

Discussion Guide

Restart

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The Story

Chapter 1. Beginnings

(No Content)

Chapter 2. A Fresh Start

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In God's wisdom, he has given us a library of writings, the Bible, which is largely a collection of stories about God, about his creation, and about ourselves. They are stories that beg us to use our imagination for we can enter a story in ways that we could never get into a book of systematic theology. These stories are given to us so that, through them, we might come to know God better, to live in a right and loving relationship with him who made us. So, here are a few questions to ask yourself as you try to step within the story of Abraham and Sarah. You may want to read Genesis 12-22 first, if it's been awhile. If you are new to these stories, you might consider first reading these chapters in Peterson's *The Message*.
 - Imagine that you are Abraham and you believe that God has told you to leave everything behind to head for a foreign land. What do you think your reaction would be? How would you even know it was God calling you? How would Abraham know? After all, even hearing voices doesn't tell us everything – we medicate that! Do you think something remarkable must have happened within Abraham's heart? How hard must it have been for him to head out?
 - Even better, imagine that you are Sarah. You are in your eighties and your husband comes home announcing that he is going to have an heir – by you! You might laugh as Sarah did. You might even take things into your own hands like Sarah. How could you trust your spouse enough? How could you trust God enough? In Sarah's mind, what might this promise cost her?
2. This is a story about faithfulness: God's faithfulness to Abraham and Abraham's faithfulness to God. How would you define faithfulness? Have there been times in your life when you felt like God was

being unfaithful? How did you deal with that? What does it really mean to be faithful to God? How could we go about being more faithful to God? What do you think God expects of us?

3. Here's one that will get you thinking. The language of Abraham's story is linked to the creation stories. In what ways is this story one of new creation? What are some similarities between the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 (Act 1) and the story of God's covenant with Abraham?

Daily Bible Readings

Genesis 12 God calls Abram and makes three promises to him: a land, numerous descendants, and that *all* the families on earth would be blessed through him. It is this last promise that is often forgotten but is the key to understanding God's redeeming work and the charge given us by Jesus Christ.

Genesis 17 God gives Abraham a sign of God's covenant: circumcision. Note that this comes *after* God promises Abraham countless descendants and pronounces him righteous because of his faith.

Genesis 18:1-15 God again promises a child to Abraham and Sarah.

Genesis 22 God commands Abraham to sacrifice his miracle child, Isaac.

Hebrews 11:8-22 The entire passage about the faith of Abraham.

Chapter 3. The God Who Saves

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The Ten Commandments is one portion of the story of the Exodus that everyone is familiar with. They embody the essence of God's teachings to his people. Read Exodus 20:1-18 and then consider the following:

1. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon remind us "that the [ten] commandments are so straightforward and terse suggests not that they are easy to know, but that they are not self-sufficient." After all, not all Christians agree on what "you shall not murder" means. Is this only referring to our modern legal definition of murder or does it speak more broadly about the sanctity of life? The meaning and application of these commandments are worked out in the life of God's people. How does this happen? How do we build a community that attempts to be faithful to God's will and way, yet stays humble? Surely, sometimes we get this wrong. Hauerwas and Willimon suggest that "we don't know what adultery is apart from a church that shows us what marriage is." Do you agree? How do we as individuals or as the church work through the meaning of these commandments? How does the church influence your own moral decisions?
2. Imagine that God came to you and proposed that he live in your house. How would this make you feel? Would it make a difference if God had done some good things for you?

Daily Bible Readings

Exodus 3:1 – 4:17 Moses meets God at the burning bush and is given his assignment.

Exodus 11-12 The warning of the final plague and the institution of the Passover meal

Exodus 20:1-18 The Ten commandments

Numbers 14 The people refuse to enter the promised Land

Joshua 3 With God as their warrior king, the people cross the Jordan river and enter the Promised Land.

Samuel 8-9 The people insist on a human king, and Saul is chosen.

Chapter 4: God's Relentless Pursuit

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Consider for a minute that God is willing to use marriage and faithfulness to that covenant as a metaphor for God's relationship with his people, that is, with us. How is this metaphor helpful in understanding better our collective relationship with God? In living it? In your view, where does the metaphor begin to break down? In the New Testament, the church is sometimes described as the bride of Christ. Is this helpful to you? How?

You might begin by reflecting upon or sharing some stories of times that your own marriage has experienced some rocky times. If you are unmarried, you probably still have experience with difficulties that beset a committed relationship. These don't have to be stories of problems that threatened to blow up the marriage. There are lots of smaller problems that drive wedges and create distance between husbands and wives. How did you get through the tough times? What advice would you give to a couple experiencing problems? How might the story of God's rocky (there's an understatement) relationship with Israel help us with our own marriage problems?

Does it surprise you that in Hosea 11:8-9, written more than 700 years before Jesus, God forswears his wrath? How do you square this with all the biblical (Old and New Testaments alike) depictions of God's wrath, his righteous anger? What might happen if we all forswore our own wrath?

Daily Bible Readings

2 Samuel 7 God's covenant with King David

1 Kings 18 During the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, Elijah confronts the priests of Baal.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 Jeremiah brings the exiles a promise of a new covenant.

Isaiah 40:1-11 God announces the end of Jerusalem's suffering.

Micah 6:6-8 God wants people's hearts, not their sacrifices.

Acts 7 Stephen recounts how the story of Israel leads one to Jesus.

Chapter 5. The Promise Keeper

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

My experience is that we tend to have a lot of pat phrases that we fall back on when it comes to talking about the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection. "Jesus paid for my sins." "We are washed in the blood of the lamb." Such phrases have their purpose but they can blind us to other ways, biblical ways, of thinking about God's work in Jesus.

What are some phrases that you've used or heard others use? What do you think they mean? If you are talking about this as part of a group, you might make a list of them. You might even try categorizing them. Which phrases are you most comfortable with? Which ones make you uncomfortable? Why? Which ones surprise?

You might go on to discuss the story of Jesus as I told it at the end of the study. How well do you think this story fits with what you've heard or been taught over the years? How well does it fit with your own reading of Scripture? What do you think it highlights? What do you think it leaves out? Do you think it would be helpful to someone trying to make sense of Jesus' death? It helps me understand that Jesus' death was not arbitrary, but the unavoidable consequence of Jesus' faithfulness to God. Do you see this too?

Finally, the story as I told it requires us to embrace Jesus as our representative, the one who has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. How do you think Jesus can be our representative? We are human after all and Jesus is God. Your answer will reveal why the Christians have always held fast to the claim that Jesus is fully and completely human, just as he is fully and completely God.

Daily Bible Readings

Matthew 1 Jesus is born.

Matthew 5-7 A summation of Jesus' teachings – the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 21:1-17 Jesus enters Jerusalem as Messiah and cleanses the temple.

Matthew 27 Jesus' trial, crucifixion, death, and burial.

Matthew 28 Jesus' resurrection and the commissioning of the disciples.

John 10:1-18 Jesus, the good shepherd.

Chapter 6. Our Place in the Big Story

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. On Pentecost, the disciples found (or better, were found by) all the passion and purpose that they could ever imagine. How could Peter, an inconsequential fisherman from Galilee, give a speech that captivated thousands? God's Spirit grabbed, filled, and powered him for astonishing work and witness for Christ. The book of Acts ought to be titled *The Acts of the Holy Spirit*, for it is the Holy Spirit who pushes and drives everyone forward, always pointing the way and strengthening the believers for their work.
2. It can be very hard for us to grasp and to know that God's Spirit works in each of us. Sometimes we can allow ourselves to "tune out" God's Spirit so completely it is as if we are tone-deaf! You see, this is not magic. The Holy Spirit works with each of us, but not as if we are mere puppets. This is about cooperation and will and discipline.
3. What can we do to help each other and ourselves to trust in God's Spirit and to embrace the power, passion, and purpose that is God's gift to us? Here's a hint. The immediate follow-up to Pentecost was this: "They (the believers) devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers." Jesus disciples did not sit around passively waiting for the next ecstatic experience. They went to work . . . but to work with a new purpose. What is our purpose in this fifth act? More to the point, what is *your* purpose?

Daily Bible Readings

Galatians 1:13-24 Paul redirects his passion, from the destruction of the Church to its growth.

Galatians 5:13-26 A passionate church lives by the Spirit.

Ephesians 4:1-16 A passionate church is unified and mature.

Colossians 1:3-14 A passionate church is faithful and thankful.

1 Thessalonians 4:1-10 A passionate church lives to please God.

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 A passionate church is generous.

Chapter 7. The End of Tears

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Seven weeks in this series. The entire biblical story from beginning to end. What is your reaction to this series? Has it helped you to grasp the immensity of God's work to rescue his creation? Do you better understand why the early Christians kept the Hebrew Scriptures?
2. What does the overarching biblical story mean for your own faith and your discipleship? The final act of our play is filled with expectation of a world put right, in which God's mercy and justice sweep across the nations. How can we grasp hold of this hope as we make our way through a world racked with trouble and suffering?
3. Finally, how would you succinctly tell this story to someone else? I suggest that you read back over these seven studies from time to time. I think you'll find that your confidence in your own understanding of this story and your ability to tell it will increase dramatically.

Daily Bible Readings

Daniel 7:9-14 The Son of Man is given dominion over all creation.

Acts 1:1-11 The angels announce that Jesus will return (v. 11).

1 Thess. 4:13-18 Jesus will return and we will all go out to welcome him back to the renewed earth.

Revelation 20:11-15 A vision of the final judgment.

Revelation 22:1-5 The river of life and the tree of life. We first encountered this tree in Genesis 2.

Revelation 22:16-17 All those who wish may drink from the water of life! Come Lord Jesus!

The Beliefs

Chapter 8. I Believe

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Our church is made up of people who come from a variety of church backgrounds and some who didn't grow up in the church. What is your own experience with creeds? With the Apostles' Creed? What have you seen as the purpose of the creed? What in this study surprised you in regards to the purpose and the pros/cons of creeds?
2. Our affirmation that God is Trinitarian (one God, three persons) often seems dry and irrelevant to many Christians. However, it is foundational to all things Christian. Why do you think I'd make such a claim? What does Jesus, and hence the Trinity, reveal to us about God that we would not otherwise know?
3. I've learned that people have widely varying experiences with fathers – some wonderful, some not. How has your relationship with your own father or even father-figures in your life shaped your thoughts and feelings about God the Father? How might expanding father into parent reshape your understanding of God?
5. If God is truly the Almighty, the *pantokrator*, the ruler of all things, what sort of claim does God have on your life? Is there any portion of your life over which God does not rule? Is there anyone on earth over whom God is not the ruler? These seemingly innocuous affirmations about God are really quite weighty and meaningful, aren't they!
6. We are part of God's creation. We are to build for God's kingdom and the renewal of all things. What are you doing today to build in ways large and small?

Daily Bible Readings

Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Galatians 3:20; Ephesians 4:1-6 The unity of God

Matthew 3:16-17; Matt. 28:19 The three persons of the Trinity

Romans 8:12-17 We are led by the Spirit of God and may cry “Abba! Father” when we call out to him.

Psalms 91 Living in the shadow of the Almighty

Genesis 1 God creates

Chapter 9.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

In this week's section of the Apostles' Creed, six truth claims are made about Jesus. For each of the six, discuss and reflect on the implications to the world and to yourself if it isn't true.

1. What if Jesus had not been born? Where would we be in the biblical story? Try to imagine the course of human history if there had been no Jesus.
2. What if Jesus wasn't the long-awaited Jesus Messiah? What of God's promise of rescue was still unkept?
3. What if Jesus isn't really God's *only* Son? What if Jesus was only one of many?
4. What if Jesus isn't really Lord? Who would have ultimate authority over you? Anyone? Anything? What if Jesus was Lord only over his own followers? How would that change the Good News?
5. What if Jesus isn't really God? Why do you think the early church fought so hard to protect the claim of his genuine divinity? What happens to the Good News if Jesus isn't really and truly and fully God?
6. What if Jesus isn't really human? Why is this claim so important to the Good News? What does this claim say about you and me?

Daily Bible Readings

Romans 1:1-7 How would you summarize what Paul says about Jesus in the opening verses of this letter?

Mark 11:1-19 Everything here is supposed to convey that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah/King.

John 1:1-18 Can we read this too often? This is John's unequivocal statement of Jesus' divinity.

1 Peter 1:1-2 Do you see the Trinitarian nature of Paul's salutation?

Philippians 2:5-8 What do you think is meant by "though he was in the form of God . . . emptied himself"?

Chapter 10. Suffered under Pontius Pilate

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. How would you summarize Jesus' life? Why do you think the creed says nothing about Jesus' teachings? Why does the creed elevate what we might call the Christ-event?
2. There wasn't much time in the study to expound on the God-Who-Suffers. What difference does such a claim possible make to your life? How might it help those who are suffering? Dennis Ngien tells the following story:

The church of the suffering God must exist in and for this world, accepting suffering itself as it cares for the needy, the sick, and the poor and seeks the liberation of the oppressed. If God is found in the human suffering of Jesus, we should not then preach a triumphalist doctrine of health, wealth, and freedom from affliction for those who believe.

Once a Christian couple came to me in Russia, requesting that I pray for divine healing for their sick baby. After prayer, the baby died in my arms. One could have asked, "Where is God?" Triumphalism has nothing to say at such moments, except lashing the wounded into deeper guilt and pain for their supposed lack of faith. But these bereaved parents said: "It is better to be in the storm with Jesus than to be in it without Jesus."

What is your reaction to this story? Speculation as to the "why" of suffering will always be fruitless.

Have you experienced the presence of Jesus in a time of your own suffering?

Daily Bible Readings

Hosea 11:8-9 Could this be the word of a God who is not compassionate, who does not suffer?

Isaiah 53:3-9 The suffering servant of God

Acts 2:14-36 Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 The contrast of Christ crucified with wisdom

Chapter 11. The third day he rose

(No Content)

Chapter 12. The Holy Spirit, the Holy catholic Church

(No Content)

Chapter 13. Communion and forgiveness

(No Content)

Chapter 14. The everlasting resurrection

(No Content)

The Objections

Chapter 15. God, Where Are You?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin by talking about the three types of convictions: public, private, and core. How well do you think this three part scheme describes the way convictions and beliefs work in us? What are some examples you've seen where public, private, and core convictions don't line-up? Do you think that we tend to know what our core convictions are? How could we come to understand better our core convictions?
2. When have you personally experienced God's presence with you? How about those times when it seemed that God was somewhere else? Discuss how a n affirmative core conviction of God's presence in the person of the Holy Spirit would help to reassure you that God is always present with you? Can our head really help us to overcome feelings of being separated from God? How do you strive to connect with God?

Daily Bible Readings

Psalm 22 You'll never feel more abandoned by God than this psalmist felt.

Isaiah 63:9-14 There are four references to the Spirit here, the presence of God

Exodus 33:12-23 The entire passage re Moses' intercession with God

John 14:25-31 Jesus is leaving his disciples, but he promises that Gdo will send the Spirit to be with them.

Romans 8:1-17 Our life in the Spirit; i.e., with the ever-present God

1 Corinthians 12 God, in the person of the Spirit, hard at work in the church.

Chapter 16. The Question of Evil

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin by talking about Job. He has suffered terribly, losing everything – all for no apparent reason. Assume that you are one of Job’s friends. You’ve come to comfort him and the conversation inevitably turns to the explanation for Job’s sufferings. What possible explanations might you suggest? What explanations might you hear from others? What is your reaction to God’s pronouncements that the answers are unknowable and that it is foolish for us even to ask?
2. What do you think is God’s role in the world’s evil and suffering? Share some things you’ve heard people say about God when confronted by tragedy, such as “this is all part of God’s plan.” How do these statements make you feel about God? What would you say to them?
3. How can God be all-powerful and all-loving and yet there be such pain in this world? Could it be that he is not as powerful as we think, as some people suggest? Or might God not be as loving as we think, as others suggest? How do we hold together our proclamation that God truly *is* good, that he *is* all-powerful and all-loving? What would you say to those who reply that given the world’s suffering, this is so much sentimental nonsense? How is the cross a response to such charges?
4. Finally, you might reflect on how hard it is for us to simply trust God with what we don’t understand? Why is it so difficult? How can we become more trusting of God?

Daily Bible Readings

Genesis 1:1-2:3 God creates the world and creates it good.

Job 3 Job curses the day he is born and expresses some of our own feelings in the face of suffering and evil.

John 15:1-17 On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus speaks to his disciples about true love (see v. 13).

1 Peter 3:8-22, 4:12-19 The early Christians were well-acquainted with suffering, even suffering for doing good.

Micah 4:1-5; Revelation 21:1-8, 22:1-5 The full consummation of God's restoration project are imaginatively depicted in these passages.

Chapter 17. Is Jesus Really the Only Way?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The content of the Christ Hymn from Colossians (v. 15-20) is staggering, but I wonder how much it actually staggers us! How can we read such a passage and truly embrace, intellectually and emotionally, the immensity of its claims? A man who died in humiliation upon a Roman cross is the image of the invisible God. All things were created in him, through him, and for him. He is before all things. . . . How could this be!? This is about far more than my inner peace or the forgiveness of my sins. This is a cosmic story. What are some steps we could take to reconnect with the sheer enormity of Jesus Christ?
2. It is important to see that saying Jesus is the way is not the same as saying that we desire to live in his way. Do you understand the difference? How would you put this in your own words? Scripture is more focused on the latter, as Marva Dawn puts it, shaping us into people who follow *on* the Jesus way *in* Jesus' way. As Jesus says just a few verses after today's reading, "the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do." How can we hold together our belief that Jesus is the way and our desire to live in his way?

Daily Bible Readings

Mark 2:1-12 Who can forgive sins but God?! Jesus can.

John 1:1-18 Jesus is the Word and the Word was God.

Philippians 2:5-11 Jesus is Lord of all creation and every knee will bow to him. (Every?) See Isaiah 45:18, 22-24 to see this language applied to God.

Romans 2:14-16 Paul is saying here that non-Jews (Gentiles) have a “law” within themselves, a conscience, that can guide them to doing God’s will. But, of course, much of the time, though not all, it is ignored.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 Paul acknowledges that the proclamation about Jesus seems like foolishness to much of the world. It is the same now as it was then.

Chapter 18. Real Christians?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Has anyone ever complained to you about the “hypocrites in the pews?” How did it make you feel? How did you respond?
2. Does it seem to you that too many Christians give Christianity a bad name? What are some examples? How have you accounted for that? Have you ever been tempted to pronounce that someone isn’t a Christian, despite what they say? What’s your reaction to C.S. Lewis’ realization that he could never know whether someone was a Christian based on their behavior (p. 3 of the study). Do you think he was right?
3. In the study, I make the point that Paul’s teachings on how we ought to live boil down to doing what is a good witness to Christ and doing what builds up the church. How helpful are these two teachings to shaping our day-to-day lives. If we were to take them seriously, how would it change your daily life?
3. What is your reaction to the phrase “born-again Christian?” What do you think it means? How would you react to someone calling you a born-again Christian? Do you understand why I say it is redundant? Why do you think it is so popular if it is redundant? How do you think “born-again Christian” came to mean something different from just a “regular” Christian? You might even talk about other popular redundancies, such as “committed Christian” and “Bible-believing Christian.” What are some others? Why do we use them?
4. In the study, I try to make the point that being “born from above,” as is the case for all Christians, is not about adding something we lack or improving us or fixing us. It isn’t even a complete makeover. Maybe a do-over is closer to the idea. As Paul puts it, we are “new creations – everything old has passed

away, everything has become new.” How might we make this new birth seem more concrete to us, more real? How do we proceed with making our thoughts, words, and actions conform to the born-from-above us? How do we avoid letting this slip into some variant of another self-help scheme? What are some practices we could engage in that would help us become the people into whom God has already made us?

Daily Bible Readings

1 Corinthians 14:1-19 Paul tells these Christians that the gift of tongues speaking is to be used to build up the church

1 Corinthians 14:20-25 Paul then tells these Christians that the gift of tongues speaking has to be restrained in public so people don't think they are crazy. What sort of witness to Christ would that be?

John 3 The full chapter on Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus.

Galatians 5:13-26 The true meaning of Christian liberty; living in the Spirit

2 Corinthians 5:11-6:10 We are new creations in Christ and we have been given a ministry of reconciliation. We are to be “ambassadors of Christ.” If only, more Christians remembered that 24/7!

Chapter 19. Is God a Bully?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Have you ever felt like God has “bullied” you in life?
2. In hindsight, do you see those perceived “bullying” experiences as God literally “bullying” you or do you see them as God stretching and growing you through challenging experiences to your life and faith?
3. There is a saying, “...without a test, we would not have a testimony.” If you had not experienced the challenges you’ve had in your life, how do you think your life would be different? Is it possible to say that you’re thankful for your struggles?
4. Romans 8:28 (NRSV) reads, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” How have your struggles shaped you and helped form your faith? Have they “worked together” for your good?
5. In the story of the death and resurrection of Lazarus in John 11:1-44, we are told in vs. 35 that “Jesus wept”. How have you experienced Jesus “weeping” with you; i.e. being present with you in challenging times of your life?
6. How have the answers to the previous four questions impacted your answer to the main question, “Is God a bully?”

Daily Bible Readings

Joshua 5:13-6:27 The story of Jericho

Hosea 2 How will God deal with his adulterous Baal-worshiping people?

Deuteronomy 32:35, Proverbs 20:22, Romans 12:14-21 God says leave the vengeance to him.

Matthew 5:38-48 Jesus gets to the very heart of the Law.

Revelation 19:11-21 Jesus the Divine Warrior

Chapter 20. Hell?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin by talking about your own understanding of hell. Did you find something close it anywhere in this study? What in the study surprised you? Has the study spurred you to reconsider some of your thoughts about the Christian view of hell? If so, how?

Daily Bible Readings

Jeremiah 7:30-34 The “valley of the son of Hinnom” would come to be called *gehanna*, the garbage dump of Jerusalem.

Psalms 16 The psalmist contrasts the temple, the path of light, with Sheol, the abode of the dead.

Acts 2:22-28 In Peter’s sermon, he quotes from Psalm 16 in verses 25-28. Notice that Sheol (a Hebrew name) is changed to Hades (the Greek name for the abode of the dead). Same place; different name.

Philippians 2:5-11 In v. 10, “in heaven, on earth, and under the earth” describes the entirety of all that God made. There seems to be no one, anywhere, who does not acknowledge and embrace that Jesus is Lord.

John 14:1-7 Jesus goes to prepare a place for his disciples.