

1 What's it all about? Finding Meaning

Pathway to the Destination for this session

- Introduce *Autumn of Christian Life: Finding Meaning and Joy Amid Pain and Loss*
- Look at scripture to investigate what life for the Christian is about and to find advice for how to participate in bringing about God's kingdom in our world – to live the ideal that Jesus taught, that is, to “love one another as I have loved you.”
- Use a true story about Jean to show the characteristics of the four seasons of a Christian's life.
- Consider some thoughts on the search for meaning in life from a counseling psychologist and various authors.
- Look at a role model (Lillian Carter) for finding meaning.
- For both Lillian and Jean, compare the Biblical advice with stories about life's purposes.
- Consider a new personal commitment to your faith journey.

Teaching Tips

- Three *Encounters* in this session
 1. Seasons of Life – Jean's Story (14 minutes) (Suggested visual aid is included.)
 2. The Quest for Meaning (15 minutes) -- *According to the Experts* (Suggested visual aid is included.)
A Role Model (Lillian Carter)
 3. My Commitment (2 minutes)
- Before the session, underline the important concepts and practice reading aloud the designated paragraphs in the *Introduction* and the *Destination* as well as the two paragraphs under “The Quest for Meaning” in the *Second Encounter*, so that with appropriate emphasis the listeners will be able to easily pick out the essential phrases.
- Prepare three flipcharts or a marker board (like the example later in this guide) for the *Introduction* and for the *Encounters*. Write only the words in bold print on your board ahead of time. Record comments under the appropriate heading as the discussion progresses.
- Before the session begins, choose four readers: a man and a woman to read the story of Jean, a woman to read about Lillian Carter and one other participant to read the Luke passage in *Food for the Journey*. Show the readers where their part is located in the materials.
- Begin each session by reading the *Destination* aloud. Remember to read the directions in the margin when appropriate.
- Use your posters or marker board throughout the session to keep yourself on track and to let everyone know the plan for their time together.
- Provide a pencil and a 3x5 card with a small envelope for each participant for their commitment.
- Point out the places where *Re-entry* is cited such as in the question about legacies in the *First Encounter*. *Re-entry* (*Reflection, Action, and Digging Deeper*) should be regarded as homework for the participants but any *Re-entry* section may be used to expand the discussion. These readings may also provide helpful background material for the leader. If your session is longer than an hour, spend time doing the *Re-entry* section together.

INTRODUCTION to Autumn of Christian Life: Finding Meaning and Joy Amid Change and Loss

- Following the order on the flipchart or marker board, take five minutes at the beginning of today's session to have the participants scan the *Introduction* in the front of the student book. Introduce the six session series by reading selected portions as indicated below. (The suggested visual aid for the *Introduction* is on the following page L.G.1-3.)

- From the first page of the *Introduction*, read the overall purpose of this particular topic *Autumn of Christian Life: Finding Meaning and Joy Amid Change and Loss* which is described in the second paragraph under *Welcome*.
- Read aloud the three paragraphs under *The Seasons of Life* which define the seasons. These definitions will be used consistently throughout the six sessions and written on the flipchart or marker board each time.
- Each person should place him/herself on the continuum line in the *POSTCARD FROM THE AUTHORS*.
- Note that these materials are written so that all ages can consider the Autumn of life. Some folks will be looking towards Autumn, others will be in the season at the time and others may have passed it.
- Point out the eight parts of the journey (listed on the flipchart or marker board) that make up each session as defined under the heading *Six Journeys*.
- Encourage full participation and commitment to the group as described at the end of the *Introduction*.
- Explain that by independently doing the *Re-entry* section at the end of the chapter, participants will realize the full potential for learning and spiritual growth.

FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY

This opening devotion will set the stage for today's discussion. It is essentially a meditation, not an in-depth Bible discussion. The purpose of these questions is to provoke thought. The following statements are responses from the authors. Discourage more involved answers since all of today's discussion is on finding meaning.

- "Who are you? What should you strive for?"

From the Luke passage: I am a child of God; someone important to God; a person of little faith who is tempted to worry; a worker in God's kingdom. My Father knows my every need even if my faith is weak. Life is about more than food and possessions. I should strive to bring God's kingdom where peace, love, and redemption reign here and now.

- What is God's purpose for my life?

We are to follow Jesus' example of love, peace and justice towards one another in a big variety of ways as in the list from the New Testament letters compiled by Gerhard Lohfink and read in the responsive prayer.

ENCOUNTERS ALONG THE WAY

First Encounter: Seasons of Life – Jean's Story (See the suggested visual aid that follows.)

The purpose of this encounter is to see all the seasons of one person's life. Before the story is read, tell the group that the story of Jean and Hope Church is true, though disguised. Ask them to refer to the definitions of the Seasons of Christian Life as already printed and summarized on the flipchart. During the reading, each person should write in the margin the season that paragraph describes. This is one of the oft repeated techniques used with stories to get each person looking for specific things, attitudes, characteristics or actions while the story, play, or case study is being read. This way they are ready to immediately begin participating in the discussion questions. These directions are written in the sidebar notes but since most people are NOT accustomed to writing in their books, it would be good to suggest this just before the reading begins.

Think. Pair. Share. (Groups of three will work also.)

This is a 10 minute discussion process of thinking about a given situation or problem, discussing it briefly with the person sitting nearby and then sharing that with the whole group. Talking in pairs even for as little as 3 minutes will give everyone a chance to participate comfortably and will uncover many varied ideas very effectively.

All the questions can be considered at the same time, not necessarily sequentially because most of the points will come out when the seasons of Jean's life are identified.

IMPORTANT: This section is intended to be a thought starter for future sessions. As such there is limited time for limited objectives. It is not necessary for every pair to report back to the larger group. The goal is to get each person to think about the stages in Jean’s life (and in their own life) and what made life worth living for Jean.

Many of the Bible passages under “What is God’s Purpose in my Life?” apply to Jean. Prior to the session the leader should make note of those. It is not necessary that the group make an extensive list of Jean’s traits or to record them.

After her story is read, have the participants point out those characteristics of each season that are in Jean’s story. List obvious behaviors, attitudes and actions seen in the story on your flipchart or marker board. Write words in bold prior to the session. Responses from the authors and from field-testing are in italics.

Suggested layout for three flip charts OR one marker board for *Introduction, First and Second Encounters*:

What’s it all about?

Seasons of Christian Life	(First Encounter)	(Second Encounter)
INTRODUCTION	Jean’s Seasons	Finding Meaning
Purpose	Spring: talents & values are sown	Summer (Brehony)
Defining the Seasons	and tended	Quest for meaning begins
	<i>Wisconsin childhood</i>	Values & goals questioned
	<i>Nursing school</i>	Spiritual questions arise
Table of Contents	<i>Army nurse in Philippines</i>	Contemplate death
Six Journeys	Summer: growth is shaped, fresh	Autumn
---Destination of the Journey	produce appears	<i>Apparent good health – Lillian</i>
---Postcard	<i>Abusive husband, baby, divorce</i>	<i>Humor, positive attitude - both</i>
---Food for the Journey	<i>Happy marriage, 2 babies, polio,</i>	<i>Interested in other people – both</i>
---Encounters along the Way	<i>husband dies</i>	<i>Widows – both</i>
(True stories, readings)	<i>Alcoholic husband, divorce</i>	<i>Liked to share herself – both</i>
---Notes for the Travel Log	<i>Foreign college student</i>	<i>- Lillian with speeches</i>
---Food for the Journey		<i>- Jean by writing</i>
---Re-entry (Reflection, Action,	Autumn: harvest and saving	<i>Long life</i>
Digging Deeper)	<i>Active at Hope Church</i>	
---Travel Guides for Journey	<i>Serious health problems</i>	Lillian
	<i>Helping others: storytelling,</i>	<i>Fraternity house mother</i>
	<i>homeless shelter, listening</i>	<i>Manage nursing home</i>
	<i>“Poet laureate” -- humor</i>	<i>Peace Corps volunteer in India</i>
	<i>Service to others</i>	<i>Speeches</i>
	<i>Travel</i>	<i>Mother of US President</i>
	Winter: storehouse tapped	
	<i>Emergency room visits</i>	
	<i>Required help from others</i>	
	<i>Sharing difficult but hope-filled,</i>	
	<i>joyful life</i>	
	<i>Good listener</i>	

After this discussion, ask if anyone wants to change where they marked themselves on the time line continuum. They do not have to share their selection.

Second Encounter: The Quest for Meaning

The phrases in italics in the preceding visual aid for this encounter are some of the responses from field-testing of this material and are included here as hints of discussion starters for the leader.

After reading the quotes by Brehony on the middle years, point out those things that people begin to search for during this stage of life under **Summer** on your flipchart for the *Second Encounter*.

- What do you think gave meaning to Jean's life? Did that change from one season of her life to another?

You can record the things that gave meaning to Jean's life by adding to the list under *Jean's Seasons* or circling the items already written during the *First Encounter*.

If you are using a flipchart, tear off the one titled *Jean's Seasons* and tape it to the wall so that it can be seen while you are recording responses for the *Second Encounter* about Lillian Carter. See suggested responses in chart. The participants should see how Biblical advice was lived out in the two different lives of Jean and Lillian.

Third Encounter: My Commitment

Allow time for each person to write their commitment on the card and seal it in the envelope before handing it to you. Tell them that they will open their envelope in Session 6.

RE-ENTRY

Before praying the closing prayer together, point out the three parts to this *Re-entry* section: *Reflection*, *Action* and *Digging Deeper*. Encourage each individual to read both the reflection and digging deeper parts and to make the personal commitment to action. Encourage them to write their proposed action in their book for voluntary sharing in the next session.