments to reflect on the evidence of God's hand and blessing on your life over the years. Write down a few examples below.

3. This week memorize Paul's prayer for the Ephesians that they would know God's love for them.

"... And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God." Ephesians 3:17b-19 (NIV)

4. We will all experience doubts and storms of life. Read Matthew 8:24-27 (NIV):

"Suddenly, a furious storm came up on the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping. The disciples went and woke him, saying, 'Lord, save us! We're going to drown!' He replied, 'You of little faith, why are you so afraid?' Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. The men were amazed and asked, 'What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!'"

Even the disciples closest to Jesus still doubted and feared that Jesus didn't care enough about their lives to save them from a storm.

How does this story help put your own doubts into perspective?

PERSONAL PRAYER

God, thank you for loving me through my doubts. I accept that you are faithful even in my darkest hours.

and asked, 'What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!'"

Even the disciples closest to Jesus still doubted and feared that Jesus didn't care enough about their lives to save them from a storm.

How does this story help put your own doubts into perspective?

5

SESSION FIVE

compassionate faith

BEFORE YOU MEET ...

- Read Chapter 7 from **Firsthand - Ditching Secondhand Religion for a Faith of Your Own**.
- Ask God to open your eyes to see the opportunities each day to reach out and meet the needs of others.
- Pray for your group members by name. Pray that God would challenge each one of them to move out of their comfort zone and live to give to others more each day.

“Jesus replied, ‘They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.’”

Matthew 14:16 (NIV)

SESSION FIVE OVERVIEW

It's easy to be absorbed with yourself and stay in your comfort zone. A firsthand faith demands that you be deeply concerned with the needs of others. In this session, we will discuss why God calls us out of a life of complacency and into a life of compassion.

BE THE MESSAGE

Ask someone from the group to read Matthew 14:13-21 out loud. After, have the group take a moment to form a mental picture of what was heard.

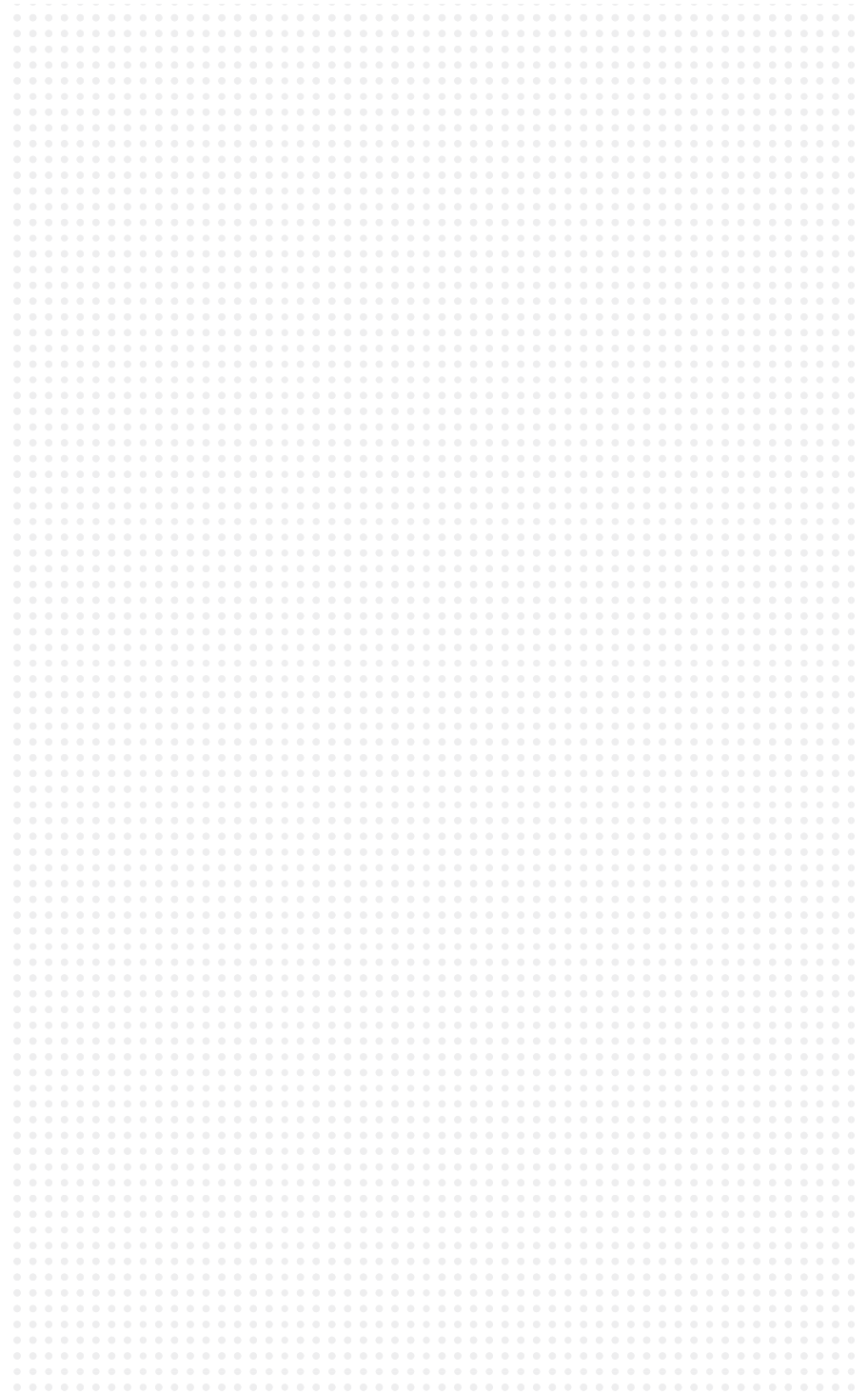
Take a moment to think about the elements of the story and answer the following with your group: What stands out to you? Who could you be in the story? What do you think God is saying in the story?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Has God ever challenged you to step out of your comfort zone and meet the needs of others? If you have reached out to serve others, what was the experience like?
2. How do you think it would affect your faith if you started to do challenging things to reach out and help meet the needs of others within your local community or the poor and powerless around the world more consistently?
3. Why does God call us to take risks and become uncomfortable for Him?
In what ways is this countercultural to modern society?
4. With so many needs in the world, how can Christians know where to focus their resources—time, energy, money, etc.?

CHALLENGE PRAYER

God, you are the only one who can create something out of nothing. We feel uneasy about the brokenness in this world, but we trust that you care for the poor and powerless. Awaken our hearts to your divine disturbances that you place in our lives.



PERSONAL APPLICATION

COMPLETE THIS SECTION ON YOUR OWN THIS WEEK

1. Research the various ministry outreach programs of your church or nonprofit organizations and charities in your local area that interest you. After your research is complete, begin to pray about how you might be able to contribute more by volunteering your time and talents with these organizations.

What ministry or organizations did you find of interest?

2. Where does your greatest passion intersect with the world's greatest needs?

3. Steve Jobs, creator of Apple inc., said, "The people who are crazy enough to think that they can change the world are the ones who do."

What are you doing that might seem "crazy" to others that has the potential to make an impact on someone in need?

If you are not doing anything, what would you like to do?

4. James 1:27 (NIV) says, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

Why do you think the Bible consistently shows God caring for the poor and powerless?

5. You have to first feel the responsibility of a God-sized problem before you can release it back to Him.

What God-sized problems in the world are disturbing you?

What are some practical ways you can help be a part of the solution to the problem?

6. Can we love God without serving Him by serving others? Why do you think it is so challenging for you to serve others? Write your answer below.

PERSONAL PRAYER

God, break my heart for the things that break your heart. Give me eyes to see and ears to hear your convictions.



6

SESSION SIX

a community of faith

BEFORE YOU MEET ...

- Read Chapter 8 from **Firsthand - Ditching Secondhand Religion for a Faith of Your Own**.
- Think about some important relationships in your life and what you can do to strengthen them.
- Begin to look for opportunities to further invest in the lives of the people you have shared the firsthand small group study with over the past six sessions.

“You can try to live out a firsthand faith on your own for as long as you want; but until you live out that faith in a community, you will never realize your full potential in Christ.”

Firsthand (page 175)

SESSION SIX OVERVIEW

God never intended for us to live a life of isolation and solitude. God has pre-wired us to be connected to a larger community. In this final session, we will explore the importance of Christian community.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Christianity is more than believing. It is about belonging. What does that mean for you?

Why do you think God wants us to be connected to a larger community of people who share a similar faith?

2. When we begin to experience personal trials and storms in our lives, why do you think one of the first things we often do is pull away and hide from others in community?
3. Even though we would all acknowledge that no one is perfect, why is it so easy for us to judge others?
4. Even though Simon denied Jesus three times, Jesus saw what he could become and renamed him Peter or Rock.

How does Peter's story encourage you to believe that God sees the potential and future He has planned for you?

5. How has being a part of this firsthand small group encouraged you?

CHALLENGE PRAYER

Thank you, God, for the firsthand community that you have placed us in. Please continue to teach us how to be the hands and feet of Jesus to a lost and hurting world.

PERSONAL APPLICATION COMPLETE THIS SECTION ON YOUR OWN THIS WEEK

1. What have been some of the factors that have caused you to be cautious of stepping into authentic community in the past?

2. How connected in a healthy community of faith would you say you are right now?

3. Take a moment to do a self-assessment on community. Check each statement that applies to you.

- ☐ **I have people praying for me on a regular basis.**
- ☐ **I meet with a group of people on a regular, ongoing basis to discuss God's word.**
- ☐ **If I died abruptly, people outside of my family would notice my absence.**
- ☐ **My faith in God has grown over the last year.**
- ☐ **My closest relationships with people are with other believers.**

If this assessment revealed an area you can improve on, ask God to direct your next steps in building authentic relationships and community with others.

If you were pleased with the results, thank God that you are connected in a supportive community of faith.

4. In what ways do you feel God is challenging you to step out and commit to after this study?

Write down the action steps you need to take concerning this commitment.

5. How has this study challenged your personal faith in God?

6. Have you discovered that you tend to lean more towards religion or a relationship with Christ?

What are some of the reasons you chose the answer you did?

7. Read Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35. What do these scriptures say to you concerning what biblical community looks like?

PERSONAL PRAYER

Thank you, God, for challenging me to always have a firsthand relationship with you. Use my talents, passions and spiritual gifts to share your love with others through my life in spite of my own imperfections. Thank you for loving me and for helping me see that you have an amazing plan for my life and future.



SMALL GROUP CONTACT INFORMATION

[illegible]

SMALL GROUP PRAYER JOURNAL

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SMALL GROUP AGREEMENT

It is helpful to set some basic guidelines before you start. Sometimes having a printed document is helpful for a group to stay on track. The following is an example of this kind of agreement. It may be useful for your group. Feel free to modify it as needed.

ATTENDANCE

We will give priority to the group meeting. We will call or email if we are going to be late or can't attend.

SAFE ENVIRONMENT

We will create a safe place where we can share and feel loved. We won't give quick answers, snap judgments or simple fixes.

RESPECT DIFFERENCES

We will be gentle and gracious to people with different spiritual maturity, personal opinions, temperaments or imperfections.

ENCOURAGE GROWTH

We will make a conscious effort to reach out to others and share our spiritual life. We will use the unique spiritual talents God has given us.

WELCOME NEWCOMERS

We will keep an open heart and an open chair so that God might bring someone new to our group.

SHARED OWNERSHIP

We will remember that each of us is a minister and will share team responsibilities.

CHILDCARE ASSIGNMENT

OUR MEETING TIMES

DAY WE WILL MEET

TIME WE WILL BEGIN

TIME WE WILL END

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

firsthand experience

KICK SECONDHAND RELIGION OUT THE DOOR

Discover a fresh and passionate firsthand experience with Christ that will last a lifetime. This six-session small group challenge along with the New York Times best-selling book, *Firsthand: Ditching Secondhand Religion for a Faith of Your Own* by authors Ryan and Josh Shook, will guide you in building an enduring relationship with Christ and His church.

SESSIONS INCLUDE

- ① AUTHENTIC FAITH
- ② A FAITH THAT FILLS THE EMPTINESS
- ③ IMPERFECT FAITH
- ④ A TESTED FAITH
- ⑤ COMPASSIONATE FAITH
- ⑥ A COMMUNITY OF FAITH



KERRY & CHRIS SHOOK

Founding Pastors of Woodlands Church and New York Times best-selling authors of the adult *Firsthand Experience* small group curriculum.



RYAN & JOSH SHOOK

New York Times best-selling authors of *Firsthand: Ditching Secondhand Religion for a Faith of Your Own* and the *Firsthand Faith* student small group curriculum.



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