

“Family Trees”

MATERIALS AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Copies of the stories for each student
- 2 Small tree branches for each student. Each branch should have a number of smaller branches on it--not just one long stick.
- 3 Paper and markers
- 4 Pipe cleaners

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS:

Welcome students and ask them to think of a memory or story about their grandparents that they can share with the class. Give them a few minutes to come up with their story, then go around the room and invite students to share. Allow them to pass if they don't feel comfortable with sharing.

CONNECT:

Invite students to choose one of the two stories (or hand them out) and give them time to read the stories. Ask students to share what happened in their stories so the whole class is familiar with both.

Involve the whole class in the “Relative Quiz” at the end of “I Never Liked My Grandpa.” Read each question and ask students to stand if they agree with the multiple choice options. (More than one option may be correct in some cases.) Invite responses from students to Question 5.

Go the Gather 'Round Connect questions that are a part of the “Father I Forgive You Story.” These questions refer to Old Testament Biblical characters. Discuss with the class.

APPLY:

Invite students to either take a tree branch, draw their own with the paper and markers, or make one with pipe cleaners. The tree branches will represent their family tree. They should make the family tree symbolize the relationships within their family. Are some of the branches broken off? Dangling? Stripped? Strong? Growing? Green? Dead?

Encourage them to think about their family members (extended family is okay too) and symbolize them with this activity.

Invite students to share their family trees, but give them the freedom to pass as well.

RESPOND:

Ask students to hold their family trees and to repeat this closing prayer after you. Let them know there will be a time of silence for them to pray their own prayers.

God, we come from imperfect trees.

(Repeat)

Our families have both healthy and broken branches.

(Repeat)

Thank you for the good relationships we experience.

(Repeat)

And be with us in the relationships that need your healing touch.

(Repeat)

Time of silence to pray for healing in relationships.

Walk with us now as we leave this time together.

(Repeat)

And bring us back safely next week.

(Repeat)

Amen.

“I NEVER LIKED MY GRANDPA”:

a true story by Steven James

He sat slouched and alone next to his ashtray in the smoke-filled living room. The television

droned on, flickering in the gloom. The shades were drawn. Only thin slivers of light pierced in from the outside world. And every once in a while, he would bark out orders or say that the kids oughta shut up and go somewhere else to play.

He wasn't exactly our ideal grandfather.

My parents told us stories about Grandpa's hunting and fishing days. I saw photos of the deer, the mounted bass on the wall, even the bear rug upstairs, and I wished he'd take me out fishing or teach me to hunt. But he rarely left the couch.

"He doesn't hunt and fish as much anymore," my parents said.

Most of his fishing buddies were too old, or too tired, or they weren't "around anymore." And Grandpa wasn't interested in making me his new fishing buddy. So my brother, my sister, and I pretty much stayed clear of the living room and explored the rest of the old six-bedroom house.

I was a kid back then, so I noticed kid things. I noticed that Grandpa stayed behind when we went to church. And when he said Jesus's name, he wasn't praying. When he got ready to tell a joke, my parents kinda remembered they needed something from the other room and sent the kids to go get it. But we heard the kind of stuff he was laughing at. I waited for someone to tell him it was wrong, but no one ever did.

Since they didn't, one day I decided I would.

My teacher at the Christian school I attended helped me write the note. At the end of our Easter visit, as everyone was saying their goodbyes, I slipped the piece of paper under Grandpa's pillow. In that note, I wrote that God didn't like it when he said those things, but that God loved him and so did Jesus and so did I, and I wanted him to go to heaven, and so did God, but he needed to love Jesus and believe in him first.

Yeah, maybe I was pretty naïve, but I wasn't sure what else to do. Deep down, I cared about him.

A few days later Grandma phoned my parents. She said Grandpa had found my note and that she wanted to talk to me. As Mom handed me the phone, she mouthed, "What note?"

Excitedly, I took the phone. I expected Grandma to thank me. She told me Grandpa had read the note. But then she said my note had made him worse. "I'll have to start over trying to get him to go to church. You can put your mother back on now," she finished.

I didn't know anyone had ever tried to get Grandpa to go to church. No one had ever tried when I was around. Why would my note have made him worse? Wouldn't it have helped? I'd thought I was doing the right thing, but now I felt rotten. For a long time I didn't want to chance telling people about Jesus for fear of "making things worse."

We kept visiting them for holidays and stuff. I'd go in, give him this awkward sideways hug, ask him what he was watching, and he'd grumble something about the bass-fishing show that was on TV, and then that was it. We didn't even make eye contact. I never knew what

more to say. I wished there was something---anything---to talk about. Mostly I drifted into the other room to do my homework.

A chasm grew between us, and after a while we both got tired of attempting to bridge the gap. So we eventually stopped trying. I kept thinking of him, though. And I prayed for him. Because, despite everything, I cared about him.

About that time, Grandpa realized he was dying.

Operation after operation made him weaker and weaker. No more smoking now. No more leaving the house. No more walking. Grandma spent all of her time taking care of him, shuffling him from the bed to the couch to the bathroom. She read devotions to him now that he didn't complain so much. A local pastor started to visit him.

I don't really know what was going through his head. Maybe the Bible stories were making a difference. Maybe we just liked to think that they were. One day Grandma told us that Grandpa believed in Jesus nowadays. "We pray together. He listens to devotions and takes the Lord's Supper," she said.

Months slipped away as Grandpa's world grew smaller and smaller. I didn't visit him much anymore because I was so busy with school and sports and planning for college. Grandma took care of him day and night until she was killing herself keeping him alive. Finally, he had to go to the nursing home.

I couldn't remember ever looking him in the eye and telling him I loved him. But I wanted to.

Then came my older sister's wedding. Grandma came down for it. And the day after the wedding, we both got up early. Our paths crossed in the living room. She was sitting there crying. I could see how much she loved Grandpa, how much it hurt her to see him suffer. And I saw how glad she was that as the cancer grew, so did Grandpa's interest in God. It wasn't the Grandma I remembered. Maybe, with time, God was changing us all.

That's when I decided I wanted to visit him again. I drove up to the care facility without bringing my parents along. I'm still not sure why it was so important for me to go. I couldn't remember anything kind he'd ever done or said to me. But he was my grandpa, you know? Maybe I just needed to see him again before the inevitable happened. Maybe I wanted to know that my note years before hadn't made him worse.

Grandpa was a man I'd never liked and never would. Yet, for as long as I could remember, I had struggled to love him. Have you ever felt like that? It's kinda hard to explain, but I'll bet you can understand what I mean.

Somehow I had to tell him.

"You still work at that Bible camp?" he grunted, without looking over at me from his wheelchair.

"Yeah. Uh ... lots of people fish in the lake," I said stupidly.

"Do you fish?"

"No, not too much."

A long, uncomfortable, hesitant pause.

"Still driving that car? That—"

"Honda? Yeah. And it's paid for now."

Back and forth we talked until all of a sudden it was time to go, and nothing had been said.

I stood up awkwardly. Someone came over to wheel him away for supper.

"Before I go, could we pray?" Without really waiting for an answer, I shut my eyes and started to pray aloud, right there in the lobby of the nursing home. It wasn't pretty. I've never been eloquent. But I meant it. It was my first and only prayer with my grandfather.

Then I said "amen" and looked up. He was crying. It might have been the stroke---he couldn't control his body much anymore. Or it might have been he was trying to express something he'd never learned the words to say. I don't know.

Only one hand was still working the way he wanted it to. After our prayer it was that hand that I took when I told him I loved him.

Then I watched as they wheeled him slowly down the hall.

I don't know if he even remembered the note I wrote to him. It was never mentioned again. But I don't feel guilty about writing it anymore. Telling people about God's love never makes them worse. Sometimes it makes them uneasy, sometimes it shakes them up, sometimes it even makes them angry. But they're not getting worse; they're finally on the road to getting better.

Even though we fumble through it sometimes, God spreads his love into the world both through us and despite us.

Grandpa died soon afterward. Pretty peacefully, I guess. Grandma had been sitting with him. She stepped into the other room; he closed his eyes and slipped into a coma. Forty-five minutes later his journey was over.

I'm glad God doesn't tell us to like people, just love them. It would be way too hard to like some people. But to love them? Yeah, it's tough, but with God's help that's something I can do.

Is Grandpa in heaven? I think so.

I think I'll see him again, not in a dark living room with the shades drawn, but just the opposite---in a light-filled valley. I like to think God chose to prepare a little fishin' hole for

him up there instead of a mansion. God always did have a soft spot for fishermen.

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“FATHER, I FORGIVE YOU”:

a true story by Justin Manzey as told to Helen Grace Lescheid

I picked up the phone in the dormitory hallway. The moment I heard my father’s voice, I knew he’d been drinking again.

“You owe me money,” He snapped.

“What money?”

“Two hundred fifty dollars for car insurance.”

When? My mind raced, trying to remember as I fought a wave of panic. I’d been praying that my father and I would have a good relationship. Now after not speaking to me for months, all he could say was, “You owe me money.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” I stammered.

My father started swearing at me. “You’re nothing but trouble.”

“What have I ever done to you?” I choked. “I’ve prayed for you—”

“I don’t want your prayers,” he shouted. “You can leave us alone.” Then his words became really vicious, “Change your last name; I don’t want you to be part of my family.”

Dazed, I hung up the receiver. I felt like I’d been kicked in the stomach. I’d been rejected by my father again. He didn’t want anything to do with me.

I was 13 when I found out I was adopted. “Your biological father walked out when you were three months old and your sister was three years old,” my mother explained. “He doesn’t want anything to do with you.”

My mother married John Manzey, a tough, hardworking rancher, a year later. Mom had two children and John had two boys and two girls when they married. John, whom I called Dad, worked hard and made a good living. He was a good, church-going man except when he drank. Then his temper flared out of control. All too often, I was at receiving end of it.

GATHER ROUND CONNECT: *Which dad favored his son with cool clothes?*

I grew up wondering why my father treated me differently than my older brothers.

He'd buy them expensive boots and get me a cheap pair from K-Mart. Once I was driving a pickup behind my brother Brian's big truck on a dirt road on our ranch. When Brian stopped suddenly, I stopped too. He began to back up, but I couldn't get the pickup into reverse, and Brian backed into the pickup. My step-brother Tom and I climbed out, just as Dad's truck pulled up behind. Dad jumped out, put his arm around Tom, and said, "It's okay. It wasn't your fault."

"I wasn't driving," Tom said, "Justin was."

Dad's face clouded as he turned towards me, "I've warned you over and over again," he shouted. "Can't you do anything right?"

GATHER ROUND CONNECT: *Which mom favored her son with special food and helped him trick his dad?*

When things like this happened, Mom felt bad for me. "Try to understand, Justin," she'd plead. "Your father's having a hard time." She tried to compensate by cooking my favorite food or doing other things to please me. Her favoritism of me infuriated my father even more.

One day I was on the phone talking to a friend.

"Get off the phone," Dad hollered.

Before I had a chance to say good-bye, he shoved me aside and ripped the phone off the wall. "When I tell you to get off, I mean NOW!" he shouted.

I gave him a stone-cold stare. How I hated him.

Then hard times fell on our family, and my father lost everything: the ranch, all the horses, cattle, machinery, some vehicles, all his savings . . . and what wasn't lost was sold to try to survive. Feeling completely broken, he had to start all over again with nothing.

My father went back to school to become an insurance broker, but hated it. He hated the men who had robbed him of everything he'd worked for. Trying to cope, he drank even more. He became even more harsh. His behavior grew more and more out of control.

Each of us boys handled the tension in our home differently. My brother, Tom, used drugs and alcohol; he broke into stores and stole cars. It became an ordinary occurrence to have the police at our house for a variety of reasons. I vented my anger and bitterness in wrestling, kickboxing, and fighting.

One day when my girlfriend and I was in the house, my father stormed at her, "Get out of my house." He grabbed my girlfriend's arm and shoved her toward the door.

My father pushed me onto the patio. "You get out too," he shouted. "Don't ever come back." I went to my girlfriend's house to stay the night.

The next day when Dad was away, I went back to our house to pick up my stuff. As usual, Mom wanted me to come back home. "Dad didn't mean it," she said. But I didn't trust him. I picked up my clothes and my Bible and headed back to my girlfriend's house.

With life out of control, I began to ask questions. God, are you real? What's the truth? What's life about anyway? My friends and I would be drinking beer and reading the Bible at the same time we asked these questions, trying to find some answers.

When I was 18, I was a black belt instructor of a Tae Kwon Do school. One day, my top instructor stopped in my office and asked his usual question, "How's it going, Justin?"

Normally I'd tell him about my class, but this time I blurted out, "Man, I need Jesus."

My instructor stared at me. "What did you say?"

"Nothing," I said, feeling suddenly embarrassed. I started to swear.

"Justin, stop," he said. "You did say something." He studied my face earnestly. "You said you need Jesus."

"Yeah, I do," I stammered. I didn't know he was a Christian. I just knew I had to get my life together.

My instructor closed the office door. "Would you like to accept Jesus into your heart now?"

I didn't know what he meant, but after he explained, I prayed, asking Jesus to forgive my sins and to come into my life. From then on, I began to think about what God wanted me to do with my life.

About a year later I was driving my truck through town when I heard a Voice as clearly as though somebody had spoken out loud, "You need to forgive your father."

Tears of rage blinded my eyes. I parked my truck in an empty parking lot. "I'll never forgive him," I shouted as I hit the steering wheel with my first. "After all he's done, he doesn't deserve forgiveness. He's not even my father."

"Then I can't forgive you."

GATHER ROUND CONNECT: *Who made huge mistakes and God used them anyway?*

Like a movie in slow motion I saw stuff I'd done before I became a Christian. One scene especially made me recoil. My brother Tom had come home in a drunken stupor and beat up my sister so badly that her face was unrecognizable. In a rage, I seized him and beat him up until his eyes rolled back and he slumped to the ground.

"Oh, God, you have to forgive me," I moaned.

"I do forgive you, Justin."

Other scenes flashed before me; I saw once more each time my father had rejected me. As I felt the pain again, I started to cry.

GATHER ROUND CONNECT: *Who did God tell to forgive his family members?*

"Forgive him," God's voice spoke gently. I began to see how unforgiveness was another form of rejection. Not only was I rejecting my father, but I was also rejecting God's offer to heal me of my past hurts.

"God, I want to be free of the pain of rejection," I prayed. "Please help me forgive him."

Then God showed me how his own heart was broken by my sin. I remembered words from Romans in the Bible, "God demonstrates his own love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." God didn't wait for us to change before offering us forgiveness. God took the first step. I knew God wanted me to forgive my father even though he wasn't asking for it.

"God, this is so hard," I cried.

Eventually, as each scene of my father's rejection came to mind, I was able to say "I forgive him for that," and really mean it.

Three hours later, I felt like a huge weight had rolled off my shoulders. In its place was peace. I felt clean, like I'd had a deep, cleansing bath.

I wanted to tell my father and brothers what had happened.

But when I told my father, "I forgive you," he said, "What for?" He acted as though he'd never done anything to hurt me.

GATHER ROUND CONNECT: *Who waited for a long time for God's promise to be fulfilled?*

For two years I just prayed for my father and my family without seeing any results. My visits at home were as explosive as ever. Many mornings I'd wake up in a cold sweat, dreaming of my father's abuse. Then one day, out of the blue, Tom called me. He and his wife were smoking pot and doing drugs and using the Ouija board. "I hate my life," he said.

I drove over to his house and the first thing I said was, "Tom, I forgive you."

Tom started to cry. We talked for a long time and both he and his wife accepted the Lord. From then on, our relationship changed from one of hostility to one of deep respect. Brian also responded positively when I said, "I forgive you," and God began to heal our relationship.

But nothing happened between my father and me. Even though I prayed every day for him, things got worse. And then the call came to the dorm when my father demanded I change my name.

Some guys down the hall, realizing I was upset, came into my room. "What's wrong, Justin?" they asked, but I couldn't talk. Then one guy said, "God's telling me that Justin needs money." He opened his wallet and put \$50 on the table; another guy put \$20 down; another, \$100. Later when I counted it all up, it was \$250--the exact amount I owed my father for the car insurance.

I stuffed the money into an envelope and reached for a piece of paper. I wanted to write my father a brief note, but my hand shook so much, I couldn't write "Dad." I was about to seal the

envelope without a note, but a Voice stopped me.

"Justin, forgive him."

"But God, I have forgiven him, and all he ever does is reject me."

"How often do I forgive you, Justin?" The Voice of Jesus was gentle, persistent.

"God, I want to forgive him, but it's so hard," I cried.

I grabbed my pen and paper and stared at it. Suddenly the words tumbled out: "Dear Dad," I wrote, "I'm praying for you. . . . If ever you're in trouble, I'll be there for you." Then I signed, "Your son, Justin."

My father did not reply.

Six months after I sent the letter, my sister called from home with bad news. Mom had called the cops to our house, and while they had stood beside my dad she had delivered divorce papers. She left the state and didn't tell anybody where she was going. "Dad went crazy," my sister said "He's been in a drunken stupor since."

"I'll call him."

"Don't. He doesn't want to hear from you."

After I got off the phone with my sister, I called my father.

"Who's this?" He was cautious and his speech was slurred.

"Your son, Justin," I said. Then in a rush I added, "Dad, I told you I would be there for you if you're ever in trouble."

My father was silent for a moment, then his words tumbled out: "I'm cursed," he said. "I've lost my wife . . . my family . . . my ranch . . . my insurance business. . . ." He started to cry. "Nothing ever works out for me."

"Dad, I believe there's still hope."

"Tomorrow it will be over," he said wearily.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll drive my car over the bridge—"

"Dad, I'll send someone to help you."

"Nobody wants to help me."

"God wants to help you, Dad."

"I don't believe in God anymore."

I had to get help to my father, but how? I called a friend who agreed to help. He got two other men to go with him, one man himself a recovered alcoholic. They visited my father and were able to persuade him to go with them to the Rehab Center.

During the months of therapy, my father gave up drinking. Eventually, he accepted Jesus into his heart. My mother also accepted the Lord. In time, God healed their marriage, and eventually God healed me. One night when I dreamed that my father was hugging me, I knew God had done a deep work of healing in me. I don't fear my father anymore.

Now when I return home, my father meets me at the airport. He gives me a warm embrace and with tears in his eyes, he tells me, "I'm glad you've come home, Justin—my son." He tells me he's proud of me and he believes in what I'm doing.

GATHER ROUND CONNECT: *Whose story includes doors opening when forgiveness is offered?*

My brothers and sisters are also eager to see me. We're not the same family anymore. Forgiveness has opened the door for bitterness to leave and allowed God to come in and restore our family. There are still times when we need to forgive one another. We're not a perfect family, just a family that has found the grace of God to forgive one another time and time again.

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