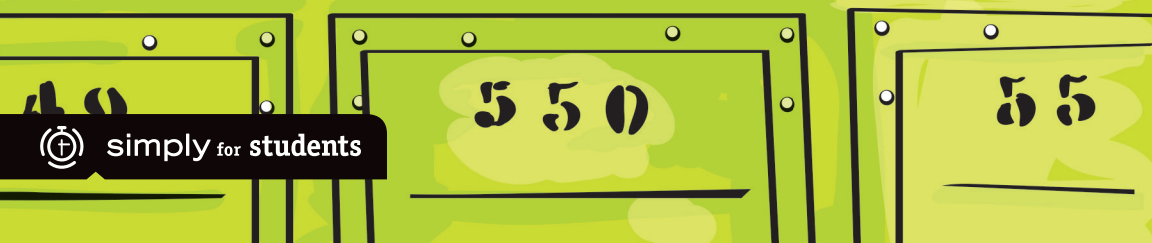


A 30-DAY DEVOTIONAL

7TH GRADE

GROWING YOUR FAITH

classes self-conscious LARS ROOD indecisive performance
peer pressure adventurous confident
insecure sports mad fun bands fitting in
nice nervous impulsive grades friendly thoughtful
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7th Grade

Growing Your Faith

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TO SOREN:

I wrote this book when you were in seventh grade. Everything here was aimed at giving life to your faith and providing us with more things to talk about when we go out to breakfast on Tuesdays. I love who you are and who you are becoming. Seeing you interact with your friends, play drums in the worship band, grow in size and character, and just live your life is so incredible to watch as a dad. You inspire me to be a better friend, husband, dad, and follower of Jesus.

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INTRODUCTION

Hey there! My name is Lars, and I'm glad you're reading this book!

Seventh grade is a crazy year in junior high (or middle school, as I called it growing up). School gets harder, and you'll probably have to focus to stay on track with everything that's being thrown at you. School gets tougher, and this might be the first year you move from classroom to classroom all day. Figuring out where you're going to spend your time becomes harder because you get pulled in many directions. Sports, clubs, church, and family can get complicated. And friendships can get weird—people who've been your friends for a long time may not seem as close anymore.

During this year, you're figuring out who you are—and that's a good thing. Your faith might face new challenges, too, and you might find that you have more questions than you can handle—and maybe the answers that you were given earlier in life just don't make as much sense anymore. Figuring out how the Bible, faith, Jesus, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit fit into everyday life is significant as a seventh-grader.

Plus, this is really the beginning of the teenage years as you turn 13 (if you aren't 13 already)!

Despite all that, it really is a super cool season of life. You start getting more freedoms, and you have bigger responsibilities. Your choices and decisions feel like they really start to matter. Maybe your parents are trusting you more—and that feels awesome. This might be the first year you're in a church youth group and have a whole new experience that's way different from "children's ministry."

So here you go as you turn the pages and begin your seventh-grade year. I hope it's an incredible experience for you!

HOW THIS BOOK WORKS

This devotional includes 30 short things for you to think about. Each reading includes some sort of story related to seventh grade and some follow-up questions to consider. Most of the stories come from my own life and experiences (yes, I was a seventh-grader once—long, long, long ago!), so you'll get to know me a little bit. I hope that hearing about some of my struggles, wins, and experiences in seventh grade will help you. Maybe you can learn from my mistakes, or at least feel like someone actually understands what you're going through.

Each devotion includes a section called "God's Thought"—simple truths that come from the Bible and give you something to think about. Pulling out your Bible and reading it is a good, beneficial habit that will help you build a great foundation for your life. God cares deeply about you here in seventh grade—and that's a message you need to hear again and again and again.

You'll also find an action step for each devotion called "Activate"—a chance to discover something and live out some important truths. They'll take a little effort to accomplish, but I encourage you to do them because they'll help you grow. When we look for ways to connect Jesus to every part of our lives, then our faith becomes more real.

You can do these devotions by yourself, but you also can benefit from discussing them with a small group of friends, with a youth worker, or with your parents. This book might become 30 weeks of curriculum or simply provide 30 days of focus before the school year starts. It's my hope and prayer that these devotions will challenge you, encourage you, and help you prepare for the future.

And if you're doing these with another person or a group of people, I'm praying you have great conversations and opportunities to talk, ask questions, and kick around what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

SECTION 1

Owning Your Faith,
Shaping Your Faith

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550

55

I grew up in a Lutheran church, and during seventh grade we started something called Confirmation. It was a two-year class (yeah, two years that felt like forever) where a pastor taught us each week about God the Father, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the church, how faith worked in life, and a whole bunch of other stuff that I can't really remember. There were only about five of us in the class, and I didn't really have any friends there. Honestly, it wasn't the highlight of my week.

But seventh grade was also really good for me. I had been kind of a loner and didn't have a lot of friends. I grew up in a fairly remote place before it was as easy to connect with people as it is today. A church near my house had a youth group, and I got connected to it simply because that was where our Boy Scouts troop met. A couple of the guys in my troop told me about a weekly thing they did, and I started going—and pretty much from then on, I rarely missed youth group all the way through high school.

We all have the opportunity to “own our faith” in life—in other words, to grow a personal friendship with Jesus and not just be a Christian because our parents or friends are. For me this really started in seventh grade. I *chose* to go to youth group. I *chose* to read my Bible and to go on youth retreats. And what I got out of youth group was exactly what I needed. People spoke truth into my life and helped me discover who God had created me to be. I also had a ton of fun and made some really great friends and memories.

This section of the devotional is filled with specific ideas that will help you discover how to own your faith. I hope the stories, questions, truths, and live-it-out steps help you see how you can become even better friends with Jesus this year.



NO. 1

MAKING YOUR FAITH YOUR OWN

The thing I most remember about my church growing up was sitting next to my mom every Sunday and hearing her sing hymns. I didn't really like the songs—and there was no way you'd catch me as a seventh-grader opening my mouth and attempting to sing them. I just stood there each week and listened to my mom sing. Wanna know what's crazy? I know almost all those songs now—and when I hear them, they mean a lot to me because I think about how my parents took me to church and made faith a big deal when I was young.

Even though I didn't sing in that church, I did start connecting with songs that we sang over at my new youth group. That first year of youth group helped me connect with God through music. Sure, I know that not everyone has the same experience, and maybe you can't imagine ever singing in public. But something that year helped me care about my faith and start making it my own.

Think About

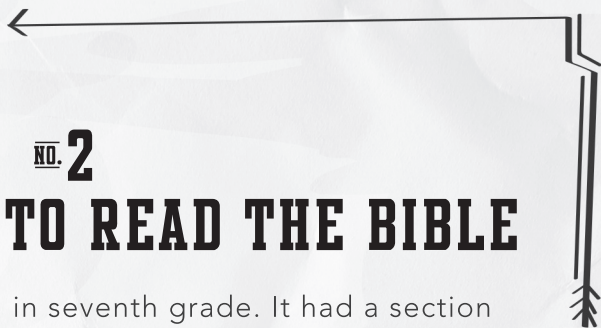
1. What adults in your life have an active faith in Jesus? How do you see them living out their faith?
2. If your parents are followers of Jesus, what are some ways they have helped your faith grow?
3. What moments in your life have helped you begin making your faith your own?

God Thought

Read Mark 1:16-20. I wonder what it was like for these young fishermen on the Sea of Galilee when Jesus told them to follow him. Why did these guys decide to follow Jesus? Why did you choose to follow him?

Activate

This idea is fairly simple—but also might seem scary. Find three adults and ask them a simple question: How did they become serious about following Jesus? If this sounds easy, ask adults that you don't know very well. And if this is really scary for you to do, come up with a plan to figure out which adults you can ask and how you might ask them. Maybe call them or send them a note somehow, instead of talking face-to-face.



NO. 2

HOW AND WHY TO READ THE BIBLE

I got a new “student Bible” in seventh grade. It had a section in the back where I could look up specific topics and then find places in the Bible that talked about those things. I found out later that it’s called a concordance. That was a huge discovery for me: Suddenly, when I was feeling something, I could look in the Bible for a place that helped me understand it. So I’d look up words like *lonely*, *anxious*, *loved*, and *crush* and find things that would help me (though it didn’t help me with how I felt about one particular girl in my class).

My student Bible was also helpful because it had extra stories that explained how to live out my faith. In fact, those stories were similar to what you’re reading right here. They were written to help teenagers figure things out.

I wish I could tell you that since seventh grade, I’ve read the Bible every day of my life. Unfortunately, that hasn’t been the case. Sometimes I remember that I haven’t read it in a while—and it’s usually at those moments that I realize I’m feeling far from God.

The Bible is such a great foundation for your faith. You might get stuck if you start reading from the beginning because there are some books that are just hard. But using the concordance to look up some key things you’re thinking about and getting a student Bible that includes some stories of how it all plays out—those two steps can help your faith grow.

Think About

1. How much of the Bible have you read? Which part did you like the most, and why?
2. Which part of the Bible has been the hardest to understand, and who helped you find answers?
3. How much does the Bible connect to your life as a seventh-grader? Be honest and share any thoughts you have here.
4. What things get in the way of you reading your Bible? How do you need Jesus' help overcoming those obstacles?

God Thought

When I was younger, I got stuck thinking about how the Bible's 66 books—written over thousands of years—could really be a message from God to me. But 2 Timothy 3:10-17 really helped me understand this, specifically in verse 16 where it says, "All Scripture is God-breathed." Read this passage and think about the truth it contains.

Activate

Look in the back of your Bible and see if you have a concordance. If not, ask your parents or youth pastor to find you a Bible that has one. Then write down five things that you are feeling and see if you can find them in the concordance. Then look up a Scripture and see if it applies. In some cases it won't, but you might find that Jesus is speaking some truth to you through this action step.

NO. 3

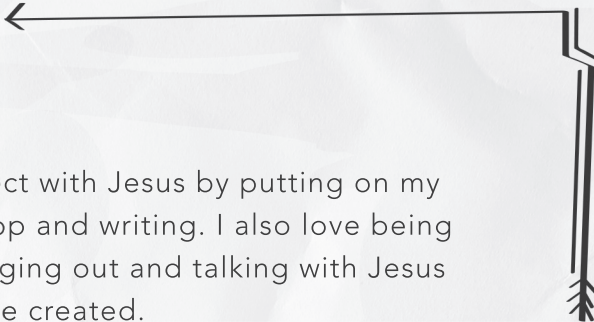
WHY SPENDING TIME WITH JESUS IS IMPORTANT

I like mornings. I also hate mornings. Weird, huh? I like to wake up and start my day, but it's hard to leave my bed and get moving.

Back in seventh grade, I started taking showers each day before school. My mom would wake me up and I'd stumble to the shower. I'd try to keep my eyes closed as long as possible—even while I showered. Of course, at some point I had to open my eyes and decide what I was going to wear that day.

Unfortunately, some days the routine got messed up. My mom woke me up late—or I fell back asleep after she turned my light on. When that happened, my whole morning would seem chaotic, and my whole day would just feel “off.”

Spending time with Jesus is an important part of a daily routine, too, because it helps you stay focused. How long that time needs to be or what you need to do during it—that's for you to figure out as you make your faith your own. I tried a whole bunch of different things, and at many different stages in my life I changed what I was doing. In seventh grade I simply tried to talk with Jesus each night before I fell asleep. This was great because it really helped my day end well, and the next morning would start with a good feeling. Later I tried (pretty unsuccessfully) to get up early in the morning and read my Bible. It just never really worked for me.



These days, I love to connect with Jesus by putting on my headphones in a coffee shop and writing. I also love being outside in nature—just hanging out and talking with Jesus while I look at the beauty he created.

Think About

1. What are some ways you spend time with Jesus? How has that gone for you?
2. If this idea is new to you, what are some things you might want to try?
3. How have you seen other people consistently connect with Jesus?

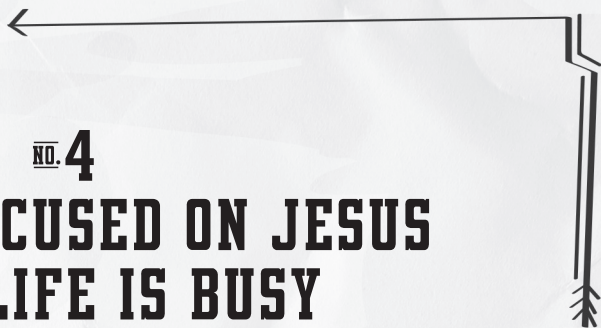
God Thought

Read Matthew 14:23, Mark 1:35, and Luke 6:12. Even Jesus needed to spend time with God the Father.

Activate

Looking for ideas on spending time with Jesus? Get up early. Stay up a little later. Take your Bible into the bathroom. And a whole bunch of other things. Try this: If you live in a place where this is safe to do, go for a walk. It doesn't have to be

a long walk—just a focused time of walking and talking with Jesus. Before you go, think about and write out three things that you want to talk to him about. As you walk, pray and talk to Jesus. Ask those three questions, or just listen. When you get back, sit for a few minutes and think about how you and Jesus connected.



NO. 4

STAYING FOCUSED ON JESUS WHEN LIFE IS BUSY

Seventh grade was the first time that I remember life getting so busy. School, Boy Scouts, sports, friends, church, random stuff my parents wanted me to do—it all made me feel busy. Sometimes it was good because I enjoyed what was going on. Other times it was just lame.

During busy seasons, we need to focus and to make time for important stuff. Think about it this way: What would happen if you just forgot about your closest friends for a few months? Would you feel connected to them? Would your friendships stay strong? Probably not.

Did you realize that faith in Jesus is optional? Here's what I mean: You don't have a choice about going to school. On a sports team you get a set schedule of practices and games and have to be at them. Family events are often non-negotiable, too, and homework just has to be done. But faith—well, that one is easy to let slide if you aren't careful.

So how do you stay focused in your faith? It's different for everyone. I simply decided that I wouldn't miss youth group and church. I went almost every Wednesday and Sunday; it became my life pattern. You may not be able to do that, but you can "own" your faith in this area by figuring out what will help keep you focused.

Think About

1. What are some things you have to do each week that you don't really like to do? How do you get them done, even when you aren't highly motivated?
2. When is it toughest for you to stay focused on your friendship with Jesus?
3. How do you need Jesus to help you stay focused on your faith when life is just so busy?

God Thought

Read Luke 10:38-42—a story about two sisters, Martha and Mary. Martha complained that she was working hard while Mary just sat at Jesus' feet. What truths do you see in this passage?

Activate

It's tough to simply do nothing. Try this: Set a clock for five minutes and just sit still until the timer ends. How did it feel to take that pause? Write down three more times in the next three days when you can take five minutes to pause, do nothing, and just think about Jesus.



NO. 5

BEING OK WITH DOUBT

The youth group I attended was sometimes frustrating because it never really felt like a safe place to express my doubts. Because I grew up attending church, I had a good foundation about Scripture, how church worked, and what it meant to be a “good” Christian. But no one told me that I could ask questions and that it was OK if I didn’t fully know how it all worked. So I sat in youth group and just listened to what my youth pastor said, even though many times I thought, “I don’t get it” and “Why don’t I just believe this stuff?”

I wish someone had told me it was OK if I didn’t get it—or had asked me if I had any questions. But that didn’t happen, so I became less and less vocal and open to talking about my faith because I didn’t have it all figured out. Here’s what I want you to hear: Be OK with being honest and sharing your questions and doubts. I hope and pray that in your church, home, or small group, someone has told you that it’s OK to doubt.

Think About

1. Where do you feel safe telling people that you don’t fully believe or understand something about your faith? If you don’t have that kind of place, where do you want to feel safe expressing those thoughts or doubts?
2. What is one thing right now that you want to get off your chest and say you don’t fully understand?

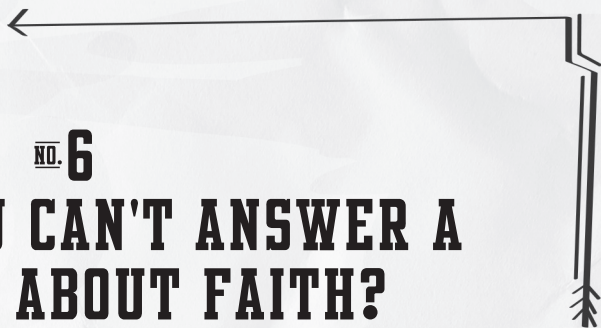
3. Who are a couple of people that you think you could go and talk with about your doubts?

God Thought

Check out John 20:24-29, which tells us about how one of Jesus' followers named Thomas didn't believe that Jesus had come back to life after his crucifixion. You can express your doubts because Jesus is clearly bigger than they are and will show you, like he showed Thomas, that he's real.

Activate

Having doubts is normal, natural, and OK. Write out three things that you struggle with, and then find a trusted adult to talk to about those things. Yeah, I know that can be tough and scary, especially if you think you will disappoint someone. But it's OK. We adults can handle it. We'd rather have you be like Thomas and question things than simply follow without fully figuring it out for yourself.



NO. 6

WHAT IF YOU CAN'T ANSWER A QUESTION ABOUT FAITH?

I hate taking tests. I don't like to get back an exam and see answers marked wrong. This fear comes from two things. First, my mom was a teacher, so I knew that high expectations were placed on me. Second, as a seventh-grader I didn't have a very good sense of who I was, so I always felt like something was wrong with *me* when I didn't get the answers right.

But I came up with a bad strategy to protect myself: I tried to stay away from situations where I had to give an answer. I avoided talking about tough things and isolated myself from people so they didn't realize I didn't have things figured out. As you might guess, this wasn't the best strategy if I still wanted to have friends. Having and being a friend means talking to people who eventually will discover that you don't have all the answers.

This can be scary if someone asks you a question about God and you don't have a solid answer. I remember one time trying to tell someone what it meant to be a follower of Jesus, and I fumbled so badly—I just knew that they were convinced I didn't know what I was talking about. But I have some good news: Jesus is OK when we don't know the answers to everything.

Think About

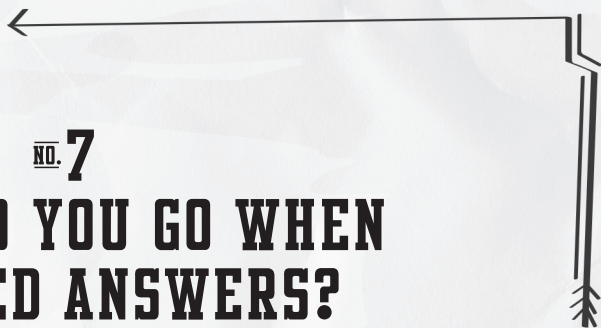
1. What's your typical response when you don't know an answer to a friend's question?
2. How have you handled discussions about your faith when you just didn't know what to say?
3. What would help you feel better prepared to answer questions about God, your faith, and what it means to be a follower of Jesus?

God Thought

I really like 1 Timothy 3:16. Read that verse and think about it. This verse tells me that in some cases, God will be a mystery and I can't know everything. I hope that gives you some freedom to be OK that you don't always know all the answers.

Activate

It's easy to find answers to many factual questions, thanks to online search engines. But answers about faith can be tougher to find. Take a couple of minutes and write three sentences expressing what you believe is true about your friendship with Jesus. Then look at those statements and write three questions that someone might ask about what you wrote. How would you answer these questions?



NO. 7

WHERE DO YOU GO WHEN YOU NEED ANSWERS?

In seventh grade, Evan was my friend and one of the smartest people I knew. He was also really good at just figuring out how things worked. His dad worked at my church as the music director and at the middle school as an English teacher. So between the two of them, I could get answers to almost any question about God, school, life, or girls.

You live in a world where it is so easy to connect with people—and get answers from them. Just the other day, while I was on the other side of the country, my young daughter video-called me just to ask where she could find a pencil in our house. I answered, and then she said bye and hung up. Classic!

Where do you turn when you need answers? Do you have a parent or relative who is ready to help? What about a coach, teacher, or family friends? We all need people that we can turn to for answers.

Think About

1. Who do you turn to when you have big questions about life?
2. What things do you feel most comfortable asking about? What topics are uncomfortable to discuss?

3. What might help you to reach out to people more naturally and get your questions answered?

God Thought

Read 1 Kings 10:1-9, which tells about the Queen of Sheba and how she was impressed by Solomon's wisdom and the way he answered all her questions. As you read, think about how God can provide the answers to your questions.

Activate

I had Evan and Bill and a whole bunch of other people in my corner; now it's time to build your support team! Grab a sheet of paper and create two lists. In one column, make a list of things that you have questions about: faith, dating, parents, friends, kissing frogs, and anything else. In the next column, write the names of people that you would feel comfortable going to with your questions. Then draw lines between the two—creating a list of people you can turn to when you have specific questions. BTW, I still ask Evan questions about stuff—and he's still really smart!



NO. 8

HOW DOES YOUR FAITH IMPACT YOUR FRIENDSHIPS?

When I was in middle school my youth group attended dance parties a couple of times a year. Of course, “dancing” in seventh grade meant standing next to a wall and talking with my friends. I have fun memories of those nights and other times from youth group. We didn’t have a big church, but almost all of my friends were from there. Faith and friendships seemed inseparable.

Your friendship situation may be totally different. Maybe most of your friends are from school, your neighborhood, or a sports team. Or maybe you feel like you don’t have many friends. It’s OK to be still figuring all this out. As you get older, you’ll have more opportunities for your faith and friendships to interact because your friendship with Jesus will become more of who you are. I hope and pray that you have and will have friends who help point you to Jesus and don’t draw you away.

BTW, I think I may have actually danced with a girl one of those times in seventh grade. But it was weird, and I quickly went back to the wall and my friends.

Think About

1. How does your faith impact your friendships right now?
2. Where did you meet your closest friends? Does the place a friendship started affect how you live out your faith? Why or why not?

3. What are the three most important things you look for in a friend?

God Thought

Read 1 Samuel 18:1-4 and think about what it means to be “one in spirit” and to “love someone as yourself.” Why are those things important in a friendship?

Activate

“To have friends you must be a friend.” I heard that over and over again growing up. So right now, go be a friend. Call, text, email, or use some other crazy way to reach out to a friend and tell them why they mean a lot to you. How did it feel to do that? What did that person say back to you?



NO. 9

FOLLOWING JESUS AND HAVING FUN

I'm super stoked that my two middle school-age sons have an amazing youth pastor, Nate. He's a really fun guy who helps teenagers experience the joy of following Jesus. I love knowing that he will impact my boys and their faith.

Nate and I met 20 years ago, when I was in college and working at a camp in California for the summer. He and some other people who worked at the camp had a faith in Jesus that seemed a lot more fun than mine was. As I watched them, I felt like God was telling me to learn from them. So I did—and over the next 10 years while I lived in California, Nate and I had a bunch of different experiences together that taught me about how to follow Jesus *and* live a really fun life.

Who in your life can help you discover the excitement of following Jesus *and* living a fun life? Maybe it's your youth pastor or a volunteer leader in your youth group. When I was in seventh grade, I learned a ton about Jesus from a volunteer in my group who led worship on his guitar. Whoever it is, find someone who can help you understand why following Jesus is the best decision ever.

Think About

1. Who in your life can help you learn about following Jesus more deeply, consistently, and joyfully?

2. What kinds of people do you look for when you want to see how to follow Jesus more authentically?
3. Is there anyone on TV, in music, in movies, or online that you believe teaches you some of what it means to be a follower of Jesus?

God Thought

Do you ever wonder what people who follow Jesus *really* look like? In Galatians 5, the Apostle Paul gives us a list of “fruit” that grows in the lives of people who are following Jesus. Read Galatians 5:16-26 for all the details.

Activate

Take a look at that list in Galatians 5 and think about which of those characteristics people see in you—or which you want Jesus to help you grow. Get a marker and write one of those characteristics on something that you can keep with you all day today. Think about it throughout the day, and pray that Jesus would help you.



NO. 10

BESIDES CHURCH, WHERE CAN YOUR FAITH GROW?

My faith grew in a boat.

Let me explain that a bit more.

When I was in seventh grade, we lived on an island and I had a boat. Once I was out on my boat during a storm. It probably wasn't more than just a slight wind, but at the time it felt pretty huge. As I left the dock, I wasn't sure that this was a particularly good idea—but I went anyway. Well, my faith really grew that day when I got carried away by the wind and wondered if that was going to be the end of me. I prayed out loud while I rowed, asking Jesus to help me get back to shore and keep me from capsizing. I didn't capsize, but I also didn't make it to the right shore—my dad had to pick me up on the other side of the bay.

My faith grew in other places, too. One spot was our local library, where I would read books all the time. I often tried to find a book that talked about people who had faith. And at that library I discovered the Narnia series of books by C.S. Lewis, which taught me a lot about God.

There are a ton of other places where your faith could grow. Maybe it'll happen at your home or at a relative's home or when you're hanging out with friends. It could happen on a sports team, at a movie theater, or just out in nature as you walk around and think about how amazing Jesus is. You just have to be looking for him.

Think About

1. Besides church or youth group or small group, where has your faith grown?
2. What makes that place significant for you? How have you grown there?
3. What are some other places that might help you think about Jesus?

God Thought

Read Matthew 2:1-6, which mentions that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. I wish you could go there and visit the place many people believe his birth happened. I've been there, and it's pretty incredible. The Church of the Nativity is amazingly beautiful, and you just feel like you are in the presence of God.

Activate

Search online for images of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Think about what it would be like to visit the spot where Jesus was born. How do those images make you feel? You probably won't go there anytime soon, so think about a spot near you where you could go and experience Jesus. Figure out a way to get there, take this book or some paper, and draw a picture that shows how you feel about Jesus' birth.

ARE YOU READY FOR SEVENTH GRADE?

It's a year filled with all kinds of changes. The world literally feels like it's increasing in size, school gets tougher, bodies go through all kinds of crazy changes, and you have to focus to stay on track with school and life. And your faith will take on new meaning, too.

This fun 30-day devotional will guide you through some of the biggest changes and challenges of this year, including handling doubt, dealing with all the physical changes, making choices that will build your friendship with Jesus, and being smart about what you see and hear and say.

Whether this is your first year of junior high or you're already trekking through middle school, *7th Grade: Growing Your Faith* will give you some solid wisdom and advice, along with lots of truths to think about and lots of ideas to put into action.



LARS ROOD has been involved in youth ministry for 20+ years, and it has been an amazing ride. A featured writer/speaker, he loves to be with students and families, and enjoys teaching youth workers and seminary students. Lars and his family live in Washington state, where he is an associate pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Bellevue. You can follow his life at larsrood.com, twitter.com/larsrood, facebook.com/larsrood.



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