

**WEEK 3**  
LESSON GUIDE

**IN THE SHADOWS**

**BIG IDEA**

When you've lost hope, ask God to surprise you.

**BIBLE**

Genesis 18:1–15; Matthew 19:26;  
2 Corinthians 4:8–12

**ABOUT THIS WEEK**

The more time we spend lost in the shadows, the more we're tempted to give up. This week, we'll look at the story of Abraham and Sarah as they waited for God to fulfill a promise. Overcome by the shadow, they stayed faithful to God until the promise came true, showing us something so important— **when you've lost hope, ask God to surprise you.**

**WHAT?** *What are we talking about today?*

**ACTIVITY | Surprise Me**

- Welcome back to another week of *In the Shadows*! We're so excited you're here with us today as we continue this series on doubt and questions. But before we go any further, I need volunteers who love free stuff.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *For this activity, you need a large bag and several random items. For example, candy, chips, a can of beans, a jar of baby food, or a soda. Be sure to have a mix of desirable items and less desirable ones. To play, pick a few volunteers and split them into two teams. Have one team member reach into the bag and pull out an item. They then must race to eat whatever they pulled from the bag. The first team to eat three items wins. Their prize is all the food left in the bag.*
- I hope you enjoyed your random can of beans! Maybe you can relate to that feeling, though. You *hoped* you'd get something great but ended up with a useless bag of plain oatmeal.
- That's sort of how life works sometimes. We can build up expectations, and then they're just some kind of...unmet. It's what we talked about last week, right? Some things disappoint us, but we don't have to *stay* disappointed. We can move through what we're feeling.

**DISCUSSION**

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion and save it for small groups. If you conduct this discussion, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
  - **What is the most disappointing food you have ever eaten?**
  - ★ **When you feel disappointed, what is the most difficult part about getting over it?**
  - ★ **Why do you think it is easier sometimes to keep lower expectations than to hope for something?**

**STORY | A Time When You Gave Up**

- I would love to tell you I never gave up, but that's not true. There have been moments in my life when things were too different from my expectations. They were more difficult than I thought, or I didn't have time to

follow through.

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Share a story about a time you gave up on something. It could be piano lessons or recreational soccer. Keep the story light and focus on why you felt giving up was best. Later on, there's an opportunity to tell a more redemptive story.*
- There will be times when you have to decide what to do. When the odds are stacked against you, do you hold on? Do you keep doing what you've always done, or let go and try something different?
- Is there a way for you to hold on and wait for something good to surprise you? And will you let those surprises keep pushing you forward towards your next goal?
- Today, that's what we're going to be exploring. How can we be surprised by what's before us, even when everything is pressing in? Let's see how God can meet us in the middle of everything we're experiencing and keep surprising us.

### SO WHAT? *Why does it matter to God and to us?*

#### SCRIPTURE | Genesis 18:1–8

- In Genesis 18, we're dropped right into the darkest shadows of someone's life. The couple at the center of the story, Abraham and Sarah, want a kid so badly. Having a kid wasn't just about raising the next generation. In this culture, having a kid was a sign of God's blessing. On top of that, kids were a way of securing your family line, moving it on for one more generation. At this point, Abraham and Sarah were both getting pretty old. They lost hope that this would happen, and the shadow overtook them.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read Genesis 18:1–8.*
- One day, Abraham saw these three guys standing near his tent. Wanting to be helpful and hospitable, Abraham offered to bring them water so they could rest a while. Then, he ran to his wife Sarah to say, "Surprise! I need some bread for these guys."
- Abraham went above and beyond to care for them, though. Even though their presence surprised him, he was ready to serve them. While Sarah gathered, Abraham hurried to make a meal. But the story wasn't over. There were more surprises ahead.

#### SCRIPTURE | Genesis 18:9–15

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read Genesis 18:9–15.*
- This news was a shock to Abraham and Sarah. It was such a surprise that Sarah laughed to herself. She knew the reality of her situation. She knew she was getting old, and having a kid now seemed like a dream. But God had other plans—bigger plans. There were so many more surprises in store for Sarah and Abraham.
- Do you know what it's like to wait for something to the point where you give up on it? There are things in our lives that mean so much to us we'd wait days, months, and even years for them to happen. Maybe it's getting your driver's license, applying to the school of your dreams, or getting your first job.
- We can live for these things, but when they get delayed and pushed back, it's easy to feel disappointed and let down. And if those feelings linger and become routine, you might feel ready to give up.
- That's where Sarah was at. She had already given up on her dream of having a kid. That's one of the reasons why she laughs. She was a realist and understood that it wasn't her time. Yet, God showed up to surprise her and Abraham. God was ready to rewrite the story and do something new with these two. God's plans would reignite their hope, trust, and love for God.

#### DISCUSSION

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conduct this discussion, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.

- **How would you have responded to the news from the three visitors if you were Sarah and Abraham?**
- **Why would it have felt risky for Sarah and Abraham to keep believing God's promises after so much time had passed?**

### SCRIPTURE | Matthew 19:26

- By the end of Abraham and Sarah's story, we're reminded God can surprise us even when our doubts seem overwhelming. The things that seem difficult for us to pull off are easy for God. Jesus said something similar, too.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Read Matthew 19:26.*
- This line from Jesus comes in the middle of teaching about holding onto our possessions. Jesus understands the human tendency to hold on tightly to what's around us when we feel like losing control. When we do this, we act in ways that don't feel like our usual selves because we're losing hope.
- Here, Jesus' words help us see a way to cling tightly to God's words even when things spin away. Instead of gripping onto our possessions or need for control, we can cling to God and learn to trust that God will surprise us by working things out for our good.
- It feels counter-intuitive to ask God to surprise you when you already feel in the shadows of your doubt and out of control, but we can run towards God, knowing we'll be greeted with open arms. When we run to God, we can surrender our plans and ask for a surprise.
  - Sometimes, it feels like we're on the verge of running out of hope.
  - In those moments, we don't need to choose to fight or flee from our troubles. We can go to God and ask for a surprise.
- We can trust God to keep showing up for us and ask God to surprise us like Abraham and Sarah. But what does it look like to talk to God? And how can we learn to do it?

### DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion and save it for small groups. If you conduct this discussion, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
  - ✳ **What is the difference between believing everything is possible with God and expecting God to do the impossible? Why do you think that difference is significant?**
  - ✳ **Have you experienced both real disappointment and real hope in God at the same time? What happened?**

### IMAGE | Prayer Is A Conversation

- If we want to ask God to surprise us, prayer is one of the best ways. When we think about prayer, we might think of something formal. The truth is, prayer doesn't have to be like that. It can be just like having a normal conversation.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *As you teach, show an image of texting bubbles [like this](#) one on screen.*
- The great thing about prayer is that God doesn't require us to have perfect and structured prayers, absent of doubt. Instead, God invites all of us to step into the light of prayer just as we are. So, if you're looking for a way to start praying or grow in your conversations with God, here are a few things you can try...
  - **TALK TO GOD LIKE YOU WOULD A FRIEND.** Think about how you and your friends talk to each other. It's probably pretty casual and light, even though there are times when you need to be a bit serious. But you can say things with your friends even if they sometimes come out funny. They

understand you better than most people, so they get that you'll occasionally make mistakes or stumble over your words. You also probably talk with your friends every day. If not in person, then online or through text. You have a standard rhythm to your conversations—when they happen, how they feel, and what you talk about. You can approach prayer in the same way by writing down a thought or a conversation in a journal.

- **LISTEN TO GOD LIKE YOU WOULD A FRIEND.** Talking isn't everything. In prayer, we can make space to listen to God the way we would listen to a friend. We might not hear an audible voice, but God might speak to us through a certain feeling or a memory that pops into our heads. In your prayer time, make space to listen just like you listen to the people you care about. You can start by being still and quiet or asking God to respond to you. Whatever you do, listen and wait for God to surprise you.
- **EXPERIENCE GOD'S PRESENCE WHILE YOU DO REGULAR THINGS.** Prayer doesn't have to be something you do quietly. Like your friends, you probably talk while at school, playing video games, or shopping. There are many ways to connect and engage with God's presence. Carve out some time to reflect with God while you take a walk. Create something that reminds you of your relationship with God. The possibilities are endless!
- The point is this—spend time talking with God. If you're in a spot where you're starting to feel overwhelmed by the shadows and situations in your life, talking with God is a significant step. Use that time to connect and ask God to surprise you. Then, wait for God to respond.
- God is with us when life feels overwhelming, complex, and scary. In those moments, we can ask God to show up and support us unexpectedly. **When you've lost hope, ask God to surprise you.**

***NOW WHAT?** What does God want us to do about it?*

### **STORY | A Time You Surprised Yourself**

- God can still surprise you even when you feel certain about a result. There's always space to try something new, even if it surprises you. You see that when you have doubts or **when you've lost hope, ask God to surprise you.** When you ask God to surprise you, God may respond.
- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *Tell a story about a time when you surprised yourself! Share about something that felt genuinely hopeless, like learning to rollerblade or building the nerve to ride a giant roller coaster. Focus your story on what you felt before and after your experience. How did it change your perspective on difficult things? Where did you sense God was in the midst of all of this? How did your prayer life change because of it? You can also ask a volunteer to share.*
- If parts of your life feel hopeless, God wants to meet you in those moments. Like Abraham and Sarah, there's still more to your story, even if it's hard to see. So, when things feel heavy and hopeless, talk with God and say...
  - **"SURPRISE ME."** You've already seen examples of what God can do. Nothing is impossible for God. So, don't be afraid to invite God to do something big when you're deep in the shadows. This week, ask God to surprise you when you have doubts or feel like you are losing hope. Don't throw in the towel because there is still much more to see. God isn't done yet.
  - **"I WILL WAIT."** Surprises don't always happen immediately. After we ask God to be with us, we might need to wait a bit. While waiting, we should be careful not to focus on one response. God might surprise us by bringing something good from somewhere else. It's not much of a surprise if we expect it, right? As you wait, keep your mind open and trust God to do what is best for you, even if you have difficulty understanding immediately. Be patient throughout the process.
  - **"THANK YOU."** One of the first things we learn when we're kids is to say, "Thank you." But, for

some reason, that doesn't always stick with us regarding God. No matter what happens, we can turn back to God in thanks. We can be grateful to God for leading us through and say "thank you" once God surprises us.

## DISCUSSION

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *If you have more than 15 students, skip this discussion and save it for small groups. If you conduct this discussion, the starred questions are designed for high schoolers, so you may want to skip them for middle schoolers.*
  - **Read 2 Corinthians 4:8–12. What would it look like to tell God about the hurt in your life like Paul does here? How can we support you if you are honest about it?**
  - ★ **Have you ever been surprised by God? How can you make yourself ready to see a surprise from God this week?**
  - **This week, when you lack hope, what's one way you will ask God to surprise you?**

## MUSIC | "Strength Courage and Wisdom" (India Arie)

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *As you lead teenagers through the following response, play the song "Strength, Courage and Wisdom" (India Arie), or choose a piece with similar themes from an artist you like! But make sure you have purchased any licenses required to do so. Here's [a link](#) to preview the song for your personal use. For more information on how to legally use copyrighted material for educational purposes, [read this!](#)*

## RESPONSE | The Doubt Board

- **INSTRUCTIONS:** *For this reflection, you need butcher paper and multiple pens of a single color. If you used the backdrop from the environment guide, we built space into painted areas of that backdrop for this module. If not, create a board out of butcher paper or poster board in one part of your meeting area. Set out some pens or markers for teenagers to write any doubts or questions they may be working through this week. If you feel that anonymity will help people more, provide some foldable sheets of paper for them to write their doubts on and then attach them to the board. You'll use this board each week of your teaching, so be sure to change your pen and marker colors.*
- Each week, we've had this Doubt Board in the room. It's been a place for us to write down some of the things we've been struggling with. It's full of questions, ideas we are wrestling with, and more.
- Today, we will write down the things we hope God will surprise us with. Maybe it's the thing you've been praying for, or perhaps a situation popped into your mind earlier, and you need help. It could be trouble with a friend, a grade, a conflict—anything where you'd like God to surprise you.
- There's no situation that is too overwhelming for God. Remember, **when you've lost hope, ask God to surprise you.**