



JUNIOR HIGH **GROUP STUDY**

THE LIFE OF JESUS

KARA POWELL
General Editor



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How to Use the *Uncommon* Junior High Group Studies

Each *Uncommon* junior high group study contains 12 sessions, which are divided into 2 stand-alone units of 6 sessions each. You may choose to teach all 12 sessions consecutively, or to use just one unit, or to present each session separately. You know your group, so do what works best for you and your students.

This is your leader's guidebook for teaching your group. Electronic files (in PDF format) of each session's student handouts are available online at www.gospellight.com/uncommon/. The handouts include the "Reflect" section of each study, formatted for easy printing, in addition to any student worksheets for the session. You may print as many copies as you need for your group.

Each individual session begins with a brief overview of the "big idea" of the lesson, the aims of the session, the primary Bible verse and additional verses that tie in to the topic being discussed. Each of the 12 sessions is geared to be 45 to 90 minutes in length and is comprised of two options that you can choose from, based on the type of group that you have. Option 1 tends to be a more active learning experience, while Option 2 tends to be a more discussion-oriented exercise.

The sections in each session are as follows:

Starter

Young people will stay in your youth group longer if they feel comfortable and make friends. This first section helps students get to know each other better and focus on the theme of the lesson in a fun and engaging way.

Message

The Message section enables students to look up to God by relating the words of Scripture to the session topic.

Dig

Unfortunately, many young people are biblically illiterate. In this section, students look inward and discover how God's Word connects with their own world.

Apply

Young people need the opportunity to think through the issues at hand. The apply section leads students out into their world with specific challenges to apply at school, at home and with their friends.

Reflect

This concluding section of the study allows students to reflect on the material presented in the session. You can print these pages from the PDF found at www.gospellight.com/uncommon/uncommon_jh_the_life_of_Jesus.zip and give them to your students as a handout for them to work on during the week.

Want More Options?

An additional option for each section, along with accompanying worksheets, is available in PDF format at www.gospellight.com/uncommon/uncommon_jh_the_life_of_Jesus.zip.

UNIT I

The Miracles of Jesus

Your God Is Too Small. The title of J. B. Phillips's book continues to haunt me. *Your God Is Too Small.* I have never even read the book, and I have no idea what lies beyond its cover, but I think of its title often. Is my God too small? Have I boxed Him in? Squeezed Him into categories I'm comfortable with and can understand? Made Him unoriginal, mundane and *ordinary*?

What about the God that your students know? Is He too small? Whether they've grown up in the church or are new to the faith, have they caught that contagious chill of tradition, routine and predictability? I pray this study will help them shake it off. Or rather that the Book talked about in this study will cure them of the spiritual blahs that can creep up and leave them dull and listless. Or—even more accurately—that the Author of the Book will do that.

The aim of this study is to expose students to the divine Author and His Son, Jesus, in their perfect balance between nearness and farness. By "nearness" I mean the too-good-to-be-true fact that God wanted relationships with us so badly that He sent Jesus to live with us, giving us the opportunity to draw near to Him. But it's not just His nearness that makes Him God. It's His farness. Some students have lost sight of the truth that Jesus is not a teddy bear who exists to make us feel better about ourselves. He is wholly other—the Holy Other—who demonstrates His power in ways that should make us shake in our shoes.

It's a good thing that in Jesus' miracles, He demonstrated His Father's nearness and farness by using that holy might to relieve and help those He cared about, including the paralyzed, the blind and the crippled. He still helps us today—from the eighth grader who hears her parents fighting every night as she lies in bed and is just sure they're on the verge of divorce, to the seventh grader who prays every day for his best friend who is Mormon. Then there's the youth worker who has had a long day and wants more than anything else to simply go home and rest, but instead loves, serves and teaches junior-highers about the miracles of Jesus.

Although we've packed this study full of teaching tips, strategies, discussions, object lessons, games, illustrations and activities to help your students

understand Jesus' miracles, I'd like to give you a few more tips to help students walk out of your meetings and be able to say:

- *This one's not computer-generated.* Computer graphic capabilities have blurred fact and fiction by making the impossible *seem* possible. Yet computers only make videos, movies and actors *seem* transformed. Jesus *does* transform, bringing new eyes, new legs and new relationships. In order to help your students understand that these miracles are *real*, take advantage of our suggestions to have them feel the mud on their hands, let the water run through their fingers and imagine what it's like to be without sight. The more tangible you can make your teaching, the more you can engage their senses, the more you help them feel as if they were actually there—the more they'll remember. Maybe more importantly, the more they'll *believe*.
- *This one's happened to me.* We know junior-highers, but we don't know *your* junior-highers. Some of them have had miracles happen to them or to people they know. It might be a physical healing, a relational reconciliation or an emotional breakthrough. Invite your students to share *real life* stories of ways they've seen the enormity of God.
- *This one means something to me.* Please do not cut response time short. Don't try to squeeze it in at the end of the meeting, as students start looking at their watches and rides begin to show up. Let students figure out what the miracle you're talking about means to them, how it shakes their world and what it does to their view of God.

May our God and all of our students' God be *huge*.

Kara Powell
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SESSION I

DEAD MAN WALKING

THE BIG IDEA

Jesus cares deeply about what you're going through and wants to help.

SESSION AIMS

In this session you will guide students to (1) understand the depth of God's desire to help in times of trouble; (2) feel a peace from knowing that the plans of God supercede their finite plans; and (3) act by acknowledging that Christ is in control of one specific, difficult area of their lives.

THE BIGGEST VERSE

"When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled" (John 11:33).

OTHER IMPORTANT VERSES

Luke 10:38-42; John 1:28; 4:43-54; 8:58; 10:40; 11:1-57; 12:9-11; Hebrews 4:15; James 1:2-4

Note: Additional options and worksheets in 8¹/₂" x 11" format for this session are available at www.gospellight.com/uncommon/uncommon_jh_the_life_of_jesus.zip.

STARTER

Option 1: Infiltration. You need a large outdoor area to play the game (the larger, the better), four adult volunteers, a stopwatch, 3x5-inch index cards, candy for prizes, one pen in each of the following colors: black, red, blue, green and orange, and one piece of sidewalk chalk in each of the following colors: white, red, blue, green and orange.

Ahead of time, use the white chalk to divide a large, rectangular area into four sectors equal in size and large enough to accommodate a group of students; then use the other colors to draw a "+" (plus sign) in the sectors, designating each sector's (and each group's) color.

At the meeting, greet students and divide them into four groups. Assign an adult to each group. Distribute the index cards to students and a colored pen to each of the four adults (you keep the black pen). Have each group stand in the sector corresponding to the colored pen that the group's leader has. One sector will be the Green Sector, one the Red Sector, and so on.

Explain that the object of the game is to reach all opposing teams' leaders (adults) without being tagged (a two-hand touch) by a member of another team. Once a leader has been successfully reached, he or she marks a "+" (plus sign) on the infiltrator's card. Each opposing team's plus sign is worth five points. When players have their cards marked by all three opposing teams, they can return to their own sectors without being tagged.

If a player is tagged while trying to enter an opposing team's sector, he or she must be taken to home base (the middle of the playing field), where you mark his or her card with a black "-" (minus sign). Each minus sign is worth *negative* two points. He or she must then start again in his or her team's sector.

At the end of the game, the team with the least amount of points scored against it wins 20 points, plus whatever points its members accumulated.

Signal the beginning of the game; then allow 12 minutes of play. Add up the scores and award the prizes to the winning team. Then discuss the following questions:

- Which strategies worked most effectively?
- Which ones didn't work at all?

Point out that although we don't always understand the methods or strategies of others, it's not necessary for us to understand something for it to be effective. The same is true with the methods God uses in our lives: Although we don't always understand or agree with them, we should be willing to learn from

His methods and know that God desires to be a “home base” for all of us in our times of difficulty.

Option 2: Which Switch Is Which? You need copies of “Which Switch Is Which?” found on the next page and some students who are up to the challenge of abstract thinking!

Distribute “Which Switch Is Which?” and then divide students into groups of two or three. Inform the groups that they have four minutes to come up with some possible solutions to the problem on the handout.

After four minutes, ask for volunteers to discuss solutions that they came up with. (*Note: Avoid potential embarrassment for those who just didn’t get it by inviting only those students who are obviously willing to share their solutions.*) If no one has come up with the correct solution, discuss the following solution with the group. Here’s the solution:

First, flip one of the three switches to the On position and leave it on for 10 to 15 minutes; then flip it to the off position. Next, flip one of the other two switches to the On position and open the door to the room. Of course, the light that’s on corresponds to the switch that you just flipped on! Here’s where the original switch you flipped comes in: One of the two lights that is now off will have a warm bulb; that light is controlled by the original switch. The cool bulb belongs to the light controlled by the switch you never touched! Simple, huh? (Yeah, right!)

After you’ve revealed the solution, explain that sometimes we try to figure out how situations could or should be resolved. We don’t always see all the possibilities, but God does. Like we’re going to see today, His planning is perfect, and He knows the solution before we even have a problem.

MESSAGE

Option 1: The Right Tools for the Job. For this option, you will need several Bibles, three adult volunteers, three random props (for instance, a feather duster, a plunger and an oddly shaped pillow) and a bunch of students who really like to ham it up.

Ask the three adult volunteers to come forward; then select six student volunteers (ideally, three guys and three girls). Divide the volunteers into three teams: guys, girls and adults. Have the adults’ team, the girls’ team and one

Which Switch Is Which?



You are in a room with three switches and a door. The switches are across the room from the door and you cannot touch the switches and hold the door open simultaneously. These switches correspond to three lights in an adjoining room (on the other side of the door). You want to figure out which switch goes with which light. It can be done by only opening the door one time. How is this possible?

Solution: First, flip one of the three switches to the On position and leave it on for 10 to 15 minutes. Then flip it to the off position. Next, flip one of the other two switches to the On position and open the door to the room. Of course, the light that corresponds to the switch that you just flipped on! Here's where the original switch you flipped comes in: One of the two lights that is now off will have a warm bulb; that light is controlled by the original switch. The cool bulb belongs to the light controlled by the switch you never touched!



student from the guys' team leave the room, and then explain to the two remaining volunteers (and the rest of the students) that the "audience" is going to call out two things: a need that people have (such as a drink of water or food) and a random place (such as a sinking ship or a football field). The two volunteers are to act out (no talking allowed) the suggested *need* at the suggested *place* and continue acting while you bring the other male volunteer back into the room.

Call the guys' teammate back into the room and hand him one of the props. Instruct him to use the prop and join in the action with his teammates. Remind all three students that there is absolutely *no talking!* Allow a couple of minutes of pantomime; then stop the action and ask the student what he thought he was doing and where it was taking place.

Invite two of the members from the girls' team back into the room and repeat the process with the girls' team, and then do the same with the adults. Congratulate the team that did the best job getting that third clueless teammate to join in and guess the right need and place.

Invite everyone to regroup. Distribute the Bibles as you point out that it's tough to have a need and not have the right tools to fit that need. Ask for a few volunteers to read John 11:1-44 aloud, and then suggest that Jesus probably visited Mary and Martha's house regularly (see v. 11). Lazarus's sickness must have been pretty severe for them to send for Jesus and ask Him to come back to Bethany, even though the people there were ready to kill Him (see v. 8).¹ Discuss the following:

1. Why would Jesus be glad that He was not present when Lazarus had died (see vv. 14-15)? *He knew this would be an opportunity for a demonstration of His power; He knew God would use it to build up the faith of His disciples, Mary and Martha and others.*
2. Jesus' reputation as a healer was obviously well known (see v. 37), so some of the crowd was frustrated that He hadn't come earlier.



Youth Leader Tip

A great way to make visitors feel welcome is to provide name tags when students arrive. Allow everyone to pick a superhero, cartoon character, celebrity or professional athlete. They will have to work hard at remembering each others' names, and visitors will feel less different.

What do Martha's words in John 11:21-27 and 39 reveal about her faith? *Although she had a relationship with Jesus, she lacked faith in who He was. In her mind she thought Jesus really couldn't do much to change the fact that her brother had been dead for four days. She understood that there would be a resurrection of the dead at the end of the world (see vv. 21-27), but did not believe Jesus could raise her brother after four days.*

3. What does Jesus' prayer in verses 41 and 42 say about His faith? *He knew that He could count on His Father to come through for Him.*

Transition to the next step by explaining that next you're going to see how Jesus' words and actions can impact us 2,000 years later.

Option 2: In God's Time. For this option, you will need several Bibles.

Select two or three volunteers. One at a time, have each of them stand in a doorway with their hands to their sides (palms against their legs). While standing in the doorway, each volunteer is to press the tops of his or her hands against the doorframe as hard as possible for one minute. When you signal that the minute is over, he or she will step away from the doorway and relax—his or her arms will float upward unaided (due to the blood rushing back into the arms). Explain that often when we stop trying so hard and let go, God can do amazing things.

Distribute the Bibles and read John 11:1-44 together, and then ask students to sit in a large circle. Instruct them to retell the story of the raising of Lazarus one word at a time (i.e., the first person might say "Lazarus." The next person could say "died.") Continue around the circle until the story is finished.

Took a long time, right? Point out that by the time Jesus got there, Lazarus had been dead for four days. The normal procession of family, friends and mourners had already been grieving for those four days. Martha went to meet Jesus, as might be expected, while Mary went to Jesus when Martha told her that He was asking for her (see Luke 10:38-42 for another example of the sisters' typical reactions).

Next, discuss the following questions with the group:

1. What might the disciples have been feeling about Jesus' actions? *They were probably confused or puzzled about why Jesus, their friend, did not immediately leave for Mary and Martha's, or they might have*

Session 1: Dead Man Walking

wondered why He didn't just heal Lazarus from a distance, as He had done for others. They also knew His life was in danger.

2. What do you think the sisters might have been thinking about Jesus? *They also knew Jesus could have stopped the death of their brother, even from 20 miles away! They were probably confused and hurt that He had not healed Lazarus, as He had done for so many others, even from a distance.*
3. What does Martha's reaction to Jesus' command to "take away the stone" tell you about her faith? *Martha still did not have a complete understanding of Jesus' power over life and death. She was still being the practical, realistic one, knowing that the reality was that her brother had been dead four days.*
4. What would you be thinking if you had witnessed this event and the miracle? *(Remind students that they have the advantage of hearing this story after the ending is known. Try to get them to place themselves realistically in the situation.)*
5. What does the fact that Lazarus walked out of the tomb after being dead four days do to your own faith? *(Allow some discussion on this. You will probably get a wide variety of reactions from complete acceptance of this miracle to complete skepticism.)*

Explain that Jesus could have healed Lazarus right away and stopped the suffering his death caused, but instead, Jesus chose to wait. Sometimes we are allowed to go through a certain amount of hardship so that when God reveals His glory, we can see His power in our lives. Jesus knew that the four days He waited to go to Lazarus's tomb would be an extremely hard time for Lazarus's family, but He also knew that the awesome power of the Father would be obvious when He raised Lazarus from the dead, demonstrating that He was "the resurrection and the life."

Conclude the discussion by suggesting that God sometimes allows difficult things to happen to us in our lives in order to strengthen us and to build our faith. In sports, athletes use resistance to build muscles, and the same is true with our spiritual lives. Our spiritual muscles are strengthened through resistance and difficulty.

DIG

Option 1: Big and Small. For this option, read the following case study aloud to your group:

Allison was always mature for her age. She developed early, was smarter and looked years older than the majority of the others at her junior high. Other girls were very threatened by Allison. They would gossip about her behind her back, claiming that she lacked morals or that she had flunked a few grades. Deep inside, however, they all knew that they were jealous of her.

Allison got the attention of the boys as well. The guys would joke with each other about which one of them would ask her out, but ultimately no one did. In fact, there were many days that went by when no one—male or female—would talk to her at all.

Chris had the opposite problem, but suffered the same torment from his classmates. He was the junior-high student that didn't grow much after third grade. Even though his doctor said he would grow again soon, he was faced every day with rude jokes and comments about being short. He was miserable.

Now discuss the following:

1. What do Allison and Chris have in common? *Actually, they have the same problem that all teens have: They can't control the internal clocks that their bodies run by! Allison's maturation schedule is rapid, while Chris's is lethargic and slow. Neither of them has any control over how fast they are growing and maturing, but both are ridiculed by their peers because of it.*
2. What do you think Jesus would feel about what they're going through? *Jesus walked on earth as a man and experienced every emo-*



Youth Leader Tip

When using scenarios like the one above, select students from the audience as models. You can even have students dress in costumes or provide other props for them to act out the story and explain the story in a visual way to the group. This helps to grab their attention.

tion we do (see Hebrews 4:15). He empathizes with us, feeling emotions as we do. Although He could see the eventual outcome of their situations, He would understand and feel their suffering.

3. What might He say to them? *Get over it! No, seriously—He'd probably tell them to have faith that, as difficult as it might be, they are both maturing at a rate determined by God for reasons only He understands—and that they are loved by Him exactly as they are, regardless of how others see them.*

Option 2: Details of a Miracle. For this option, ask your students the following questions:

1. What reasons might Jesus have had for not raising Lazarus on the first day? *There are lots of them: It was important that there was no doubt that Lazarus was truly dead. Jesus was also aware that His crucifixion wasn't far off, so it's possible that He was demonstrating God's power over death. Finally, everyone involved learned more about faith through the experience and many actually came to faith because of Lazarus's death and resurrection (see John 11:42,45).*
2. Why does God allow bad things to happen to us? *There are certain things that happen for a purpose we may never understand. We do have God's assurance, though, that He is making us stronger in our faith through those experiences. As James 1:2-4 teaches, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, when you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."*
3. What reasons might Jesus have for crying over Lazarus's death, as described in John 11:35, if He knew that He was going to bring him back to life? *He must have felt the sadness of those around; after all, He was good friends with Lazarus and his sisters and probably felt empathy for those who were mourning. He might have also been saddened that people still didn't believe in Him and His power to perform miracles. He may have been angry over the realities of sin and death caused by His enemy, Satan.*

4. In verse 42, Jesus said, “I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here.” Does that mean it’s okay to pray just so others can see you and hear you? *You should never pray just for show; however, praying aloud in earnest thanksgiving and praise to God can be an awesome teaching tool for unbelievers to understand the power and purpose of prayer and to recognize His answers. His prayer made people take notice and consider the source of His heavenly power—our heavenly Father.*

APPLY

Option 1: Putting Lazarus in the Tomb. For this option, you will need a miniature coffin made out of a shoebox that has been cut and pasted into the shape of a coffin (and then painted to resemble one). You will also need colored paper and pens or pencils. (If there’s no time to make the coffin beforehand, just use the shoebox as is.)

Distribute colored paper and pens or pencils as you point out that Jesus proved that He had the power to raise Lazarus from the dead (see John 11). If He is powerful enough to do that, He can certainly help students in the areas of their lives that are difficult.

Turn their attention to the coffin and explain that just like Lazarus in his tomb, our struggles in life are not out of Jesus’ reach or ability to help. Ask students to write down one area of their life that they want God’s help in—maybe it’s a relationship that’s gone bad; perhaps they’re struggling with their parents about certain areas of their life; maybe there are things at school that are hard to handle. Whatever it is, God cares and wants to help. Allow a couple of minutes for students to write their problems; then invite them to come forward and place their papers in the coffin.

After everyone has come forward, remind students that Jesus waited four days before raising Lazarus—days that must have seemed endless for the mourners—so their situations may not be remedied overnight. They can be sure, though, that God will work in that area.

Option 2: Prayer Reminder. You need pieces of black construction paper and several pens with white, gold or silver ink (these can be found at most office or craft supply stores). *Economy Option:* White, yellow, gold or silver crayons or pencils may be more affordable—anything that will show up on the black paper is okay.

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Explain that sometimes we feel as if we're the only ones in the world who have to deal with tough situations, but the truth is that people all around us have struggles, too. Tough situations can look pretty dark for those who don't have the comfort that knowing Jesus gives.

Distribute the construction paper and pens and explain that the black paper symbolizes the pain and problems of people who don't know Jesus yet. Instruct students to think about someone they know who's going through a tough time right now and doesn't know Jesus. Invite them to draw a picture on their paper that symbolizes the person they have in mind (this might include their initials, but not their full name).

Remind students that just as they can see what they have drawn on the black paper, the Good News of Jesus stands out in dark times. Ask students to place their papers where they will see them and be reminded to pray for others who are going through tough times.

Close in prayer, asking God that all of the people symbolized on the papers would be led to Jesus' comfort and help.

REFLECT

The following short devotions are for the students to reflect on and answer during the week. You can make a copy of these pages and distribute to your class or print out from the PDF available online at www.gospellight.com/uncommon/uncommon_jh_the_life_of_Jesus.zip.

1—TURN TO HIM

Need help? Discover who has some for you in Psalm 46:1-3.

Kelly felt as if her life was falling apart. The factory where her mom and dad worked closed down and both her parents lost their jobs. Her family had to move into a smaller house in order to save money, and they scrimped on everything. Kelly’s parents were unable to find work. The stress of the situation began to take its toll and it seemed they fought constantly.

After a few months, Kelly’s parents decided to get a divorce. Her mother was moving to California, her father was moving to Connecticut and it was up to Kelly to decide which parent she wanted to live with. She felt so alone and confused, because no one she knew seemed to understand what she was going through.

God cares about all our suffering. He wants desperately for us to turn to Him when we’re in need and tell Him what’s going on.

Do you turn to Him when you’re in trouble and tell Him everything that’s happening? Why or why not?

What is one thing that you can share with Him right now?



2—WHERE DO YOU HIDE?

Who will keep you strong? Look up 1 Corinthians 1:8-9 to find out.

Imagine that you're caught in a terrible storm. Wind is stinging your face, rain is pelting your body and you're freezing cold. Where would you hide?

- Under a piece of newspaper
- In a shack with no door and broken windows
- Inside the local 24-hour grocery store
- Under a scrawny, leafless tree

Sometimes life can feel like a terrible storm—and we're trapped smack-dab in the middle. God says that He is our place to hide in times of trouble, but we can easily get distracted and hide in other places: watching TV, sleeping, playing video games, school—even friends and family.

Where do you hide from life's turmoil?

Pray that God will remind you to hide in Him as you walk through the storms of life.

3—GOD REMEMBERS

Look up 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 and find out who called you.

Andrew's mom was one thoughtful gal. She remembered to pick him up from school—even on half days and when he had to stay late for band practice. She remembered that he hated tuna and never packed it in his lunch. She even remembered that he asked her not to call him Andy-bear-baby in front of his friends. Andy was extremely glad that his mom remembered everything that was important to him because that made him feel that he was important to her.

God remembers all the promises He made to us and He is faithful to His Word. It can be hard to see that when times are hard—when we are sick, when

everything is going wrong or when someone we love has died—but God has promised to be there for us always, especially when we’re hurting.

Thank God for always being there for you and pray that you will remember to turn to Him when you are in need.

4—GOD COMFORTS US

Find 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 as fast as you can!

Imagine that your best friend has a nasty cold and you’re planning a visit to cheer him or her up. What will you bring to comfort your friend? (Check all that apply.)

- His or her favorite magazine
- A giant bottle of hot sauce
- Your dirty laundry
- Cough drops
- Tissues
- His or her least favorite candy bar

God comforts us in our times of trouble. He also uses us to comfort others.

Do you know anyone who’s going through a tough time? Maybe you have a friend or a neighbor who could use some comforting. What’s one way you can comfort them today and show God’s love?



Miracle-Worker . . . Storyteller . . . Life-Changer



Is it really possible that the words and actions of a guy from the ancient Middle East can change the lives of junior-highers today? The short answer is yes, but you can find out firsthand with the help of *The Life of Jesus*, part of the *Uncommon* youth study series created by youth-ministry expert Kara Powell. Twelve sessions of Bible study and activities will surprise and excite the young teens in your group as they discover the miracles and parables of Jesus . . . which will make a difference in their lives today. Plus, downloadable student handouts and additional options are available for every session—find out how inside!

Every session is an interactive study of God's Word, created with junior-highers in mind

Flexible format—use for Sunday School, midweek meetings, camps and retreats

Each session has two activity options to fit the needs of your group

Created by Kara Powell, one of today's leading authorities on youth and family ministry

These studies flesh out two absolute essentials for great curriculum: biblical depth and active learning.

Duffy Robbins

Professor of Youth Ministry
Eastern University, St. Davids, Pennsylvania

Great biblical material, creative interaction and user friendly! What more could you ask?

Ken Davis

Author and Speaker



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