SESSION GUIDE

WONDER DISCOVERY PASSION

SESSION ONE
This Session Guide is designed to give you a quick overview of everything you’ll need to make this session happen, from start to finish.

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There’s a lot to love about campfires. They bring warmth, light, community and (oh, right) s’mores! If you’ve ever huddled around a campfire on a chilly night, you’ve experienced this. But then you probably also realize that, if you step away from the fire, you get cold. It gets dark. It might even get a little scary. The farther you move from the fire, the less you feel its warmth. Have you ever felt like, maybe, God is a lot of like that campfire? Sometimes there are seasons where we’ve felt really close to God, where it’s easy to talk to Him and feel close. But, other times, it’s not easy to feel His warmth, see His light, or feel his comfort. Sometimes, it feels like God is far away. Maybe we wonder if He’s listening, if He cares, or if he’s even there. But maybe, just like a campfire, if we find ourselves getting cold, or stumbling around in the dark, it’s not God who moved…it’s us. And if that’s the case, then maybe the secret to feeling close to God again is to simply take a step closer.

**BOTTOM LINE**

To get close to God, you need to move.

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**PRELUDE**

Setting the tone for the experience.

**BACKGROUND PLAYLIST**

Our suggested background playlists for each series are also available on Spotify.

- “Made for You” by Alexander Cardinale (from Made for You)
- “Brother – feat. Gavin DeGraw” by NEEDTOBREATHE (from Brother)
- “The Moment” by Tame Impala (from Currents)
- “A Perfect End” by Atlas Genius (from A Perfect End)
- “Drag Me Down” by One Direction (from Drag Me Down)
- “My Love” by Circa Waves (from My Love)
- “Expensive” by Tori Kelly (from Unbreakable Smile)
- “Your Type” by Carly Rae Jepsen (from Your Type)
- “Unbelievable” by Owl City (from Mobile Orchestra)
- “Sun Goes Down” by David Guetta (from Listen)

**SOCIAL**

Providing time for fun interaction.

Since we’re talking about getting close to God during this series, we recommend the game Close Enough from the XP3 Middle School Games Library.
TRANSITIONS
Moving smoothly from one thing to another.

SCREEN GRAPHICS
Display the Main Slide image or Loop video from this series (found in your Graphic Support folder) on your screen throughout your program.

BUMPER VIDEO
Use the Bumper video for this series to transition into your teaching time.

WORSHIP
Inviting people to respond to God.

Choose 2-3 songs from our recommended Set List:
- This Is Amazing Grace by Phil Wickham (from The Ascension)
- One Thing Remains (featuring Kristian Stanfill) by Passion (from White Flag)
- Close by Steve Fee (from North Point Inside Out: Hear (Live))
- Sons and Daughters by Brett Stanfill (from North Point Inside Out: Hear (Live))

STORY
Communicating God’s truth in engaging ways.

TEACHING SCRIPT
You’ll find the Teaching Outline and Teaching Script for this session in your Session 1 folder.

TEACHING VIDEO
The Teaching Video for Session 1 can take the place of a live communicator, but it will not cover the Interactive.

TEACHING AUDIO
The Teaching Audio of this session can be found in the Session 1 folder.

INTERACTIVE
In this session, you’ll use a Prop (an artificial campfire) and a Take-Home (a bag of s’mores ingredients) to help your middle schoolers remember that, if we want to get close to God, we just need to move toward Him.

STUDENT NOTE PAGE
The Student Note Page for Session 1 is a fun prompt to help your middle schoolers remember the visual of the campfire.

GROUPS
Creating a safe place to connect.

Use the SGL Email for Session 1 to tell your small group leaders what they need to know, and what they need to do, to prepare this week. Don’t forget to attach the Small Group Guide, and print enough copies for all of your small group leaders.

The XP for this series will take place during this session, so make sure you’re ready with all of your supplies! And be sure to communicate with your leaders in advance so they’re prepared, too.

HOME
Prompting action beyond the experience.

Use the Social Media Plan for this Series to stay in touch with parents and students during the week.

Send parents their Parent Cue after you complete Session 1 of the series.

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INTRO
Introduce the Interactive. I love campfires. They’re warm and comforting, especially on a cold night. And there are s’mores.

TENSION
I imagine God is kind of like a campfire. His presence is warm and comforting, but we don’t always feel close to Him. Tell a personal story.

TRUTH
James 4:8 says that if we want to feel close to God, we just need to move closer to Him. It’s like the campfire. The fire never goes anywhere. We just need to move closer.

APPLICATION
You get close to God the same way you’d get close to a friend. Invite Him into your life. Talk with Him like you would a close friend. Know He’ll never stop loving you.

LANDING
God is always close to you, no matter how far away from Him you’ve walked. It only takes one step toward God to bring you back to Him.

BOTTOM LINE
TO GET CLOSE TO GOD, YOU NEED TO MOVE.

SCRIPTURE
“Come close to God and he will come close to you.”
JAMES 4:8 (NLT)

ANGLE OF SCRIPTURE
This week, we’re keeping our Scripture short and simple. We’ll spend plenty of time throughout this series talking about what it means, exactly, to come close to God. But this week is the set-up. If we want to get close to God, we’ve got to move.

SESSION SUMMARY

QUESTION
HOW CLOSE DO I FEEL TO GOD RIGHT NOW?
TEACHING SCRIPT

INTRODUCTION

INTERACTIVE: Playing with Campfires

See the Interactive for detailed instructions.

Do we have any campfire fans in the room? What do you love most about campfires? [Take a couple of minutes to let your students respond.]

I love campfires. I love sitting around a warm fire with friends, telling stories, talking for hours, maybe singing a song or two. I love the crackling sounds they make. I love the way they smell. And I really love s’mores. The ooey, gooey goodness of s’mores is hands down my favorite part of the entire campfire experience. By the way, instead of boring old chocolate, have you ever made a s’more with a peanut butter cup? Wow. It is an absolute must. There is a lot to love about campfires. But I haven’t mentioned my favorite thing about campfires yet. They’re warm! Especially on a chilly night, it’s so nice to gather around a big cozy campfire with friends and family.

So let me ask you question. When you’re huddled close to a campfire on a chilly night, it’s warm and bright and comforting right? [Begin to back away from the fire.]

But if you take a few steps back, what happens? [Let your students shout out a few answers.]

That’s right! It gets cold. It gets dark. You might start to trip on things or step on gross bugs. Maybe it even gets a little scary. The farther you move from the fire, the less you feel its warmth or see its light or experience its cozy comfort. (And it’s pretty hard to make a good s’more from all the way over here.)

BOTTOM LINE

TO GET CLOSE TO GOD, YOU NEED TO MOVE.

TENSION

When I think about God, I like to imagine that God is kind of like a campfire. God is the source of warmth and light in the midst of darkness. God’s presence is welcoming and inviting. (And don’t forget the s’mores! You know those are God inspired.) Maybe you’ve had times when you’ve felt really close to God. When we feel close to Him, it’s easy for us to talk to Him. It’s easy to trust that He is there. It’s easy for us to believe that He loves us, and likes us, and wants to be involved in our lives.

But we don’t always feel close to God, do we? It’s not always easy to feel His warmth, His light, or His inviting welcome, is it? Sometimes, it feels like God is far away. We wonder if He’s listening. We wonder if He cares. Maybe we
wonder if He’s even real at all. Sometimes, when we don’t feel close to God, we start to think that, maybe, God has left us.

TELL A PERSONAL STORY
Tell a personal story that illustrates the following ideas...
• Share about a time when you felt far from God. Maybe it was before you knew God. Or maybe you knew Him, but you felt disconnected.

Does God ever leave us? Does He walk away? When you feel far away from God, how do you get close again? Or, if you’re not sure you’ve ever experienced what it’s like to be close to God, how do you find your way into His warmth, light, and presence?

I think the best place to look for this answer is in the Bible, specifically a book called James. The book of James was a letter written by a guy named (you guessed it) James to a group of Christians a couple thousand years ago. That’s a long time ago, but here’s the cool thing about this book: even though it’s really old, it’s full of things we can still relate to today! Originally, James wrote this letter to a group of Christians who were raised Jewish. If you know anything about Jewish culture, you know that the Jewish people wanted to know God. Their parents and whole communities raised them to have a great desire to be close to God. They memorized tons of Scripture and had a lot of religious traditions that helped them worship and follow God. But when those Jewish people began following Jesus, they stopped performing many of their old Jewish traditions. As Christians, they weren’t always sure how to connect with God anymore. Without the traditions and rituals they had followed when they were Jewish, they probably felt a little distant from God sometimes. They were probably wondering, “How do I worship God now? What do I do to get close to Him? Are there steps, or formulas, or rituals, or special words I need to say?”

Now listen to what James said to them. According to James, being close to God is pretty simple.

Come close to God and he will come close to you. (James 4:8 NLT)

What James says is so simple! Do you want to feel close to God? Then move. Come close to God and He will come close to you.

It’s like the campfire, isn’t it? When you’re standing close to the fire, you feel its warmth and see its light. As you get farther and farther from the fire, though, you can’t feel it or see it quite as well. You get cold. It gets dark. You trip over things. It’s a little scary. Maybe you get frustrated with the fire. Maybe you’re confused about why you can’t feel it or see it anymore. Maybe you get so far away that you start to wonder if the fire ever existed at all.

But did the fire ever move? Of course not! It’s us who moved away.

If we want to get close to God, James says that the only thing we need to do is to move close. It’s up to us to move towards the campfire. God is inviting you to come closer. You don’t have to be perfect. You don’t have to have the whole God thing figured out. Just move closer. Take steps towards God. He will be there. He never left. He isn’t like the person who promises to come to your baseball game, school play, or birthday party and then forgets to show up or calls in sick. He loves you. He wants to be close to you. He’s waiting to welcome you. So if you want to be closer to God, just make a move. You will find Him, because He never went anywhere. Step towards the campfire that’s been there all along.

Romans 8:39 tells us nothing is able to separate us from the love of God. God is with you, no matter how far away He might seem in your life right now. No matter what you have done, you cannot separate yourself from God’s love. He will never stop loving you.

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So, if you want to be close to God, how do you move towards Him? Where do you even start? What does it mean to take a step towards God?

Think of a friend you have whom you haven’t seen in awhile. How would you reconnect with that person?

The best way to reconnect with a friend is usually by starting a conversation. A chat, an instant message, a text, a conversation at school. Do the same with God. Open your heart. Open your mouth. Start talking to Him.

Now think about your friends again. Once you’ve reached non-stalker status with someone, and you’ve struck up a friendly conversation, an invite is usually next, an invitation to hang out and spend time together. The same is true with God. Spend time with Him. There are no special prayers or rituals you have to do or memorize. Simply invite Him back into your life.

Then talk with God like you would talk with a close friend. Invite Him back into the details of your life. Remember, He hasn’t gone anywhere. He has been with you the whole time. You may have taken a few steps away from the campfire, and it may happen again someday, but here’s what I want you to remember: at any moment in your life, no matter how far from God you feel, you can always turn around and walk right back to the fire. God never moves. He never leaves. He is always there waiting for you. He will never stop loving you. He knows you better than you know yourself. And He has a story to tell in and through you.

You’re going to leave here today and go back to your everyday lives. And when you do, I hope the next time you see a campfire or a candle or even just a simple light bulb, you’re reminded of God’s presence. Of God’s warmth. Of God’s light. Remember, your seat is right here around the campfire with a s’more in your hand. God is always close. No matter how far away you’ve walked. No matter how far away God feels, it only takes one step towards God to get right back to the fire. If you draw close to God, He will draw close to you.

As you go to small groups, I want you to think about this question: How close do I feel to God right now?
INTERACTIVE

PLAYING WITH CAMPFIRES | PROP & TAKE-HOME

OVERVIEW

Because of the way middle schoolers’ brains are developing during this phase, they can better learn and remember abstract concepts when those concepts are tied to something physical and concrete that they can experience with their senses. That's why props and visuals are so helpful.

So this Interactive is designed to help middle schoolers grasp the somewhat abstract concept of getting close to God with an artificial campfire and a s’mores take-home.

THE SET-UP

WHAT YOU'LL NEED (PROP)
- 5-10 assorted branches (about 1” in diameter)
- String lights
- Assorted rocks

WHAT YOU'LL NEED (TAKE-HOME)
- Plastic snack-sized bags
- Marshmallows, graham crackers, and individually wrapped chocolates (one per student)
- The label image provided in your Interactive folder
- 8.5” x 11” label paper

THE HOW-TO

To prepare your campfire, first decide where you’d like to display it. Then begin by arranging your rocks in a circle, creating the border of your fire pit. Then pile your string lights inside the border. Make sure to leave the end of your string lights hanging out of the circle so it can be plugged in. Next, arrange your branches inside the rock border, in a cone shape, touching toward the top. The branches should all balance on one another, holding each other up. If you have trouble getting your branches to stay up, wedge them between the rocks. And you’re done! Just plug in your string lights and you’re ready to go.

For your take-home, assemble a snack bag for every student. Inside each bag, place a marshmallow, a chocolate, and a graham cracker. Then print the labels provided on label paper and stick one on each bag. Give them to your small group leaders to hand out as students leave.

IF USING THE TEACHING VIDEO...

The video for this session will not cover the Interactive for you. We recommend building and displaying your prop throughout the series and giving away your s’mores bags in small group.
SCRIPTURE: “Come close to God and he will come close to you.” JAMES 4:8 (NLT)

GOAL OF SMALL GROUP: To encourage students to remember that, if they want to get close to God, all they need to do is take a step closer. To do this, create meaningful conversation. This guide is a suggestion, not a formula. Adjust the questions and activities as needed, and don’t feel like you need to do, or ask, everything you see here.

When it comes to feeling close to God, keep in mind that a middle schooler’s feelings can be pretty all over the place. It’s an inconvenient, but necessary, part of this phase. As you talk about what it means to be close to God, you’ll probably encounter questions about how your few can “feel” close to God every day. When those questions come up, it might be helpful to set some realistic expectations for your few. Because, the truth is, we won’t “feel” equally close to God every day, but that’s okay. Getting close to God is about more than just our feelings. It’s about our actions.

THINK ABOUT THIS
When it comes to feeling close to God, keep in mind that a middle schooler’s feelings can be pretty all over the place. It’s an inconvenient, but necessary, part of this phase. As you talk about what it means to be close to God, you’ll probably encounter questions about how your few can “feel” close to God every day. When those questions come up, it might be helpful to set some realistic expectations for your few. Because, the truth is, we won’t “feel” equally close to God every day, but that’s okay. Getting close to God is about more than just our feelings. It’s about our actions.

JUST FOR FUN
• Have you ever gone camping?
• What are your favorite s’mores ingredients?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
• Describe what you think it means to be close with God.
• Describe what you think it means to be far away from God.
• What are some things that make us feel far from God?
• When have you felt closest to God? (NOTE: Encourage your students to think about the different ways they can connect with God - maybe through nature, through music, through learning about God, or through serving others.)
• If God is always close to us, what does it tell us about what He is like?
• What are some ways we can take steps closer to God?
• How is getting closer to God like getting closer to a friend?
• What is one thing you’ll do this week to take one step closer to God?

SAY THIS
“We’re talking about camping this morning because campfires have a lot to do with getting close with God.”

The XP for this series will take place during this session. So get to it! First, turn on your candles and place them on the floor. Then say something like, “Today we talked about getting closer to God. If this candle represents God, stand as close to the candle as you feel to God.” After everyone has taken their places, bring everyone back together and ask if anyone would like to talk about why they stood where they did. To close, challenge your few to take just one step closer to God this week and ask if anyone would like to share how they plan to do that.

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Hi Leaders – Welcome to week one of Close. This series is simply about being close to God…but what does that actually mean? Well, we get to explore the idea with our students over the next three weeks in what promises to be a great series. See you this week!

SESSION 1 SUMMARY: Move [Insert Date]

There’s a lot to love about campfires. They bring warmth, light, community and (oh, right) s’mores! If you’ve ever huddled around a campfire on a chilly night, you’ve experienced this. But then you probably also realize that, if you step away from the fire, you get cold. It gets dark. It might even get a little scary. The farther you move from the fire, the less you feel its warmth. Have you ever felt like, maybe, God is a lot of like that campfire? Sometimes there are seasons where we’ve felt really close to God, where it’s easy to talk to Him and feel close. But, other times, it’s not easy to feel His warmth, see His light, or feel his comfort. Sometimes, it feels like God is far away. Maybe we wonder if He’s listening, if He cares, or if he’s even there. But maybe, just like a campfire, if we find ourselves getting cold, or stumbling around in the dark, it’s not God who moved…it’s us. And if that’s the case, then maybe the secret to feeling close to God again is to simply take a step closer.

BOTTOM LINE
To get close to God, you need to move.

THE GOAL OF SMALL GROUP
To encourage students to remember that, if they want to get close to God, all they need to do is take a step closer.

STORIES
Anytime you have a win with your small group, not only would we love to hear it, but you can also share it with an online community of small group leaders – leaders who do what you do every week – at leadsmall.org. Just click here: http://leadsmall.org/submit/?age_group=56

Be sure to include important ministry dates, announcements, and events. And don’t forget to attach your Small Group Guide for this session.

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