

LESSON SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

The Bible contains an Upper Story and a Lower Story. The Upper Story tells the big picture, the grand narrative of God seeking relationship with mankind as it unfolds throughout history. The Lower Story contains the details of particular people, the episodes we've become familiar with: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the flood, etc. This Upper Story is really a framework around which we approach and apply any one part of the Bible. It unifies God's whole message to us and helps guide us through the hard times in life by doing two things:

- a) reminding us of God's eternal, long-range plan and,
- b) putting our experiences into a divine context formed by a perfect Creator.

For example, without the "Upper Story", a lost job could be seen as an event without hope. But put into the context of the larger chronicle of our lives, and God's perfect design, that lost job can be seen in a very different light, perhaps as an opportunity for God to reveal something better.

So, by putting all we read into the larger picture, we can make modern-day application from the Bible that takes into account the grand, mysterious ways of God, and guards us from misapplications that can result from an isolated "what this verse says to me" approach. In other words, the Upper Story creates the context for the Lower Story.

At our church we want to use *The Story* to help everyone gain a better understanding of the big picture of the Bible and to better understand God's redemptive plan for us today. As we journey together through *The Story* we will take note of both the temporal events and characters (Lower Story), as well as the eternal purpose of God: to restore and build a relationship with His creation.

Icebreaker Question: Who in your life has been the most influential in your spiritual journey? Why?

[Select the questions that best fit the needs of your group. Additional questions can be found in *The Story*, pp. 473-487.)

1. Has your experience with studying and learning the Bible been fulfilling or frustrating? Why?
2. Do you have a favorite Bible story or Bible character? What is it about the story or character that most fascinates or resonates with you?
3. The Bible has been attacked by skeptics for centuries. A July 9, 2008, headline reads, "Dead Sea tablet casts doubt on death and resurrection of Jesus." The DaVinci Code is on the national bestseller list for weeks. Other religious groups declare that the Bible is full of inconsistencies and is therefore untrustworthy. How have similar experiences impacted your personal trust in the Bible?
4. List a benefit (or two) that you expect to personally experience from going through *The Story* this year. How do you think our church as a whole will benefit?

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 1, THE BEGINNING OF LIFE AS WE KNOW IT

TIMELESS TRUTH: SIN CHANGES EVERYTHING.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

In the beginning, God. God is the central character of the grand story of the Bible. It really is all about Him and His desire to be in relationship with people. In the opening chapters of Genesis, the Upper Story is in full view. God has a grand vision to be with us, and enjoy harmonious life with us on the newly created perfect earth. Man and woman together reflect God's image as community. As images of God, they are to rule as His benevolent representatives over the earth. In the garden, there is perfect communion with God, one another, and with the creation itself. It is all about relationships—relationship with God and relationship with each other.

But God doesn't force those relationships. When man and woman choose to listen to a creature rather than the Creator, the vision is ruined. Sin enters in and brings with it physical death and separation from God and expulsion from the garden. The whole earth is cursed and begins to die. The sin nature is inaugurated by Adam and Eve and its tragic consequences are passed on to their offspring. Cain killing Abel demonstrates that every human is infected with sin. But sin is more than what we do, it is what we are—it is now our very nature.

Relationship between God and man has now been broken as has the harmony between man and woman. Even the earth itself no longer relates well to man. Immediately, however, God begins His plan to get us back into a right relationship with Him; and that Upper Story never changes even to the last chapter of the Bible. Even after God brings judgment upon a wicked earth, Noah and his family still emerge from the ark with their sin nature. It is going to take something beyond people to solve the sin problem. A clue to the solution is subtly given to us in God's response to Adam and Eve. God Himself makes for them clothes from an animal's skin to cover their nakedness—blood is shed to cover their sin. And a promise is made that sin will one day ultimately be vanquished.

This first chapter of *The Story* is vital to understanding God's Upper Story. The major doctrines of our faith are rooted here, namely sin and redemption. In the Bible, only the first two chapters of Genesis and the last two chapters of Revelation give us a glimpse into life in a world without sin, a world as God intended it to be. When we compare our world with what the world was like before sin, we learn that nothing is as it should be. Nothing. Sin changes everything. Since the fall in the garden, man exists in a fallen world under the dominion of Satan. But the believer's hope lies in knowing that one day the Messiah, promised from the beginning, will return to earth, conquer evil, and fully restore the relationships lost in the garden.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: We've all had prized possessions: gifts given to us as children, family heirlooms, and expensive purchases. And most likely, at one time or another, someone or something has ruined or broken something we cherish. Can you share such a time in your life and what was destroyed?

1. Chapter 1 shows that everything began with God creating and ordering. How is this different than other explanations you have heard of how the world began? How might knowing that life has purpose and direction affect your daily decisions?
2. What do think it means to be made in the image of God (page 2-3)?
3. Part of the meaning of being made in the image of God is that we were made for relationships and community. When sin entered the world relationships were destroyed. Describe the change in relationships that occurred between the following:
 - a. God and mankind
 - b. Adam and Eve
 - c. Mankind and the rest of creation
 - d. Mankind and everlasting life
4. After each event in the creation story, God said "It is good." Where does God say it is not good (p. 4)? What does this say about God's plan for the human family?
5. What do you think Eve's real sin was? What role did Adam play in the process?
6. Explain how Adam and Eve played the "blame game" (p. 5). Why is it so hard for us to accept the responsibility for our bad choices?
7. What can we learn about work from Chapter 1 of *The Story*?
8. Discuss the parallels between Noah's culture and our own. What attributes and actions of Noah can help us face the challenges of godly living in the world today?
9. Many people perceive God as vengeful and distant when they encounter an event such as the Flood in the Old Testament. While God clearly establishes Himself as Judge of His creation, chapter one is overflowing with examples of His love and grace. How many can you identify?
10. God made a promise to Noah never again to destroy mankind by a flood and He confirmed it with a rainbow. What promises has he made to you?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 2, GOD BUILDS A NATION

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. God asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, for two reasons: first, to test his faith and, second, to point to the future sacrifice of the heavenly Father's only Son. Is there an area of your life that God is calling you to "sacrifice" or entrust to Him? Identify the next step you need to take.
2. God's chosen people are both faithful and flawed. List the "faithful" attributes of either Abraham or Sarah that you want to follow. List the "flawed" attributes and mistakes of either Abraham or Sarah that you want to avoid.
3. When God does not deliver on his promise to provide offspring for Abram, he starts to take matters into his own hands (p. 15-16). Despite his good intentions, this caused several complications for him domestically. When have you tried to take things into your own hands or force God into action? What was the result?

DAY 2

1. The maidservant Hagar fled from Sarah's harsh treatment. Alone, hurting, and in despair, God saw her. But she also saw Him and declared, "*I have now seen the One who sees me*" (p. 16). When have you seen God most vividly acting in your life?
2. Esau and Jacob are prime examples of sibling rivals. We learn from the story that they were estranged for more than twenty years (p. 22). What life lessons can be gleaned from observing each character throughout their reconciliation? Can these life lessons be applied to an estranged relationship of your own?

DAY 3

1. In the midst of a deep, personal crisis in Jacob's life, we read about a curious struggle in the wilderness (p. 23-24). In the end, Jacob's name was changed to Israel because he struggled with God and man and overcame. (In the ancient world, a name represented the character of a person.) Identify a crisis in your own life that entailed "wrestling" with God. If God was to change your name to represent the outcome, what do you suppose it would be?
2. Nearly everyone has experienced the playground process of "choosing teams." Compare the way God chooses His "team" with the way you choose your "team." Who in your life do you need to see from God's perspective?

CHAPTER 2, GOD BUILDS A NATION

TIMELESS TRUTH: WHAT SIN CHANGES, FAITH OVERCOMES.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

“I will.” These are words of covenant commitment and promise spoken by a sovereign God to Abraham. God’s master plan to restore us to Himself gets a fresh start with these words. God is determined to fulfill His promise in spite of the frailties and failures of His people. God chooses to create a new nation through Abraham, revealing Himself to and working through this new community of faith. God promises Abraham saying “I will...”

- make your descendants into a great nation
- give this nation a land in which to dwell
- bless all other nations through the nation of Israel

And two thousand years later God’s Son was born, a descendant of Abraham, thus fulfilling the covenant promise.

This chapter demonstrates a striking duality: God using broken people to fulfill His unbreakable promises. But on a day-to-day basis, God’s people continue to make bad choices that expose their ever-present sin nature. Abraham and Sarah, waiting for years for the child God promised, opt for a workaround to conceive an heir through Sarah’s servant, Hagar. Isaac and Rebekah raise a very dysfunctional family. Jacob perfects the “workaround method” by conniving and cheating his way through life.

But what sin changes, faith overcomes. In spite of their failures, God’s people respond in faith. Abraham picks up stakes and travels to a foreign land just because God said to. He gives his relative Lot the choice real estate, having faith God would still bless him. Abraham and Sarah, through laughter and tears, finally see God fulfill his promise through the birth of a son, Isaac. In a dramatic episode, Abraham shows he is willing to go so far as sacrificing his only son, Isaac, just because he trusts God. This foreshadows the willingness of God to do the same to his own Son. The key verse of the chapter is: “*Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*” Therein lays the Gospel itself.

His family continues to demonstrate faith. By faith, Isaac finds a wife for his son. Jacob comes to faith after literally wrestling with God. By faith, Esau also shows Jacob grace and forgiveness. With every story, we are reminded that God works through flawed people who take steps of faith.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: Share a time when someone important in your life made a promise to you and kept it. Was there a time when someone failed to keep a promise? What was the result?

1. Chapter 2 of God's story opens with God calling Abram to make the sacrifice of leaving a comfortable life: homeland, friends, family and steady income. Describe an experience when God has called you to do something similar. What was required of you to obey His instructions? What were the results?
2. God chose Abraham and his descendants to represent Him to others who did not yet know God. What parallels can you draw between Israel and the Church?
3. Consider God's interaction with each character in chapter 2 of *The Story*. What patterns can you identify? What do these patterns reveal about the character of God?
4. Abraham serves as the example of justification by faith. Faith could be described as "trust in action based on God's revelation." Identify acts which demonstrate Abraham's faith. What demonstrations of faith can you identify in your own life?
5. Abraham and Sarah waited 25 years for God to fulfill His promise of a child. Have you waited for a long period of time for God to act in a given situation? Are you waiting on something now? (Share the circumstance only if you are comfortable.) How might this example serve to encourage you? How can the group best pray for you?
6. Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant, was treated harshly by Sarah, causing her to flee on two different occasions. What do you learn about God from observing His interactions with her?
7. In Abraham's culture, a name said a lot about someone's character. God makes his relationship with Abram and Sarai official by making a covenant with them and changing their names to Abraham and Sarah. How has your character changed since your relationship with God began?
8. Jacob said to Esau, "*For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably*" (p. 24). By showing grace to Jacob, Esau demonstrated God's gracious character. To whom do you need to show grace?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 3, JOSEPH: FROM SLAVE TO DEPUTY PHARAOH

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Compare the sin of Adam and Eve with the sin of Joseph. Then compare the sin of Joseph's brothers with that of Cain. What similarities do you discover? What similarities do you see to the sin in your own life? How can the pattern be broken?
2. Joseph was betrayed by his brothers, his boss' wife, and his friends in prison. Instead of becoming bitter, he trusted God. How can you avoid becoming bitter when you are betrayed?
3. What character traits do you see in Joseph that made Potiphar trust him (p. 31)? How might your boss describe your character? What is a trait Joseph had that you can improve on this week?

DAY 2

1. How was Joseph able to resist the sexual temptations of Potiphar's wife (p. 31)? What can you do to protect yourself from sexual sin?
2. Twenty years after his brothers sold him into slavery, they came to Joseph to buy grain. How does Joseph's story serve as an example to you of forgiveness, trust, and restoration? What is the hardest thing you have ever had to forgive? Be forgiven for?
3. Looking back on his life, Joseph said that what others intended for evil, God intended for good. When has an evil done to you turned out for good? How can you use this to help you in the future? What does this reveal about God?

DAY 3

1. Joseph's brothers had been lying about his disappearance for 20 years and were afraid of how he might react, especially after their father's death. They told Joseph a made-up story saying that Jacob had asked them to request that Joseph not harm them. They were having trouble forgiving themselves. Is there a mistake you have made where you've found it difficult to forgive yourself?
2. Reflect upon the first three chapters of *The Story*. What family cycles emerge? What life lessons can you apply to your own life from observing these cycles?

CHAPTER 3, JOSEPH: FROM SLAVE TO DEPUTY PHARAOH

TIMELESS TRUTH: THOUGH MAN FAILS, GOD'S PLAN PREVAILS.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

The Story continues with Abraham's great-grandson, Joseph. His story doesn't get off to a very good start and it goes downhill from there. In the process, we see very clearly that God's plan of redemption cannot be thwarted by man's evil intentions and feeble efforts.

Joseph was the 11th of 12 sons, so he had little to expect by way of blessing or position through seniority. Even so, he was his father favorite and Jacob gave him a beautiful gift to demonstrate his preference. This gift, coupled with Joseph's prediction that his 10 older brothers would one day bow down to him, guaranteed an intolerable case of sibling rivalry. The 10 plot his death at first, but wind up selling him into Egyptian slavery instead.

The road to Egypt rid the brothers of their nuisance, but landed Joseph a job as manager of Potiphar's household. God blessed Potiphar because of Joseph and Potiphar was therefore pleased with Joseph. It turns out Potiphar's wife was also pleased with Joseph, but for different reasons. After rejecting her advances and refusing to sleep with her, she accused him of rape and he got a prison sentence in exchange for his integrity.

But even in prison, the circumstances start to look familiar. Joseph's good character was noted and, once again, he was promoted to manager within the prison. He ended up interpreting some dreams for two of Pharaoh's court officials who were doing time with him. Pharaoh eventually hears of Joseph's talents and summons him to unravel one of his own dreams and ends up promoting Joseph from prison manager to Deputy Pharaoh.

Hard times were on the way, so Joseph initiated a plan to storehouse food to sustain Egypt during a coming worldwide famine. This famine was felt back home by Joseph's family as well, and they made their way to Egypt to buy food. It had been 20 long years since they sold him into slavery, but sure enough, Joseph was right: there they were, bowing at his feet. Sometimes, dreams really do come true.

Joseph's entire family was saved. The Hebrew word actually means *preserved* as though God had something in mind here; and indeed, He did. Jacob, the brothers, and all the extended family moved to the safety of Egypt where they would survive the famine, and God would in fact safeguard his people and his promises. Joseph saw the Upper Story, the big picture. He declared to his brothers, "*You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done*" (p. 42). There it is: redemption in a sound bite. The Messiah would not come for centuries, yet God's storytelling had begun. Joseph's life is a precursor, reminding us that though man plans for evil, God redeems for good. Beauty for ashes. Life from death. Man fails, but God prevails. Every time.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: What's the best promotion you ever received? How did you earn it?

1. If Jacob had learned from his parent's mistakes, he might not have torn his family apart by showing Joseph favoritism. What are some practical lessons families can learn from their stories? Are there any "family history" issues you need to overcome or avoid? Any items you want to preserve for your family? Do you have a "victory" story that you could share?
2. As a teen, Joseph had two dreams that indicated he would one day rule over his brothers. List Joseph's character qualities that demonstrate why he was God's choice for a leader. Which of these character qualities are important in a leader today?
3. Even though Joseph experienced betrayal, he went on to enjoy a full and purposeful life in Egypt. What factors or spiritual understandings do you think made this possible? How was it possible for Joseph to forgive his brothers?
4. What are the benefits experienced by Joseph's employers, Potiphar and the prison warden (p. 31-32)? How would your workplace benefit if you allowed God to work through you there?
5. List the injustices Joseph suffered. What sustained him? Recall a time in your own life that you suffered unjustly for doing the right thing. What sustained you?
6. Twenty years after his brothers sold him into slavery, they came to Joseph to buy grain. Do you see evidence they had changed over the years?
7. Why do you think Joseph did not reveal his true identity at first? What was he waiting for?
8. Over the course of twenty years, Joseph had risen to a place of power and prestige as Pharaoh's governor. Why do you suppose he never returned to his home?
9. Jacob's whole family lived in Goshen for seventeen years before he died (p. 41-42). Do you think the family relationships were every truly restored?
10. Ponder the whole life story of Joseph. As a group, list the ways God's sovereignty came to light. How does God's sovereignty impact your personal faith in Him?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 4, DELIVERANCE

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. During the scene at the burning bush, Moses has trouble believing God could use him. Do you think his hesitancy came from his own insecurities or from his lack of faith in God? Are there areas in your life where you feel insecure? How might this story help you?
2. You may never have seen a burning bush, but have you experienced “standing on holy ground” – a time when you definitely felt the presence of God in your life? What was that like? Take a few moments to recall, journal the experience, and thank God for making Himself known in a tangible way.

DAY 2

1. When Moses told the Israelite leaders about God’s plan for deliverance, their response was to bow in reverence and worship; Pharaoh’s response was to increase their workload. This was obviously the opposite of what they had hoped for. What strengthens your faith when circumstances turn out differently than you’d hoped?
2. Only God could have solved the Israelites problems. Both Israel and Egypt discovered He alone was LORD. Can you identify a situation in your own life (or someone else’s) that testifies to God’s deliverance alone—that no one else could take credit for? Who could your story serve to encourage?
3. Moses and Aaron received instructions from God and then “did just as the LORD had commanded.” Think of an instruction God has already given you, and how you can be more obedient to it this week.

DAY 3

1. Israel celebrated Passover annually and we celebrate communion regularly to remind ourselves corporately of God’s deliverance. What personal reminders could you initiate to celebrate what God has done in your life?
2. Only days after being set free, the Israelites complain, saying they want to go back. Have you ever been tempted to return to a past way of life, even when you know it will be destructive? What attitude change would help you make healthier, more faithful choices?

CHAPTER 4, DELIVERANCE

TIMELESS TRUTH: GOD IS THE ULTIMATE DELIVERER.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

The Hebrew people knew the stories of Joseph and Jacob and how they'd settled in Egypt four centuries ago on Pharaoh's dime. But that was then and this is now – and now, they were slaves. Some might have thought it was 430 years too late, yet God's plan for deliverance was right on schedule. His servant Moses was born during the rule of a tyrannical Pharaoh whose infanticide program was aimed at annihilating the nation of Israel. Ironically, baby Moses was delivered from danger when Pharaoh's daughter rescued him from the Nile, hired his mother to nurse him, and raised him as a royal son.

Moses grew up in the palace but knew he'd been born a slave. Feeling sympathetic to the plight of his people, he killed an Egyptian task master and was forced to flee. Moses became a refugee in the far off land of Midian where he married and began tending his father-in-law's flocks. Moses spent the next 40 years hiding from Pharaoh and like the Hebrew people, assumed this would be the way he'd spend the rest of his days.

Then he met up with a burning bush. God spoke from the bush and commissioned Moses as Israel's deliverer. Not a bad promotion for an 80 year old man with only "ex-prince" and "shepherd" listed on his resume. God revealed Himself to Moses as *I AM*, the covenant-keeping Redeemer of His people. Moses doubted his own qualifications and abilities, but God responded with the guarantee of His presence.

Moses returned to Egypt with the promise of God and the support of his brother Aaron. As expected, Moses' demands of freeing the Hebrews were met with Pharaoh's stubborn refusal. So God sent a series of plagues and a cycle of challenge began: the plague strikes, Pharaoh relents; the plague stops, Pharaoh recants.

Then God presented a shadow of what would be the "ultimate deliverance" with the final plague. All the firstborn in the land would die in a single night and there was only one means of rescue. Every household in Israel was to select a perfect Passover lamb, slaughter it, and cover the doorposts of their homes with its blood. That night the angel of death would come and "pass over" the blood stained houses, preserving the lives of all who were inside.

The Hebrews left Egypt that same night, and later, an enraged Pharaoh took off in pursuit. Trapped between his powerful army on one side and the Red Sea on the other, Egypt's victory appeared certain. But God split the sea in two and the people walked to safety on dry land. They celebrated when Pharaoh's army drowned in the same sea...but only for a moment. Their jubilation quickly turned to complaint when Israel forgot what God had done. They grumbled over the lack of water and food, but God again proved Himself faithful by providing water, manna, and quail to sustain them, this time from their fears and inability to provide for themselves.

The story of God's people had just begun. The details of the Lower Story already form an outline of the big picture found in the Upper Story. God delivered His people from bondage in Egypt as an early clue of the deliverance that Christ would bring. It would be centuries before Jesus would come as God's perfect Passover Lamb and secure deliverance for His people. Yet the blood of Passover is a long shadow of what was to come when the Lamb of God set foot on the stage of history. These miracles were merely a hint of things to come; the *I AM* is still our Deliverer.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: Share a time when God delivered you from a close call, such as death or danger.

1. How did Moses' life experiences prepare him for God's call? What life experience could God use to minister to others through you?
2. In the same way that God used Moses to set the Israelites free from slavery, He uses us to help people find freedom in Christ. Discuss your experiences with sharing your faith; what inhibitions keep you from doing so?
3. When Moses asked for God's "official" name, God replied: *I AM WHO I AM*. Why do you think God identified Himself that way? What is the significance of that name? What does this name for God tell us about Him?
4. When Moses tells Pharaoh to set the Israelites free, he responds by increasing their workload. Recall a time when you were obedient to God, but the situation worsened instead of improved. What life lessons can be drawn from these examples?
5. Look at God's description of Himself on page 48 (note the "I will" phrases). What is Moses focused on? What is God focused on?
6. Pharaoh was "plagued" many times over, yet still refused to humble himself before God. Is there someone you know who has hardened his or her heart toward God? Can you see how God might use their decision?
7. While this story has many obvious displays of God's wrath, we also learn a lot about God's goodness. List the ways this story shows God's goodness.
8. The Feast of Passover (p. 51-52) was to be perpetual reminder of how God delivered Israel. What are the parallels between Communion today and the Passover?
9. Even after being delivered, the people of Israel continue to grumble. Do you know any grumblers? Are you one? How does perpetual dissatisfaction affect those in its orbit?
10. God provides food and water for the Israelites while they are wandering in the desert. Describe a time God met your need (emotionally, physically, spiritually, financially, etc.) in an unexpected way. Share how this impacted you and others.

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 5, NEW COMMANDS AND A NEW COVENANT

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Moses said, “Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning” (p. 61). Describe what it means to “fear God.” How does your life show that you fear God?
2. Moses was an intermediary between Israel and God. Has there been someone in your life who prayed for you, helped you see God’s will, or acted as a spiritual mentor? Would that type of relationship be a blessing to you today?

DAY 2

1. God continued to use Aaron, even after the Golden Calf debacle. Have you ever felt like your sin disqualified you for service to God? How does Aaron’s story encourage you?
2. Moses prayed to God on Israel’s behalf (p. 66). Who in your life needs you to intercede for them? Make a list in your journal and offer a prayer for them now.

DAY 3

1. Could you be described like God: compassionate, slow to anger, gracious, abounding in loving kindness? Which of these traits best describes you? Which are most difficult?
2. God reminded Moses that children live with the consequences of their parents’ sins (p. 68). Identify a sin or unhealthy tendency in your own family line that still affects you. What measures can you employ to stop the cycle?
3. Moses’ face was radiant because he had spoken with the LORD (p. 69). What evidence of your relationship with the LORD would others say they see in you?

CHAPTER 5, NEW COMMANDS AND A NEW COVENANT

TIMELESS TRUTH: BE DIFFERENT—SET APART—FOR GOD’S PURPOSES.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

The journey had begun. And, like all journeys, there is a “from” and a “to.” God saved Israel *from* slavery, and He saved them *to* become a holy nation – set apart for His purposes. Israel was to be different than the pagan nations surrounding them; they were called to honor God and to point others to this LORD. Just weeks after the exodus, God inaugurated a new covenant with Israel that, if obeyed, would shape them into the holy nation that He intended them to be.

God had worked through Moses to lead His people out of Egypt and now they were assembled at the foot of Mount Sinai in the desert wilderness. A holy God requires a holy people, so they were to consecrate themselves (p. 60) to prepare to meet with Him. When God’s presence filled the top of Mount Sinai with thunder and fire the people were terrified. They were invited to a direct relationship with the LORD, but opted for Moses to act as an intermediary on their behalf. Moses met with God on the mountain and received the Ten Commandments written on tablets of stone. These commands and ordinances revealed God’s expectations for His covenant people. This covenant was sealed with blood and ratified by Israel’s full commitment to obey.

That commitment, however, did not have the spiritual character to back it up. Just days after Israel agreed to obey God’s laws, they were up to their earrings in idolatry and then some. While Moses was on the mountain with God, the people traded their golden opportunity for a golden calf. When Moses caught sight of their depravity, he shattered the tablets and took immediate action. He assembled the faithful and put to death the corrupt. Sin, as always, was pricey, painful, and never worth the cost.

When God proposed to send Israel on to Canaan without Him, Moses prayed for God’s presence to remain. God graciously agreed and promised He would remain with Israel, in the form of a cloud over the Tabernacle. God then graciously answered another prayer of Moses to “*show me Your glory*” (p.67). God passed before him allowing Moses to only see His back because “my face must not be seen.” What an expression of God’s compassion and grace! After spending forty days with the LORD on Mount Sinai, Moses came down with two new tablets of the covenant law. Moses’ face was so radiant after time with God that he had to be veiled because the people were afraid.

God’s grace compels a devotion to Him alone. He is a jealous God for our benefit; all other gods lead to sin and death. His people are free – not to act any way they want, but free to become who He created them to be – holy, different, and designed to point the world to him. God didn’t just redeem Israel *from* slavery; He redeemed them *for* holiness. Their freedom did indeed carry a purpose.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: What was the worst discipline you received while growing up? What had you done to deserve it?

1. What do the Ten Commandments reveal about the nature of God and His desire to have a relationship with us (p. 61-62)?
2. What does it mean that God is holy? What are the implications of God's holiness as we seek Him?
3. Moses said, "*Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning*" (p. 61). How does the fear of God restrain sin?
4. The Lord spoke to Moses "*as one speaks to a friend*" (p. 67). What was there about Moses that God found so pleasing? How would you rate your relationship to God, from 1 = Total Stranger to 10 = Close Friend.
5. God describes Himself as jealous. What does this tell us about God? Why is it okay for God to be jealous?
6. How did Israel go from "everything the Lord has said we will do," to building a false god in scarcely over a month? Why is it so easy to become forgetful of God's mercies?
7. God reminded Moses that children live with the consequences of their parents' sins (p. 68). How have your parents' choices (good and bad) affected your life? How are your choices possibly affecting your children? What needs to change?
8. God showed Moses His glory because He is "gracious and compassionate." Describe a time when God showed grace and compassion to you (yes, this is a trick question).
9. After punishing the Israelites for the golden calf, Moses immediately sought reconciliation with God. How should believers today hold one another accountable? How can we do this gracefully?
10. God describes Himself as compassionate, slow to anger, gracious, and abounding in loving-kindness (p. 68). Where do you see these qualities in this chapter?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 6, WANDERINGS

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Israel's complaining is a reminder of how easy it is to become ungrateful. List five things you for which you are grateful. How does gratitude change your perspective?
2. God punishes Miriam and Aaron for slandering Moses. Have you ever had to deal with lies spoken against you? How did you handle it?
3. If you had been the 12 spies, how would you have described the Promised Land?

DAY 2

1. How many examples of answered prayer can you find in this chapter? Which most encourages you and why?
2. The story of Baal at Shittim is only one of many examples of the link between sexual immorality and idolatry. How has ungodly sexuality affected your life?

DAY 3

1. Moses charged Israel to keep God's commandments and diligently teach them to their children? How can you, whether as a parent or a member of your church community, pass on God's commandments to the next generation?
2. When he passed on the mantle of leadership, Moses told Joshua to be strong and courageous. Is a lack of courage keeping you from becoming a leader?

CHAPTER 6, WANDERINGS

TIMELESS TRUTH: FAILURE ALWAYS BEGINS WITH UNBELIEF.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

God's plan was clear: deliver His people through a series of miracles, defeat their enemies, give them a covenant and set of laws to make them a chosen nation, and provide them a land of promise. Simple, right? God speaks, the people listen. God delivers, the people believe. God provides, the people trust. Well, maybe not so much.

God always held up His end of the bargain: He always provided, always delivered, always kept His promises. It turns out the people were equally consistent: They always forgot, always questioned, always rebelled. Their lack-of-faith list was long. When daily bread fell from heaven, they craved a taste of Egypt. Even Moses' siblings, Miriam and Aaron, grew jealous and undermined their brother's leadership.

Then they reached Kadesh and the perimeter of promise became a pinnacle of rebellion. Moses sent twelve leaders to spy out the Promised Land of Canaan. Ten of the twelve said the cities were too strong, the people too big, and God was too small. Only two, Caleb and Joshua, trusted God. They encouraged Israel to go and take what God had given them, but the people complained and failed to believe.

Failure always begins with unbelief. So, Israel spent the next forty years wandering aimlessly in the wilderness. The faithless generation would die out before they set foot on the other side of the land of promise. Only Caleb and Joshua would outlive them all to eventually cross over into their inheritance.

Forty years later, the story comes full circle again to Kadesh, the edge of the promised frontier – and little had changed. The people needed water, so they did what they do best...they complained. And God did what He does best...He provided. The LORD pointed Moses to a rock. He told him to speak to the rock and water would pour out. Moses struck it with his staff instead. The water still gushed out, but Moses and Aaron had ignored God's instruction and lost their right of admission to the Promised Land.

Moses then commissioned Joshua as Israel's new leader before giving his farewell address. He reminded them of all that the LORD had done. He told them again about their special role as His chosen nation and how they would enjoy His blessings if they would simply love and obey Him. Then Moses died and was buried by the LORD.

The wilderness wanderings remind us that faith leads to life and unbelief leads to death. Faith honors God and God always honors the faithful.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: How would you classify your teen years and early 20's: Rebellious and wild? Compliant and obedient? Somewhere in between?

1. When have you felt overburdened like Moses did? When have your burdens caused you to question God's goodness? How might Moses' honest conversation with God help you handle heavy burdens in the future?
2. Israel believed the report of the faithless spies out of fear. What do you think was the cause of their consistent lack of faith and trust?
3. The manna and quail episode ended in a severe plague (p. 71-73). What Upper Story lessons was God trying to teach? How do they apply to us today?
4. God asks the question: "*How long will these people treat me with contempt?*" (p. 76). Do you think their actions merit such a severe word as "contempt?"
5. Israel's rebellion led to a 40 year punishment and kept an entire generation from seeing the Promised Land. How might you minister to someone whose life choices resulted in irrevocable consequences?
6. Moses is described as a "*very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth*" (p. 73). What examples from his life illustrate this? How would you rate your humility level? (Yes, this is another trick question.)
7. Despite his years of service, Moses' disobedience kept him from entering the Promised Land. What did Moses do wrong? Do you agree with the punishment? What does this teach you about God's expectations for leadership?
8. Moses charged Israel with passing the commandments down to their children. What is your role in teaching the next generation? What are some practical ways you can serve as a parent, grandparent, or mentor?
9. Carefully reread Moses' farewell message (p. 84-88). How does he emphasize God's Upper Story of redemption?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 7, THE BATTLE BEGINS

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. What can we learn about godly leadership and succession planning as we watch the baton passed from Moses to Joshua?
2. We often draw black and white lines when we disagree with others. Read Joshua 5:13-14. How do people today co-opt Jesus to ensure He's on "their side?"

DAY 2

1. God gave Joshua assurances to face the coming battles, but Joshua still had to act in faith. What battles are you currently facing? How can God's presence and promises change the way you cope with them?
2. Do you suppose God viewed Rahab as a woman of sin or a woman of faith? Who in your life needs to be viewed through "grace-colored glasses?"
3. How does the destruction of peoples and cities in the Promised Land square with God's Upper Story of redemption?

DAY 3

1. Observe the battle between Israel-Gibeon and the five kings of the Amorites (p. 95-98). What human factors and what divine factors led to victory? What parallels can be drawn between this battle and your own spiritual battles today?
2. Joshua is known for the statement "*as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD*" (Joshua 24:15). What habits and attitudes have you seen in other families that are good examples of leading a household in serving the LORD? How can you emulate them?

CHAPTER 7, THE BATTLE BEGINS

TIMELESS TRUTH: FAITH IS THE VICTORY.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

Israel had spent the last 40 years on a road to nowhere. A lot can change in 40 years. All of the people who were slaves in Egypt had died, except for two, Joshua and Caleb. Moses had died too. Joshua had been his right-hand man and he was Israel's new leader. The wilderness of disobedience and defeat was behind them now and a new generation camped at Canaan's edge.

A lot had changed during the wilderness years, but God had not. The promise He'd made to Abraham over 600 years before was about to turn into reality. The LORD spoke to Joshua saying, "*Be strong and courageous, for I am with you. Be careful to obey my law*" (p. 89). Joshua listened well. He had spied out the land as a young man and trusted God to give it to them as He'd promised. Now he sent two spies into Jericho to appraise the land. They were hidden in the house of Rahab, a prostitute who protected them from the king of Jericho. She boldly confessed her faith in the LORD as the one true God who had given the land to Israel. The spies responded to her faith by agreeing to save her whole family when they attacked Jericho.

This new generation of Israelites had heard the stories about crossing the Red Sea on dry land; now, their first steps into the Promised Land were taken across another patch of dry land when God parted the Jordan River – another highway leading into God's promise.

When they reached Jericho, the military strategy was unorthodox. The priests marched the Ark of the Covenant around Jericho's walls each day for six days. On the seventh day, they marched around the city seven times. Their parade concluded with the sound of trumpets and shouts as they completed a seventh circle around the city. Amazingly, the walls of Jericho collapsed! Jericho was destroyed and Rahab and her family were saved.

The land of Canaan was a place of conquest and victory for Israel. When Israel obeyed, God faithfully delivered her enemies into her hands. When they failed to trust Him, they missed out on the fulfillment of those promises. Even the temporary defeat at Ai caused by disobedience was later turned to victory when the people followed God's command. In the annihilation of entire cities, we see God's holy intolerance of sin. In the account of Gibeon, we see God's mercy extended to a people who were willing to follow the true God. After taking the entire region by force, Joshua divided up the land by tribe as Israel's inheritance.

The chapter closes with Joshua's final words as he recounts the stories of God's faithfulness and deliverance. God will keep His promises. He will also let us choose whether or not we will participate in the blessings of His promises. These stories of God's people are our stories too and, like Joshua, we must "*choose this day whom [we] will serve.*" Joshua stated he and his "*household [would] serve the LORD*" (p. 101). What will you choose?

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: As a young person, who did you look up to as a hero, either fictional or real? What about them made them your hero?

1. In the original languages both “Joshua” and “Jesus” mean “Jehovah saves.” How is Joshua’s relationship to Israel similar to Jesus’ relationship to the Church?
2. What basis did Joshua have for being “*strong and courageous*” (p. 89)? Which assurances that God gives Joshua most strengthen and encourage you?
3. What concerns might Joshua have had as he accepted the reigns of leadership from Moses? What can we learn from the people’s response to Joshua that can apply to changes of leadership at our church?
4. Rahab told the two spies: “*I know that the Lord has given you this land*” (p.90). Upon what was her declaration of faith based? How could she be a prostitute, so easily tell lies, and not be a part of God’s chosen people, yet be attributed with great faith?
5. Rahab hid the spies and then lied to the authorities when they came looking for them (p. 90). When, if ever, is it okay to lie? How do you know?
6. Review the main points of the covenant that God made with Abraham. (See the summary for Chapter 2, also p. 13.) What examples can you find in this chapter that show God’s faithfulness to its fulfillment?
7. How does God’s command to annihilate entire cities fit into the Upper Story of the Bible? In what way do these battle stories fit into God’s Upper Story? (Hint: review p. 86, especially the first full paragraph.)
8. Some people doubt the Bible because of miracles like Joshua’s “long day” (p. 97). But some people, like Rahab, come to believe in God because of His miraculous works. Discuss how you might respond to the skeptic who discounts the miraculous as myth.
9. What character traits of Joshua most impress you? Which of those would you like to be known for?
10. Joshua is known for his statement “*As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD*” (p.101). How can you lead your household to serve the Lord?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 8, A FEW GOOD MEN AND WOMEN

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. God used Israel's enemies to turn them back to himself. Have you ever had a painful or dangerous experience that led you back to God?
2. Deborah's military leader was named Barak, which means "lightning" or "flashing sword." Did he live up to his name? Describe a time when fear held you back from living up to the name "Christian."
3. In the evil days after Joshua, "every man did what was right in his eyes." In a pluralistic society, why is it dangerous when everyone gets to pick their own definition of right and wrong?

DAY 2

1. What are some characteristics of Deborah that make her a good role model for young women?
2. The angel of the Lord greeted Gideon as a mighty warrior though he was from the weakest clan and of the least in his family (p. 108). Do you tend to define yourself by your weaknesses or by the potential God sees in you because He is with you?
3. Samson's strength did not make up for his moral weaknesses. When has a strength of yours been insufficient to overcome your conditions?

DAY 3

1. In examining Samson's marriages, what takeaways would strengthen yours?
2. Think of some of the prayers in this chapter, such as Gideon's or Samson's. What does this teach us about prayer?

CHAPTER 8, A FEW GOOD MEN AND WOMEN

TIMELESS TRUTH: THE CALL VS. THE CULTURE - AN ETERNAL PROBLEM

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

The nation of Israel had a place to call home at last. Settling into the Promised Land enabled them to leave behind their wandering ways and fulfill one of the key promises to Abraham: a land for God's people to occupy. But, failing to evict the Canaanites from the land, these pagan neighbors became a toxic influence on a nation called to be different.

After the death of Joshua, God's people felt this pull of worldly culture and a destructive pattern emerged:

- o Israel turned again and again to the worship of pagan gods.
- o God brought divine judgment.
- o Israel cried out for God's help.
- o God raised up a judge to save them.

This cycle of sin became the pattern of life in Israel for the next 300 years.

Early on, Israel was conquered by the Canaanite king, Jabin. God appointed Deborah, a prophet, judge, and strong leader to deliver her people. She and her military leader, Barak, defeated the powerful Canaanite army led by Sisera. He escaped and took refuge in the tent of a woman named Jael, who killed him while he slept. Israel had been delivered for now, but the cycle would continue.

Israel was later oppressed by the Midianites. God called Gideon out of nowhere to deliver His people. Gideon was pretty sure that God has mistaken him for some well-built four-star Israelite commander and asked twice for a miraculous sign. God confirmed His intentions and Gideon gathered 32,000 troops to take on the vast Midianite army. God, however, trimmed their forces to just 300 men. He used them to rout the Midianites and the people enjoyed freedom...for a while.

The cycle continued and Israel was soon dominated by the Philistines. This time God prepared a deliverer by promising a child to a barren woman. This child, Samson, was to be raised as a Nazirite, who was set apart to God. His hair was not to be cut and he was to drink no wine. He was well known for his superhuman strength and less than super character, especially in the company of beautiful women. His second wife, Delilah, betrayed him by cutting his hair so he would forfeit his advantage and God's favor. Samson himself embodied this insidious cycle that had enslaved Israel, with his saw-tooth history of indiscretions and victories.

As a result, the Philistines took him captive and gouged out his eyes. But his hair grew back, and his strength returned. Samson's last day was his best one. He was brought into the Philistine temple to entertain their leaders. He prayed to the LORD, collapsed the pillars of the temple and defeated the Philistines at last.

God is never bashful about His intentions for His people. He never tolerates sin and, at the same time, never breaks His covenant with His people. Israel may not have fully understood God's discipline, but over and over He had to bring them to their knees in order to bring them to Himself.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: Have you ever been rescued from a dangerous or difficult situation? What happened?

1. Israel is constantly running from the true God to other false gods. What are some of the false gods in our culture today? Which of them have you trusted?
2. False gods trigger a cycle: a web of sin, God's judgments, crying out for help, and God providing deliverance. What are some destructive cycles you have seen in your own life?
3. Do you think that the Israelites did a good job of passing their faith to the next generation? How can we do this better in the church and in our own families?
4. How would you describe Deborah? In what way does her story influence your view of women in leadership?
5. Do you think Gideon's request for a sign was an act of faith or an act of faithlessness? Does his faith change over time?
6. Your friend, Samson, confides in you that he has trouble with women but doesn't understand why. What would you tell him?
7. In what ways was Samson a faithful man of God? In what ways was he not?
8. What was Samson's true weakness? How can you deal with your weaknesses before they become your downfall?
9. Where do you see God's grace in this chapter?
10. Which character in this chapter stands out to you and why? How can you be more like them?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 9, THE FAITH OF A FOREIGN WOMAN

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. How would you describe the relationship between Naomi and her daughter-in-law? Is there anything you can apply to your relationship with your in-laws or future in-laws?
2. Ruth and Boaz provided for Naomi. In what tangible ways can you provide for the less fortunate both in your family and your community?

DAY 2

1. Boaz praised Ruth saying, “*May the LORD repay you for what you have done [for Naomi]. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge*” (p. 123). How did God answer Boaz’ prayer for Ruth? How does an “others-centered” life create blessings for the giver?
2. As you reflect on times of need in your life, when have you experienced divine providence and unexpected provision?
3. Character is revealed by what we do, what we say, and often by what others say about us. How does Boaz serve as an example of a godly man or Ruth as a godly woman for you?

DAY 3

1. The theme of redemption is found throughout this story. Compare Boaz’ redemption of Ruth and Naomi to how Christ has redeemed you.
2. Faithful Boaz and Ruth were great-grandparents to King David and therefore they were also in the line of Messiah Jesus. Who in your family tree has been a godly example to you? Who in your church family stands as an example of godliness?

CHAPTER 9, THE FAITH OF A FOREIGN WOMAN

TIMELESS TRUTH: GOD'S GRACIOUS REDEMPTION EXTENDS TO ALL.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

The story of Israel's judges closes with a line that could just as well be the opening for the story of Ruth: *"In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit"* (Judges 21:25). God's chosen ones looked more like a reality show gone wrong than a holy beacon of hope. They had abandoned God's plan (again) and had become moral misfits and spiritual adulterers. The light had gone out on God's people. Then a foreigner stepped onto the stage and a candle of hope flickered once again.

The story of Ruth is a literary and redemptive gem that glimmers against a backdrop of blackness. In the opening scene, Naomi's family caravanned away from the Promised Land where famine had left them hungry for food and for hope. They settled in Moab where idol worship was the prevailing ritual and God seemed far away. Naomi's two sons married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. The weddings were too quickly followed by funerals—three of them. Naomi's husband died first. Soon after, both of her sons died too. And all that was left was three widows, no children, and no prospects. The prospects were indeed grim.

Naomi heard the famine had lifted and decided to return to Bethlehem. She sent her daughters-in-law back to their homes where they might find new husbands. Ruth expressed her strong will and even stronger faith by refusing to leave. Her poetic declaration of loyalty and commitment offers the first sign of hope: *"Where you go, I will go; your people will be my people and your God my God"* (p. 122). The duo of widows made the journey back to the Land of Promise where the only hope was mere survival.

Once there, Ruth exercised a widow's right to gather the extra grain from the fields. Her field of choice just happened to be the farmstead of a godly man named Boaz. He also happened to be a family guardian who could carry on the heritage of Naomi's deceased husband and sons. He noticed Ruth from the start and admired the way she worked to provide for her aging mother-in-law. Boaz offered his help and protection; Ruth noticed him too.

Jewish law required a family guardian to redeem both a widow and her land to preserve the family line. So, as was the custom, Naomi told Ruth to offer herself in marriage to Boaz. He was delighted but also knew of a closer relative who had the right of first refusal. That man chose to forfeit Naomi's land since it also meant he would have to marry Ruth, which might threaten the inheritance he would pass along to his own children. Neither Boaz nor Ruth was disappointed by his choice since his refusal paved the way for Boaz to fulfill his role as a family guardian or "kinsman redeemer." Boaz gladly married Ruth and redeemed the family's land. God cheerfully restored Naomi and planted a family tree: Ruth and Boaz → Obed → Jesse → King David → Jesus.

There's no denying this story as a great romance. But even more, it brings us to a defining episode in the greatest love story ever told. Boaz's love for Ruth is a mirror image of the heart of God. Boaz steps in as a willing kinsman redeemer and foreshadows One who would step in as the Redeemer for all people. So, it turns out the even the "not so chosen" are chosen after all. God's plan will overwhelm every obstacle, overturn every injustice and overcome completely in the end. Soon, we'll see that God is writing a happily ever after for this story after all.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: Describe a time when you felt uncomfortable, out of place, and far from home.

1. Meanings of Biblical names are always significant. Elimelek's name meant "my God is King." Naomi's name meant "my pleasantness," but later asked to be called Mara, meaning "bitterness." Ruth's name meant "friendship." Boaz's name meant "swift strength." Who best lived up to their names and who did not?
2. Compare Naomi's attitude at the beginning and end of this story. How does her view of God and the Upper Story change?
3. Look at Ruth and Boaz's interaction with Naomi. What can you learn about the challenges and benefits of caring for an aging parent? What challenges do you face with your parents?
4. The period of the Judges was marked by weak faith and irresponsible living, but this foreign woman gives hope. What specific examples of strong faith and responsible living can you find in the characters of Ruth and Boaz?
5. The story of Ruth demonstrates laws that God had given Israel to take care of marginalized people (Deuteronomy 25:5-10, Leviticus 25:25, Leviticus 19:9-10). What do these laws and customs reveal about the heart of God for the poor, the widow and the orphan? How could your group care for the less fortunate and thereby reflect the heart of God?
6. The love story of Ruth and Boaz stands in contrast to many of the "love" stories we hear today. What can single men and women learn from their example (note Ruth's reputation in the community, p. 123, 125).
7. The word for *redeem* is used twenty times in this story, making it a key theme. What does it mean to be redeemed? How does Boaz's redeeming of Ruth compare to our redemption found in Christ?
8. What some people might call *coincidence* others call *divine providence*. What are some key examples of God's divine providence in this story?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 10, STANDING TALL, FALLING HARD

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Hannah wanted a child so badly she promised God that she would give the child over to him.
2. Have you ever made a bargain with God? What thing do you want the most?
3. What do we learn from Hannah about how to pray?

DAY 2

1. How did Eli help Samuel know when he was hearing the voice of God? How can you tell when God is speaking to you?
2. The Ark of the Covenant was treated like a good luck charm. Do people treat God, or symbols of God, like that today? What is the difference between giving God the respect he deserves and treating a symbol like a rabbit's foot?
3. Samuel was hurt that the Israelites wanted a king, instead of remembering God was their king. Why was this such a temptation for them? When have you found it hard to trust God to take care of you?

DAY 3

1. Why do you think it was hard for Saul to admit to Samuel when he was in the wrong? Rate yourself from 1-10 on your ability to own up to your mistakes.
2. God repeatedly chooses the least and the last to accomplish His will. What could He do through you today?

CHAPTER 10, STANDING TALL, FALLING HARD

TIMELESS TRUTH: OBEDIENCE MATTERS.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

Blessing. This was meant to be the distinguishing mark of the people of God. God's covenant with Israel required obedience and promised ultimate blessing. Yet, the period of the judges is anything but a time of obedience and blessing in Israel. More fitting descriptions are: Barrenness. Blindness. Battles.

Bereavement. Blessing was hard to come by in those days. God's people had abandoned God Himself, and "*everyone did as he saw fit*" (Judges 21:25). Few remembered God's commands. Even fewer obeyed.

But God always has a few. One was a woman named Hannah. She had long endured the grief of childlessness accompanied by the taunts of her husband's other wife. On one of her visits to worship at God's house in Shiloh, Eli, the priest, mistook her devotion for drunkenness. She had poured out her heart first in desperate prayer and then to Eli and vowed that she would dedicate her son to the LORD. Eli assured her that her prayer would be heard. God did give Hannah a son and she kept her word. She named the boy Samuel and took him to serve in the tabernacle under the High Priest, Eli.

God spoke to Samuel one night when he was still a boy. God told Samuel that Eli and his sons would be judged and his priestly line would soon end. And as it always does, God's word came true, this time through the Philistines. Israel lost their first battle with the Philistines at Aphek and blamed their loss on the absence of the ark of covenant. Their own absence of obedience went unnoticed. They faced the Philistine army again, this time with the ark as their good luck charm and lost both the battle and the ark. Eli had grown old and blind, and the devastating news of Israel's defeat, the death of his sons and the loss of the ark of covenant left Eli dead on the spot.

Samuel took Eli's place, but Israel was dissatisfied and asked for a king. Samuel knew better and expressed his opposition. God knew He'd been rejected. Israel knew only that they wanted to be like their pagan neighbors, the very people they were *not* to emulate. God warned that their demand for a king would be costly; that he would exploit them to the point of slavery. The people ignored God's warnings and still insisted on having an earthly king to fight their battles. Saul was anointed by Samuel and began well. He was affirmed by miraculous signs from God. He fought the Ammonites and gave God credit for their victory. Samuel reminded the people that God had not rejected them, even though they had turned away from Him. He encouraged them again to follow God and serve him from the heart and God affirmed Samuel's words with unheard of thunder and rain during harvest.

Saul's honeymoon as king was short-lived. During another battle with the Philistines, Saul got nervous; Samuel was late. So Saul took his authority too far and took matters—and offerings—into his own hands, violating the role God had reserved for the priests. Samuel confronted Saul; he backpedaled, made excuses, and tried to justify his sin, but wound up losing a dynasty. Saul's path of half-hearted obedience and fear-based leadership grew longer by the year and more twisted with every step.

God rejected Saul as king. Saul's reign was Israel's opportunity to see that monarchy is no better than anarchy when a man after God's own heart is not on the throne. God had already chosen such a man, an unlikely shepherd boy who would one day become Saul's successor. His throne would endure and would point God's people again to the Shepherd King who was yet to come.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: Share about a time when you had to admit you were wrong. Was this easy or hard?

1. Eli's encouragement helped Hannah move from deep sadness to hope. Share about a time when someone deeply encouraged you.
2. What can we learn about prayer from Hannah and Samuel?
3. Compare the three fathers in the story: Elkanah, Eli and Samuel. What were their best and worst traits? Which of these traits do you wish you had more of?
4. Samuel was probably about 12 years old when God called him to be a prophet to Eli and all of Israel. He was required to speak the truth in love to his mentor and friend. Have you ever been in this position?
5. The Israelites and the Philistines both treated the Ark of the Covenant more like a good-luck charm than the sacred presence of the LORD. How might people today try to manipulate God for similar gain?
6. Samuel is hurt when he sees that the Israelites want a king like other nations, instead of recognizing God as their king. Do you ever struggle with a desire to be like the culture around you, instead of letting God rule your life?
7. You are on the search committee for the first king of Israel. What would you look for in your applicants? What were Saul's actual qualifications?
8. How do you think Samuel would have described the "state of the union" at the end of his time as judge? Where do you see God's grace in his statement after the battle with the Ammonites?
9. Imagine you have a friend like Saul, who keeps taking matters into his own hands and ignoring what God's word teaches him. What advice would you give him?
10. Chapter 10 opens with the beautiful story of Elkanah's love and leadership of his family. The chapter closes with the story of Saul's poor leadership of Israel and his self-love. Compare and contrast the leadership styles of these two men. In what ways is your leadership style similar to either one? In what areas can you improve?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 11, FROM SHEPHERD TO KING

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Contrast God's view of David with man's view of David. Would you say you are winsome in the world's eyes? How does God see you?
2. Who or what are the giants in your life that need to be faced with courage? How can you equip yourself to do this?

DAY 2

1. Think of a time when jealousy has somehow overtaken you. How can focusing on the Upper Story help conquer these feelings?
2. Review the exchange between David and Saul at En Gedi (p. 153-154). What does Saul's response to David's offer of grace teach you about God's grace?
3. *"The Lord does not look at the things human beings look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart"* (pg. 145). What words or acts of encouragement can you offer today to others (from family to strangers) based on God's view of them?

DAY 3

1. When David wanted to build God a temple, God redirected him, just as God sometimes constrains our best intentions because He wants us to serve Him in other ways. How has God redirected you? Looking back, was this initially disappointing?
2. After Nathan delivered God's revelation, David went to the LORD in humble awe and praise (p. 159-160). Praise God using your own words by writing a short Psalm.

CHAPTER 11, FROM SHEPHERD TO KING

TIMELESS TRUTH: THE LORD ACCEPTS ACCORDING TO THE HEART.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

Saul was a man's man. He was tall, handsome, kingly and impressive...a likely choice for a king. He was just what Israel wanted. Trouble was, Saul was not God's man. King Saul cut corners on God's commands, so God cut Saul out of the picture and set His sights a king who was, at the moment, singing songs and tending flocks in a nearby pasture.

God's ordination began in the unlikeliest of places: the humble house of Jesse in a less than notable village called Bethlehem. Seven of Jesse's sons were paraded before Samuel, but none were chosen. The youngest brother, David, had not been invited but was easily found with among the sheep. After being summoned from the fields, the choice was immediate: David was anointed by Samuel to replace King Saul. The boy then did what any responsible shepherd would do: he returned to tending his sheep.

Life was quiet for the newly anointed boy king until he was once again called from the fields, this time to supply his brothers on the frontlines of battle against the Philistine army. When he arrived, David saw what everyone else did not: an opportunity for God's power to be displayed. Armed with a slingshot, five pebbles, and an extraordinary faith, he faced down Goliath...and won. The Philistine's superhero lost his head while his army lost their courage and ran!

David's days in the pastures were over. Saul brought him into the king's court and assigned him a high rank over military operations. David was well liked and successful in all his pursuits. He eventually married Saul's daughter, Michal, and became best of friends with Saul's son, Jonathan. But his success planted an irreversible seed of jealousy in Saul, to the point where he tried repeatedly to murder David.

David fled for his life and days in the palace came to a close. Still, his popularity grew. Unfortunately, so did Saul's fear and irrational behavior. His thirst for David's blood quickly turned to obsession. Saul and his army pursued David and killed 85 Levite priests in the process because they had fed and sheltered the fugitive. On one occasion, David had an opportunity to kill Saul, but he refused out of respect for the man whom God had anointed king. He chose, instead, to extend mercy and grace to Saul who tearfully confessed, "*You are more righteous than I...I know that you will surely be king*" (p. 154). Saul's new lease on life was as short as his fuse and the chase quickly resumed.

David found consolation by journaling his fears and his faith in his psalms. Saul's obsessive pursuit of David blinded him to the fact that the Philistine armies were once again on the attack. They prevailed and Saul and his sons were killed. Israel was defeated and David was left to mourn the staggering losses.

It was another seven years before David was recognized as king over all Israel. He became the military, civil, and spiritual leader. He conquered the city of Jerusalem, made it his capital city, and then brought the Ark of the Covenant there with great fanfare. All Israel joined him except his wife Michal, whose empty heart left her with an empty womb.

David was home at last. His first desire was to build a house, a temple, for God. Instead, God told David, "*The LORD will build a house for you*" (p. 159). God made a covenant with David and promised him a house (an eternal dynasty), a throne (royal authority), and a kingdom (rule on earth). David responded as usual with awestruck worship and gratitude, knowing that distant generations of his own family would welcome the King whose reign would never end. Though David may not have fully recognized it at the time, he had indeed built a house for God...the temple of his heart.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: In your childhood, when a team was chosen, were you closer to the first one chosen or the last?

1. When Saul disobeyed God at the end of chapter ten (p. 143), Samuel told Saul that the LORD had sought out a man after God's own heart and appointed him as the ruler for His people. What does it mean to be a man or woman after God's own heart based on David's example? (See Acts 13:21-22.)
2. In his battle with Goliath, "*David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him*" (pg. 149). When have you had the courage to face down an impending conflict?
3. Contrast Saul's downward trajectory and David's upward trajectory. Where do you see the inverse of Saul in David?
4. What was the fundamental reason for David's choice to spare Saul's life in their encounter at En-Gedi (p. 153-154)? How does this choice reflect David's view of submission and of God?
5. What do you learn about God's character and His ways from the episode of David and the ark (p.156-158)? (For further insight, see Exodus 25:14 and Numbers 4:15.) Would you characterize your own worship as reserved or unbridled?
6. In humility, David offered to build a house for God, but instead God promised to build a "house" for David. What prompted David's concern for God's dwelling place?
7. Through no merit of his own, David received God's grace through God's covenant with him (p. 159). What specific covenant promises did God make with David? How is this covenant with David later fulfilled in Christ (Luke 1:32-33)?
8. Identify some episodes from David's life that demonstrate David's clear view of God's Upper Story. How were his choices influenced by that macro view?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 12, THE TRIALS OF A KING

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. List three to five lessons that you can apply to your own life from the episode of David's sin.
2. God used Nathan to confront David about his sin. Has anyone ever confronted you about a sin in your life? Who has permission to be your "Nathan"?
3. Compare David's confrontation with Nathan to Saul's confrontation with Samuel (p.162-163 and p. 141-143.) What does David seem to understand that Saul does not?

DAY 2

1. Psalm 32 (p.165-166) shows what David felt like when he kept his sin a secret. Do you have a secret sin? How does keeping it secret affect you?
2. After David's baby died, he arose and worshiped (p. 165). What does this say about the nature of worship? About David's ability to release the past?

DAY 3

1. King David grieved over his son Absalom's death, even though Absalom had betrayed him. Why do you think he reacted this way?
2. David was excited to give his time, money, and effort to building a temple he would not even live to see. Is giving easy or hard for you? How can you be a more cheerful giver?

CHAPTER 12, THE TRIALS OF A KING

TIMELESS TRUTH: SIN HAS ITS CONSEQUENCES, BUT REDEMPTION IS ALWAYS NEAR.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

David was voted least likely among his brothers to be anointed king. He was the last person on the battlefield you'd pick to play the hero's part, but David was the underdog who overcame. He confronted lions, giants and kings with bare hands and bold faith. At last, the man after God's own heart became the man on Israel's throne.

But kings who stay home from battle are seldom at rest. David's eyes wandered and so did his heart. He summoned the very lovely and very married Bathsheba to his palace and then into his bed. When Bathsheba sent word she was pregnant, David turned his strategy tactics toward her husband, Uriah.

He called Uriah home from the battlefield to visit his wife, expecting a night together would position Uriah as the father-to-be. The plan failed, so David concocted a surefire Plan B. He sent Uriah back to the frontlines carrying his own death warrant: an order for General Joab to engineer a battlefield "accident" and guarantee Uriah's death. The plan worked. David married Bathsheba and went back to the business of the kingdom.

Then Nathan, the prophet, came to the palace. Guilty kings never fare well when prophets arrive for a visit. Nathan told a parable and pointed the finger of blame squarely in David's face. He asserted, "*You are the man!*" and David knew he'd met his match. The man after God's own heart had become the man with blood on his hands. David and Bathsheba's marriage feasting turned quickly into mourning the death of their son. David repented of his sin and God forgave him. They had a second son named Solomon, which means *peace*.

Sadly, David was a better king than father. David's sin was forgiven, but its aftermath was calamitous. His son, Absalom, attempted to usurp the throne and his rise to power resulted in a rebellion. David instructed his troops to be gentle with his proud son, perhaps because he connected the dots between Absalom's behavior and his own failures as a father. But the clash between David's army and Absalom's rebels was brutal. When Absalom was found hanging from a tree limb, Joab seized the moment and killed the conspirator. King David mourned in anguish when he heard the news.

David's closing chapter turns the page from battles to building. He knew that his son, Solomon, would build a house for God, so he did all he could to prepare the way. From the overflow of David's heart came the emptying of his bank account. Others followed the king's example and gave willingly to build God's temple. King David's story draws to a close with poetic psalms of praise, reminders of faithfulness to Solomon, and his sights set on living "*in the house of the LORD forever.*"

David's Lower Story places the spotlight on one man's sin and its tragic consequences. Yet it also beams with the offer of forgiveness and redemption. God's grand Upper Story reminds us that no one is righteous on their own. God's promise to David (p.159) pointed across a millennium to a sinless King of Kings; no end of righteousness, no end of peace, and the redemption of all things.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: Share a time when you made a wrong turn on a road trip and the results created a real hardship.

1. What were the steps in David's sin and cover-up? Compare David's steps leading to sin with Eve's (p. 5). How can your group help hold each other accountable to guard against the same pathway?
2. Which Ten Commandments did David break in his sin with Bathsheba and Uriah?
3. Why did God take the life of the child when it was his father who sinned? How do you feel about God's decision?
4. Does God's punishment of David (and all his family) fit the crime if God truly forgave him?
5. Psalm 32 describes what David felt before and after his confession (p. 165-166). If all our sins were forgiven by Christ dying on the cross, then what value does confession have today? Why is it so important?
6. Who did David sin against—Bathsheba, Uriah or God? Find examples in the text that prove your point. What does this teach us about sin?
7. Compare David's reaction when hearing the news that his baby had died (p. 165) to his reaction when his son Absalom had died (p. 169). Discuss with your group some explanations that could account for the differences.
8. Following his sin, David's family unraveled. He was betrayed by his son Absalom and deeply mourned his death. How have you responded to betrayal?
9. How did the people feel about giving to the work of the temple that Solomon would build? Why were they so willing?
10. Look back at Psalm 23 (p. 173). Why do you think this passage continues to be so meaningful to people?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 13, THE KING WHO HAD IT ALL

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. At the beginning of the chapter, Solomon is humble, and looks to God for help. By the end of the chapter, he is using political power and slave labor to maintain his reign. What led to this change?
2. Solomon was only 20 when he became king. One of his first acts as king was to ask God to give him wisdom. Where you have influence, when did you last ask for wisdom?
3. If the LORD offered you anything you wanted, what would you ask for?

DAY 2

1. What does the prayer of Solomon teach us about God and how we approach him?
2. Despite Solomon's wisdom, he also made some poor decisions. Which would you say was the core bad decision and how will you avoid this in your life?

DAY 3

1. The Queen of Sheba traveled a long distance to experience the wisdom of Solomon. Who do you go to for wise advice? How can you take better advantage of those relationships?
2. As Solomon grew older, he was a rich and established ruler. He did not apply the wisdom that defined his early career. How can you continue to seek wisdom, even after you have experienced success?

CHAPTER 13, THE KING WHO HAD IT ALL

TIMELESS TRUTH: COMPLETE YOUR WALK - FINISH FAITHFUL.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

The “man after God’s own heart” had known seasons of triumph and tragedy, yet his legacy is marked by overall faithfulness and trust that God would keep His word. David’s story closes with instruction and warning for his son, Solomon, who was already poised to carry on the heritage. David charged the new king with the divinely appointed task of leading God’s chosen nation and urged him to “walk in His ways,” so their family would “never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel,” as God had promised.

Solomon’s reign began with a series of defining events. He married the daughter of the Egyptian Pharaoh, and ironically, the nation that had once enslaved Israel now sought the good graces of God’s people. Then God appeared to Solomon in a dream and offered to grant his heart’s desire. Solomon asked for wisdom to lead and God was pleased to grant this request and gave him wealth and honor as well. His wisdom was quickly tested when two prostitute mothers fought over a son. Solomon correctly judged in favor of the true mother and his people held him in awe. Solomon’s keen wisdom became the hallmark of his reign and gave him insight into human nature. He penned thousands of proverbs that gained him an international reputation. People from around the world sought him out and Abraham’s descendants became a blessing to the whole world as Solomon demonstrated that the cornerstone of all wisdom is a holy fear of God.

During Solomon’s reign, peace prevailed in the Promised Land. The time had come to build a temple for God. The construction project was massive and followed the pattern of the tabernacle that had been used since the days of Moses. The end result was as majestic as one could imagine. With great reverence, Solomon had the ark placed in the Most Holy Place. The temple was filled with a cloud of God’s glory and Solomon humbly realized that even a magnificent temple could not sufficiently contain Him. Still, the temple would become the enduring focal point of worship and life for God’s people.

Following the dedication of the temple, God appeared to Solomon and warned him of the consequences Israel would face if they turned away from Him. *“If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and heal their land”* (p. 188). He also promised Solomon a royal dynasty in Israel if the king remained faithful. But if Israel followed other gods, God’s people would be cut off from the land.

King Solomon experienced phenomenal success. His wealth and wisdom were legendary. His reign was marked by peace and prosperity. But all of Solomon’s insight and riches could not make up for his choice to collect wives like gold. He married hundreds of women, many of them foreigners. Just like God had said, his foreign wives “turned his heart after other gods.” This single decision shaped the future of his descendants and of the nation of Israel.

Solomon’s story began with great promise, incomparable wisdom and magnificent achievement. His father and grandfather had also started out well, but the way each of them ended was disappointing. There are no final words of wisdom recorded for the wisest king of all time. Instead, his closing chapter reveals that the kingdom would be torn in two. Solomon spent his last days fighting off enemies and rebels. His splendor and his legacy were tarnished by disobedience and idolatry. What a sad ending for the king who had it all, but ultimately failed in the only thing that really mattered: finishing well.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: What is one of the smartest things you have ever done?

1. How did Solomon (and other Israelites) show love for the LORD in the Old Testament? How does this differ from New Testament believers? (See John 14:15, 15:12, and 1 John 5:2-3.)
2. Look at Solomon's prayer of dedication. What does this teach you about how you should approach God?
3. Solomon authored many proverbs that teach general principles of wise and practical living. Some examples are found on pages 179-183. Choose one that you particularly like or one that resonates with you. What is the main point that it communicates? How might your life be different if you applied the proverb?
4. Using what you have learned about Israel's history in previous chapters of *The Story*, why did Solomon make the dedication of the temple such a big event? What would it have been like to experience it first hand?
5. Compare God's promises to Solomon with His promises to David (p. 159). Which promise(s) had God faithfully fulfilled? What would Solomon and his descendants need to do to keep a successor on the throne (p. 176, 188-189)? How could Israel avoid captivity (p. 189-188)?
6. Solomon accumulated unprecedented riches. Look up Deuteronomy 17:15-17 and 28:1-14. Did Solomon go too far? Is extreme wealth a good thing or a bad thing?
7. As Solomon grew older, he was a rich and established ruler, but he did not apply the wisdom that defined his early career. How can you continue to seek wisdom, even after you have experienced success?
8. Solomon's failures began when he married women who served other gods. Why is it important for a husband and wife to both be committed Christians? What advice would you give someone who is considering dating a non-Christian?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 14, A KINGDOM TORN IN TWO

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Rehoboam sought counsel from the elders who had served his father first and then to the young men who had served him. To whom do you turn when you need advice in making difficult decisions? Why?
2. This chapter is full of stories of conflict. Do you avoid conflict or are you more apt to provoke it? What lessons about conflict and conflict resolution can you learn from the stories in this chapter?

DAY 2

1. Jeroboam turned away from the LORD and caused Israel to sin in order to hold on to his position and power. When in your own life have you sinned against God in order to maintain a position, hold on to power or boost your standing? What safeguard could you put in place to help you make God-honoring choices in the future?
2. When the man of God spoke against Jeroboam, the king was outraged (p. 196-197). How do you receive correction?
3. The anger of the LORD is mentioned four times in this chapter (p. 198, 202). If someone asked you what makes God angry, what could you tell him or her? To which of the Ten Commandments was God's anger related (p. 61-62)?

DAY 3

1. Review the summary statements made about Kings Asa and Ahab (p. 201). In a single sentence, write a summary statement that you would like to define the character of your life. If it is not true of your life now, what steps do you need to take toward that goal?
2. What are a few of the ways that the national leaders of this chapter shaped the populace of their nations? Our nation has new leadership. Based upon what you have learned from this chapter, write a prayer for them and for our country.

CHAPTER 14, A KINGDOM TORN IN TWO

TIMELESS TRUTH: LEADERSHIP ALWAYS HAS ITS CONSEQUENCES.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

Solomon, whose name means peace, found peace slipping away during the final years of his reign. His son Rehoboam was to take his place as ruler over the 12 tribes of Israel. A large party of disgruntled leaders led by Jeroboam showed up at Rehoboam's coronation ceremony requesting that he grant relief from the heavy burden of taxation and forced labor that Solomon had placed on them. Rehoboam rejected the counsel of the experienced elders and took the advice of his immature peers who theorized that bullying and intimidation were better leadership tactics than servanthood. Rehoboam promised even heavier taxation and more forced labor. With one decision, the nation divided and its fate was sealed.

Only Rehoboam's tribe of Judah remained loyal to him. The other 10 tribes to the north seceded, took the name of Israel and made Jeroboam their king. Instead of appreciating the gracious gift of God, Jeroboam, like Aaron centuries before, set up idols of counterfeit worship, leading Israel into idolatry. God sent a prophet who warned of judgment for their idolatry and predicted that someday a king named Josiah, a descendant of David, would destroy their pagan worship sites (this was fulfilled 290 years later). As a sign to authenticate his message, the pagan altar split in two and Jeroboam's outstretched hand turned leprous.

This did little to curb Jeroboam's pagan practices. When his son became ill he sent his wife in disguise to the prophet Ahijah to inquire about their son's fate. Though blind, Ahijah's spiritual sight was 20-20. He not only saw through the charade, but gave Jeroboam's wife a message of doom predicting that her husband's dynasty would soon end and Israel would one day be carried away into captivity. The message of doom was to be authenticated with the death of their son as soon as her footsteps crossed the entrance to the palace. And so it came to pass.

God's chosen people were now committing the same idolatrous and immoral practices that compelled God to purge the land of its Canaanite inhabitants in the first place. God's righteousness and covenant loyalty moved Him to jealous anger. Rehoboam allowed Judah to fall into the same idolatry as the North. The golden years of peace faded further when God judged Judah by using Shishak, king of Egypt. He attacked Judah and carried off the all of the gold and silver treasures. Rehoboam replaced them with bronze, but the decline in moral and spiritual values was even sharper than the drop in value from gold to bronze.

The Lower Story is primarily a list of idolatrous kings who lead both Judah and Israel further and further away from God. Abijah son of Rehoboam became the next king of Judah. His tenure was short and sinful like his father's. No good kings reigned in Israel after the split of the kingdom. Things went from bad to worse with the house of Omri. His evil son King Ahab and her royal wickedness Queen Jezebel drove Israel to new lows in idolatry.

But in the Upper Story, we see two things: First, those who reject the LORD will reap His grim judgment. But second, this judgment is always designed to redirect His people and produce repentance back toward the God who still relentlessly pursues His people, through prophets like Ahijah and kings like Asa who forged a path for people to find their way back to Him. The era of the kings, despite their terrible freedom, inaugurates a path to the King of Kings, who would redeem not just this era of division and strife, but every age from everlasting to everlasting.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: What's the best advice you have received? What was the worst? Did you follow the advice?

1. Rehoboam sought counsel to make an important decision (p. 194) and so did Jeroboam (p. 196). What criteria did each seem to use in evaluating the counsel of others? What makes for wise counsel? What kind of counsel does or should your small group provide for each other?
2. Jeroboam "counterfeited worship" by redirect Israel's attention away from the temple in Judah to local idols. What did he gain from this?
3. The split of Israel and Judah led to continual warfare for hundreds of years. What issues divide God's people today? Share with your group practical ways to promote unity at our church and unity with believers from other churches.
4. Does the prophecy from the man of God, the sign of the altar, and the leprous hand represent acts of grace or acts of judgment toward Jeroboam (p. 196-197)? What should Jeroboam's response have been?
5. Jeroboam recognized that Ahijah spoke the truth, even when he did not like it. How do you respond when you hear a truth you do not like? How can you be different from Jeroboam and use these as opportunities to change?
6. Have you had an occasion when someone asked you for advice and counsel because he or she respected your integrity and truthfulness? What happened?
7. Under King Rehoboam, the people of Judah "*engaged in all the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites.*" The idolatry in the culture had become the idolatry of God's people. In what ways are God's people today similar to the non-Christian culture all around us? How are we different?
8. Why did the sons of Hiel die during the rebuilding of Jericho? Consult p. 93 of *The Story* or Joshua 6:26. What does this incident teach you about the character of God?
9. Why would God allow such evil kings to rule over His people? How do the tragedies in this chapter fit into God's Upper Story?
10. What is the standard used in this chapter for a good king? What kind of standards are you setting for the generations that will follow you?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 15, GOD'S MESSENGERS

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. God sent Elijah to the Kerith Ravine where he was fed by ravens. How has God provided for you in unlikely or surprising ways?
2. Elijah experienced a great miracle, defeating the prophets of Baal, but then began to fear for his life. Why do you think this miracle was not enough for him?

DAY 2

1. What role did prayer play in Elijah's life? Look up James 5:16-18. What made Elijah's prayer effective? What makes you righteous and your prayers effective? (See 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Galatians 3:6 for further insight.)
2. When Elijah fled from Jezebel, he prayed, "*I have had enough, LORD. Take my life.*" Who do you know that could be experiencing similar despair? What can you do to help?
3. After a dramatic series of events, God revealed himself to Elijah in an *undramatic* way. Why would God choose to dwell in the whisper?

DAY 3

1. Elisha and Solomon were both given the opportunity to ask for whatever they wanted. What did they ask for? What does this teach us about what we should ask God for?
2. According to the prophecies of Amos and Hosea, what does God warn is coming? What is his ultimate purpose in Israel's judgment? What does this teach you about God?

CHAPTER 15, GOD'S MESSENGERS

TIMELESS TRUTH: GOD SPEAKS THROUGH HIS PEOPLE.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

Just when you thought it couldn't get any worse, it does. Israel sank deeper and deeper into the cesspool of idolatry under the royal wickedness of Ahab and Jezebel. They led the people further into idolatry and disregarded the God who had made them a nation. The people of promise had broken their promises. But YHWH is a jealous God who would not sit idly on His heavenly throne and allow worthless non-gods and their followers to go unchecked. So He called prophets who would speak on His behalf and demonstrate that there is no God but Himself. Sounding the alarm, these prophets warned faithless Israel that her unbelief would march her right into captivity.

Elijah warned Ahab that Israel would experience a 3-year drought because of their worship of the pagan god, Baal. The shriveled up land seemed a fitting picture of Israel's desiccated hearts and shrunken worship. Ahab had gone so far as to build a temple for Baal in the capital city of Samaria. Then, atop Mount Carmel, the supposed sacred dwelling place of Baal, Elijah challenged the idolaters to the ultimate smackdown—YHWH vs. Baal. Baal failed to show up but the LORD made a dramatic statement when He consumed the water-logged sacrifice with fire. Elijah then put to death the 450 prophets of Baal. Ahab's wife Jezebel, the Queen of Mean, threatened to kill him so Elijah fled into the desert. Fatalistic, fearful and not without some Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, he traveled forty days and forty nights until he reached Mount Horeb. God revealed Himself there to Elijah, much like He had done nearly 600 years earlier to Moses at Sinai. He told Elijah that he had kings and prophets to anoint – one of whom was his successor, Elisha. Once again, as with Moses and Joshua, God was passing the baton to the next generation of leaders who would speak for Him.

While the two prophets were traveling together, Elijah parted the Jordan by striking the water with his cloak – another throwback to Moses. As they continued on, a whirlwind took Elijah up to heaven in a chariot of fire. The cloak fell to Elisha whose authority was confirmed when he too divided the Jordan. Similar to Elijah before him, Elisha performed many miraculous feats for the benefit of the faithful remnant in Israel. He promised a barren Shunammite woman a son. When the boy suddenly died years later, Elisha brought him back to life. When the Aramean king sent his troops to capture the man of God, Elisha prayed. He asked God to open his servant's eyes so he could see the angels who were standing guard around them and to blind the Arameans. The prophet then led his captives to Samaria where he asked the king of Israel to prepare a feast of friendship in lieu of execution. This unconventional act of grace established peace between Israel and Aram.

Even with the powerful ministries of Elijah and Elisha, the deeply embedded idolaters remained powerful, numerous, and unrepentant in Israel. God sent Amos, a herdsman from the southern kingdom of Judah, to warn the northern kingdom of Israel that her prosperity, injustice, and sinful ways would soon be judged. He promised them that if Israel did not repent, they would be taken captive. God also sent Hosea to Israel as a living object lesson of His faithfulness and Israel's unfaithfulness. Israel refused to hear the pleas of God to return to Him.

God's holiness demands judgment against rebellious men, but His redemptive love always provides a way of escape. Whether it's a mountaintop showdown, a boy raised from the dead, a vision of guardian angels, or a prophet commanded to marry a woman who would become unfaithful, God is always telling His Upper Story of redemption and compassion through His messengers.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: When you were growing up how did your parents warn you that you were in trouble? Was there a special word or phrase that they used?

1. What is it about Ahab and Jezebel that provoked unprecedented anger from the LORD? How does this relate to the first two commandments?
2. Look up Deuteronomy 13:1-5. Was Elijah correct or too brutal in slaughtering all the prophets of Baal? Why does God take idolatry so seriously?
3. Baal worshipers believed their god made rain and storms, and during the dry season he needed to be brought back to life. Mount Carmel was his supposed sacred dwelling place. What was the point in God taking the battle to enemy territory?
4. Despite a recent, dramatic victory, Elijah was scared and depressed when he ran from Jezebel. Why do the deepest doubts often come on the heels of great triumphs or strong spiritual advancement?
5. Elijah ended up at Mount Horeb, the same mountain where Moses received the Ten Commandments from God (p. 207). What other parallels do you discover between Elijah and Moses?
6. Elisha's spiritual insight allowed him to know the plans of the king of Aram and to see God's angelic armies. Are there forces at work in our world today that we cannot see (p. 211-212)? What did this episode teach you about spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:12)?
7. What is the role of the prophets in this chapter? Was their role predicting the future or calling the people to repentance? Does God still send prophets today?
8. Do you see any similarities between the prophecies of Amos and Hosea and our world today? What do you think they would say to America? Our church?
9. Evaluate the prophets' ministries. On what basis would you judge whether or not they were successful? How should we evaluate success in our work for God? How should we evaluate our own success for the kingdom?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 16, THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. The reigns of kings Hoshea and Hezekiah overlapped for about six years. Which king seemed to have God's Lower Story in view and which seemed to have His Upper Story in view? How do you know?
2. God used the Assyrians to discipline his people. Look up Hebrews 12:4-11. According to Hebrews, what should be the outcome of God's discipline? Has this been your reaction?

DAY 2

1. What do these stories of kings and their people teach you about leadership?
2. The Assyrians tried to convince the people of Judah not to trust God. Whose "voice" is most likely to cause you to doubt God? To whom do you listen when you feel surrounded by your enemies?
3. Isaiah lists several analogies that show God's love for His people (p. 227-228). Which ones are most reassuring to you?

DAY 3

1. Consider Isaiah's vision of the LORD in the temple. What made Isaiah so aware of his own sinful condition?
2. Isaiah realized that his whole nation needed cleansing. Write out a prayer for our nation and for its cleansing.
3. God used Isaiah to warn Judah of an imminent judgment. God also provided the promise of restoration through Isaiah. What specific promises (p. 227-228) might bring you comfort in those times that you feel forsaken or forgotten by God?

CHAPTER 16, THE BEGINNING OF THE END

TIMELESS TRUTH: GOD DEALS WITH DISOBEDIENCE, BUT HIS COMPASSION NEVER ENDS.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

For 209 years, the northern kingdom of Israel had endured one evil king after another. Their failure to keep God's covenant meant they would be expelled from the covenant. They had been chosen to be a blessing to all other nations, but now they would be delivered over to those very nations.

Shalmaneser, King of Assyria, set up a puppet government for the northern tribes of Israel and appointed Hoshea as king. Hoshea was as defiant of Shalmaneser as he was of God, the true King of Israel. He stopped paying tribute and as a result, the Assyrian army destroyed the capital city of Samaria and captured Hoshea. The king, along with many of his fellow Israelites, was deported by Shalmaneser's successor, Sargon II. By resettling them throughout Assyria, God was settling His own accounts. Idolatry, disobedience, and stubbornness provoked God's anger and led Him to expel the northern kingdom from His land.

Meanwhile, just to the south in the kingdom of Judah, godly King Hezekiah was nervously watching these world-shaking events on his northern border. Hezekiah stands out from all of the other kings of Judah for his efforts to remove every vestige of idolatry in the land. He rebelled against the new Assyrian king Sennacherib. The Assyrians sent envoys, claiming that they wanted to negotiate a peaceful surrender with Hezekiah in Jerusalem. Their reasoning was flawless: What other nation had been able to stand against the Assyrian might? Had not God Himself commissioned them for this task? Sennacherib's commander appealed directly to the populace of Jerusalem, speaking to them in Hebrew.

King Hezekiah trusted in the LORD and prayed for deliverance. The prophet Isaiah promised that God would deliver them. What faith it must have taken to trust the prophet's prediction! The angel of the LORD swept through the Assyrians army as they slept. The next morning Sennacherib's camp was littered with 185,000 dead Assyrian soldiers. The army retreated and Judah was saved.

Isaiah had been called to be a prophet during the last year of King Uzziah's life. In a majestic vision of the LORD, he was commissioned to speak for God to turn the people of Judah away from sin and toward their God. He warned that Judah was walking in her sister Israel's footsteps and therefore would reap similar judgment. Unfortunately, he seldom found a listening audience.

The threat of foreign exile failed to curb the widespread social injustice, moral decay, and religious apostasy. Judah's pride would be her downfall; God loved His people too much to allow their sin to go unchecked. And although He warned of judgment, He also promised a future restoration. When Israel perceived herself as forsaken and forgotten, her compassionate God would fully restore her. The whole world would know that the LORD is their Savior and Redeemer.

What a comfort Isaiah's prophecies must have been to the faithful remnant of Judah: God's Upper Story of redemption would triumph over the sin of His people. Even the godliest of kings could not overcome the sin nature of mankind. In his most memorable passage, Isaiah described a Suffering Servant, who was "pierced for our transgressions." Looking down from the Upper Story, we can see that this was a description of the true King, who would suffer for all mankind.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: Can you think of a time when you suffered an unjust punishment or consequence? What about a time when you deserved a consequence for your actions but were “let off the hook”?

1. Why did God send the northern kingdom into captivity? (See 2 Kings 17:7-17 for more details.) Compare God’s actions against Israel to Moses’ warning in Deut. 28:45-50 and 30:1-5. What do you discover?
2. God frequently reminded Israel of examples of his faithfulness, such as their deliverance from Egypt (p. 219). What past experiences have you had that remind you of God’s faithfulness? (See Romans 8:31)
3. How have you seen people respond when they receive just consequences for sinful actions? How should a Christian respond to the consequences of sin and the discipline of God?
4. King Sennacherib of Assyria sent his envoy to Jerusalem to persuade King Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem to surrender peacefully, claiming he came on the LORD’s orders (p. 221). Isaiah’s message to Hezekiah said otherwise. How do you evaluate people who claim to have a word from the LORD?
5. What is King Hezekiah’s view of YHWH the God of Israel (p. 223)? What is the result of a correct understanding of God?
6. What about the vision of God in the temple made Isaiah realize that he was a sinner? Compare Isaiah’s response with Peter in Luke 5:8 and John in Rev. 1:17. What are the implications?
7. According to Isaiah’s prophecy (p. 225-226), what was the southern kingdom of Judah like? What did he say that God would do as a result?
8. Isaiah’s prophecy predicted punishment and captivity for Judah, as well as return and restoration (p. 227-228). How did Zion (Jerusalem and Judah) react to this message?
9. List the qualities of the Suffering Servant (p. 228-230). (See Matthew 8:16-17, 26:63-67; 1 Peter 2:22-25; Romans 5:19; Luke 22:37 for further insights.) What does this teach us about God’s Upper Story?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 17, THE KINGDOM'S FALL

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. List the evil practices of Manasseh that aroused the anger of the LORD. Can you find examples of any of these practices in our own community?
2. Where did Manasseh set up his altars and Asherah poles? According to 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, where is the temple of God now? What are the implications for you personally?
3. What does Manasseh's redemption teach you about God? About people?

DAY 2

1. Look up 2 Chronicles 33:14-20, 23. What was Manasseh's response to the grace of God?
2. God told Ezekiel, "You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious," (p. 236). Have you ever been fearful to speak the truth?

DAY 3

1. What must it have been like to be Jeremiah as Jerusalem was destroyed? How did he view God's Upper story and His Lower story, according to his lament (p. 243-245)?
2. List the specific promises that God says He will do for Israel (p. 245-246). According to the text, what is the result of God's Spirit in you? How does it affect your life to have the Spirit in you?

CHAPTER 17, THE KINGDOM'S FALL

TIMELESS TRUTH: LISTEN AND LIVE.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

Legacies are fragile things. Hezekiah had been King of Judah for nearly three decades. His reforms were sweeping, his achievements notable, his accolades many. He is listed among the few who “*did what was right before the LORD His God.*” After his death, his son Manasseh ascended to the throne and unraveled his father’s spiritual heritage. Manasseh’s reign marked a spiritual relapse from which the kingdom of Judah would not recover. He made a mockery of Hezekiah’s faithful reign and did more evil than any of his predecessors.

King Manasseh set up altars in the LORD’s temple where worshipping the stars accompanied worship of Jehovah. He filled Jerusalem with the blood of innocents and turned his own heart and his people’s hearts away from God. Manasseh was eventually captured by the Assyrian king and led off to Babylon in utter humiliation. At last, he turned to the LORD who had compassion on him and eventually allowed him to return to Jerusalem. God re-enters the story to give ultimate forgiveness even to the worst of kings.

But God’s people would not return to Him. They ignored the prophet’s warnings. So God did what He said He would do—He sent foreign armies to raid Judah. Babylon’s King Nebuchadnezzar laid three sieges against Judah and Jerusalem. The first came against King Jehoiakim and the second against King Jehoiachin. Nearly 10,000 Judeans were captured and taken away to Babylon. The king and the prophet Ezekiel were among their prisoners.

Ezekiel’s visions are some of the most colorful in all ancient literature and foretold of Jerusalem’s certain doom. God commissioned Ezekiel to speak truth to the exiles who disregarded their guilt, even when faced with such stern judgment. He refused to give up. He called Jeremiah to alert the adulterous people that they must own up to their reckless sin. And God also sent word that the worst was yet to come.

Zedekiah was Judah’s last and most pitiful king. His government was controlled by Babylon and he and the people rejected God, broke His Law, and defiled His temple. The time for judgment had come, so God arranged the final battle: King Nebuchadnezzar vs. King Zedekiah. The outcome was certain. An 18-month blockade left Jerusalem’s inhabitants weakened by famine. Zedekiah made a last ditch plea for help from the prophet Jeremiah, but no one much cared for Jeremiah’s response. He reported that Jerusalem would not be saved and he urged surrender as their only hope of survival. Most regarded his claims as treasonous.

In 586 BC, the Babylonian army broke through the walls of Jerusalem. They demolished the city, looted the temple, and led the people away to Babylon. Jeremiah was among the few who were left behind. He grieved the loss of his beloved city and mourned the sin of God’s people. He knew that Judah could have been saved, but even in his sorrow, this weeping prophet stood firm on the sure promises of God. He trusted that God would have compassion on the remnant who remained in Jerusalem.

It had been eight centuries since God delivered His people from slavery in Egypt. Now they were exiles in Babylon. Hope vanished. But God told Ezekiel that all was not lost. He reminded His people that He would one day cleanse and restore them. He assured their return to the homeland. And He promised that He would be their God.

To illustrate His point, God showed Ezekiel a valley of dry bones and asked, “Can these bones live?” When Ezekiel spoke God’s message to the bones, they came to life and stood like a vast army. This astonishing demonstration confirmed that even exile in Babylon would not hinder God’s great Upper Story and foretold a future resurrection for the faithful. Life would return to Israel’s dried up bones. God would make them a nation again. He would bring them back to their land. Only He could.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: What is the most memorable destruction or disaster that you have seen first-hand?

1. List the evil things that King Manasseh did to arouse the anger of the LORD (p. 231-232). How did Judah compare to the pagan nations that the LORD had driven out of the Promised Land? (See the first full paragraph on p. 86 for insight.)
2. What are the “starry hosts” (p.231)? What are the implications for astrology, horoscopes, and other “harmless” and “fun” fortune tellers?
3. Who is most culpable for the sins of Judah—the people or their king? How can believers today avoid being led astray?
4. What happened to King Manasseh? What do you think led him to change his ways?
5. Review Isaiah’s prophecy made over one hundred years before Nebuchadnezzar’s attacks (p. 225-226). Compare Isaiah’s predictions with the events during the reigns of Kings Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah.
6. During the exile, God gave Ezekiel the mission of sharing his word with the Jews living in a foreign land. How does the Christian mission today resemble this situation?
7. Jeremiah was still in Jerusalem after the first two sieges. According to his prophecy (p. 238-240), what single condition must be met for God to forgive the city? Are you as forgiving as God? Why or why not?
8. Nebuchadnezzar’s final siege lasted eighteen months ending in 586 BC. How did King Zedekiah regard the LORD? What was God’s final word to him?
9. After the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah grieved for his beloved city (p. 243-245). What did Jeremiah believe about the Upper Story of God? What specifically can we apply to our own lives from Jeremiah’s lament and praise?
10. What did God promise He would do for Israel in spite of their great sin, their Babylonian exile, and their stone hearts (p. 245-246)? What does this teach you about God’s heart for His chosen nation?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 18, DANIEL IN EXILE

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Carefully observe how the chapter describes Daniel (p. 249, 257-258, 259). Do other characters in the chapter confirm or deny such attributes?
2. How does your prayer life compare to that of Daniel? Is it difficult for you to set aside time for regular prayer?
3. Although they might have only been teenagers, Daniel and his friends stand out for their choices to observe a strict diet and only worship their God. How can you help the young people you know to be more like Daniel and his friends?

DAY 2

1. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were punished for their faithfulness to God. How would you answer the question, "Why does God allow bad things to happen to people of faith?"
2. Daniel and his friends remained faithful to God, although they were given leadership positions in a pagan government. What can you learn from their leadership? What can you learn from their relationships with their boss and co-workers?

DAY 3

1. Did God promise Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego deliverance from the fiery furnace? What consequences are you willing to accept in order to stand firm in your faith?
2. Daniel's integrity was so consistent and above reproach that even his enemies could find no grounds to accuse him (p. 257-258). Examine your own life. Do any inconsistencies exist between your public life and your private life?

CHAPTER 18, DANIEL IN EXILE

TIMELESS TRUTH: THE FAITHFUL PROSPER WHILE THE FAITHLESS FALL.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

Judah's best and brightest were deported to Babylon when Jerusalem was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar's armies. Daniel and his trio of friends were among their ranks. King Nebuchadnezzar introduced them to their new homeland by enrolling the four young men in his exclusive three-year "How to Live Like a Babylonian" Training Academy. Students were lavished with food and wine from the king's table and invited to enjoy the cosmopolitan pleasures of the world's most sophisticated city. Daniel and his companions graciously resisted. They asked for vegetarian meals so they could stay faithful to Jewish dietary laws. The king's official worried that their meager diet might leave them pallid and weakened, but God blessed their choice with academic success and physical stamina. They flourished and the ruler of the world's greatest empire took notice.

The king awoke one morning having been greatly troubled by a dream. He demanded an explanation of its meaning from his wise men and also expected them to tell the dream itself as a guarantee of accuracy. Failure was no big deal except for the accompanying death sentence. The request was impossible, of course, except that God revealed both the events of the dream and their meaning to his servant, Daniel. Nebuchadnezzar had dreamed of a four-layered statue. Its head of gold represented Babylon's might. The remaining layers of silver, bronze, and iron symbolized world empires that had not yet risen to power. Daniel's interpretation satisfied the king and saved his life and the lives of all the magicians and wise men in the kingdom. King Nebuchadnezzar promoted Daniel to ruler over Babylon, made high-level officials of his three friends, and worshipped Daniel's God.

This devotion, however, was only temporary, as the king's advisors played to his pride. He built a gold statue in his own honor and all were commanded to bow down and worship at its feet. Daniel's three friends, Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego, were faced with a grim choice: idolatry or death. They refused to bow. The king was enraged and ordered them to be thrown into a fiery furnace. They defied the king's last chance order and chose to remain faithful even in the face of death. The fire was stoked and the young men were bound and thrown into the inferno. An astonished king watched a fourth man join them as they walked unbound and unharmed through the fire. And once again the king praised their God.

Nebuchadnezzar was succeeded by Belshazzar. King Belshazzar threw a grand party using the holy goblets they had stolen in the raid of Jerusalem's temple. The LORD sent him a mysteriously written message that appeared on the wall of the banquet hall. The king was terrified...for good reason. Daniel explained that the message said the king would soon meet his Maker. That same night the Persian army invaded Babylon. Belshazzar was killed and Persia became the silver layer in the statue King Nebuchadnezzar had dreamed of years before.

The new king, Darius of Persia, gave Daniel a promotion. Daniel's rivals were jealous and plotted his death. They deceived Darius into signing an irrevocable decree forbidding prayer to anyone except the king. The penalty was a single night stay in a cave of hungry lions. Daniel responded by doing as he had always done; he knelt and prayed. Of course, the king's officials felt "duty bound" to bring such dangerous activity to the king's attention and Darius was forced to throw his trusted servant to the lions. So, the king spent a restless night and rose in the morning to find that Daniel was safe and sound in the lions den. And the great King of Persia worshipped Daniel's God.

While Daniel, his friends, and the other exiles were kept in Babylon during the seventy years of captivity. The prophet Jeremiah carried out his duties in the ravaged city of Jerusalem. Jeremiah sent a letter of hope to the captives reminding them that God would one day bring them back to Jerusalem and encouraging them to prosper even as exiles in a foreign land. Daniel had done just that. He watched the rise and fall of kings and kingdoms and remained faithful. In the great Upper Story of God, Babylon had been a detour rather than a destination.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: What's one of the strangest dreams you can recall?

1. Daniel stands out among the prophets. How is he like other Old Testament prophets and how is he different?
2. Jerusalem and God's Temple were in ruins and most of the Jews were living in exile. It is easy to see how one could lose faith. What helped them hold on to faith? What helps you hold on to faith when you experience difficulties?
3. Look back at God's covenant with Abraham (p. 13 or Gen. 12:1-3). How was it fulfilled through Daniel and his three friends?
4. Compare the story of Daniel with the story of Joseph. Do you view difficulties the way they did? Why or why not?
5. List the various ways that God revealed His supernatural power in this chapter. What message did God's actions send to the exiles? What impression did He make on the gentile leaders?
6. When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to bow down to the golden idol, they did not know whether God would save them or not. How do you stand up for God when you know the results could be disastrous?
7. How did Daniel regard the various governmental authorities? Look up Romans 13:1-7, 1 Timothy 2:1-2, and Titus 3:1. How should Christians regard governments?
8. How did God show Himself to be sovereign over human kingdoms and rulers? How does this help you view our world today?
9. Jeremiah's message (p. 260-261) was sent in a letter from Jerusalem to the exiles in Babylon. What was God's Lower Story and Upper Story promises to them?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 19, THE RETURN HOME

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. If you had been an Israelite exile in Babylon when King Cyrus permitted your return, would you have returned to the Promised Land or would you have remained in Babylon? Why?
2. How had the LORD's 70-year discipline affected the people of Israel? Have you experienced personal change as a result of the LORD's discipline?

DAY 2

1. What did Israel's enemies do to undermine their efforts to rebuild their temple (p. 265)? When have you experienced a similar situation wherein someone tried to undermine something important to you? How did you respond?
2. Read pages 266-267 and list the reasons the temple work had ceased. Do you struggle with misplaced priorities? What are some ways you can reprioritize your life?
3. Some were disappointed that the new temple was no match to the glory and beauty of Solomon's temple. How can such comparisons be dangerous? According to Haggai's second message (p. 267-268), what is the remedy for their – and our – discouragement?

DAY 3

1. Haggai the Prophet encouraged the people to get back to work on the temple building project that had stalled for sixteen years (p. 267). Are there areas of your spiritual growth that have stalled out?
2. Review Zechariah's message of hope and promise. What did God promise the faithful Israelites He would do? List the ways they were to respond to God's grace (p. 269). How do you rate in these areas?

CHAPTER 19, THE RETURN HOME

TIMELESS TRUTH: GOD'S GRACE PROVIDES A FRESH START.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

After generations of idolatry, God's people had been defeated by the empires that controlled the ancient world. The Assyrians had conquered the Northern kingdom, deported the people, and re-populated the land with exiles from other countries. Their practice was to redistribute people from conquered nations throughout their vast empire. The foreigners who were resettled in northern Israel intermarried with the few remaining Jews and became the half-breed Samaritans.

The Babylonians were next on the world scene. After each of their three conquests of the Southern Kingdom, the Babylonians deported Jewish captives to enclaves in Babylon and sought to assimilate them into their culture. Now, 70 years of captivity had elapsed. Kings and kingdoms rise and fall; world empires come and go.

The next world power, Persia, was more benevolent. They preferred the benefits of high taxation and the favor of the various gods. So King Cyrus issued a decree to repatriate all aliens to their homelands while allowing them some degree of self-rule. And thus the people of Israel began their journey home.

Under the guidance of the Hebrew leader, Zerubbabel, nearly 50,000 Jews returned to Jerusalem. They were intent on rebuilding, and the temple was the first priority. They rebuilt the altar and prepared sacrifices in accordance with the Law of Moses. Fifty years had passed since the temple had been torn down by the Babylonians, and at last God's people were again able to worship as God had instructed. The foundation of this humble temple could not compare to the magnificence of its predecessor, but the process had begun, and God was leading the way.

The locals didn't necessarily roll out the welcome wagon for the repatriated Judeans. They made a backhanded offer of help as an attempt to sabotage the temple rebuilding project. Zerubbabel didn't fall for their scheme, but the Jews were intimidated and construction halted.

Sixteen years later the prophet, Haggai, spoke on God's behalf. He twice urged his people, "Give careful thought to your ways." He reminded them that the temple had to be built as a place of honor and glory for God. The LORD encouraged His people and they returned to their work. Though the new temple would not have the splendor of the old one, God promised that His unsurpassed glory would return. Zechariah agreed; Jerusalem would again teem with life and prosperity because the people would live righteously. God promised to shower Jerusalem and Judah with His goodness and make Israel a blessing to the world.

When the building resumed, a new antagonist, Tattenai, wrote to King Darius hoping to obstruct progress. Darius searched the royal archives and discovered that his predecessor, King Cyrus, had given his royal thumbs up to the rebuilding of God's temple. In a fitting twist of events, Darius penned a letter back to Tattenai charging him with responsibility for funding the temple reconstruction. The plot backfired, and in 516 B.C., the temple was completed.

It had been 70 years since the people were first taken captive. This long and painful season of discipline brought much needed change to the hearts of God's people. In the Lower Story, God brought them out of captivity again. He returned them to the Land of Promise where they rebuilt His temple and their lives.

But the Upper Story once again rings with echoes of delivery from bondage. The LORD had redeemed His people from foreign captivity as God's great, over-arching plan continued unabated. This story of liberation and restoration is a poignant reminder that this world is not our home. Like Israel, we wait in joyful anticipation of our journey to a land of eternal promise (Heb. 11:16) where all things are new and home will be forever.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: What's the farthest you have moved? How was the adjustment?

1. How did the LORD fulfill His word spoken by Jeremiah? Look up Jer. 25:12 and 29:10. What happened to the king of Babylon? (See p. 256-257 for further insight.)
2. Look up Isa. 44:28 - 45:1. About how many years had passed between Isaiah's prophecy and Cyrus' edict? What does this teach you about God?
3. Why do you think many of the exiles chose to stay in Babylon instead of returning home to the Promised Land? How do you suppose God viewed that choice?
4. How did the temple builders and worshipers regard their covenant, the Law of Moses (p. 264-265)? Compare their view of the Law to the Israelites' attitude before the exile.
5. When the temple was re-established, some were overjoyed, and some were heart-broken. Many churches go through periods of growth, reconstruction and challenge. How should we respond when mixed feelings pull us in opposite directions?
6. What difficulties did the Jews experience in their rebuilding efforts? How did they respond to adversity? How can you use this story when facing adversity?
7. Zechariah's message claimed that people from other nations would be attracted to the religion and the God of the Jews (p. 269-270). What was to be the basis for this attraction? In what ways should our church be attractive to outsiders?
8. Once they resumed work on the temple, opposition resumed from Tattenai and others (p. 270). What examples of irony can you find in the correspondence between Tattenai and King Darius? What support do you find that "the eye of their God was watching over" them?
9. With Zechariah's encouragement, the people completed the task God gave them. Who in your group needs encouragement? Make a list of specific needs to pray for, and check on them next week.

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 20, THE QUEEN OF BEAUTY AND COURAGE

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Compare and contrast either Queens Vashti and Esther or Mordecai and Haman. Consider how their actions and words reveal their characters and synthesize your conclusions into a simple life lesson that applies to you today.
2. Mordecai seemed to have God's Upper Story in view when he sent word to Esther, "*And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?*" (p. 282). When has God most recently placed you in a position to serve a greater purpose than you desired? How did that make you feel?

DAY 2

1. How did Esther respond to Mordecai's instruction to approach the king and beg for mercy (p. 282)? Other than courage, what else was driving Esther's response?
2. Briefly list all that Haman boasted of to his wife and friends (p. 283). Why then was he not satisfied? What does this teach you about pride and discontentment?

DAY 3

1. The story of Esther demonstrates the need for fasting when facing a major crisis. Fasting is not an effort to "bribe" God into granting our request, but instead is done in reverence of His sovereignty and to focus our efforts. Have you ever fasted? What was the result?
2. A Medo-Persian king's edicts could not be repealed. How might your words or speech be different if you could not undo them? (See Matthew 5:37, James 3:1-11, James 5:12, and Ephesians 4:29.) What should characterize a Christian's words?
3. What was supposed to be a day of great destruction became a day of great deliverance and celebration of God's faithfulness. If you were to commemorate a time when God delivered you or providentially watched over you, what would it be and how would you celebrate it?

CHAPTER 20, THE QUEEN OF BEAUTY AND COURAGE

TIMELESS TRUTH: GOD'S PROVIDENCE INCLUDES BOTH JUSTICE AND LOVE.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

King Xerxes of Persia had reason to party. His vast empire was powerful and prosperous. His queen was lovely. His palace was ideal for a celebration befitting such a monarch. His merrymaking continued for six months when Xerxes summoned Queen Vashti so he could put her on display for the inebriated revelers. She refused. Kings do not like to be refused. With his advisers' support, he stripped Vashti of her crown and banished her from his presence.

Kings also do not like to be queenless. The king commissioned a kingdom-wide beauty pageant and young women from every province were whisked into the king's harem for a year-long visit at the royal spa. One such woman was a Jewish girl named Esther who had been raised by her cousin, Mordecai. Esther won everyone's heart, including the king's. He made her queen but did not know she was a Jew. Soon after, Mordecai learned of a plot to kill the king. He passed the news to Esther; the king was rescued and the conspirators hanged. Xerxes' scribe recorded Mordecai's service in the annals of the king.

Haman was King Xerxes' right-hand man. Haman reveled in his high standing and enjoyed having all the royal officials kneel at his feet. Mordecai refused to pay such homage. Haman was enraged. To exact his revenge, Haman deceived the king into issuing a decree to exterminate Mordecai and his people, the entire Jewish population of Persia. He cast a lot, or pur, and chose a single day of unfettered violence against the Jews.

Mordecai sent word to Esther asking her to beg the king for mercy. Queen Esther feared for her life because no one could legally go before the king without prior permission. Mordecai's immortal words persuaded her: *"Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"* Her courageous response was, *"If I perish, I perish."*

She and the Jews in Susa fasted, and Esther approached the king. Xerxes welcomed her and offered to grant her heart's desire. She invited the king and Haman to a private banquet. Haman was delighted. Esther invited them both to another fancy but ultimately fatal feast. Haman was elated to be the exclusive royal guest but still enraged over Mordecai's insolence. With all the satisfaction of a Cheshire cat, he erected a pole on which Mordecai could be impaled.

Kings with full stomachs must not sleep well, so Xerxes spent the midnight hours reading the royal records. He discovered the account of Mordecai's report that saved his own life and wondered how he might honor such a man. The king asked Haman for advice on how he might honor one of his favorites. Assuming that *he* was the king's favored, Haman dreamed up an elaborate ceremony. Within moments, a mortified Haman was giving his nemesis the king's robes, leading him through the streets and singing his praises. Haman later enjoyed the queen's second banquet until Esther exposed his plot to destroy her people. The king left the room in a fury only to return and discover Haman appearing to assault his queen. He ordered that Haman be impaled on the very pole intended for Mordecai.

The king could not repeal his original edict declaring the destruction of the Jews. But he enabled Mordecai to issue a counter-edict providing for the Jews to take up their own defense. The day planned for destruction became a day of deliverance. Though the lot was cast, God remains the author of the story. Even in exile, God protected His people, and in Esther, we see God's heart for saving us all.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: What's the biggest, most lavish party you have attended?

1. Analyze the positives and negatives of King Xerxes as a leader.
2. The book of Esther has been called the “godless book” because God’s name is never mentioned. Prayer, the Law, sacrifices, and temple worship are also conspicuously absent. Where can you find God’s supernatural blessings in the story anyway?
3. Look up Isaiah 48:20 and Jeremiah 29:10, 50:8, 51:6. What do these verses say about the Jews like Mordecai and Esther who stayed behind? What do you learn about God through His providential care of the Jews outside of the Promised Land?
4. The book of Esther is full of irony, such as Queen Vashti who would not come before the king when requested and Queen Esther who came before the king when not requested. What other examples of irony can you find in this chapter?
5. What life lessons does Haman teach us about pride, self-centeredness, and hatred?
6. Review the correspondence between Mordecai and Esther concerning an appeal to the king (p. 281-282). What is the relationship between God’s providence and our responsibility?
7. What risk was Queen Esther taking by approaching the king and how did she prepare for it (p. 282-283)? What factors do you suppose could account for Esther finding favor in the eyes of the king?
8. Queen Esther was willing to risk her life to save her people. Can you share a time when you took a risk to do what was right?
9. Esther is not the first Hebrew that God positioned in a place of influence to be a source of deliverance for His people. Who are the other deliverers we have studied in The Story and what common threads connect Queen Esther’s story to theirs?
10. How does the Lower Story of Esther fit into the covenant that God made with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3)? How does it fit with God’s Upper Story of redemption?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 21, REBUILDING THE WALLS

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Ezra “devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel” (p. 292). How has your own devotion to the study of God’s word changed since the beginning of *The Story*?
2. Review Ezra’s praise prayer (p. 294). Compare it to Proverbs 21:1. How might this help inform your view of our country’s newest government leaders?

DAY 2

1. Why did Nehemiah and Zerubbabel respond differently to opposition? (Review p. 264-266.) How are you most likely to respond when you face opposition?
2. Compare Nehemiah’s self-defense (p. 296-298) with Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 5:38-45. How do you reconcile the differences?
3. What characteristics make Nehemiah a good leader? Which characteristic do you most need in your life?

DAY 3

1. Nehemiah chose Hananiah as a co-leader of Jerusalem “Because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most people do” (p. 300). How would you benefit from surrounding yourself with “Hananiahs?”
2. Compare Malachi’s message on marriage with 1 Peter 3:7. Of what is marital unfaithfulness a symptom? What warnings might you give to a friend who treats a spouse poorly?

CHAPTER 21, REBUILDING OF THE WALLS

TIMELESS TRUTH: GOD ALWAYS PRESERVES A FAITHFUL REMNANT.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

It's no surprise that the Hebrew people were homesick after 70 years of foreign captivity. At this point, it had been 80 years since King Cyrus first gave the green light for the exiles to return to their beloved Jerusalem. Zerubbabel was among the first to go. Fifty thousand former slaves packed their bags and joined him on the trek back to the holy city in 537 B.C. But many remained beyond the borders of God's promise.

Ezra had earned the favor of Persia's King Artaxerxes during his time in Babylon. The king authorized Ezra to take a second contingent of Israelites back home. Ezra was a faithful scribe and teacher, and he was given permission not only to teach God's law but also a mandate to appoint judges and a bottomless expense account to finance his journey.

Nehemiah remained in the palace of Susa as the favored cupbearer of the Persian king. He was dismayed to hear that the walls of Jerusalem remained in disrepair, for without walls, no city would be secure. The king gave Nehemiah a leave-of-absence so he could lead 42,000 exiles back to Jerusalem. His first order of business was to assess the condition of the walls and the people. He quickly rallied the city leaders to rebuild.

Sanballat and Tobiah were none too pleased. As leaders of nearby nations, they were threatened by the prospect of Jerusalem's comeback. They retaliated with intimidation and made repeated attempts to out-manuever Nehemiah and his rebuilding project, but Nehemiah was undeterred. He encouraged his leaders and armed his people. Some worked while others stood guard. Some carried supplies with one hand and a weapon in the other, but the threats continued. Even when Israel's enemies enlisted an Israelite as a false prophet to undermine the progress, Nehemiah was not shaken. He refused to entertain empty lies, and the wall was rebuilt in record time—only 52 days!

As Nehemiah rebuilt the walls, Ezra set out to rebuild God's people. He began by teaching them the Scriptures for the next 13 years. The people gathered to hear Ezra read and other priests joined in to teach as well. At last, they got it! They grasped the reality of God's great story and celebrated the Feasts of Booths as Moses had written of so long before. The people and the priests hungered to worship God and God's people were restored in the Land of Promise.

Yet old habits die hard and the people's fervor soon dwindled. The priests and the people became apathetic, so God commissioned the prophet, Malachi, to speak His words of divine warning. The priests had begun to dishonor God with sacrifices that were less than the best. They treated their wives poorly and wondered why God was not pleased with their worship. They withheld their offerings and the whole community began to again turn away from God.

Malachi prophesied the return of the prophet Elijah as sign of things to come. God had restored His people and protected His faithful remnant. He had protected Judah's royal line in keeping with His promise to David. He spoke His final words of warning and promise through Malachi and then God was silent. God's people would not hear from Him again until the promised Elijah would step forth as God's new messenger. God's redemptive story, for now, was quietly marching toward history's climactic event.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: What's the most extensive remodeling or construction project you have been involved in?

1. List the three things to which Ezra devoted himself (p. 292). What is significant about this order that also applies to the successful Christian life of every believer?
2. Why is it important for teachers like to be like Ezra – “well versed” and “learned” (p. 291) in God’s word? Share with your group who has been your most influential Bible teacher and why.
3. Compare the “first exodus,” Exodus 11:1-3 and 12:35-36, with this second exodus. How can you tell that this was clearly God’s response to Ezra’s prayer (p. 294)?
4. Why do you suppose Nehemiah did not reveal to anyone the plan that God had put in his heart (p. 295-296)?
5. Nehemiah prayed for protection, but he also posted guards. Does this show a lack of faith on Nehemiah’s part? How should we “follow-up” after we pray for something?
6. Nehemiah’s enemies tried to use the false prophet Shemaiah to distract him from the rebuilding project. How do you determine if a message from God or another source?
7. What can you learn from Nehemiah about leadership?
8. What does Nehemiah teach us about prayer? Do you notice any patterns in his prayer life?
9. Years after the walls had been rebuilt, the prophet Malachi was sent to correct the priests and the people (p. 302). What were they doing that dishonored God?
10. According to the prophet Malachi, what is the correlation between one’s relationship with God and one’s treatment of their spouse?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 22, THE BIRTH OF THE KING

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Many people dispute Jesus and His true nature. Some say He was only a good man. Others say He was a god. What does p. 309 or John 1:1-14, 18 teach you about The Word, Jesus?
2. “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (p. 309 or John 1:12-13). Look up 1 John 3:1-3, 4:7-11, and 5:1-5. How does someone become a child of God? What does it imply for you to be a child of God?

DAY 2

1. What do you suppose Mary might have thought and felt after Gabriel’s visit?
2. Describe Joseph’s character and faith. What makes him an especially good role model for men today?
3. Mary “pondered these things in her heart” (p 313, 316). Surely her understanding of who Jesus was grew and matured over the years. How has your understanding of Jesus grown through this study of *The Story*?

DAY 3

1. How has this chapter changed your perception of angels?
2. We know very little about Jesus’ childhood except for the episode at Passover when He was 12 years old. What do you think Jesus understood about Himself by this time? What lessons from this episode could you share with children and youth?

CHAPTER 22, THE BIRTH OF THE KING

TIMELESS TRUTH: THE WORD BECAME FLESH.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

Heaven had been very quiet for 400 years. No burning bushes. No splitting seas. No visions. No dreams. No prophets. No message from God...just silence.

Then, in a magnificent yet inauspicious way, a word – but not just a word, The Word came. At the time, the event seemed inconsequential to all but a blue collar carpenter and his teenage bride. But in fact, the Word of God had taken on flesh and blood and was first heard in a baby's cry. His birth was unspectacular, yet His presence dispelled darkness and cast an inescapable ray of light across history, past, present, and still unwritten. God's promises to Abraham and David had found fulfillment at long last. Jesus would bless all nations and would take His rightful place on David's throne. It is this event to which everything thus far in The Story has pointed.

Mary was the first to hear the news. In the midst of wedding plans and setting up house, the angel Gabriel pronounced that she had been chosen to give birth to the Son of God. Nothing could have been further from her mind...or her to do list. Mary was engaged and a virgin. The power of the Most High would take care of everything, he said. So Mary rejoiced. She accepted her position as God's servant and praised Him with purest trust in His plan. Joseph was the next to know. He considered pursuing a legal dissolution of their relationship to save them both from the humiliation of an illegitimate pregnancy. But he received his own angelic visitor, who confirmed Mary's innocence and gave his blessing on their marriage. Joseph married Mary and soon after made the journey to Bethlehem to pay his taxes as required by law. The town was bustling, and the inn was full – so the Son of God was born in a stable.

Angels delivered the birth announcement and shepherds became the welcoming committee for the King of Kings. They hurried to see for themselves, and found a surprisingly unassuming setting for a king: a baby in a feeding trough, accompanied by his mother, earthly father, and the local livestock. God also sent signs in the stars and faraway wise men charted their course with gifts in hand. King Herod felt threatened by the birth of another monarch, so he ordered the massacre of all the baby boys in the surrounding areas. God sent angels again so His redemptive plan would stay its course. They warned Joseph in a dream to flee to Egypt until it was safe to return.

Joseph, Mary, and Jesus returned to Israel only after Herod's death and they made their home in Nazareth. Jesus grew up there as the precocious son of pious Jews. He and His family traveled to Jerusalem every year to celebrate Passover. When Jesus was 12, He stayed behind in the temple unbeknownst to his frantic parents. They found Him sitting with the teachers who were amazed at His words. Jesus grew up as all boys do and Scripture tells us that He increased in wisdom and favor with God and with people.

God's Upper Story intersects with His Lower Story at the birth of Jesus Christ, the God-man. God's redemptive story approaches its climax as the Son of God from eternity past becomes the Son of Man for eternity future. Messiah has finally come.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: What is your favorite part of the Christmas story and why? If you were in a Christmas pageant as a child, what part did you play?

1. These verses in the Gospel of John reveal one of the most important beliefs. How does page 309, or John 1:1-14, 18, help clarify the relationship between God and Jesus? Why is this so important?
2. “*In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind*” (p. 309, John 1:4). Look up John 5:21-29, 6:47-58, 10:10, 11:25, 14:6, 17:3, and 20:31. What does it mean, that in Him was life?
3. List some of the names of Jesus and their meaning or significance (see also Isaiah 9:6-7).
4. What things did Mary know about her child even before she conceived (p. 310)? Why was this important?
5. In response to her situation, Mary offers a song of praise (p. 310-311). Compare Hannah’s praise song in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. How these songs are similar? Did Mary see herself as part of God’s Lower Story or part of His Upper Story?
6. What do you suppose Joseph thought and felt about Mary’s pregnancy before and after the angelic visitation (p. 311-312)? What is the difference between having faith in people and having faith in God?
7. Joseph was “*faithful to the law*” (p. 311, Luke 1:19) but was not necessarily considered to be so by others (John 8:41). What examples can you find of his faithfulness?
8. Herod was not the first evil ruler to commit, or attempt, infanticide against Hebrew babies. What other examples can you recall? What does this teach you about God’s Upper Story plan of redemption?
9. The text tells us “*all who heard [about Jesus] were amazed*” (pg. 313). What do you suppose it was that surprised them?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 23, JESUS' MINISTRY BEGINS

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Review the temptation of Jesus (p. 322). Look up Hebrews 2:14-18 and 4:14-16. How does Jesus' temptation benefit you personally?
2. John the Baptist pointed two of his own disciples toward Jesus (p.324). They *"went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him"* (p. 324). If you could spend the day with Jesus, what would you ask?
3. Both Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman struggled to understand what Jesus meant by eternal life. What do these passages teach you about eternal life? How would explain eternal life to some one else?

DAY 2

1. *"Many of the Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman's testimony"* (p. 329). What do you suppose she said and why do you suppose it was so effective? Practice sharing your testimony by writing a brief paragraph of what Jesus has done in your life. Finally, pause and pray that the LORD will give you an opportunity this week to share it.
2. What do you learn about the heart of God from Jesus' interaction with the sick, the seekers and the sinners (p. 329-332)? Which group of people could you cultivate a greater compassion for?

DAY 3

1. John began to doubt Jesus when he was in prison (p. 333-334). How have doubts actually strengthened your faith?
2. During his ministry Jesus interacted with followers, doubters, and mockers. If you had met Jesus at this time, which do you think you would have been? Why?

CHAPTER 23, JESUS' MINISTRY BEGINS

TIMELESS TRUTH: JESUS: THE MESSIAH YOU'D NEVER EXPECT.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

If God's prophets were meant to be peculiar, John the Baptist did not disappoint. Eccentric is too mild a description for this wilderness dwelling preacher who wore odd clothes and lacked both a sense of tact and a balanced diet. His message, though, was right in step with a long line of prophetic predecessors. He called for Israel's repentance and baptized the penitent in the Jordan River.

John was awestruck when Jesus came to be baptized by him. Then he watched in amazement as heaven opened wide and the Spirit of God came to rest on Jesus. John and those with him were astonished to hear the voice of the Father Himself broadcasting His divine approval. The community of God had gathered to bear witness to their incarnation. The Spirit then led Jesus to a lonely wilderness, where he spent the next 40 days in one-on-one combat with Satan, the enemy of God. He confronted Satan's evil allurements and proved Himself obedient to the Father and triumphant over sin.

John the Baptist denied claims that he was Messiah, pointing to Jesus and announcing, "*Look, the Lamb of God.*" Andrew heard John's message and rushed to tell his brother, Simon Peter, and others that Messiah had come. Jesus gathered His band of followers and began training them with marvelous words and miraculous ways. His first miracle took place when He went to a wedding in Cana with his mother, Mary, and his disciples. The wine ran out, so Mary turned to Jesus to remedy the embarrassing state of affairs. Jesus simply instructed the servants to fill six jars with water and serve the guests. When they did, the guests marveled that finest wine had been kept such a secret until now and Jesus' disciples caught their earliest glimpse of the One who shared creative power with His Father.

The disciples became increasingly aware that Jesus was indeed their long-expected Messiah, but others were not so sure. A religious leader called Nicodemus had a clandestine encounter with Jesus to find some answers. Jesus' simple reply was, "*You must be 'born again' . . . of the Spirit. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" Jesus had a similar conversation with a Samaritan woman who had come to draw water from a well. With her, he spoke of 'living water,' but the message was the same: accept His gift and be saved. When she mentioned the Messiah, Jesus confirmed His identity. She believed and shared the news with her entire village, as the second missionary of the new Messiah.

Jesus traveled the area, taught in the synagogues and healed the people. He ousted demons and cleansed socially exiled lepers. The crowds grew and so did His critics. On one occasion, four men dug through the roof of a house so they could bring their paralytic friend to Him. Before he healed him, Jesus forgave the man, while the religious teachers grew indignant over such claims. But Jesus validated His authority by commanding the paralytic to get up and walk. The Pharisees missed the miracle and were incensed that Jesus had violated tradition by healing on the Sabbath.

This Sabbath infringement, coupled with his absurd claim to be the Messiah Himself, on top of his questionable social circles, quickly turned the establishment against Him. And so the conspiracy to kill Jesus began. While many debated, questioned, and wondered about Jesus' identity, one thing was certain: Jesus was controversial. Some saw hope, but others hated Him and wanted only to be rid of Him. John the Baptist had loved Him from the beginning but now, languishing in prison, he began to doubt as well, demonstrating that even the best of us have our faith tested under difficult circumstances. But throughout this chapter, His baptism, His triumph over temptation, His miracles, and His message confirm Him as the long expected One who confounds expectations, is drawn to the least and the lost, and whose message is indeed for all, from the graduate professor to the immoral woman to the leper – the Anointed One indeed.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: When did you first begin to understand the message of Jesus as your Savior and Lord? Who helped you understand?

1. Identify the ways in which the God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit appear at Jesus' baptism (p. 322). Look up Isaiah 11:1-2 and 42:1 and Psalm 2:1-7.
2. What does Jesus' example teach us about how to resist temptation (p. 322)? (See Ephesians 6:10-17 for further insight.)
3. Upon what did the original disciples base their belief in Jesus (p. 324)?
4. Nicodemus and the woman at the well both had conversations with Jesus (p. 326-329). Why do they represent such a contrast?
5. How do the biblical Satan and other evil spirits compare to popular depictions of demons in films, television, literature, or art?
6. Jesus was constantly interacting with different types of people: curious Jews, antagonistic Pharisees, tax collectors, and society's castoffs. What can you learn about how to respond to different types of people from observing Jesus?
7. The faithful friends of the paralytic carried him to Jesus (p. 330-331). If you are comfortable, share with your group a time in your own life that you had to totally depend of the faith of a Christian friend to get you through.
8. Jesus clashed with the Pharisees who hoped to catch Him violating the Sabbath (p. 332). Doing work was punishable by death according to the Law (Exodus 31:14, Isaiah 56:1-2). Who is actually guilty of violating the Sabbath in this encounter?
9. John the Baptist who had earlier proclaimed, "*Look, the Lamb of God,*" was now languishing in prison where he began to wonder about this Jesus (p. 333-334). Look up Isaiah 35:5-6 and 61:1. Why did Jesus answer John the way He did?
10. John has his moment of doubt. Can doubts and faith co-exist? Do our circumstances today affect our view of Jesus' credibility, as it did with John?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 24, NO ORDINARY MAN

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Review the story of the soils (p. 335-336). Which best fits your faith walk?
2. Who do the shepherd and the woman in the lost sheep and lost coin parables represent? What do they value (p. 337)? Compare what God values in these parables to what the Pharisees value (see Luke 11:42-43 and 16:14.) Has your heart aligned more with God's or with the Pharisees' in the past week?
3. What does the Sermon on the Mount (p. 342, Matt. 6:25-34) teach you about worry and anxiety? In light of Jesus' teaching, what should be your relationship to wealth and material possessions?

DAY 2

1. Describe the Gerasene demoniac before and after his encounter with Jesus (p. 343-344). Compare this with Paul's description of every believer in Ephesians 2:1-10. What can you learn from this man about gratitude?
2. Review the healing of the woman with the bleeding disorder (p. 344-345) and then look up Leviticus 15:25-30. What do you suppose her life had been like for the past twelve years? How do you treat social outcasts and the infirm?
3. Jesus said to the crowd who followed Him, "Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill" (p. 349). Have you ever looked to Jesus to take care of your Lower Story needs? What is the right balance between Lower Story needs and an Upper Story perspective?

DAY 3

1. Jesus' miracles were not random; they showed his power over different forces in this world. What forces did He conquer? What areas of your life do you need to show more trust?
2. If you could go back in time and be an eyewitness to the Sermon on the Mount or experience any one of His miracles firsthand which would you choose and why?

CHAPTER 24, NO ORDINARY MAN

TIMELESS TRUTH: NEUTRALITY IS NOT AN OPTION – JESUS DEMANDS A RESPONSE.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

One thing about this Jesus: He never invited neutrality. His followers called Him the Christ. His contenders called Him a blasphemer. Some were drawn to Him, while others could muster nothing in His presence but contempt. His teachings were revolutionary and His miracles undeniable. He claimed nothing less than equality with God and proclaimed Himself as the long expected Messiah. Jesus never left sitting on the proverbial fence as an option.

He attracted criticism in spades, but He also drew crowds. He often taught the people in parables, pithy stories that drew spiritual lessons from everyday life to reveal the “secrets” of God’s kingdom. With simple illustrations, Jesus taught that in Him, God’s kingdom had come, while exposing the religious leaders’ misguided view of religion. Jesus’ trilogy on lostness told of a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son and demonstrated the value God places on a repentant heart. In the story of the lost son, Jesus exposed the hard-heartedness of the Pharisees as the older brother’s indignity, angered by his father’s compassion. Like this father, Jesus’ concern for sinners created an ever-widening rift with the Pharisees. His popularity increased and so did His opposition. Yet Jesus’ teaching ministry to the masses continued, and in the Sermon on the Mount, He taught them how to live by faith in close relationship with God.

Jesus was a great teacher, but even His closest disciples struggled to grasp His true identity and purpose. He authenticated His words with miracles that made His authority irrefutable. The disciples were awestruck when Jesus calmed a raging storm at sea. The people were confounded when he expelled demons from a possessed man into a herd of pigs, who promptly drowned themselves. Who was this man? He certainly wasn’t looking or sounding like a Messiah should. The desperate came to Him for healing, and weren’t found wanting. Jesus healed a woman with a bleeding disorder, while pausing to restore her dignity and commend her faith. Meanwhile, the daughter of a synagogue leader named Jairus died. Jesus established His authority over death by raising her back to life. He healed two blind men, and the Pharisees exposed their own desperate lack of vision by crediting such miracles to the prince of demons.

News about Jesus spread through villages and cities, homes and institutions. Even King Herod grew interested. He was haunted by the fear that John the Baptist might have returned from the dead, for he had ordered John’s execution. Wherever He went, people gathered around Jesus. After one especially long day, Jesus fed more than 5,000 with five loaves of bread and a couple of fish. The miracle was meant for more than filling empty stomachs. He had come to fill empty lives; the real point was that He is the “bread” of eternal life. As a result of his teachings, the people were divided. Many turned away, but those who truly believed remained. In one of His finest moments, Peter announced, “*You have the words of eternal life...you are the Holy One of God.*”

Many came to Jesus with Lower Story needs, but Jesus’ mission was greater than any had imagined. He’d come to offer an Upper Story life, to fulfill the promises that began centuries ago with Abraham and David. He’d come to offer a life of faith – faith in unseen realities, faith in who He is, and what He could do for them eternally. The offer still stands.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: What's the hardest class you had to take in school? What made it so hard for you?

1. You might think that Jesus spoke in parables so everyone could understand, but the disciples as well as the crowds had a hard time understanding his meaning. Why did Jesus say he spoke in parables (p. 335-336)? Why was this so?
2. Who was Jesus referring to when he said “*whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them*” (p.336). What will be given or taken?
3. How are genuine believers differentiated from unbelievers in the parable of the soils? What does each of the soil types represent? Can a “soil type” be changed?
4. Note the setting and the target audience of the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin and lost son (p. 337-338). From the parable of the prodigal son, what do we learn about what the Father values? Do you share his values?
5. Review pages 335-337. Based on the parables, what is the Kingdom of God? Look up Mark 1:15. What should be our response to the Kingdom of God?
6. The Sermon on the Mount opens with nine statements called “the Beatitudes,” from the Latin word for “blessings.” How does someone gain these blessed qualities? (Hint: See Rom. 3:21-23.)
7. Christians believe that Jesus was fully God and fully man. How do you see this in the episode of calming the storm (p. 343)? What encouragement can believers today draw from this story?
8. John the Baptist languished in prison until he was finally executed. Faithful believers are persecuted around the world in greater numbers today than ever before. Discuss practical ways that your group could support the persecuted church around the world. (*Check out www.persecution.org . This website provides accurate details about the persecution of Christians throughout the world.*)
9. What lessons of faith and courage can be gleaned from the account of Peter walking on water (p.348-349)?
10. Identify two or three ways the crowds misunderstood Jesus’ description of their need for eternal life (p. 349-351). How is Jesus’ message (Jn. 6:29, 35, 47) different from most people’s idea of salvation?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 25, JESUS, THE SON OF GOD

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Jesus' audience thought he was going to establish His kingdom by force, but He strongly rebuked Peter for such thinking. Reflect on a time when you have struggled between doing things the easy way and doing things God's way.
2. Despite confessing Jesus to be the Christ and witnessing the transfiguration, Peter continued to struggle to be faithful. What miracles has God done in your life that you sometimes forget?

DAY 2

1. During the Festival of Tabernacles, a celebration of God's provision while Israel wandered in the desert, Jesus claimed to be the way of salvation. Why would He choose this festival to make this claim? Does John 1:14 bear on this?
2. Look up 1 John 1:5-7 and 2:8-11. Jesus said that His followers "*will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*" How does Jesus illuminate our Lower Stories?
3. Why did Jesus delay in coming to Mary and Martha? What does this tell you about God's timing? Does this relieve or intensify your own anxieties and concerns?

DAY 3

1. Who do you think was most surprised at Lazarus' resurrection?
2. Those who opposed Jesus "*loved human glory more than the glory of God.*" Honestly evaluate yourself: whose glory do you pursue most often? Whose approval do you seek?

CHAPTER 25, JESUS, THE SON OF GOD

TIMELESS TRUTH: HE IS I AM

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

Who do you say I am? It was the most important question Peter was ever asked. People did not know what to make of this Jesus. He was like no other rabbi. His claims about Himself were outrageous and way out of line if He were merely human. Two thousand years had passed since God promised Abraham that through his seed all nations would be blessed. A thousand years had passed since God promised David that his descendant would reign forever. Now, in Jesus, God's marathon plan of redemption was sprinting toward its climax. Peter's answer to the question would change his life forever.

"You are the Messiah," Peter confessed. Then Jesus began to teach His disciples that this messianic mission included suffering, death, and a resurrection from the dead. They objected to this idea of a Messiah, but Jesus rebuked them. His mission was set and no one could come between Him and the cross. In fact, He taught His disciples that they too would need to lose their lives to save them.

Jesus took Peter, James, and John up a mountain and gave them a glimpse of His future glorification. When He was transfigured before their very eyes, they fell face down in fear. Jesus had often made "I Am" statements connecting Himself to the name YHWH or "I Am." Then a voice from heaven stated that Jesus was the Son of God, thereby confirming His assertions.

I AM the light of the world. I AM the bread of life. Jesus declared that failure to believe in Him would have eternal consequences—you would die in your sins. But the Pharisees knew full well the weight of the "I AM" statements – and Jesus' claims to be God were, to them, nothing short of blasphemy. From then on, their hatred of Him ripened into an assassination plot.

I AM the resurrection and the life. Despite getting word that His friend Lazarus was on his deathbed, Jesus delayed His journey. By the time He arrived, Lazarus had been entombed for four long days. Sisters Mary and Martha mourned their brother's death, disappointed that Jesus had not arrived in time to heal him, but Jesus assured the women that His delay was for divine glory. At His command, Lazarus walked out of his tomb, vindicating Jesus' assertion that He alone is the Source of life.

The march toward Jerusalem continued. His time was fast approaching and He had to prepare the disciples for what lay ahead. He told them that the kingdom of God is accessible to those with childlike trust and humility, not through performance. Along the way, Jesus met a rich young man who had performed well since childhood. Jesus told him that discipleship, for him, would mean giving away his riches. Unable to part with earthly wealth, the young man walked away from Jesus' offer. So strong is the lure of riches that, as far as the gospels record, this is the only time Jesus' offer was refused.

For the third time, Jesus told them that His work included suffering, death, and a resurrection after three days. Now it was time for Jesus' grand entrance. He sent His disciples to fetch appropriate transportation and a colt was just where Jesus said it would be. He mounted the donkey and triumphantly rode into Jerusalem as people laid down their coats and branches on the road and hailed Him as the long awaited King, son of David!

Jesus was preparing to glorify the Father's name. He continued to offer eternal life to all who would believe. The incensed Pharisees instilled fear in many; some who did believe kept quiet. But Jesus' claims were non-negotiable; He was the only Source of eternal life, the climax and culmination of God's redemptive plan. *Who do you say I am?* It is the single most important question that everyone must answer.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: What event in this chapter in the life of Jesus would you like to have witnessed? Why?

1. Jesus said we must “deny ourselves” and “take up our cross;” and if we seek to save our lives we will lose them. (p. 353-354). What are the implications of these commands for your life, such as marriage, parenting, and career ambition?
2. Jesus was transfigured on the mountain (p. 354). The Greek word translated transfigured is the root of the English word metamorphosis which refers to a radical change. This same word is used in Romans 12:2 and 2 Corinthians 3:18. What do these verses teach us about the transformation of every believer?
4. Look up 1 John 1:5-7 and 2:8-11. What did Jesus mean when He said that “*whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life*” (p. 357)? What does this look like for the Christian living a typical daily life?
5. Look up Exodus 3:14, Isaiah 43:11-13, and John 5:18. Why did Jesus’ opponents try to stone Him (p. 358)? How might you answer the skeptic who says that Jesus never claimed to be God?
6. Up to this point, Jesus had claimed to be the bread of life, the water of life, and the light of life. And here with Mary, Martha, the disciples, and a crowd of mourners, He claimed to be the resurrection and the life with another I AM statement (p. 359). What is the relationship between belief and life? Between belief and resurrection?
7. Why do you suppose Jesus was “deeply moved in spirit,” “troubled,” and wept? Consider Genesis 2:17, Romans. 6:23, 1 Corinthians 15:26, Hebrews. 2:14-15, and I Thessalonians 4:13-17. How has your faith helped you deal with death?
8. Three times Jesus predicted His death and resurrection (p. 353, 354, and 362; Mark 8:31, 9:30-31, 10:32-34) and followed each with a lesson on discipleship (p. 353-354 [Mark 8:34-38], Mark 9:33-37, Mark 10:35-45). What principles of discipleship did Jesus teach and why would He relate them to His Passion?
9. After Jesus entered Jerusalem as the rightful King of Israel, He cleansed the temple because some had turned it from a house of prayer into a place of corruption (p. 364). Suppose Jesus walked into our own church. With what would He be most pleased? What corrections might He make?
10. At what points was Jesus’ humanity most evident to you? His deity?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 26, THE HOUR OF DARKNESS

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. While in the upper room with His disciples, Jesus knew his death was imminent. What was most important to Him (p. 367-371)? How would you spend the last day of your life and why? How might your answer shape your daily life now?
2. In John 14:1-17 (p. 369-370), Jesus described His relationship with the Father and the Spirit. This relationship, referred to as the Trinity is foundational to our understanding of God. How would you describe their community?
3. What did Jesus teach about the relationship of the Spirit to you personally?
4. Jesus said, “*If you love Me, keep my commands*” (p. 370). Looking at your past week, in what ways have you succeeded in following Jesus’ commands?

DAY 2

1. List some ways we see Jesus’ love for his enemies. How does this compare with your treatment of *your* enemies? Your loved ones?
2. Describe Peter’s volatile relationship with Jesus. What lessons from him can you apply to your own relationship with the LORD?

DAY 3

1. Jesus’ crucifixion happened in conjunction with the Passover. What does it mean that Jesus is our Passover lamb?
2. “*It is finished*” (p. 314, John 19:30). During the time of Christ, this was the same word which was written across tax receipts and mortgages, meaning “paid in full.” What was finished? Look up John 1:29, Romans 5:6-10, and 2 Corinthians 5:21 for insight. Ponder for a moment your personal “debt” and your new “account status” because it was “paid in full,” then respond in appropriate prayer.

CHAPTER 26, THE HOUR OF DARKNESS

TIMELESS TRUTH: IT IS FINISHED!

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

Knowing that His time had come, Jesus spent His last few hours with His disciples. The Passover was approaching so they prepared a customary feast. But this was no ordinary Passover meal; Jesus was about to change history. At His “last supper,” He taught the disciples a significant lesson by washing their feet. He even washed Judas’ feet, although He knew Judas would betray Him. Then Jesus took the unleavened bread and cup of wine from the Passover meal and instituted the New Covenant, the Covenant that Jeremiah and Ezekiel had promised centuries ago. Aware of His God-ordained destiny, Jesus clarified His relationship to the Father so that His disciples might understand what lay ahead. He promised them that an advocate, the Spirit, would come and help after His own departure. After a lengthy prayer to the Father for His glorification, Jesus led this rag-tag group through the night to the Garden of Gethsemane.

What Peter lacked in judgment, he made up for in zeal. Peter pledged to even die with his Lord rather than abandon Him. But Jesus knew that He would go through His ordeal alone. He told Peter that he would disown Him three times before dawn. Jesus’ anguish for what was to come drove Him to agonizing prayer. Peter and his companions quickly exchanged fidelity for forty winks while Jesus prayed, searching to see if there was any way to avoid what was awaiting Him. He answered His own prayer when He acknowledged that He would do God’s will and not His own. Then Jesus’ betrayer and conspirators arrived to arrest Him. They escorted Him to Caiaphas’ kangaroo court. No one could find legitimate charges against Jesus until He affirmed His identity—Messiah, the Son of God. The Sanhedrin charged Him with blasphemy and sentenced Him to death. The religious henchmen beat and belittled their legitimate King. Watching from a safe distance, Peter denied knowing Jesus three times before the rooster crowed. Stunned and ashamed, he left in bitter humiliation. Judas, in a sudden moment of remorse, returned the blood money and opted for a rope.

Meanwhile, Pilate was stuck between a rock and a hard place. The Jews wanted Jesus crucified, and he wanted Caesar’s sustained support. What’s a governor of a no-name, backwater region of Rome to do? Interrogating Jesus himself, he found no legitimate charge to pin on this man. Yet the pressure was escalating from the crowd as they threatened to turn him in to Caesar as a rebel sympathizer. Pilate’s thug soldiers clothed, beat, and crowned Jesus with contempt before they marched Him to the cross.

Crucifixion was an exceptionally cruel way to die. The public execution drew hordes of scornful onlookers. Their jeers challenged Jesus to save Himself. They failed to grasp that Jesus was there to save them. One of the two criminals crucified with Jesus, however, got the picture. His faith secured his place in paradise. Even the creation itself testified to the enormity of this event. As sin overcame Jesus, darkness eclipsed the whole land. For the first time in eternity, Jesus was forsaken by His Father.

“It is finished,” He proclaimed. At that very moment, the temple curtain was torn, an earthquake split rocks and tombs were opened. It was finished. What could compel the Son of God to endure such torture? Finishing. Finishing the work that the Father sent Him to do. The debt of all sinners was put on Jesus, who alone could pay it in full. God is holy, loving, and just. His love compels Him to pursue His people, but His holiness requires justice for sin. The mob of mockers witnessed a Lower Story drama. A few faithful disciples witnessed a Lower Story injustice. But God witnessed the Upper Story culmination of a plan prepared before the foundation of the world. It was no surprise. It was justice. And it was finished.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: Which of the unusual events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus do you find most compelling, and why?

1. In what ways does Jesus' preparation and celebration of his final Passover meal parallel the original Passover? What does this teach us about the purpose of Jesus' death? (Review Exodus 12:1-13 and 21-27, John 1:29, and 1 Corinthians 5:7-8.)
2. What was Jesus trying to teach the disciples when he washed their feet? What are some ways you can wash each others' feet as a small group?
3. Review Jeremiah 31:34 and Ezekiel 36:26-28, where the prophets describe the new covenant. What are some of the characteristics of the new covenant listed in these verses? How does Jesus fulfill these promises?
4. Look back at pages 369-370. How would you describe Jesus' special relationship to the Father?
5. How is the Spirit described on p. 370? How have you experienced the Holy Spirit in your life?
6. What can we learn about Jesus and about prayer from the Garden of Gethsemane (p. 372-373)?
7. Compare Judas with Peter after each betrayed Jesus (p. 375). How can you tell the difference between remorse and repentance?
8. The Sanhedrin could find no evidence to charge Jesus (p. 374). (Jewish Law, Deuteronomy 17:6, required two witnesses.) Three times Pilate declared, "*I find no basis for a charge against him*" (p. 376-377). Why is this important? Why was Jesus crucified?
9. Discuss the irony of the statement, "*He saved others but He can't save himself.*" How do you feel that such a price was paid for you?
10. Compare Jesus as King to Israel's and Judah's former kings and the religious leaders of Jesus' day to Israel's religious leaders in the past. Why did Israel need King Jesus?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 27, THE RESURRECTION

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Seventy-five pounds of spices and aloes was an unusually large amount to use to prepare Jesus' body for burial. It was enough to bury a royal king. How do you suppose Nicodemus changed over time in his relationship with Jesus and what might account for that change (p. 381-382)? (See p. 326-327, John 3:1-18.) When in your own life have you experienced the greatest change in your faith and what accounted for it?
2. What were Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Salome going to do that early morning and what does it indicate they expected about the resurrection (p. 382)?

DAY 2

1. As Jesus talked with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, they later reported that "*our hearts [were] burning within us while He talked to us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us*" (p. 385, Luke 24:13-35)? Has your heart ever burned with insight into God's word? What did you learn?
2. Jesus in essence explained the Upper Story to the downcast disciples on the road to Emmaus and to the Eleven (p. 384-386). How have you been changed by watching the thread of the Upper Story weave throughout the Old Testament?

DAY 3

1. The night before He was crucified, Jesus taught Peter and the other disciples about abiding in Him (John 15:1-5). How does this teaching relate to the fishermen's miraculous catch and Jesus' call on Peter's life (p. 386-388)? Reflecting on these events, how do you know that you can carry out the mission God has on your life?
2. What does Jesus' Great Commission on the mountain in Galilee require of all His disciples (p. 388)? What are the various ways you can obey this command?

CHAPTER 27, THE RESURRECTION

TIMELESS TRUTH: HE IS RISEN!

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

Ashamed. Afraid. Absent. Mere hours after they pledged never to leave Jesus—even to die with Jesus—the Eleven were nowhere near the cross as the sun began to set. The Roman soldiers were still there though and pierced His side to prove Jesus was very, very dead. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, an unlikely duo, show up at the cross. These two members of the Sanhedrin shed their secret discipleship and took responsibility for burying Jesus' body. Wrapping Him in enough spices for a king, they laid Him in a nearby tomb. Remembering Jesus' words, the Jewish authorities and Pilate secured the tomb and posted a guard there to keep the three-day resurrection story from gaining any traction.

Early Sunday morning, a small band of faithful women approached His tomb wondering who could remove the rock that sealed the entrance. Imagine their shock as an angel announced to them that Jesus was not there, *"He is risen, just as He said!"* Hearing the news, Peter and John sprinted to the tomb. They, too, found it empty. As Mary Magdalene remained weeping, Jesus appeared to her. Later the same day, an unrecognized Jesus approached two downcast disciples on the road to Emmaus. Evidently all of Jerusalem was abuzz with the events of the last three days. The One whom they had trusted to redeem all of Israel had been crucified and they were disappointed. Some silly women even had an unbelievable angelic vision and the tomb was empty. But what's a guy to do except head home to Emmaus? Jesus admonished the two for their unbelief. Then He used Moses and the Prophets to teach them about the Messiah. Jesus dined with them that evening. When their eyes were opened and they recognized Him, He disappeared from their sight, but they finally got it! So they headed back to Jerusalem at full speed and full of joy to report their experience to the Eleven. They were interrupted there by yet another Jesus appearance. An empty tomb and two appearance reports later, the disciples still cowered and mistook Jesus for a ghost when He spoke to them. *"Touch me and see,"* He said as He showed them His hands and feet. When Jesus re-explained the Old Testament in light of all that had happened, He opened their minds so they too finally understood.

Thomas was not about to believe these second-hand stories. He wouldn't believe it until he saw the nail marks for himself. A week later, Jesus graciously appeared to Thomas and the others just so he could touch the scars for himself. Thomas confessed, *"My Lord and My God!"* Yes, now he believed that Jesus was the God-man and that He was risen indeed.

Sometime later, Jesus appeared to the disciples by the Sea of Galilee. Having caught nothing all night, Jesus told these fishermen to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. The miraculous catch was so great that they could hardly get the fish into the boat. It prompted Peter to bail out and head to the Lord. Over a beach breakfast, Jesus three times asked Peter if he loved Him. Then He told Peter three times to care for His sheep. The Eleven met Jesus on a Galilean mountain where He commissioned them to continue to carry out His mission by saying, *"Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."*

As God, Jesus had all authority to now commission His disciples to carry out the building up of His new community of believers who would be identified with the Triune God. They in turn could accomplish their mission because, as Emmanuel (Matthew 1:23), He would be with them to do so. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ vindicated Him as the Son of God. It is the cornerstone of the Christian faith and the climax of God's great story of redemption. The redemptive work was finished, but now there was more work to do to spread the good news, and this ragtag group of disciples were just the ones to do it, armed with the supernatural power headed their way.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: How did you celebrate Easter when you were a child?

1. People have always had difficulty believing that Jesus was God in the flesh. (Read 1 John 1:1, 2:22 and 4:2-3.) What details did John include in the crucifixion story for his readers to know for certain that Jesus, fully human, had truly died? How does knowing that God came to live among us affect your daily life?
2. For whose sake did the angel roll away the stone (p. 382)? What other major events have been announced by angels?
3. List everything you have learned about Jesus' resurrection body from this chapter. Why is Jesus' literal, physical resurrection a non-negotiable teaching of the Christian faith? (See Romans 1:4, 4:25 and 1 Corinthians 15:17.)
4. Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-23, 42-49. What does Jesus' resurrection mean for you personally and for all believers?
5. Thomas is frequently referred to as "doubting Thomas" because he refused to believe his fellow disciples' testimony. Then, a week after the resurrection, he confessed, "*My Lord and My God!*" Do you think Thomas' reputation is justified or do you think he has been labeled unjustly? Why or why not?
6. What parallels can you find between Peter's denial story (John 18:17-27) and his restoration story (p. 387-388, John 21:15-23)? What does Peter's restoration reveal about Jesus' heart and how does it apply to you personally?
7. What does Jesus' Great Commission on the mountain in Galilee require of all His disciples (p. 388)? Discuss what is involved in "making disciples."

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 28, NEW BEGINNINGS

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Just fifty days earlier Peter denied Christ and cowered in fear and shame. Now we find Peter preaching in the first megachurch, facing down Jewish religious leaders, and noticeably full of courage. What factors accounted for this change?
2. What was the new church doing to build relationships and to make disciples in Jerusalem (p. 392, 395)? How can our church do the same?
3. How did early Christians regard material possessions (p. 395)? What should be the role of the church in helping the poor today?

DAY 2

1. Why do you suppose the early believers “*enjoyed the favor of all the people*” (p. 392) and “*were highly regarded by the people*” (p. 395)? How critical is this to the mission of the church?
2. When ordered by the Sanhedrin to discontinue teaching and preaching in the name of Jesus, Peter answered, “*We must obey God rather than human beings!*” (p. 396). He was also willing to accept the consequences of his stance. Yet Christians are also called to respect and to submit to governmental authorities (Rom. 13:1-7). When do you think it is okay for Christians to resist authority and when is it not?

DAY 3

1. Cornelius’ conversion along with his household dramatically changed the direction of the church. What began as a Jewish messianic movement would now cross ethnic barriers. Consider the ethnic and racial barriers that exist in the Church today. What are some ways that our church can promote greater racial and ethnic integration and harmony in the church locally? Globally? Personally?
2. What did you learn about the relationship between the Holy Spirit and believers from this chapter of *The Story*? What does this mean for you?

CHAPTER 28, NEW BEGININGS

TIMELESS TRUTH: HE IS RISEN—SPREAD THE NEWS!

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

What could turn a group of gutless deserters into courageous, outspoken evangelists willing to be imprisoned and even die for their cause? They had witnessed the resurrected Christ. He had proved Himself alive for forty days to various people in a variety of circumstances and places. Just before His ascension, Jesus told the disciples to wait for the promised power of the Holy Spirit so that they could be witnesses to His resurrection in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Ten days later on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit stormed in like tongues of fire. He empowered each disciple to declare the gospel. Peter became the first mega-church preacher and that day three thousand new believers were baptized. This new community of believers embraced teaching and fellowship and enjoyed the favor of nearly all the people. All but the powerful Jewish rulers, that is.

The new church continued to grow rapidly. The apostles were even able to perform miracles similar to those Jesus had done! As the apostles spread the word of the resurrection in Jerusalem, they incited outrage and opposition from the Jewish rulers. Peter refused to be silenced and continued to speak in spite of orders to stop. Even a severe flogging could not curb his zealous proclamation that Jesus was the Messiah. Stephen's scathing sermon before the Sanhedrin showed how the Jews had repeatedly rejected God's prophets and resisted God's Spirit. The Sanhedrin dragged him outside of Jerusalem to stone him. He saw a vision of Jesus standing at the right hand of God and entrusted himself to the Lord.

Sparked by the martyring of Stephen, persecution drove Christians like Philip out of Jerusalem and into outlying areas like Samaria. While the opposition grew, so did the spread of the gospel message. A Pharisee named Saul made it his personal mission to defeat this movement once and for all, but his blinding come-to-Jesus moment on the road to Damascus really "opened his eyes." Meanwhile, God prepared Ananias to deliver God's marching orders to Saul: he had a mission to be God's witness to the Gentiles. As Ananias laid his hands upon him, Saul's sight was restored and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. Within a few short days, this persecutor of Christ became a preacher of Christ. Needless to say, his turnaround was met with suspicion and doubt, but trusted Barnabas vouched for him to the apostles in Jerusalem. Saul soon found himself on the receiving end of death threats, so he too was sent away from Jerusalem. The church spread throughout Judea and Samaria as God used even persecution to achieve His Upper Story purpose of spreading the news that Jesus is the risen Messiah.

God's next move was so radical that He had to prepare both Peter and Cornelius for this new revelation. While an angel told Roman centurion Cornelius to send for Peter, Peter was given a vision of unclean animals on a sheet. A heavenly voice instructed him to eat this meat that was definitely not kosher. What Peter called impure, God now called clean. As Peter was trying to interpret the meaning of this vision, Cornelius' servants arrived and summoned him to their master's home. When he explained the gospel to a full house, the Holy Spirit was poured out on these Gentiles too! The Holy Spirit was now available to all who believed! Peter now knew his vision was not about food but about God's plan to declare all people "kosher" who would believe in Christ. Peter's ministry continued in Jerusalem where Herod Agrippa's persecution grew deadly. Peter was imprisoned but even prison bars could not stop God's plan. As his friends earnestly prayed for him, an angel miraculously freed him. Kings, rulers, and prison guards all found themselves fighting against God and helpless to stop His plan. While the Lower Story of persecution drove believers away from Jerusalem, the Upper Story of resurrection drove many to God. He alone can redeem even the worst of circumstances. After all, He alone is the God who raised the dead!

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: Share about a time when you had to begin a new job or project.

1. Look up Ex. 3:2, 3:21, and 19:18. Why do you suppose the Holy Spirit was portrayed as tongues of fire that came to rest on each believer at Pentecost and how does His relationship to believers change *after* this event?
2. According to Peter's Pentecost sermon (p. 391-392 or Acts 2:22-24, 36), who was responsible for Jesus' death? As a group, discuss the tension we experience between God's sovereignty and man's free will.
3. What marked the community life of the believers (p. 392, 395)? Discuss ways your church and small group help foster a similar community. Share what is most meaningful to you personally.
4. The church grew rapidly from the beginning even in spite of growing opposition and persecution. What factors might account for such growth then?
5. God the Father was the most visible person of the Trinity in the Old Testament. Jesus, God the Son, was most visible in the gospels and now God the Holy Spirit becomes prominent in Acts. For most Christians, the Holy Spirit is the least understood person of the Trinity. List all you learned about the Holy Spirit from this chapter. What did you learn about the empowerment of the Holy Spirit for your own life?
6. How did Stephen's martyrdom help fulfill God's mandate of Acts 1:8 (p. 389) beginning with Philip? If you are comfortable, share an example from your own life of God fulfilling an Upper Story work out of a Lower Story tragedy.
7. What accounts for the dramatic change in Saul of Tarsus from persecutor to preacher? Do you know anyone personally who has gone from being a Christ-hater to a Christ-follower? (Please be sensitive to privacy by refraining from mentioning names.)
8. God intended to teach Peter something even more profound than a lesson about foods through the vision of unclean animals (p. 402-403). What was it and why was Cornelius' conversion such a big turning point in the life of the early church? (See Acts 11:1-3, 15-18, Romans 10:12-13 and Ephesians 2:11-13 for further insight.)
9. What did you learn about suffering from Peter's flogging (p. 397) and imprisonment (p. 403-404), and Stephen's martyrdom (p. 397-399) that you could apply personally?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 29, PAUL'S MISSION

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. What method did Paul consistently use to prove that Jesus is the Messiah?
2. Paul took three missionary journeys throughout Asia and Greece to help fulfill the mandate to be witnesses “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Locate some of the cities and territories that Paul visited using the map in the back of *The Story*. If you could go on a short-term mission trip to anywhere in the world, where would you go and why?
3. What did you learn about the relationship between faith and suffering from Paul's life and the church at Thessalonica (p. 414-415, 416-419)? How might this help you cope as you endure your own trials and suffering?

DAY 2

1. Describe Apollos (p. 420). What can you learn about Christian discipleship from his relationship with Priscilla and Aquila?
2. First Corinthians 13 is often called the “love chapter” (p. 427, 1 Corinthians 13:1-7). This kind of love is sacrificial and benevolent, not self-serving but doing what is best for another—John 3:16 love. Notice the list of things that love is and is not. Choose one or two to practice this week. How could your family relationships be affected if you practiced this kind of love this week? Your friendships? Your church family relationships?

DAY 3

1. Review Paul's teaching on the gospel (p. 427-428, 1 Corinthians 15:1-8). List the key points of the gospel that Paul said were of “first importance.” How many people saw the resurrected Christ and what makes His resurrection such a crucial piece of the gospel?
2. Look through this chapter at the many times the Holy Spirit directed Paul and the apostles. What did He influence? How does this constant direction compare with His control of your life?

CHAPTER 29, PAUL'S MISSION

TIMELESS TRUTH: THE GOSPEL SPREADS TO THE CIVILIZED WORLD.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

Saul began his career as a radical Jewish scholar who was so convinced the Christians were wrong that he had them imprisoned and stoned. After an encounter with the resurrected Jesus he became a Christ-follower. Saul became Paul (his Greek name) who proclaimed Christ to the Jews first and also to the Gentiles. Led by the Holy Spirit, the believers in their home base of Antioch in Syria commissioned Paul and Barnabas and sent them out as missionaries to spread the news that Jesus the Messiah is raised from the dead. Their first missionary journey took them to the island of Cyprus where they encountered a Jewish sorcerer who opposed them and a Roman proconsul who embraced the gospel. They set sail for the region of Galatia (present south-central Turkey). They were invited to preach in the synagogue in Antioch and, after an initial favorable reception, they faced persecution so they turned their sights toward the Gentiles.

Paul was joined by Timothy, Silas, and eventually Luke for his second missionary journey. They visited many cities in Macedonia, including Philippi where a church was begun in Lydia's home. The evangelists were beaten and thrown in jail where their faith convicted not only their jailer, but apparently the other prisoners as well. Many Jews and Greeks from Thessalonica believed before Paul and Silas were sent away for their own protection. Paul then met Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth where he was again opposed by the Jews. But Gentiles believed, so Paul stayed and ministered there for about a year and a half. He also wrote letters to these churches to teach and encourage them. He wrote the Thessalonians to encourage them to continue to be the model of Christianity that they had become in expectation of the Lord's return.

After returning to his base of operations in Antioch, Paul set out on his third journey. As he strengthened the churches in the Galatian region, Apollos showed up in Ephesus where he met Priscilla and Aquila. He was a powerful speaker and strong disciple, but needed further teaching. Paul arrived in Ephesus, a hotbed of pagan idolatry, and as he began teaching in the synagogue, most Jews rejected his message. He stayed more than two years teaching both Jews and Greeks. Many people from the region came to hear him as the word spread. Some of the Ephesians believed and left their idols and witchcraft in exchange for a new life in Christ. This did not set well with the idol artisans who staged a riot to drive Paul out of town. While in Ephesus, he penned letters to churches in Corinth, Galatia, and Rome, though he had not yet visited there.

The Corinthian church had enjoyed a who's who of early church leaders. This privilege should have prodded them onto Christian maturity but instead they chose sides like children on a playground. Paul chastised them for their divisiveness, corrected their immorality, and answered questions that they had about spiritual gifts. They needed to practice sacrificial love for one another. Some were even denying the resurrection so Paul gave them a remedial lesson on the essentials of the gospel and the hope of a future resurrection. The Galatian churches were confused by Jewish Christians who insisted they practice the Jewish ceremonial rites. Paul's letter is a masterpiece on Christian liberty as he defended justification by faith alone. Paul's pastoral desire to minister to the believers in Rome prompted him to write a letter to convey the foundations of the Christian faith. In spite of every form of opposition, the word of God could not be contained. God sovereignly saw to it that obstacles became opportunities for Paul and others to take the gospel "*even to the ends of the earth.*"

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: What do you like best about the church you attend?

1. God set apart Saul (Paul) and Barnabas for foreign mission work (p. 407) to help fulfill the mandate to be witnesses “*to the ends of the earth*” (Acts 1:8). Review the list of missionaries supported by your church. Read about each and pray for the needs that are listed for each one. (*Bring photos and ministry descriptions of missionaries supported by your church.*)
2. What differences do you find in Paul’s message to the Jews in the synagogue (p. 408-409) as compared to his message to the Gentiles (p. 411, 413)? Discuss applications we might make today for reaching different people groups with the same gospel.
3. Compare the conversions of Lydia and the jailer at Philippi (p. 412, 413). What differences do you find? What similarities?
4. What makes the Church in Thessalonica “*a model to all the believers*” (p. 416-417; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-2:8) and what application can we make for our church if we want to be known as a model church?
5. What problem seems to be at the root of the divisions and quarrels in the Church at Corinth? (p. 424-425, 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, 3:1-11) Do you see any lessons here for our church?
6. Read 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12:3-8, and Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16. Why is the human body a good metaphor for the church and how does it relate to spiritual gifts?
7. According to Paul’s letter to the Galatians, does freedom from the law grant freedom to sin (p. 431, Galatians 5:13-26)? What are some results of living by the Spirit?
8. What is the relationship between righteousness and faith and why do you suppose Paul used Abraham to prove his point? (Hint: The Jews placed their trust in keeping the Law and the fact that they had been circumcised.)
9. Of all the books in the Bible, Paul’s letter to the Romans most clearly outlines a pattern we can follow to lead a person to Christ. It shows man’s lost condition and makes clear what we must do to receive what God has done to correct our sad condition. This collection of verses has often been called “the Romans Road to salvation.” Trace the following verses, perhaps even marking them in your Bible. Romans 3:23 → 3:10-11 → 6:23 → 5:8 → 10:9-13 → 5:1, 8:1, 8:38-39. In 25 words or less, what are the essentials of the gospel? (Hint: Review 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.) How do you think the Romans Road could help you share your faith in the future?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 30, PAUL'S FINAL DAYS

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. Paul said to the elders in Ephesus, “Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (p. 440, Acts 20:13-35). List several ways a shepherd is a good metaphor for the role of an elder and why it’s important to remember that the church belongs to God. Even if you are not an elder, how do the passages apply to you?
2. Review Paul’s personal testimony that he gave to the Jews from the steps of the barracks (p. 442-443, Acts 21:37-22:21). What pattern in Paul’s example might help you articulate your own testimony?

DAY 2

1. Paul was wrongly accused by his enemies, just as Daniel and Jesus had been. How did each of these men respond to false accusations and what can you learn from them? How might you respond when confronted with anger about your Christian beliefs?
2. Which unlikely situations did Paul use as opportunities for evangelism in this chapter? What are some unlikely situations in your own life that can be used as opportunities to evangelize?

DAY 3

1. Review Ephesians 2:1-10 found in the second paragraph of page 453. Make a “before and after” list of those things that are true of all people before salvation and after salvation. Name at least three outwardly observable ways that you can apply these truths to your life because you are in Christ. *Now that I am in Christ, I am no longer* _____.
2. What did Paul’s letter to the Ephesians teach about family relationships and why would he include this as part of living “a life worthy of the calling you have received” (p. 455, Ephesians 4:1, 5:22-32)?
3. Look up Acts 9:15-16, Philippians 4:11-14, and 2 Corinthians 11:23-28. Paul asked Timothy to join him in suffering for the gospel (p. 456, 2 Timothy 1:8). What does Paul’s life teach you about suffering? If Paul had asked you, like Timothy, to join him in suffering for the gospel as he had, what might have been your response?

CHAPTER 30, PAUL'S FINAL DAYS

TIMELESS TRUTH: SUFFERING AND PERSEVERANCE ARE PART OF THE CHRISTIAN JOURNEY.

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

If one could earn frequent traveler miles two thousand years ago, Paul might hold a record. After spending nearly three years in Ephesus, he retraced his steps through Greece and Macedonia before docking in Miletus. There, he summoned the Ephesian elders for a tearful and final farewell. He charged them with shepherding the church of God. After a brief stay with Philip in Caesarea, Paul headed for Jerusalem, knowing that chains awaited him there.

Paul seemed to always be able to stir up a controversy. Just walking into the temple court stirred up trouble. The Jews tried to kill him in Jerusalem so the Roman authorities stepped in to arrest him. While being taken into custody, Paul gave his testimony before an angry crowd. The Roman commander brought him before the Sanhedrin to get some answers, but that only made the problem worse. Paul remained in protective custody and was transferred to Caesarea's higher court where he remained for two years before appealing to Caesar.

When Paul wrote to the church in Rome while still on his missionary journeys, he told them that he planned to visit them. He probably did not anticipate his "fourth missionary journey" to be under these circumstances. Luke joined him on this cruise to Rome with Julius, a kind Imperial centurion, as Paul's personal escort. Paul warned the crew that sailing on in bad weather would be disastrous, but they continued anyway. Conditions worsened to hurricane force winds off the coast of Crete driving their ship every which way. Weeks later the storm had not weakened, but all thoughts of survival surely had. Food was low, gear was gone, hope was gone. What seemed like a bad episode of Gilligan's Island became unlikely opportunities for Paul to talk about God. The next morning they arrived safely ashore on Malta where the islanders showed exceptional hospitality. When Paul was bitten by a poisonous snake without incident, the people thought he was either a criminal or a god. Paul healed many of the locals during their winter stay there. Three months later they were finally able to set sail for Rome.

Paul was greeted by believers at the port of Puteoli, modern day Pozzuoli, about 150 miles south of Rome. They encouraged him and he spent a week there before traveling on. When the Roman Christians heard he was coming, they joined him for the final forty miles of his trek to Rome where Paul was confined to house arrest under the supervision of a soldier. Paul invited the Jewish leaders to come to his house. There he told them about his conflict with the Jerusalem Jews and the fulfillment of the Scriptures by Jesus. Some believed, but others rejected his message. So, once again, Paul pronounced his mission to the Gentiles. He spent the next two years boldly teaching anyone who would stop by about Jesus (60-62 A.D.). In his spare time, Paul corresponded with some old friends.

Paul had a special place in his heart for the church in Ephesus. He had spent three years there developing the new church (Acts 20:31). He wrote to remind them of the high calling in Christ that is the basis of God's plan to unite all believers—Jews and Gentiles alike—in one body, the Church. Therefore, those who are called are to conduct themselves in the highest of ethical standards. Although the world is hostile, believers are to preserve unity in the Spirit. During his final Roman imprisonment (67-68 A.D.), Paul wrote to Timothy to encourage him to be faithful in preserving the gospel in the midst of persecution and false teachers. Timothy faced hardship in Ephesus. So knowing he was probably facing execution soon, Paul penned a heartfelt letter to strengthen this son even from a damp, cold dungeon in Rome.

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: Has there been a more mature Christian who has helped guide you in your spiritual growth? What did they do that most helpful for you?

1. From his farewell speech, describe Paul's ministry in Ephesus (p. 439-440). Look up 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. What did he teach about the responsibility of elders from his personal life, his farewell address, and his letters?
2. In 1 Corinthians 4:16 and 11:1 and 1 Thessalonians 1:6, how was Paul an imitator of Christ throughout his ordeals and what are the implications for believers today?
3. Paul was a Jewish Pharisee and a Roman citizen (p. 443) who exercised his rights as either at various times in his life. Discuss as a group the appropriate exercise of our civil rights in the light of our "heavenly citizenship".
4. What evidence of God's grace and sovereignty can you find in Paul's arrests, trials, and travels?
5. Look up Acts 28:30-31, Ephesians 6:20, Philippians 1:7, Colossians 4:10 and 4:18, and Philemon 1. How did Paul spend his two years while under house arrest in Rome (p. 452). What lessons can you learn about dealing with disagreeable and difficult circumstances?
6. Ephesians 1:1-10 (p. 452) teaches that as Christians we are "in Christ." What benefits and blessings does this status bring us?
7. Paul urged the believers in Ephesus to "*live a life worthy of the calling*" that they had received (p. 455, Ephesians 4:1). According to Paul's letter, what does that mean?
8. What makes the marriage relationship a good metaphor for the church's relationship to Christ? What does Christ do for the church (p. 455, Ephesians 5:21-33)?
9. Look up Romans 5:3-5 and 2 Timothy 3:10-17 (p. 457-458). What has Paul's life taught you about perseverance? What might perseverance look like for us today?
10. Paul reminded Timothy of his need to persevere in the work of preparing a future generation of Christian servants using the three illustrations of a soldier, athlete, and farmer (p. 457, 2 Timothy 2:1-7). How does each one help Timothy fulfill his call while facing hardships? Which of these traits do all believers need to fulfill their service to the Lord, even today?

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

CHAPTER 31, THE END OF TIME

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. As you study this final chapter of *The Story* throughout your week, develop a comprehensive description in your journal of God the Father and of Jesus the Son. For example, on page 459, Jesus Christ is “*the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.*” How does this portrait of Christ in Revelation compare to the Christ of the Gospels?
2. Jesus had a message for each of the churches in Asia (p. 461-462). Identify the problem and the solution in each church. What was promised to the one who overcomes it? How could we apply the messages to these Asian churches to ourselves today?

DAY 2

1. Sketch or paint the throne room of God as it is described on pages 463-464.
2. How will Christ’s second coming (p. 466) differ from His first coming in purpose and in scope? (See Matthew 25:31-34, 41; Mark 10:45; John 3:16-17; and Acts 17:30-31 for further insight.)
3. Read Matthew 24:29-44, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, and Titus 2:11-14. How should Christ’s second coming apply to your life now?

DAY 3

1. Now that you have studied the New Heaven, New Earth, and New Jerusalem, what do you look forward to the most (p. 466-469)?
2. What did this chapter of *The Story* contribute to your understanding of God’s Upper Story of redemption? How might you respond to a Christian friend who sees no value in or is confused by studying Revelation?
3. Spend a few minutes reflecting on your *Story* experience and then capture some of those thoughts in a paragraph below. Be sure to include how God’s Upper Story impacts how you live now.

CHAPTER 31, THE END OF TIME

TIMELESS TRUTH: THE KING IS COMING!

CHAPTER SUMMARY (Have someone in your group read the summary section.)

Yes, I am coming soon.—Jesus. Of the original apostles, only John remained to hear these words. He had experienced the climax of salvation history, but God was not yet finished. He had one more message to share with John and the growing churches to show His servants what must soon take place.

John was exiled on the island of Patmos for his faith in Jesus. It was here that the glorified Christ appeared to John with a message of His second coming. John saw someone “like a son of man” dressed in a priestly robe and ready to judge. He fell like a dead man at His feet. This John who had leaned against Jesus’ breast (John 13:25) could not even stand before Christ’s unveiled glory. Jesus presented Himself as the resurrected One who has authority over life and death. He stood among seven golden lamp stands which represent the seven churches located in the province of Asia Minor on the mainland close to the island of Patmos.

Jesus had messages for each of these seven churches. From the three churches addressed in this chapter, a pattern emerges. First, there’s a unique description of Jesus that is related to the message. Then each message contains both a word of commendation and a rebuke for the congregation. He then gives an instruction or warning before an encouraging promise to those who listen and overcome the problem. Jesus who stands among the lamp stands was carefully watching His churches.

John then saw the throne room of heaven where he was shown visions of future events. God sat upon His throne in unimaginable splendor and beauty. He was surrounded by living creatures and elders who worshiped Him without ceasing. He held a scroll that no one was found worthy to open, causing John to weep. But John’s hope was restored when he saw the Lamb standing as if slain. For the Lamb was worthy to open the scroll and also to receive power and glory and honor and praise!

Shortly thereafter, the bride, who symbolizes all faithful believers, was ready, wearing clean linen and prepared for the marriage supper of the Lamb. Then John saw heaven opened and Jesus descended in full glory on a white horse ready to wage war and judge mankind. The King of Kings was ready to rule with blazing eyes and a blood drenched robe, a sharp sword and filled with the fury of God’s wrath. He was accompanied by the armies of heaven. His appearance is a dramatic reminder of the awfulness of God’s coming judgment upon those who reject the Lord. God’s final judgment from His great white throne is the final event of human history as we know it. The dead stand before Him in judgment. Those not found in the book of life are cast into the lake of fire.

Then John saw the New Heaven and New Earth and the New Jerusalem. In this future re-creation, God dwells among His people where He wipes away every tear. Many themes from His redemptive Story find their culmination in this place where all things are made new. The majestic and glorious New Jerusalem will be home to all the redeemed. Nothing impure will ever enter it. The water of life flows from the throne of God, the tree of life bears much fruit, and all are invited to partake. This place is the hope of every believer, for it is where God’s Upper Story and His Lower Story finally merge into one. It is here that the redeemed will enjoy the presence of God and of the Lamb forever. As Jesus concluded His message to John, three times He said, “Look, I am coming soon!” No wonder we are called blessed! Our King is coming! Come, Lord Jesus, come!

ICEBREAKER QUESTION: Have you ever had a dream that seemed so real that when you awoke you had to convince yourself that it had not actually happened? What was the dream about?

1. Why might Christians resist studying this book? According to this chapter, what are the benefits connected to studying Revelation? (Hint: p. 459, 469; Rev. 1:3, 22:7.)
2. Make a list of the various ways God the Father and God the Son are described throughout this chapter of *The Story*. For example, on page 459, the Father is “*him who is, and who was, and who is to come*”; Jesus Christ is the “*faithful witness*.” After completing your list, discuss what one or two of these descriptions mean.
3. Jesus’ messages to the seven churches usually follow a general pattern: a description of Himself, a commendation, a rebuke, a warning or instruction, and a promise. Compose a letter to your church using this format.
4. Notice the description of the throne room of heaven (p. 463, Rev. 4:1-6). Look up Ezekiel 1:26-28, Exodus 19:16 and 20:18, Job 37:4, and John 12:27-28. What do these images communicate about God?
5. What four-fold reason makes the Lamb worthy to open the scroll and receive praise (p. 464)?
6. Read Matthew 24:29-44, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, and Titus 2:11-14. How should you live in anticipation of Christ’s return?
7. From what you have learned in this chapter about the great white throne judgment and the lake of fire, how might you respond to the person who does not believe that a loving God could ever sentence anyone to hell (p. 466-467; Rev. 20:11-15, 21:8)? See also Revelation 20:10 and Matthew 25:41 for further insight.
8. Find at least three similarities between the original creation (Genesis 1-2) and the new heaven and new earth (p. 466-469; Rev. 21-22). How do these sections of Scripture contribute to our understanding of God’s Upper Story and what would we be missing without them?
9. Share with your group how *The Story* experience has impacted how you live now.

In the time remaining ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.

CLOSING PRAYER

Thank you for taking your small group through The Story. This set of Small Group Study Guides provides you with three basic tools to use every week with your group to enhance your connection with the Bible and with each other.

TIMELESS TRUTH & CHAPTER SUMMARY

The Timeless Truth captures the essence of the chapter in a few powerful words. This is a great phrase to actually have your group learn and repeat out loud to cement the big idea in their minds.

The Chapter Summary is intended to be read out loud to your group. Select a good reader from your group to start off your meeting by reading the summary. Because this is a long passage that provides key teaching, you may wish to send the summary to the reader ahead of time so he or she can run through it beforehand.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

After the Chapter Summary is read, transition to the discussion time by asking the Icebreaker Question. There are 8-10 discussion questions provided, which is really more than can be used in one study session, so select the ones that best meet the needs of your group.

Here are a few guidelines for facilitating a meaningful small group discussion:

1. **It's the inside that counts.** Sincerity, honesty and authenticity are key qualities for any group leader. Your openness will set the tone and direction. Remember, trust is the foundation for building significant relationships in your group.
2. **Ask good questions.** The key to leading a good discussion is asking good questions. A key step in asking a good question is to patiently wait for someone to answer. Good questions produce an interchange of ideas and insights so we can learn from each other and deepen relationships. Be sure to focus on the questions that encourage personal reflection and application to daily life.
3. **Learn to listen.** Nothing says "I care" like taking the time to really listen. Listen with your heart, your eyes, and your ears. Good listeners draw information from the group by:
 - Rephrasing what's said to make sure you heard correctly
 - Asking them to expand on their comments to clarify what was said
 - Understanding what people are feeling as well as what they are saying
4. **Transformation not just information.** The goal of a small group is not just to learn the facts and details about the stories in the Bible but to be transformed by them. Share with your group how *The Story* is reshaping your own life.
5. **Make prayer a priority.** Praying for your group members and your study time is the best way to prepare. Make prayer a part of your study time. Also, be careful about asking others to pray before they are ready for such a step.

Additional group discussion questions for all chapters can be found starting on page 473 of *The Story*. Refer to these questions if you need other ideas for your particular group.

Note: All page numbers referenced throughout these study guides are from The Story, 2011 Edition.

PERSONAL DEVOTION QUESTIONS

This section is actually a handout that you can copy and distribute to your group to use during their personal devotions in the coming week as they read the next chapter in *The Story*. The last activity of every group meeting is, “*In the time remaining, ask your group members to share any of their personal reflection insights from their journal entries.*” This is a reference to their answers to these Personal Devotion Questions. So, **before your first meeting**, distribute the questions for Chapter 1 (provided on the following page). Encourage group members to read Chapter 1 before your first meeting and to record their answers to these questions in a journal; they will be given an opportunity to share their insights at the close of the group discussion.

CHAPTER 1, THE BEGINNING OF LIFE AS WE KNOW IT

Journal your answers to these questions as you read through the chapter this week. You may wish to read one day and journal the next, or spread the questions over the whole week.

DAY 1

1. God created Eve because he felt that it was not good for Adam to be alone (p. 4). When have you felt most alone? How would your life be different if you were experiencing deep community? What might you do help someone else who is alone and isolated?
2. Adam and Eve hid from God because they felt shame and guilt. Both failed to accept responsibility for their sins and failures. Often, the first step to the healing and the restoring of relationships is to accept responsibility for our mistakes. What, if anything, do you need to own this week?
3. Adam and Eve's disastrous decisions demonstrate our own inability to choose well between right and wrong. Describe a wrong choice you made and how it affected your life. How has God helped you heal from that choice?

DAY 2

1. Cain's feelings of jealousy and hurt led to Abel's murder. Is there anyone in your family who you have hurt, or who has hurt you? What might you do to reconcile with this person? Identify a family relationship in your own life that is loving and secure. Share your thankfulness for that person with a note or phone call.
2. When God looked at the earth and saw that it was only evil all the time, He "*regretted that he had made human beings, and His heart was deeply troubled.*" Our hearts are often deeply troubled when we observe the horrors of this world. How might you respond to someone who asks how a good God could allow so much evil to take place?

DAY 3

1. God pursued Adam and Eve after they had sinned. God pursued Cain even as Cain was steeped in anger. Describe a time in your own life that God sought you out. What happened? How did it deepen your relationship with God?
2. Noah is noted for being "righteous" and "blameless." Are there any areas of your life that could be described this way? What areas of your life are most difficult to act righteously or blamelessly? Who do you know who could hold you accountable for these things?