BACK TOGETHER

Reunited! It’s a beautiful word, one that exudes hope and promise. The idea prompts heavenly thoughts, as if all is made right in the world. And it must have seemed that way to this particular mother and daughter. Way back in 1949, they were separated by a heartbreaking lie. Today they have been reunited, thanks to technology.

When Genevieve Purinton gave birth to her daughter at age 18 in an Indiana hospital, she was told a life-altering lie. “I was a young, unwed mom, and they said my baby died during birth,” the mother said. Genevieve never received a death certificate, and she never had more children.

Needing More

Her daughter, later named Connie Moultroup, was promptly adopted by a loving couple and they lived in Santa Barbara, California. Her favorite bedtime story was of her adoption. After losing her adopted mother at age four, Connie’s adopted father remarried quickly. In her teen years, Connie’s adopted father passed away, and she was raised by her stepmother. “I dreamt of meeting my real mom — a beautiful woman who swooped in and rescued me,” she said.

Last year Connie received a gift from her own daughter: a DNA kit. After submitting it and receiving the results and then pursuing connections with another relative, it finally happened. She connected with her birth mother! After several phone calls, Genevieve invited Connie to visit her in Tampa, Florida. After being separated for nearly seventy years, the mother and daughter were joyfully reunited for the first time.

No Longer Separated

There are all sorts of reasons people are separated: time, distance, and competing ideals, beliefs, or pride. However, that is not God’s desire for us in any of our relationships, human or divine. The DNA results are in: We are family! The God of all creation will stop at nothing to bridge the gap of separation!

“I’m convinced that nothing can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus our Lord.” —Romans 8:38a
GETTING BACK TOGETHER

Question of the Day: How would you feel about reuniting with a loved one after decades apart?

Purpose: To assure teens that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Cultural Connection: Mother and Daughter Reunite After Seventy Years Apart

Topic: Reunion

“BROTHERS GOTTA HUG!”
Genesis 45:1-15
He threw his arms around his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his shoulder. He kissed all of his brothers and wept, embracing them. After that, his brothers were finally able to talk to him.

—Genesis 45:14-15

Commentary:
This Bible family’s story is complicated, so here’s a simplified version: Jacob, otherwise known as Israel, is the father of twelve sons, who become the figureheads and namesakes of the twelve tribes of Israel. Earlier in Genesis, we read about Joseph’s immaturity as the favored son. Joseph’s actions fueled his brothers’ jealousy, eventually causing them to sell him into slavery to an Ishmaelite tradesman. In this Scripture, decades have passed and with God’s help, Joseph has survived and ascended to a prominent position in Egypt. He finally reveals his true identity to his brothers after playing a few tricks on them.

Questions to think about:

► Joseph seems anxious to reconnect with his brothers.
► How might you have felt, do you think, considering the circumstances?
► How do you think the brothers felt after Joseph revealed his identity?
► If you were cast off from your family but then had the opportunity to save them many years later, what do you think you would do?

RUNAWAY JESUS
Luke 2:41-52
When they [Jesus’ parents] didn’t find Jesus, they returned to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple. He was sitting among the teachers, listening to them and putting questions to them.

—Luke 2:45-46

Commentary:
At age twelve, Jesus was considered to be almost an adult, and so he didn’t spend a lot of time with his parents during the festival. People traveling to attend these festivals did so in groups, providing protection from potential robbers. It was customary for women and children to travel at the front of the caravan, while the men traveled in the rear. It is conceivable that a twelve-year-old boy might have traveled in either group and, therefore, both Mary and Joseph likely assumed he was with the other group. But when the caravan left Jerusalem to travel home, Jesus stayed behind at the temple, engrossed in discussion with the religious leaders.

Questions to think about:

► Does it seem strange to hear a story about Jesus being lost or left behind?
► Why would Mary and Joseph be worried?
► Why do you think they were irritated when they found Jesus and questioned him?
► Do you think anyone in this story—Joseph, Mary, or Jesus—made a mistake?

No matter what threatens us, we cannot be separated from God’s love.
NO SEPARATION
Romans 8:31-39
I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.
—Romans 8:38-39

Commentary:
The apostle Paul, who authored this letter to followers of Christ in the city of Rome had not visited nor met these believers yet. He had planned to visit Rome, and thus wrote this letter as an introduction, encouragement, and statement of faith. Believers in Rome were keenly aware that allegiance to anyone other than the emperor would surely bring death and hardship upon their families. The risk of Christian faith was severe. Therefore, Paul’s words were even more critical to a people in harm’s way. Still, the message was clear: No matter what threatens us, we cannot be separated from God's love.

Questions to think about:
► This verse states that nothing can separate us from God's love. Do you believe that statement is true? Why or why not?
► What is the nature of God's love?
► Who or what does tend to separate us from God?

DEVOTION: ONE BIG FAMILY REUNION

Take a few minutes to read and reflect on Revelation 7:9-12.

Spending eternity with Jesus sure sounds like a blast! The unending celebration will not be a party as much as a praise fest. Our collective worship will unify us—not simply in purpose but also in heart and mind.

The closest I have come to experiencing this was during an outdoor experience on the last night of a foreign mission trip. The people gathered together were different in so many colorful ways, and yet our hearts were unified in faith. We raised our pitiful voices over the sound of a weak electric keyboard, serving as proof that the power of the moment did not rest in sound nor technology. For forty-five minutes, we sang the same song over and over and over: Children playing, men and women clapping, all of us praising and laughing. It surely would have appeared odd to a casual observer. But to us, it felt right. It felt like home in a far-off place. It was heaven on earth. May we all experience a glimpse of heaven's reunion in our daily lives.

NEXT WEEK: LwC celebrates Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, January 21, by helping teens to understand that Christ calls and equips his followers to serve in both large and small ways.
Getting Ready: You will need copies of Youth Page 6, pens or pencils, colored pens in red, blue, and black; multiple Bible translations; and space to play a few games.

OPEN
So, Back to Back
(5–10 minutes)
Have some fun trying to get everyone to stand up together, using the following process. Before working with the whole group, start in pairs. Ask each student to pair up with someone similar in size and sit down back to back. Pairs should interlock their arms, keeping their bottoms on the floor with knees bent and feet flat on the floor. From this position, each pair should count off and attempt to stand up. The best way to rise together is by leaning firmly against the back of your partner. After pairs succeed, invite them to try it again with three people, then four, and so on. The final challenge is for everyone to stand simultaneously. The bigger the group, the more difficult the task. When everyone is standing, invite teens to try it again in pairs and without interlocking their arms (which provides a good bit of stability).

Before debriefing this activity, invite someone to read aloud today’s cultural connection on Page 1. Discuss the questions below to reflect on how the opening activity connects with today’s topic.

► Can you imagine what it must have felt like for this mother and daughter to meet?
► How does the standing exercise relate to today’s topic of reunion?
► What happens when we do not lean on one another in life?

EXPLORE
Talk Topic 1: Brothers Again
(15 minutes)

Middle School Option
Transition from the opening activity by saying: “There are way too many things that can separate us in life. It’s human nature. There are also numerous biblical stories that prove the point. Let’s check out an example in Genesis.” Talk through the commentary and questions in Teacher Bible Prep, then continue discussion using the questions below.

► If you have siblings, or cousins, what are some things that tend to drive you apart?
► Can you recall a time when you’ve reunited/reconciled with someone? How did you feel when the relationship was restored?

High School Option
Transition from the opening activity by saying: “Now let’s read about a family in Scripture who didn’t do very well at standing together. In fact, they almost didn’t survive.” Examine the focal Scripture, commentary, and questions in Teacher Bible Prep. Enhance the discussion by asking and talking about the questions below.

► What does this Scripture teach you?
► Who would you most likely be in the story?
► What’s the most difficult family conflict you’ve had to navigate?

As a group, read aloud Ephesians 2:14-19 in several different translations if possible. Then, complete the activity on Youth Page 6. Invite students to be open and honest in their answers. Assure teens they will not be expected to share or show anyone their responses. When everyone is finished, discuss the questions below.

► Thinking of people your age, what is something common that keeps teenagers apart?
► Does anyone feel comfortable to share what you wrote in blue ink? No pressure!
► If we imagined this wall as real, and we focused all our time, energy, and effort on the black-ink blocks (ways to overcome division), what do you think would happen?
Talk Topic 2: Jesus’ Family Reunion
(15 minutes)

Middle School Option

Note to Leader: Do not try this activity unless you are on carpet, grass, or another soft surface. Depending on your group size, form teams of 3 or 6 each. Teams should form a pyramid on their hands and knees and crawl 10 to 15 feet. If space does not permit all teams to race simultaneously, then make it a time trial for each team. Make sure students are safe and position the sturdiest members on the lower level. After the race, ask teens the following: “What was challenging? How does this activity relate to our faith?”

Wrap up the discussion by saying something like: “Working together isn’t always easy; but when we are united, amazing things can be accomplished.

It’s tempting in a situation such as this to give up or cheat. Who was ready to quit? Who wanted to figure out the solution? Why?

How can we feel united with people who are far away and yet feel distant from people who are seated next to us?

Now explore the Scripture, commentary, and questions in Teacher Bible Prep. Then ask the following questions to prompt further conversation.

Was Jesus lost? Why or why not?

If your sibling, or even your own child, were missing in a big city for more than three days, what would be your concerns?

Have you ever been lost or left behind somewhere? What was it like to be found and reunited with family/friends?

Talk Topic 3: Nothing Can Separate Us
(10 minutes)

Combined Middle School and High School Option

One of the greatest promises contained in all of Scripture is found in Romans 8. As you read this Scripture passage, commentary, and questions in Teacher Bible Prep, be sure to pause and truly consider the magnitude of such a statement. The character of God is profoundly with us—redeeming, reclaiming, renewing, and reuniting. As we understand and live into this truth more and more, our lives become increasingly influential on the world in which we live. Use the additional conversation starters below to help your group further explore these ideas.

Have you ever been surprised by a family member’s unwavering love and support for you?

Other than a family member, who else would stand by you no matter what?

What are some of the most challenging scenarios you can imagine that life might present you in the next decade?

TAKE AWAY

We often put up barriers between ourselves and others and between God and ourselves. Let’s do the opposite this week! With God’s help, let’s go break down some barriers and let the reunions begin!
WORKING IT OUT
CHRIST IS OUR PEACE

In the Bible: Readings for the Week

MONDAY: Read Matthew 11:28-30.
God, reveal to me someone with whom I need to reconcile.

May I rejoice in the reunion that God's presence offers me daily.

WEDNESDAY: Read Exodus 2:5-10.
How can God work miraculously to bring about reunion in my life?

THURSDAY: Read Colossians 1:22.
We praise you God for this gift of reunion.

FRIDAY: Read Leviticus 17:11.
God, thank you for the life, death, and resurrection of your son, Jesus, to offer reconciliation to the world.

SATURDAY: Read 2 Corinthians 5:16-19.
How can I share in this ministry of reconciliation today?

WHAT'S TRENDING?
When have you accomplished something great by working together with others? Tweet or post your response with the hashtag #reunited on Twitter to @YMPartners or on facebook.com/youthministrypartners

As children we often played together without any inhibitions, fear, or prejudice. But as we age, we begin to notice our differences. We form opinions about who and what is right and wrong. Consider these common perspectives as you complete the following exercise.

- Using RED ink, in five blocks on the stone wall above, write common reasons people stay divided.
- Using BLUE ink, in five other blocks, write personal reasons that often prevent you from having closer relationships.
- Using BLACK ink, in another five blocks, write ways you can work to overcome these divisions.

Inherit the Mirth

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