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1. Melissa's Prayer Journal: **An Honest Window to Faith**

Perhaps what is most remarkable about Melissa's Prayer Journal (MPJ) is that it is the real-life, honest reflections of teenager's journey of faith. It is the rich, unembellished journaling to God of a young person going through very typical, and some extraordinary, life experiences.

Indeed, when Melissa was writing this journal, she did not do so to create something that would be published. The writing is not intended to be instructional or exemplary. (Though it is!) Melissa was not striving to be inspirational or profound. (Though she was!) She was not attempting to show herself at her best, most faithful, or most admirable. (And so, what a witness!) This is Melissa journaling as Melissa, as she works to connect with God, friends, new relationships, family. It is Melissa writing to God as she discovers and records highs and lows of everyday life, as well as the specific struggles of cancer. It is the journal of a unique child of God, as we all are, who provides a most powerful window for us into the Christian faith.

It is important to be clear, in addition, that while Melissa did not write the journal to be published for others, it is clear that the publishing of this journal in this form is something she would have been very pleased with. As the content shows, Melissa celebrated nothing more than being able to share and spread her faith. Indeed, core to the creation of this journal, is honoring her own sense of God using her, to spread Christ's love and grace. And so, those who assembled this journal did so with the greatest care and consideration of Melissa's hopes, personality, and boundaries. Likewise, great care was taken to honor and respect the boundaries and roles of Melissa's friends and family.

In MPJ, we have a warm and comfortable invitation and opportunity to bear witness and even to join with Melissa on a remarkable journey of faith.

2. The Richness & Challenge of MPJ

When approached intentionally, I find the authenticity of MPJ can make it feel more powerful than a sermon and more real than a devotional book. As I've introduced MPJ to youth, I have come to see it as something like rare, contemporary, primary source material. Its flow and organization are written as they authentically occurred to Melissa. Youth and adults respond powerfully to its honest witness. The flip side of this richness, however, is that it also presents an added layer of challenge for those working with it. If part of why MPJ is so uniquely beneficial is that it provides a clear and unadorned window to faith, the corresponding difficulty is that it was not written in order to be an orderly account with a beginning, middle, end. That is the main reason for this Leader's Guide; hopefully it will be a resource for group leaders in using MPJ. Hopefully this will help in unpacking MPJ to get at the embedded, rich faith lessons. I find the approach here similar to the type of reflection required for getting the most out of scripture. This guide is simply to help your group discover the transforming power of MPJ.

3. Using MPJ as a Bridge to Faith

This guide is geared towards helping people across the spectrum of Christian belief to use MPJ. Melissa was a person with a strong and clear faith. Those with a similar faith would be able to resonate easily with Melissa's language, experiences, and images.

However, for youth or young people new to or more skeptical of Christianity, this guide will hopefully provide a vital bridge.

Indeed, part of how I have found MPJ so useful is as giving newcomers and skeptics a glimpse of the fabric of a stronger Christian faith. Much of my experience of working with

3-a. Real Life Issues: Sickness & Mortality

Notes to Leader:

This is an intense study, with a powerful and heavy topic. It is probably beneficial for most groups to do this study, since working with to MPJ may engender questions of illness, death, and God's role with such issues. Again, this is an additional benefit of MPJ- it provides a vehicle for dealing with these issues, which are key to life and key to faith. Indeed, the issue of mortality is crucial in Christianity. In many ways, the Resurrection is at the core of Christianity.

Therefore, in a way, this topic is arguably the most important to address. In this, though, it is important to be sensitive to the needs of the group and to assess at what point to present this topic. Remember the studies in this book can be used in any order that fits your group and your goals.

In a way, the recommended structure for processing topics of sickness and death varies from the rest. Here you may need to give people time to talk and share their thoughts and feelings before encountering Melissa's prayers. Again, avoid the temptation to come up with answers during this discussion, and feel free to delay the group from trying to reach answers too quickly. Sometimes our faith grows as we contemplate the mystery of God and our own inability to completely grasp the infinite.

Opening Prayer

"Dear Lord, The thought of being sick or considering our own mortality are two places we do not want to go. And so we ask you to help us to see how Your goodness is present even in the most difficult of circumstances. As we consider this, we ask that listening to Melissa's voice may help us hear your words of reassurance and love. This we pray to you, Our Divine Healer and Helper, in Jesus name, Amen."

Introduction:

“One of the tough parts of this journal is that we get to know Melissa, sometimes identify with her concerns, and then have to face the fact that she did die, and now is with God in way beyond our clear knowing. As people of faith, we have the consolation that Melissa is in God’s secure embrace, that she is in heaven. And yet we may still experience fear, anxiety, questions, and doubts as we consider this topic.

As we move into this study, we can think of whether we have had situations where we have encountered illness or death?

As we recall these, or as we think of these topics apart from our own experiences, we might consider our feelings and thoughts... We might ask of these topics:

What do we think about them?

How do we feel about them?

As we consider Melissa’s journey, we might have questions such as:

How does God let someone like Melissa (someone like us, even) die?

Melissa had such faith in God. So, where was God when she needed God most?

Today we are going to see what Melissa’s perspective was about her illness. But before doing that, we’re going to explore some of our own thoughts and questions. So, before we read from MPJ, answer the following questions.

** In your life, have you ever had first hand experience (yourself or loved ones) of serious illness or death?*

** What are thoughts or feelings you have about these topics? Are they comfortable? Uncomfortable? What else?*

** What questions, fears, or concerns do you have?*

** What hopes, confidence, reassurances do have?”*

Key Points for Preliminary Discussion:

- ⇒ Common reactions to loss—experienced or imagined— include anger, guilt, sadness, and fear. If you are feeling any of these or any other reactions, this is normal!*
- ⇒ God calls us to bring all our feelings, even our anger and fear, to God! Also, part of what’s nice about this group, is that we can bring them to one another. We all share having to face these types of hard things at time!*
- ⇒ Key to our faith is that God is with in all these things. We’ll get to this more later, but key to our faith, is that in Christ, God chooses to be with us, even in death. Moreover, God’s promise to things such as sickness and death is resurrection—new, full, and eternal life!*
- ⇒ If all that sounds big, don’t worry for now. We’ll continue talking about it here. Plus, as a Christian, you’ll continue working through that your whole life!!*

Read: Page 16-17, 27- MPJ,

Out loud as a group.

Questions to Answer Individually:

Follow the same instructions listed on pages 16-17 in this book, using the following questions. Allow participants to jot down answers and continue with open discussion.

3-a. Real Life Issues: Sickness & Mortality

Read MPJ, Page 16-17

1. What strikes you most about this prayer?
2. What did Melissa do when she was feeling desperate?
3. What did Melissa want the most?

Read MPJ, page 27

1. Melissa asks for healing. What else does she ask for? What do you think about this?

Key Points to Emphasize and Share:

- ♥ *Melissa is honest with God about being desperate. We can bring every negative feeling to God. God's wants to hear them! Melissa prayed when she was angry, fearful, distraught, guilty, and disgusted, but she didn't always write them down. Prayer is one way of coping with our negative feelings, because God really does help and answer.*
- ♥ *Melissa focused on the positive and gave thanks for the ability to cope with her illness.*
- ♥ *Melissa used Christian music, friends and scripture to be strengthened and encouraged and to lighten her mood.*
- ♥ *Melissa's greatest desire was to be close to God. She lived out the Christian understanding that, while we all die, by being intentionally close to God we have the grace filled truth of living most fully in this life, as well as forever.*
- ♥ *On page 18, the next prayer, we perceive Melissa's happiness. God gave her blessings that filled her life with happiness.*
- ♥ *On page 27, we see that Melissa had everything to live for. She was in love and hoped to marry Jamie and have a family. When her faith was shaky, she prayed for faith: "please give me peace of mind about putting my life in your hands". She chose to trust God, and asked God to help her with the feelings of peace to follow that choice.*

Related Scripture:

Read MPJ, page 52-53.

- ◆ *Why did Melissa write down these verses?*
- ◆ *How do you think they helped her?*
- ◆ *What do they say to you?*
- ◆ *What do these pages tell us about how Melissa gained her strength and peace?*

[Emphasize points in text box, page 53: Christian music and scripture got her through tough days].

Closing Prayer:

“God of grace and love, fill our hearts with your peace, just as you filled Melissa’s. Fill our minds with trust in you, and fill our lives with your awesome love. May we also feel the joy in knowing you, a joy so great, it can’t be contained. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.”