

THE STORY

LEADER'S GUIDE

The Story is your opportunity to encounter God in his Word like never before. *The Story* is a collection of the basic stories of the Bible that tell the whole story from beginning to end. Through *The Story*, you will get a bird's eye view of the Bible.

The Story for Groups has been written to help facilitate discussion among those reading through *The Story*. Each chapter has a DVD presentation that retells *The Story* in a conversational format. There are also discussion questions for each chapter that will help you guide the group to learn and apply God's truth to their lives.

Have group members read two chapters of *The Story* per week. During your group meetings, watch the DVD lesson on the first chapter and discuss it, then watch the DVD lesson on the second chapter and discuss it. Each chapter of *The Story* is designed to take about 30 minutes of group time (about 10 minutes for the DVD and 20 minutes for discussion), so going through two chapters in one meeting should take approximately one hour.

To further enhance your group's experience with *The Story*, provide group members with *The Story for Individuals* to encourage them in their daily devotions, and *The Story for Families* to help them engage all their family members in *The Story* during the week.

THE BEGINNING OF LIFE AS WE KNOW IT

This session covers: Genesis 1-9

Summary:

God's creation is beautiful from the start, but sin causes everything to turn dark. God then decides to use a man named Noah to begin his work again.

Ice breaker:

There are 50 flavors of Jelly Belly jelly beans. Purchase some in advance and then allow group members to sample and choose their favorites. If you don't get them in advance, have people tell you their favorite flavors.

Think about:

What is the most beautiful thing you've ever seen in God's creation? What's the most unusual thing you've ever seen? What speaks most clearly about God's ability to be totally unique every time he creates?

What does it mean to you that you were created in God's image? How should that affect your life and your walk? (See Ephesians 4:22-24) How should this affect the way you view those around you? Think of three difficult individuals. Make it a habit to pray for them daily.

God's Story started even before creation. It will continue long after this world ends. As God introduced Adam and Eve into his Story, they chose to pursue a story of their own. This led to them believe the lie of Satan and to fall from God.

That Satan influenced Adam and Eve all those years ago is clearly understood. But what about today? What do you believe about Satan? (See Ephesians 6:10-12) What is he doing today? (See 1 Peter 5:8-9) What are some of the schemes of the devil that you need to be alert for today?

It's hard to imagine things being so bad that God would choose to wipe everything out and start over again. Or is it? We live in a world that is full of darkness. Yet, the darker the setting is, the more brilliant the light. (See Matthew 5:14-16) What are some practical ways you could let your light shine?

Genesis 6:8 (*The Story*, page 7) says, "Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD." What would it take to live in such a way that you found favor in the eyes of the Lord? How would it look for you to live in a way that put a smile on God's face?

Take away:

God's beautiful creation is marred by the result of our sin. However, we can still choose to follow God and live in such a way that puts a smile on his face.

Prayer:

Father, thank you for the incredible way you created all things. Thank you for the plan you have, The Story you have written. Help me to live out my role in your Story and to do so in a way that brings honor to you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

GOD BUILDS A NATION

This session covers: Genesis 12-35

Summary:

God builds a nation by faithfully keeping his promises and refining the character of his followers, even using those who are far from perfect.

Ice breaker:

Have group members write on a slip of paper a name that would best fit his/her own personality or life-style. Drop them into a hat or basket, then draw them out one-by-one and see if the group can pair the name with the person.

Think about:

Discuss how God changed names to fit the person. Abram became Abraham, “Father of a Great Nation.” (Genesis 17:5) Sarai became Sarah, “Princess.” (Genesis 17:15) Jacob became Israel, “A Prince of God.” (Genesis 32:28; 35:10) What name would you like God to give you to reflect who you would like to be in his eyes?

This part of *The Story* begins with a command, a promise and a response. Find each of these components in Genesis 12:1-4 (*The Story*, page 11).

Command: _____

Promise: _____

Response: _____

What is an important principle for us to learn from the relationship God had with Abraham?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Abraham got ahead of things by speeding up God’s promise with the birth of Ishmael (*The Story*, pages 13-14). Discuss a time when you prayed for something and then got ahead of God by trying to make it happen. What was the result? Were there consequences?
2. Isaac is referred to as the son that Abraham loved. Name someone you love. How difficult would it be to give up that person?
3. What did Abraham prove to God through his willingness to sacrifice Isaac? What did God prove to Abraham by His willingness to provide a substitute sacrifice?
4. Isaac is a picture of God’s ultimate sacrifice. What does this tell you about God’s desire to have a relationship with you? (See John 3:16)

Take away:

God was ready to create a nation of people that would be his own. But this nation would need to be established upon a relationship of obedience and trust. These are the same characteristics that should reflect our relationship with God today.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we come to you humbly seeking your commands and promises. We want to follow you according to your Holy Word. Help us make time to read the Bible daily so we can know how you would have us respond in every situation of life. Give, we pray, the promise of a blessing along with the command. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

JOSEPH FROM SLAVE TO DEPUTY PHARAOH

This session covers: Genesis 37-50

Summary: Joseph shows himself faithful to God, trusting in his sovereignty, even in difficult times.

Ice breaker:

Creative writing time! If someone were writing the story of your life, what would be the theme? For example: struggle between right and wrong, stressing through life, searching for joy, etc. Try not to think too hard. Just give the first answer that comes to mind.

Think about:

Two main themes characterize the life of Joseph: his faithfulness to God, and his trust in God's sovereignty.

How would you define sovereignty? A supreme authority, an all-powerful ruler, etc. (You might look this up in a dictionary as you are meeting together)

How do you think God's sovereignty is different from any ruler or king? He knows the end of the story even when we are still at the beginning. He has total control. He can do all things. He sees the full picture, etc.

Which do you think Joseph had first – overwhelming faithfulness to God, or a trust in his sovereignty? (No right or wrong answer, but perhaps the idea that the two work together would be a good topic to discuss.)

What happens to our faithfulness when hard times come around? We either attack our struggles armed with a strong faith to let God work it out and make hard choices to remain faithful to him, or we crumble under the pressure because our faith is not strong enough and we question God's plan.

As Joseph went through life he had some hard times. He was thrown into a pit, sold into a foreign culture as a slave, separated from his family, propositioned by Mrs. Potiphar, and sentenced to an Egyptian prison. Yet he rose to the top in his position every time. Even in prison he chose to use his God-given talents and serve with his leadership abilities, rather than sulk and pout and become a bitter old man. In the end, Joseph chose to help his family, and to forgive his hateful brothers.

Did Joseph know what would happen at the end of his story? Who did? Look up Genesis 50:20 (The Story, page 34) and have someone read it aloud. Who intended harm? Who meant it for good? Who knew how it was going to work out? Who had to show humility to allow God's plan to unfold?

As Joseph was faced with each of these situations he had a choice to make between faithfulness and bitterness. Each time, what did he choose? Faithfulness to God.

Take away:

In order to show faithfulness to God, we have to trust that he is sovereign and is working out his plan even when our circumstances look grim. We must choose faithfulness above all things, and watch God's plan unfold.

Prayer:

Father, thank you for your mighty work in our lives. We know you have an ultimate plan and we know you have the process to achieve your plan. Build our faith, Lord. Use our circumstances to strengthen our faith in you and to reveal your sovereignty to us. Help us to trust you with all things and to be faithful to you in all circumstances. In Jesus' name, Amen.

DELIVERANCE

This session covers: Exodus 1-17

Summary: God shows his authority, strength and provision as he delivers his people.

Ice breaker:

Have group members answer this question, “Which of these activities would you be most unwilling or feel most incompetent to do? 1) Prepare a meal for twelve; 2) Parachute from a plane; 3) Give a speech before a large group; 4) Learn a new language.

Think about:

Mention some circumstances that “fell into place” during Moses’ life leading up to God’s calling. (*The Story*, pages 35-37) His mother devised an ingenious plan to save his life. It was Pharaoh’s daughter who found him. His sister arranged for his own mother to raise him. He grew up moved by the plight of his own people, etc.

Discuss what the Bible says about God’s plan for each of our lives? Read Psalm 139:13-16 and Ephesians 1:11-14.

God chose Moses to spearhead Israel’s deliverance, despite his flaws. What things did Moses have going against him? (Not trusted by Hebrews. He apparently had a hot temper which resulted in his murdering someone. Because of that action, he was on the run, banished from Egypt. He was a poor orator.) What does this tell us about God’s ability to know a person’s true potential? What promise did God give Moses to bolster his self-confidence? (See Exodus 3:12)

What promises does God give us when we are called to serve? Read Isaiah 41:10, 13; Acts 4: 8, 13; James 1:5

Define the word “sovereign.” (Absolute authority and power) Discuss how God’s sovereignty was displayed in the story. (The plagues He brought upon Egypt) Pharaoh’s stubbornness wouldn’t allow him to accept God’s authority. Give examples of times when it’s hard to accept God’s authority or when we wonder why certain things happen. At times like that, what should we remember? (See Isaiah 55:8-11; Jeremiah 29:11-13; Romans 8:28)

God provided meat and manna for his people daily, yet they grumbled and fretted, worrying about their future. We’ve probably all done the same; worried about careers, health, finances, etc. In closing, read Matthew 6:25-34 to see what Jesus said about such worries.

Take away: God has a plan for everyone’s life and walks with us every step of the way.

Prayer:

Father, God. We thank you for the way in which you provide for us each day. We are in awe of your sovereignty, displayed before Pharaoh and the people of Israel. We take comfort in it, knowing that you rule our lives as well. Help us to understand and carry out the plan that you have for us. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

NEW COMMANDS AND A NEW COVENANT

This session covers: Exodus 19-40

Summary:

In establishing the way his people are to relate to him and to each other, God establishes his presence as what is most needed.

Ice breaker:

What was one rule that your parents had for you that you thought was crazy when you were a child?

Think about:

God gave Moses the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai for the people he led out of Egypt. (The Story, page 49) Why were these rules necessary for God's new nation? These commandments were designed to lead Israel to a life of practical holiness. In these laws the people could see the nature of God and his plan for how they should live.

Which commandments were the most difficult for the Israelites to live by and why? Which commandment did the Israelites break first and why would they break this one? The first and second commandments were the most difficult for the Israelites because they had just come from Egypt, a land of many idols and gods.

What idols do we have that may take precedence over God? Money, job, relationships, sports, hobbies, television, goals, etc.

We have all lied, we have all coveted something in our lives, we have probably cursed, and many of us have stolen. If we haven't kept these commandments which are God's design for holiness, how can we get to heaven which is a place of perfection? We can only get to heaven by Jesus paying the price for our sins or imperfection. God gave us a plan that covers our sins so that we can have eternal life with God.

Read John 3:16; Romans 3:23

Take away:

These commandments are God's way to show us how to have a relationship with both him and with each other. Since we have not kept these commandments purely, we are in need of a Savior, who is Jesus.

Prayer:

Lord, thank you for your commandments and your law. But more importantly thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, and for helping us when we have messed up. Your grace is awesome and we thank you for your Son. In His Name we pray, Amen.

WANDERING

This session covers: Numbers 10-27 and Deuteronomy 1-34

Summary:

God's people continually show themselves to be rebellious, while Moses reminds them of what they must do to truly follow God's plan.

Ice breaker:

Have group members write on a slip of paper something no one could possibly know about them. Draw the slips of paper from a hat or basket, read them aloud and have others guess who wrote them.

Think about:

God was very clear about his directions in biblical times. He spoke audibly to Moses. He guided the Israelites through the desert with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Although God doesn't communicate in quite the same way today, he still speaks to us – through his word – and he still guides us – through circumstances and through open and closed doors. His messages are very clear and his commands are obvious.

The Israelites complained about the food, the journey, the lack of water. Miriam and Aaron complained about Moses and his Cushite wife. What was God's reaction to the Israelites' complaints? (See, for example, Numbers 11:18-20)

Now it is time to deal with your own complaints. Do they have to do with lack of possessions? Place of residence or work? Other people? Circumstances?

What attitude do we show by complaining? What can you do to eliminate the complaints in your life? Read Philippians 2:12-18. What does Paul say about complaining?

God's people would continue to be complainers all of their lives. They were constantly rebelling against God's plan. Near the end of Moses' life, he clearly tells God's people what is at stake – life or death; blessings or curses. (See Deuteronomy 30:11-20, *The Story*, page 70)

We often go through life picking and choosing how much of God we want in our lives. What would it be like if you had to be all or nothing with God?

Take away:

We have the opportunity to follow God completely, but we will need to trust him to do this. We also need to realize that we must follow him according to his plan.

Prayer:

Father, thank you for giving me the opportunity to follow you. Thank you for making life and blessings available as I choose you. Keep me close to you all ways. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE BATTLE BEGINS

This session covers: Joshua 1-24

Summary:

God called for the total destruction of the inhabitants of the Promised Land so his people could live lives of complete devotion to him.

Ice breaker:

Squirt gun, water balloon, or snow ball? As a kid, which method of attack did you prefer during battle? Who did you want on your team? Who did you prefer to do battle against?

Think about:

God instructed the Israelites to destroy all the current inhabitants of their Promised Land. Do you find this instruction a bit excessive? Why do you think God called for such a drastic action?

Have someone look up Exodus 20:1-3 and read it aloud.

God had already told the Israelites that he wanted to be their only God. In order to make sure his chosen people did not get tangled up in the pagan gods, he wanted the land free of that influence. God has said the same thing to us. But our battle is not for land and our enemy is not people.

Have someone look up Ephesians 6:10-13 and read it aloud. Who is our enemy? In what ways does Satan try to take our focus away from our devotion to God? In other words, what things in our life get in the way of our devotion to God? Stress, activities, not enough time, work, responsibilities at home, children, hobbies, money, etc.

Have someone look up 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 and read it aloud. Read that very last phrase again, "... and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." Our battle is not against men, and the battleground is not a field of grass. Satan is subtle and sneaky. Where does Satan wage the battle for our devotion to God? Our minds. We have to fight Satan in our minds before we can be fully devoted to God and live our lives.

Joshua was very clear about this to the people of Israel. Have someone look up Joshua 24:15 and read it aloud. (*The Story*, page 83)

Take away:

In order to live fully devoted lives for God, we must destroy every enemy that fights against him. With Satan, we must begin the battle in our minds. Joshua instructed the people of Israel to make a choice. That same choice is ours today. Whether we are just starting out on our journey with God, or have been walking that journey for thirty years, we make choices every day that affect our devotion to God.

Prayer:

Father we are so thankful that the battles we face every day are not fought alone. Since we belong to you, you fight the battle for us. We thank you for your Word which gives us plenty of ammunition. We pledge our devotion to you, Father, and ask that this week you would give us the needed grace and strength to choose you first above all things. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A FEW GOOD MEN...AND WOMEN

This session covers: Judges 2-17

Summary:

God's people demonstrate a pattern in their relationship with him that finds them disobedient until things get too tough, and then crying out for his help.

Ice breaker:

Have group members name a favorite food that has honey as an ingredient, then take a guess at how many miles a honey bee flies to produce one pound of honey (55,000 miles). Perhaps give the person who comes closest to the correct answer a jar of honey!

Think about:

How did the Israelites disobey God when they settled in Canaan? (See Exodus 23:31-32). In what ways did such co-inhabitation with a pagan culture influence them? They began living like their neighbors, practicing immorality and idolatry. They turned away from God. They forgot about God! Talk about some influences that we need to be wary of in today's culture. Does that mean we are to isolate ourselves from the world?

The story says, "After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel." (Judges 2:10) In other words, parents did not teach their children about God. Read what the Bible says about our responsibility as Christian parents in Deuteronomy 6:6-7 and Colossians 3:16. Talk about the ways you, as parents or grandparents, can teach your children. Share stories of how you as a child were influenced by a Christian adult.

A recurrent theme of this chapter is God's patience and faithfulness. Repeatedly the Israelites "did evil in the Lord's sight" which always brought about hardship. "But when they cried out to the Lord for help, the Lord again raised up a rescuer to save them." How patient is God when it comes to forgiving us for repeated failures? (See Isaiah 43:25 and 1 John 1:9) Take a look at the simple Q&A of Matthew 18:21-22. What do you think Jesus' answer meant in terms of God's unconditional love for us?

Gideon needed repeated signs and proof from God before he was willing to follow God's command. (*The Story*, pages 89-90) Yet, God often expects us to step out in faith. Give examples of when you or others you know had to do just that? As Christ-followers what important assurances do we have from God as we face life's battles? He hears our prayers; He is always with us; He gives us peace; etc.

Talk about your overall impressions of Samson. (*The Story*, pages 93-98) Super hero? Super flawed? As fellow sinners, can we identify with any of his faults? Hot tempered, easily tempted, revengeful, selfish, etc. What can we learn from the fact that despite Samson's many failings, God was still able to use him for his purpose? What was the key to God helping Samson in his final moments? (See Judges 16:28) He acknowledged he needed God's help and asked for it.

Take away:

Our God is patient and faithful. He disciplines but never forsakes. He hears his people's prayers and comes to the rescue.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we know we often disappoint you and often find ourselves adrift in the ways of this world. Help us stay focused on you and look to you for rescue. Convict us and forgive us for those sins we have committed and let us always take comfort in your forgiveness and faithfulness. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

THE FAITH OF A FOREIGN WOMAN

This session covers: Ruth 1-4

Summary:

The book of Ruth provides us with a great view of total commitment, family responsibility and a reminder of God's ultimate plan.

Ice breaker:

Have group members answer this question, "Name something tough in life you have experienced. What did you learn from it?"

Think about:

What were some tough things Naomi was going through in Chapter 1? (*The Story*, page 99) There was a famine in the land, her husband Elimelek died, her two sons, Mahlon and Kilion, also died, and she was stuck in an unknown, far-off land.

God was looking to turn Naomi's famine into a harvest, but she continued to focus on her pain and not on God's plan. Even in Naomi's darkest hour, God was working and giving her little bits of hope that he had a greater plan.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:8-9.

Who in Naomi's life gave her some glimpse of hope and how? Ruth gave her hope because she did not leave her but stuck with her during her tough times. Ruth was a godly example during dark times and her faithfulness and consistency of character was eventually blessed by God.

Do you think that God gives us people along the way to restore our hope in tough situations? God gives us faith, family and friends. If our faith is under attack and our family as well, just as in Naomi's situation, God often gives us friends to lift us up.

Read Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

What did Boaz do to help out Naomi? Boaz took Ruth as his wife and restored their family name. According to Jewish Law, only two men were able to marry Ruth, and Boaz did. If not married, then Naomi's line would have died with her daughters-in-law, but her name lived on in her grandson. Why was her grandson, Obed, significant? He would end up being the grandfather of David, ancestor of the Messiah, Jesus.

Read Psalm 27

Take away:

In our darkest hour many times we can only see the darkness. But God is at work, shining his light into our darkness.

Prayer:

Lord, we thank you for continually being faithful and never leaving us nor forsaking us even during tough times. We pray that you would keep us faithful and consistent during those tough times. We look for your hope and the light of your bigger plan. Help us to be the hope for others when they go through these famines in their lives. We pray all of this in Jesus' name, Amen.

STANDING TALL, FALLING HARD

This session covers: 1 Samuel 1-15

Summary:

In asking for a king, God's people rejected his authority over their lives, but they found that their king would not last because he would not follow God's ways.

Ice breaker:

Tell the story about the man sitting on the fence (author unknown).

A bunch of people were sitting on a fence minding their own business. The fence divided two vast pieces of property. Along came Jesus on one side and Satan on the other. They both beckoned people to follow. Little by little everyone dropped off the fence and began to follow their leader. Many chose to follow Christ; others chose to follow Satan, until only one man remained on the fence.

Jesus had left with His followers. Satan had left with his followers. But Satan came back. "Come on," he said to the guy on the fence. "Let's go." The man on the fence shook his head. "No," he said. "I'm sitting on the fence. I am not going to choose one or the other. Perhaps I can have both." Satan looked back and grinned. "You have to come with me," he said. "I own the fence."

Now allow guests to share their personal stories of times when they sat on the fence or even when they chose the world's ways over God's ways. What was the outcome? How would they do things differently now?

Think about:

Read John 15:1-8. What relationship is indicated in these verses? Living connected to God as a branch is connected to a vine. What would it look like for you to live connected to God?

Now look at verses 18-25 in the same chapter. How would you describe the relationship with the world for those that choose to follow God?

Now read 1 John 2:15-17. What is God clearly telling us?

Take away:

God's people wanted a king so they would be like everyone else. (The Story, page 110) However, their choice indicated their unwillingness to follow God. We must intentionally choose the way we will go.

Prayer:

Father, thank you for inviting me to follow you. The Bible is full of stories of those who chose not to do so. With your help, I commit to choose you each day. In Jesus' name, Amen.

FROM SHEPHERD TO KING

This session covers: 1 Samuel 16-18, 24, 31; 2 Samuel 6, 22; 1 Chronicles 17; Psalm 59

Summary: It's all about the heart. David is chosen to be king and lives a life of faith and trust in God.

Ice breaker:

When you were a child, what did you want to be when you grew up? Did you end up doing what you thought you'd do, or did God lead you elsewhere?

Think about:

Read 1 Samuel 16:7. (*The Story*, pages 117-118) What was God looking for regarding Israel's next king? What kind of heart do you think God wanted in a new king?

God knew what was in David's heart, even if others did not. Others can only see the results of our hearts' cry, or evidence of what's inside. It wasn't long before God gave David an opportunity to prove his heart to others. David's initiation as a public servant takes place on a battlefield. As we strive to develop a heart like David's, let's take a look at the hearts' of others in our story.

Read 1 Samuel 17:10. What were Goliath's actions saying about his heart? Read on in verse 11 and also in 1 Samuel 17:24. What kind of heart did Saul's army show? (*The Story*, pages 118-119)

Next we find Saul himself, the leader of the Israelite army. Saul at first tries to talk the boy out of such a feat. Then Saul tries to put his personal armor on the young man, which David refuses. Finally, Saul sends him forth with this blessing, "Go, and the LORD be with you." Do you think Saul is resigned to the situation? Or do you think he is sending David forth knowing that God will come through and not only take care of this disgusting Philistine, but protect the young shepherd boy?

Have someone look up 1 Samuel 17:45-47 and read the passage aloud. (*The Story*, pages 120-121) This mini-sermon by the young man who will later be called "a man after God's own heart" is showing his own heart in this passage. Does this sound like the work of a cocky, immature, overly-hormonal adolescent? Or does it sound like the expression of a deeply loyal, faith-filled servant of the Living God? What evidence of his heart do we see in his words?

Of course we all know the way this battle ends. David said it best when he told the Philistine bully, "the battle is the LORD's." But this is only the start of David's walk of faith. His heart is tested often before he ever sits on the throne. Like David, our hearts are tested daily. We may not have to face a literal giant who taunts the loyal army of the living God. But we face little giants every day, and every day we make small choices that show where our heart loyalties lie.

Take away:

Every trial in our lives will test our heart. We can prove our heart by choosing a reckless abandonment of faith in God or fail the test with a timid fear of a battle our LORD tells us he already has won.

Prayer:

Father, thank you for the example of heartfelt faith we see in your servant David. We know that David, like ourselves, was not perfect. But we also know that you called him a man after your own heart. May our hearts prove our loyalty to you. May we face each trial in our lives with a faith that will show us to be men and women after your own heart. In Jesus' name, Amen.

TRIALS OF A KING

This session covers: 2 Samuel 11-12, 18; 1 Chronicles 22, 29; Psalms 23, 32, 51

Summary:

David lives out every aspect of real life. His heart for God is captured in psalms of repentance (Psalm 51), gratitude for forgiveness (Psalm 32) and trust (Psalm 23).

Ice breaker:

Name a favorite hymn or contemporary Christian song. Those who are brave enough can even hum or sing a few bars when it's their turn!

Think about:

God had protected David from lions, a giant and a jealous king. He had given him military savvy, a position of power and abundant possessions. Yet somehow greed led to lust, adultery and murder. (*The Story*, pages 131-134) The Bible tells us we should always keep our guard up regarding temptation. (See 1 Peter 5:8) Review these passages for ways that help us stay strong: Psalm 119:9-16; Galatians 5:16-18. What important promise has God given us regarding temptation? (See 1 Corinthians 10:13)

What were some of the consequences of David's sinful behavior? Uriah and other soldiers lost their lives; Joab was made complicit to murder; the baby conceived from his adulterous affair died; David's family suffered violence and public shame. Son Absalom caused David great sorrow. Yet in Psalm 51, David writes, "Against you, you only, have I sinned." Why do you think David penned these words considering his actions had cause harm to so many others? All sin offends a holy and just God and separates us from him.

God used the prophet Nathan to confront David about his sin. What should our role regarding accountability be with fellow Christians? (See Galatians 6:1-3 and Matthew 18:15-17)

In Psalm 32, David joyously expresses his thanks to God for the forgiveness he received. What are some ways we should show our gratitude to God for his forgiveness? How should knowing that God forgives us affect our relationships with those who wrong us? (See Colossians 3:12-14)

Why is the analogy used in Psalm 23 of a sheep and its shepherd perfectly suited to show the relationship between God and us? In it, David writes "even though I walk through the valley..." not "even if." Does that mean even Christians should expect tough times? (See John 16:33 and Acts 14:21-22) Psalm 23 is often read at funerals or turned to in times of danger or sorrow, but how is its message always relevant? We can and should always rely on God's protection and provision.

Take away:

David's life was filled with tragedy and triumph. Above all, it was filled with an abiding faith. His story of repentance, gratitude and trust is an example to us all.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, show us how to apply the lessons learned from David's extraordinary life to our own lives. We thank you for the forgiveness you give when we genuinely repent of our sins. Help us always to put our full trust in you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

THE KING WHO HAD IT ALL

This session covers: 1 Kings 1-8, 10-11; 2 Chronicles 5-7; Proverbs 1-3, 6, 20-21

Summary:

Solomon chooses wisdom as he begins his reign as king; however, he ends his reign with his heart turned from God.

Ice breaker:

Have a variety of magazines available for group members to peruse. Have each person decide what s/he would want if s/he could have anything in the world.

Think about:

God gave Solomon an incredible opportunity! We find this in 1 Kings 3:5 where God says, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.” Can you imagine? What would you ask for? Think about more than just the things you talked about in the icebreaker. What would it be?

Solomon asked God to give him a wise, discerning, understanding heart. (*The Story*, pages 144-145) What does this mean? What would a heart like this look like in your life? How would it impact you at home? How about at work? What would it have to do with the way you spend your money or your time?

Why is the condition of our hearts so important? (See Psalm 119:33-40; Proverbs 4:23) How can you know the status of your heart? (See Psalm 139:23-24) What can be done to change our hearts? (See Psalm 51:10)

God not only gave Solomon what he did ask for, he also gave him what he didn't ask for. Why do you think this was so? What does this say about the nature of God as a giver? (See John 3:15, James 1:17)

Solomon now has literally everything! He has what he asked for and even what he didn't ask for. Apparently this still wasn't enough to keep him from allowing his heart to wander. (See 1 Kings 11:1-4, *The Story*, page 157) Read Jeremiah 17:9. What do you need to keep in mind about your heart? What has the potential to make your heart wander from God? What are you doing to keep that from happening?

Take away:

Even though Solomon had it all, he still allowed his heart to wander from God.

Prayer:

Father, help me remember the status of my heart. Help me to keep my heart pure and focused on you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A KINGDOM TORN IN TWO

This session covers: 1 Kings 12-16

Summary:

The once strong and powerful Nation of Israel begins to fight against itself and each successive king leads his people farther and farther away from God.

Ice breaker: Who in your past was a positive influence or role model? Who was a negative influence?

Think about:

Following the reigns of Saul, David and Solomon, the Nation of Israel divides into two kingdoms. (*The Story*, pages 159-161) The ten northern tribes retain the name Israel and set up their capital in Samaria. The two remaining tribes in the south (Judah and Benjamin) are referred to as Judah and set up their capital in Jerusalem. It was through the southern kingdom that God kept His promise to David that one from his family would always be on the throne.

Israel was on a downturn, having nine dynasties and nineteen kings, all of them evil. Judah had one dynasty, David's, which was interrupted only for five years by Queen Athaliah who usurped the throne. Although better than Israel, Judah had twenty kings, and only seven were good.

To consider the impact that leaders have over their people, compare King Asa of Judah (1 Kings 15:9-24) with King Ahab of Israel (1 Kings 16:29-33). (*The Story*, pages 164-166) What direction did they set for their country? What kind of examples did they provide for their people?

Who do you have the responsibility of leading? What kind of example are you setting for them? Who are you following as your example? (See 1 Corinthians 11:1)

Note the one-sentence description for each king (Asa – 1 Kings 15:11; Ahab – 1 Kings 16:30). What one-sentence summary could be made for your life?

Take away:

Leadership makes a difference! We must choose carefully who we choose to follow. We also must take seriously our responsibility to properly lead others.

Prayer:

Father, help me to be fully aware of those after whom I tend to pattern my life. Guide me in finding those who honor you. Give me complete awareness regarding those who are looking to me for leadership. Help me to set a good example. Most of all, keep me following you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

GOD'S MESSENGERS

This session covers: 1 Kings 17-19; 2 Kings 2, 4, 6; Hosea; Amos

Summary: Different messengers; same message – return to God.

Ice breaker:

Have the group members read the following verses aloud in their biggest “fire and brimstone” voices.

2 Peter 3:9

Acts 17:30

Matthew 9:13

James 4:8

Luke 15:10

Isaiah 55:6-7

Proverbs 28:13

Joel 2:12-13

Acts 8:22

Psalm 34:18

Acts 3:19

Romans 2:4

Think about:

All of the verses we just read are calling us to repentance. Spiritually speaking, repentance includes not only sorrow for what we have done, but turning away and a step in the other direction. When we turn on our heels and run the other way, we flee from sin. Just as messengers in ancient times called people to repent, God is calling us to repentance today.

Read Hebrews 13:8. We serve the same God who was calling to the people in the time of the prophets. God spoke to them in great miracles and mighty acts. He also sent messengers to give the same message he wants us to hear today.

Since you are here at this small group, we are assuming that you have either accepted God's call to repentance, or are very interested in what it is and how it works. How long did it take God to get your attention so you would listen to him? Did you fight it along the way?

Think about your own journey with God or towards God. Can you think of someone who was instrumental in introducing you to Christ? Perhaps the roles have now changed and you are the messenger God wants to use. Can you think of someone God has put on your heart? Is there someone who needs to hear the message that you can now give?

Even the messengers themselves needed to stop and hear the voice of God. Elijah tried to hear God in the wind and in the earthquake. (*The Story*, page 170) He did not hear God until it was quiet enough to discern God's gentle whisper. What kinds of things get in the way of God's voice these days? Many times we, like those of old, ignore the message God is trying to give us. In this study we have learned the importance of a quiet time with God. Are you doing the individual study that goes along with the book?

Take away:

Perhaps times have not changed so much after all. In the times of the prophets, God desired for all to hear the message of repentance and turn to Him. He desires the same thing today. We need to pay attention to the messengers and the message. We need to be the messengers to take the message. We need to pay attention to God's call for repentance, and not ignore his call on our life to spread the message of repentance.

Prayer:

Father, just as the prophets of old had a message from you, so we have today. Just as they were called to repent, we repent today. Help us to turn away from our wickedness and get right with you. On this journey toward you, or with you, I pray that we will take the next step, no matter what it is or where it takes us. We know you are with us all the way. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

This session covers: 2 Kings 17-19; Isaiah 3, 6, 14, 49, and 53

Summary:

Even as Israel falls and Judah gets closer to the same fate, God's message to his people is one of hope and salvation.

Ice breaker:

How many homes have you lived in during your lifetime? Tell which was your favorite and why? Which was your least favorite and why?

Think about:

Have you noticed that our introductions to the various kings of Israel and Judah usually include a one-sentence resume: "He did evil in the eyes of the Lord," as was the case of Hoshea, or "He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord," as was the case of Hezekiah. What does that say about the importance of our personal relationship with Christ? (See 1 Samuel 16:7) Just think for a second. If your life was summed up in one sentence what would it be? Think about your proudest accomplishments. Is God a part of them?

Before we become too judgmental about Israel's obsession with worshipping idols, it might be good to look at our own culture (and in our own hearts) to see if we Christians aren't sometimes guilty of the same sin. Name some of the things that people allow to become gods in their lives. (See 1 John 2:15-17 and Matthew 6:24)

Read *The Story*, pages 182-185. When the king of Assyria blasphemed God, what were the dire consequences? He also taunted Judah about their trust in God. Have you ever been teased or even ridiculed for being a Christian? Tell the others about how you responded. Why do you think some people react negatively towards Christians? Read Romans 1:16 and 1 Peter 4:16. What does the Bible say about being persecuted for Christ? (See Matthew 5:10-13)

Defeat seemed certain for King Hezekiah. Instead of surrendering to the enemy, he surrendered himself to God, the only one who could help him. Read Proverbs 3:5. What does this verse mean by "lean not on your own understanding?" Discuss some situations we all face when we simply have to let go and let God, trusting that his will is best for us?

The prophet Isaiah's audience consisted of the people of Israel and Judah who lived between 740 and 686 BC, but many of his poetic words are as relevant now as ever. How did the people of that time react to his words of warning and promise? What can we learn from those same words today? Discuss how Isaiah's writings, which foretold the actual events of Christ's life and death, verify the authenticity of the Bible. (*The Story*, pages 189-190)

Take away:

Even while punishing his people, God patiently longed for their return. Through Isaiah, his message to them – and us – was the way to restoration and redemption.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank you for a love that has never faltered or failed no matter how much we, your people, have disobeyed and saddened you. Thank you for devising the perfect plan of redemption that Isaiah foretold and Christ completed. In His name, Amen.

THE KINGDOM'S FALL

This session covers: sections of 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Ezekiel

Summary:

Rebellious to the end, God's people receive the consequences for not returning to him. Even in his wrath, God sends words of hope and restoration.

Ice breaker:

Tell about a time you received a warning for inappropriate behavior. It could have been from your parents as you were growing up. Perhaps it was in school from your principal. Maybe more recently it was from a police officer. Did you heed the warning? Did you change your behavior? What would have happened if you hadn't made the change?

Think about:

God had been working with his people to establish an exclusive relationship with them. For this to happen, they needed to set their hearts completely on him. When they refused to do this, God warned them of the consequences. Unfortunately, God's people did not respond to his warnings and headed right into his judgment.

Why don't we heed warnings? Why do we continue down paths of rebellion, even when we know the consequences? (See Deuteronomy 31:24-29; Ezekiel 2)

Because of their continued rebellion, God's people faced his judgment and were carried off into captivity. (The Story, pages 200-201) For us, there are times we live without a sense of accountability or judgment. It seems as if there are no real consequences for our actions. However, this certainly is not the case. God's Word is clear about his justice. (See Revelation 20:11-15). How can we be sure our name is written in this Book of Life? (See John 3:16-17)

God's justice demands punishment and his love extends hope. Even as God's judgment is carried out, his prophets bring words of restoration. Even after he punishes his people, God reaches out to them and promises to restore them. (The Story, pages 203-204) He is still pursuing them for a relationship.

God pursues you with the same passion and determination. He wants an ongoing, personal, intimate relationship with you. (See Psalm 25:1-7; 30:1-5)

Take away:

Be certain that continued rebellion results in punishment. But be comforted in knowing that God's hand continues to reach out.

Prayer:

Father, point out the rebellious ways in my life. Thank you that your desire is to bring me back and keep me close to you. Thank you for your love and forgiveness. In Jesus' name, Amen.

DANIEL IN EXILE

This session covers: Daniel 1-6; Jeremiah 29-31

Summary:

In captivity, God's people show themselves to be faithful and God encourages them with words of hope and restoration.

Ice breaker:

Work together to answer the following questions...

1. Where were the Jews during this captivity? Babylon
2. What was the name of the king there? Nebuchadnezzar
3. What were the Hebrew names of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego? Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah
4. What name did the king give Daniel? Belshazzar
5. Who was the next king? Darius
6. Which of Daniel's gifts brought him before the king? He was able to interpret dreams
7. What was the emotional response of the king when Daniel had survived the lion's den?
He was happy

Think about:

After all their years of disobedience, God finally brought about his judgment and sent his people into captivity. They would stay in Babylon for 70 years until God would restore them to their homeland.

As was always the case, there were those who stayed faithful to God even in Babylon. In this chapter of *The Story*, we meet four young men who continued to serve God in a foreign land.

Have you ever been in the minority when it came to your faith? What was that like? How did you stay faithful? God blessed the four young men by taking special care of them as they stood strong against the culture. (*The Story*, pages 209-211)

In one of the greatest testimonies to living out a strong faith, we read about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego's appointment with the furnace. Why did they refuse to bow down to the king? What are ways that we are enticed to compromise our faith?

These three men stood firm before the king based on their belief that God would save them (Daniel 3:17). The next verse begins with six of the most powerful words in the Bible, "But even if he does not." Yes, they believed God would save them, but that wasn't the strongest part of their faith. They would do the right thing even if God chose not to save them.

Wow! Is your faith strong like that? This reminds us of the martyrs throughout the ages who believed in the power of God, yet died for their faith. Would you be willing to die for your faith? Are you willing to live for your faith?

Take away:

We can choose to remain faithful to God no matter the situation. In doing so, we show our faith to be strong and independent of circumstances.

Prayer:

Father, you have given us great examples in those who have faithfully lived for you throughout the ages. Help us to live out this legacy in our lives every day. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE RETURN HOME

This session covers: Ezra 1-6; Haggai 1-2; Zechariah 1, 8

Summary:

God uses foreign kings to support the return of his people to their homeland, ward off opposition, and successfully complete his Temple.

Ice breaker:

If you could be a character in a book, what book would you choose and what character would you be? Why?

Think about:

God's use of unbelieving kings to position his people where he wants them is a sure sign of his sovereign plan being worked out among his people. Read Ezra 1:1. The key phrase to look at here is "in order to fulfill the word of the LORD." God can, and will, use all available means to fulfill his will and carry out his purpose. He can even use an unbelieving king. (The Story, page 217)

Consider what was accomplished through Cyrus (see Ezra 1:2-4). What did God ask Cyrus to do first? Cyrus told the Jews they had a job to do in Jerusalem. What was the job? When they attempted to rebuild the temple, what were some problems they encountered? (See Ezra 4) What did Cyrus do about the ones who were trying to keep the temple from being rebuilt?

Read Ezra 1:1 again. This time we'll emphasize another phrase. "...the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia..." According to this verse, what did God do to gain Cyrus' help in moving the people and rebuilding the temple?

Read Proverbs 19:21. God's purpose will prevail. The question is, does his purpose prevail with our submission and obedience or with us kicking and screaming? Are we going to be a part of God's plan or fight against it? We already know from this verse that God's sovereign purpose will be done.

Have you, more often than not, been in submission or opposition to God? Knowing what we know about King Cyrus, what will need to happen to get us to follow God? We can seek a change of heart. Read Psalm 51:10. What do you think is the best way to insure a pure heart and a right spirit with God? Read Colossians 3:16-17. Whatever we do, we are to give thanks to God. Look again at the very first part of this verse. What should be dwelling in us? How do you think we get the word of Christ to dwell in us?

God has the power to change hearts. His Spirit dwells in every believer. If we desire a change of heart, we have to individually set aside time to allow the work to get done by spending time with him in his word. Having a daily time in God's Word and prayer with our Father is the best way to develop a pure heart and a right spirit within. If you do not have a daily time with God, now is the time to start.

Take away:

God accomplished the rebuilding of the temple because he used pagan kings to complete his plan. Imagine what he can do with a spirit-filled believer who spends time seeking him in his Word.

Prayer:

Father God, thank you for your Word. Because of your Word we have the stories of people like King Cyrus, whom you used in a mighty way to accomplish your plan. Make us hungry for your Word. Plant it deeply into our souls so that you might accomplish the renewing of our hearts and the transformation of our minds into committed Christ-followers. Use us to further your purpose in our families, our church and our community. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE QUEEN OF BEAUTY AND COURAGE

This session covers: Esther 1-9

Summary:

God's sovereign hand puts a Jew on the throne in a foreign land as a means of saving his people from destruction.

Ice breaker: If you could visit anywhere in the world, where would you go and why?

Think about:

Did you notice that God is not mentioned one time in the entire book of Esther? Yet, his hand is clearly evident in the destiny of both Mordecai and Esther. (*The Story*, pages 231-233) Mordecai tells his cousin, "And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" Mention some of the "chance" circumstances that led to Esther becoming queen. Tell others about "chance" circumstances in your life that may have seemed inconsequential at the time, but later turned out to be pivotal in your growth as a Christian or in an opportunity to advance God's kingdom. As Christians, how can we be open and willing to be used by God for his purpose?

If Esther had reacted differently to becoming queen – either feeling so unworthy she lacked confidence or becoming so self-centered she lost focus – she would have missed the role God had planned for her. Mention some of the unique opportunities Christ-followers who have been given riches, public status or great influence have. Would you say those of us who are placed in these positions have greater responsibilities?

We're told that Mordecai and Esther kept a low profile regarding their Jewish heritage. All this fit into God's plan. Esther probably would have been disqualified as a queen candidate if her Jewish heritage was known. But, when it mattered, how did they both publicly proclaim their faith? Mention some situations we might face in today's world where it takes courage to publicly stand for Christ.

Upon learning of the king's death decree, the Jews banded together in mourning, fasting and prayer. Discuss why tragedies unite people. Do you think Christians do as much as they should to support fellow Christians in need?

Name some reasons why, at first glance, Esther would seem an unlikely candidate to save a nation? What one important thing did Esther have on her side? Would you agree that, just as God chose Esther to do great things, he still uses the weak and the insignificant – armed with his strength and protection – to change the world? Do you have any stories to illustrate this truth?

We know God never breaks his covenants with us. Think about what promises of God would have been broken if Haman's plan for annihilation of the Jews been successful? (See Genesis 22:17 and Isaiah 9:6-7)

Take away:

God controls the entire universe – every major event, every mundane happening. As we take notice of God in every detail, we should be open and willing to fulfill his purpose in our lives, knowing he will give us the courage we need.

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, we acknowledge your sovereignty in the world and in our lives. Give us the courage to do your will and make a stand for you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

REBUILDING THE WALLS

This session covers: Ezra 7; Nehemiah 1-8; Malachi 1-4

Summary:

Even after God's people had returned to their homeland, Jerusalem was still in disrepair. God used Ezra and Nehemiah to focus the people on the work and the Word.

Ice breaker:

What do you think of when you hear the word "façade" (f - säd)? You might think about the architectural style of the exterior of a building. What are some classic, very recognizable façades that tell you about a building just by looking at it? (i.e., the White House, a beautiful cathedral, town hall). We hear the word façade more often when considering the false front a person shows. What type of façades have you seen in people?

Think about:

In an incredible way, God moves through the heart of a foreign king to help his people rebuild Jerusalem. (*The Story*, pages 239-242) What did it take? Are you aware of God moving in and around your life? How can you become more aware of what God is doing? If God could move through a foreign king, how much more should he be able to move through us? (See Jeremiah 18:1-4 and Romans 12:1-2)

After working through opposition, the task of rebuilding the walls was finally completed. The people had restored the dwelling place of God, and the city was a safe place to live once again. However, there was one thing still in disrepair – the heart of the people. (*The Story*, pages 247-248)

Which is easier for you to repair: issues on the outside or issues on the inside? (See Matthew 9:4-8; 23:25-28) Is it easier to learn to say "thank you" or to develop an attitude of gratitude? Can you more easily develop a habit of driving the speed limit or have a mindset change that you are under authority?

God's people took care of the Temple and the walls, but their hearts were still in bad shape. When it comes to the internal issues of the heart, we must learn that we are dependent on God's help. (See Psalm 51:7-12; Ezekiel 36:24-27)

How does God work in our hearts? One way is through the Bible (see Psalm 119:9-16; 33-40). Through consistent time in the Word, God can change us from the inside out.

Take away:

While there will always be areas of life that are in need of repair, the greatest work God desires to do is in your heart. Here is where God is working to make you more and more like his Son, Jesus Christ.

Prayer:

Father, I want to give you freedom to move in my life and do the work you desire. Change my heart to make me more and more like you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE BIRTH OF THE KING

This session covers: Matthew 1-2; Luke 1-2; John 1

Summary:

Jesus had always been, but comes to live among his creation. The circumstances surrounding his birth are both supernatural and humble.

Ice breaker:

Consider the story of Jesus' birth. What part of the story do you most enjoy? What part is most amazing to you? What part is most surprising? How would you have written the story about the coming of the Messiah if you were in charge?

Think about:

God in the form of a baby. How incredible! Why did God do things this way? Where were the white horse and the armies of heaven? Why didn't the world fully understand God had just invaded time and space?

Read John 1:1-2. (*The Story*, page 255) Jesus has always been. He was with God at the beginning of The Story. Jesus is not some second-rate character added along the way.

Read Philippians 2:5-8. Jesus was with God and chose to come to earth. But he didn't come as the King of kings and Lord of lords. How did he come to earth? What role did he assume? How far did he go in being obedient to God? What does this communicate regarding the way we are to live our lives? (See Philippians 2:1-4)

Jesus comes from eternity to earth and he comes as one of us. Well, almost like one of us. Read Hebrews 4:14-16. What is an important difference between Jesus and you and me? What benefit is there to us knowing that Jesus came the way he did? How can we approach God knowing this to be true?

Read Hebrews 2:17-18. How does knowing that Jesus suffered when tempted help you deal with temptation? What truths are found in 1 Corinthians 10:13 regarding temptation?

Take away:

It's amazing to consider that the God of the universe chose to come live among his people. It's even more amazing to consider the way he chose to do it. By being like us, Jesus has given us the comfort of knowing he understands us.

Prayer:

Thank you so much for coming to live among us. As I come to you, I have full confidence that you understand what I am going through. I pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

JESUS' MINISTRY BEGINS

This session covers: Matthew 3-4, 11; Mark 1-3; John 1-4

Summary:

John the Baptist reveals Jesus to the world and Jesus starts his ministry by caring for people. He calls His disciples to follow him and learn his ways.

Ice breaker:

Think of someone in your life who has been a mentor, whether they know it or not. Who was it? What particularly did they teach that was beneficial? Have you ever been a mentor to someone else?

Think about:

Who introduced you to Jesus? Did they talk to you about Christ first, or did you notice something about them that drew you nearer?

Read John 1:29. (*The Story*, page 267) The Jewish people had been waiting for their promised Messiah. But they did not expect him to come the way Jesus came. If you were introducing Christ to the world for the first time, how would you plan his coming-out party? Jesus' introduction to the world was a humble start. But breaking the expectations did not stop there. One of his first tasks was to choose his disciples. In Jewish culture, a rabbi had a following of educated men who desired to learn all they could from their master. These men were chosen as young boys for their bright minds and a heart for learning the scriptures. Their job was to glean everything possible from their master so they could grow up and have a following of their own. When Jesus chose his followers, he used a different technique.

Read Matthew 4:18-21. (*The Story*, page 268) Whom did Jesus call? Who were these men? What did they do? And how did they react when Jesus told them to come? Now read Mark 2:13-14. Who else did Jesus call? And what was Levi's job? Does it surprise you that Jesus chose such ordinary men?

In the culture of the day, boys without the quick minds needed to follow a rabbi were given other jobs. Fishermen and tax collectors had their jobs because, frankly, they were not smart enough to be expected to learn much. Does it surprise you that all these men followed Jesus without question? Why do you think they did?

What was Jesus' first miracle? After his first miracle, Jesus headed out into public life. His disciples, like good students of their rabbi, followed him to learn all they could.

Open your Bibles to the book of Mark and look over the headings of chapters 1 through 4. What are some of the miracles the disciples began to witness? Many of these miracles may be familiar to us if we have been in church for any amount of time. But the disciples were right there, seeing these things for the first time. They were astounded by what Jesus did. As they watched and listened, they began to see Jesus for the one he truly was. Seeing God work personally in our lives helps us to see more fully who he really is. How do you think those who do not know Jesus can begin to see him for who he really is?

Take away:

As followers of Christ, we are called to do just what the first disciples did. We are to follow our Savior closely, learn what he did for people, and serve them in his name.

Prayer:

Thank you God for your indescribable gift and for your grace, given freely, that we might know Jesus. Help us to know him better. Help us to reveal him more. Give us opportunities to serve and share, the wisdom to recognize them when they come, and the boldness to do as you ask. In Jesus' name, Amen.

NO ORDINARY MAN

This session covers: Matthew 5-7, 9, 14; Mark 4-6; Luke 10, 15; John 6

Summary:

Through understandable teaching and powerful miracles, Jesus shows he is not just any religious man.

Ice breaker:

Read any good books lately? How many books do you read in a year? What is your favorite genre: romance, murder mystery, fantasy, historical, self-help, biography? Share with others what, in your opinion, makes for a good read.

Think about:

Good communicators have always used imagery their listeners could relate to in order to get their message across. Spend a few minutes looking through the book of Psalms and point out metaphors used by David. What were some common themes to Jesus' parables? Jesus' parables were accepted with mixed reviews. (See Matthew 7:28-29; 19:3; 22:15-22) Why are Jesus' parables forever relevant? As we read the parables of Jesus, how should we prepare our hearts?

Who was the audience Jesus was addressing when He taught the parables about the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son? (*The Story*, pages 279-280) Why was his message – that God sought after sinners – such a radical idea? The mindset was still centered on the law – that right living was the way to God. Grace was a radical new concept. Discuss some of the truths gleaned from these three stories.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, why were the neighborly acts of the Samaritan toward the Jewish traveler remarkable? They were enemies. Jesus ends His story with a direct command, "Go and do likewise." Were those words meant merely for the audience that day, or for all who would continue to hear the story from that day forward? Mention some small acts of kindness we can do to obey Jesus' command.

When asked how to pray, Jesus gave his disciples a succinct example. (*The Story*, page 282) Use this ACTS acrostic to remember these essential parts to your talks with God: Adoration (See Psalm 103); Confession (See 1 John 1:9); Thanksgiving (See Philippians 4:6-7) and Supplication (See Matthew 7:7-11).

How do you define the word "miracle?" Do you think the word is used too casually today? On the other hand, if a proper definition of the word is "an act that only God can perform," what would you say to someone who stated, "God no longer performs miracles like he did in the Bible?" Share some events in your life or in the life of someone you know you would classify as miracles. Notice what is often mentioned before Jesus performed his miracles. (See Matthew 9:2, 22, 28) Discuss ways Jesus' miracles impacted others. What benefits can you derive from learning about Jesus' miracles?

For some, Jesus was merely entertainment or someone they hoped would become an earthly king. He astounded them with his interpretations of the law and his miracles, but they somehow missed the big picture: He was the Messiah!

Take away:

The teachings and miracles of Jesus changed forever the people who personally encountered him. Some walked away empty, but for many others, they received the gift of eternal life.

Prayer:

Father God, thank so much for all your Son came to earth to give us: a fulfilled life now, and an eternity of unimaginable joy with you to come. Give us insight as we study the teachings of our Rabbi Jesus' life. May we always hunger and thirst for your Word. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

JESUS, THE SON OF GOD

This session covers: Matthew 16-17, 21; Mark 8-14; Luke 9, 22; John 7-12

Summary:

A clear understanding of who Jesus was resulted in anger from the religious leaders and hope for those that would believe in him.

Ice breaker:

Give directions from your home to your small group gathering without using directional indicators (north, south, left, right). Be as clear as possible.

Think about:

How good are you at clearly stating your position on an issue? Are you able to clearly articulate your opinion to others? Jesus asks his followers what people were saying about him. Their answer reflects a wide range of thoughts on this matter. But Peter's response was clear and to the point. (See Matthew 16:13-17) (*The Story*, page 291)

Why was Peter able to be so clear? How did he have such insight? John the Baptist had a similar testimony. (See John 1:29-34)

How do you answer the question from Jesus, "Who do you say I am?" What evidence do you have for your response?

Jesus clearly claimed to be God's Son throughout the Bible. That Jesus was clear about this is seen in the response of the religious leaders. (See John 8:48-59; 10:22-39)

You really can't stay neutral when it comes to Jesus. It's been said you have to consider him a liar, a lunatic or the Lord. Are you clear on your beliefs about who Jesus is? Can you clearly articulate this to others?

Sometimes we get intimidated because we don't know exactly how to express our faith and our beliefs. Consider what the healed blind man said in John 9:13-25. What personal encounter with Jesus can you share that gives evidence to who he is?

Take away:

Jesus' clear expression of who he was gave rise to the anger of the religious leaders. However, this also gave rise to great faith among those who believed.

Prayer:

Thank you for the truth about who Jesus is. Help me to know clearly what I believe. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE HOUR OF DARKNESS

This session covers: Matthew 26-27; Mark 14-15; Luke 22-23; John 13-19

Summary:

During the final hours of Jesus' life, He shows what it means to serve others and follow God's plan all because of his great love for us.

Ice breaker:

If you knew you only had a few hours to live, who would you choose to be with? What would you choose to say to them?

Think about:

This chapter of *The Story* brings us to the final moments of Jesus' life. Before he heads to the cross, he has some last words with his followers. What does he say? What does he do?

We join Jesus and his disciples in the upper room where they are celebrating the Passover. (*The Story*, pages 303-304) This is the Jewish festival commemorating God's passing over the Israelites during the final plague in Egypt (see Exodus 12). Note that the blood of a sacrificed lamb is used to indicate those following God. How amazing that Jesus would be revealed to the world as the sacrificial lamb given to mark those following God.

During this Passover meal, also known as The Last Supper, Jesus institutes a time of remembrance for another purpose. (*The Story*, page 305) What is this time, now referred to as The Lord's Supper, all about? (See 1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

The Bible says during this meal, Jesus gets up from the table and begins to wash the feet of his disciples. This is the job of the lowest servant, yet no one has offered to do it. How are Jesus' actions consistent with his whole life (see Matthew 20:20-28)? Notice what Jesus says as he finishes this task. (See John 13:12-17) What are the implications of his words for your life? How will you "wash the feet" of others? What other examples did our teacher give that we should follow?

Perhaps the greatest example Jesus gives us happens when he dies. Read John 13:34-34. "Love one another" is certainly not a new command, but this is how Jesus refers to it. Why? What new aspect of love does Jesus want us to see? What is the example he calls us to follow? (See John 3:16)

From the upper room, Jesus and his followers travel to a place called Gethsemane. Here he prays asking God to spare him from what lies ahead. God's silence confirms what Jesus must do. (See Matthew John 12:23-28) Have you ever sensed silence from God? What did you do?

The next scenes of The Story are of the arrest, trial, suffering and crucifixion of Jesus. What images come to your mind? What thoughts? What feelings?

Take away:

Jesus takes the final moments he has with his followers to show them the way they should live. Knowing this is the way our teacher lived his life ought to cause us to live our lives in the same way.

Prayer:

Jesus, you taught us how to live. You showed us how to love. Now, help me to live the way you did. I pray in your name, Amen.

RESURRECTION

This session covers: Matthew 27-28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 19-21

Summary:

Jesus rose from the dead, spent time with his followers, and gave them instructions to tell the whole world.

Ice breaker: Would you rather be the teacher or the learner? Why?

Think about:

Chapter 27 is the climax of *The Story*. If Jesus had not risen from the dead, what would he be to us today? Indeed, if Jesus' death had been the end of the story, he would have become just one more of those who promised something he could not deliver. But he didn't just die. He arose. Instead of the end of the story, we receive the promise of new life. Jesus did not just conquer evil; he conquered death.

Read 1 John 5:11-13. It is because of Jesus' resurrection that we can believe everything he said before he died, and everything he has promised to us in the future. This one act is the testimony of who he is. This one act gives him the authority to be our Lord. So what do we do with that? How should we respond to the truth of Jesus' resurrection?

Read Matthew 28:18-19. (*The Story*, page 320) Jesus gives the disciples, and us, our marching orders. Where does Jesus get his authority to commission us? Who gave it to him? What does he tell us to do? Take the verse apart and list the actions we are to take (there are four verbs in this passage).

This final instruction from the risen Christ to his followers has been called The Great Commission. It was not just for Jesus' few disciples gathered around him before he ascended into heaven. It is also for us today. In the process of making disciples, believers move out into the world to demonstrate Christ's love. With the ministry comes the message that Jesus came to die for our sins. Consider yourself commissioned!

Go back to the Great Commission in Matthew chapter 28. Let's not neglect the last little bit of this famous passage, because when we talk about our authority to be in such a position, we have to recognize something very essential. Read the last sentence in the passage. Do we go out to fulfill this commission alone? Who goes with us?

Whether it is across the room, down the street, into the homeless shelter, the church nursery, the schools, the workplace or to the other side of the globe, Jesus has called us to care enough to share his message with others. And he has promised to go with us.

Take away:

Jesus is who he says he is, and he can do what he says he can do. Because of that, we can trust him to be with us always as we share his message.

Prayer:

Dear Jesus, the message of salvation is for everyone. We are so grateful that someone shared it with us. Help us to share this life-giving truth with others. Help us to be disciples that make disciples. And thank you that you are with us always. In your name, Amen.

Preparation for next session:

Ask group members to bring a picture of themselves as children next week.

NEW BEGINNINGS

This session covers: Acts 1-12

Summary:

The coming of the Holy Spirit made it possible for a small group of ordinary people to radically change the world.

Ice breaker:

Spread pictures of the group members as children on a table and have people guess who each one is. If group members did not bring photos, ask them to describe how much they've changed (physical appearance) since high school, noting hairstyle, weight, fashion, etc.

Think about:

Before ascending into heaven, Jesus gave his disciples "The Great Commission," the command that they should make disciples of all nations. (See Matthew 28:18-20). Can you imagine how impossible a task it must have seemed to a mere dozen men? Read the description of the disciples' demeanor in Luke 24:50-52. Why do you think rather than feeling overwhelmed, they felt overjoyed? In what ways does witnessing for Christ often seem overwhelming for Christ-followers today? How does Christ's promise to his disciples then hold true for us today?

In Acts 2:38-39, we learn the Holy Spirit resides in every believer. (*The Story*, page 325) Read the following verses and discuss the role of the Holy Spirit mentioned: John 14:26; John 16:7-11; Romans 8:26-27; Romans 15:13; Galatians 5:22-23 and Ephesians 3:16-20.

Compare the activities of the modern day church to those cited about the Acts 2 church as found in Acts 2:42-47. (*The Story*, page 326) How are we doing? Mention some adjectives to describe those first Christ-followers?

Read Acts 4:13. Does anyone remember what Peter and John were doing before they started following Christ? Fishermen! Today's Christ followers are teachers, stay-at-home mothers, bankers, cab drivers, farmers, journalists, business men, sales clerks, students, doctors, builders, craftsmen, construction workers - we could go on and on and on. They are ordinary men and women. Look at that verse in Acts again. At the very end you will see what made them different. What was it?

Take away:

Despite obstacles and opposition, the first church grew and flourished as every member received the power of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer:

Christ Jesus, we stand amazed at the courage, compassion and zeal of those who first came to know you as their Savior. Help us imitate them in every way as we continue their pursuit of expanding your kingdom. In your name, Amen.

PAUL'S MISSION

This session covers: Acts; Romans; 1 Corinthians; Galatians; 1 Thessalonians

Summary:

Even though Paul faced difficulties and obstacles on a regular basis, he continued faithfully teaching God's people how to live.

Ice breaker:

Ask group members to share stories about interesting far-away places they may have visited. Were there any hardships? Do you still have any connections in those places? What would it be like sharing your faith there?

Think about:

After his conversion, Paul spent his life traveling across Asia Minor preaching the good news about Jesus. He gathered those who responded and started churches all along the way. He raised up leaders for these gatherings and continued to be part of their lives through follow-up visits and letters. It's been estimated that Paul traveled over 14,000 miles in his lifetime. It's incredible considering the types of transportation available in his day.

Unfortunately, Paul was not welcomed everywhere he went. The message about Jesus brought two distinct reactions. While some responded with great joy, others responded with strong hatred. (*The Story*, pages 339, 341, 343) Consider the various hardships Paul endured during his missionary journeys. (See 2 Corinthians 11:23-27). What has it cost you to be faithful? What reactions have you had when you've shared your faith with others?

Regardless of the situation, Paul was on a mission. Part of this mission was taking the message of Christ to people who had never heard of Jesus. (Romans 15:20) Another part of this mission was returning to cities where the gospel message was received to strengthen and encourage the new believers. Look at the maps in the back of a study Bible to see the routes of Paul's journeys. Note the route Paul took, carefully retracing his steps to see how people were doing with their new faith.

Do you remember people along your faith journey who were committed to see how you were growing? How did they do it? How did you respond? Are there people you are investing in now, helping to guide their steps? We have the incredible privilege and tremendous responsibility of being part of the spiritual lives of those around us.

As author of nearly half of the letters of the New Testament, God used Paul to make an impact on our faith. Paul was a great teacher used by God to encourage, challenge, and instruct. Paul knew the role of teacher could not end with him. There would be others God would need to continue to teach the message of Christ (see 2 Timothy 2:2). How can you be one that will carry on this message?

Take away:

Even in the face of great difficulty and danger, Paul stayed on track with his mission of bringing the good news to the world. While we may not engage in ministry the way Paul did, we can make an impact on the lives of those God has put in our lives.

Prayer:

Father, help us to see how we can make an impact on those you have placed in our lives. Keep us strong in our faith as we journey with you so we can be used by you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

PAUL'S FINAL DAYS

This session covers: Acts 20-23, 27-28; Ephesians 1-6; 2 Timothy 1-4

Summary:

Paul faithfully follows God's plan to the end, writing words of encouragement and challenge all along the way.

Ice breaker:

If you could give a brief, one sentence word of encouragement to someone new in the faith, what would it be?

Think about:

Because of Paul's willingness to be used of God, most of the New Testament books are attributed to him. From his conversion until his death, Paul wrote of his own struggles and encouraged others to remain faithful in theirs.

Paul makes so many references to races, and prizes and games, to winning and to losing, one might think he was an athlete. But maybe he would make a better coach. Let's look at some of Paul's encouragement to believers. Whether we've been a follower of Christ for forty years or four days, Paul's words are a shot in the arm on our lowest days.

Read 1 Timothy 4:7-8. We know that salvation is a free gift, but in what area does Paul say we need to train ourselves? Read 1 Timothy 4:12. In which areas does this verse imply we need to train ourselves? Why do we need this training today? If we are to be examples, who is watching us? Much of Paul's encouragement is aimed at believers to become encouragers themselves. We are not just to live this life for the joy that Christ brings. We are to equip others to do the same.

Here is a summary of what we've seen so far. We can say that Paul encourages us to train ourselves in the areas of speech, life, love, faith, and purity so that we can be an example to others. We are to be careful of what we think and what we do because others are watching. Now, here are some words from Paul which equip us to do all of this.

Read 2 Timothy 1:7. To be a good example, what kind of help do we get? Where do we get this help? Read 2 Timothy 2:15. For Timothy, what do you think the word of truth was? For us, what is the word of truth? Read Timothy 3:16. For training ourselves, for coaching others, for learning and for teaching, what is our tool? Read 2 Timothy 4:7-8. Paul's race is coming to an end. Does he sound like he has any regrets? What is his final encouragement to us?

Finally, read Philippians 1:21. This is Paul's philosophy summed up in one verse. Do you think it is a good one?

Take away:

In this race of life we can be encouraged and give encouragement every step of the way. The prize at the end of our race will be worth all we have gone through for Him.

Prayer:

Father God, Paul was such a man of faith. We can count on his encouragement to build our own faith and equip us to help others build theirs. Help us to live with your presence pervading our every move here, and give us the promise of a well-earned reward when we see you in heaven. In Jesus' name, Amen.

THE END OF TIME

This session covers: Revelation 1-5, 19-22

Summary: Jesus reveals himself to John and shows what awaits those who trust in Christ.

Ice breaker:

What type of movies do you most enjoy - romance, action, adventure, etc.? What's your favorite movie of all time? If you read movie reviews, do you avoid the spoilers that tell the story? How do you react when someone tells you about the end before you've even seen the movie?

Think about:

The book of the Revelation is at the end of *The Story*. John gets an incredible glimpse into the future (see Revelation 1:1-3, 4:1). Sure, John's revelation contains incredible images of future events and he learns much about what is to come. But more than anything, there is Jesus.

Read Revelation 1:9-18. (*The Story*, page 380) Try to put into your own words what John saw and experienced. Keep in mind that John described himself as "the disciple Jesus loved" (see John 13:23, 19:26). John was simply overwhelmed by being in the presence of Jesus.

Read Hebrews 1:1-3. Do you have a full enough sense of who Jesus is? Are you content meeting with Jesus without an agenda? Do you come into his presence only to spend time with him and not to have him answer all your requests? How long could you sit still before him and just be amazed?

We should get a head start on being amazed with Jesus. After all, it is what we will be doing for all of eternity. Read Revelation 4. (*The Story*, pages 382-383) Try to picture this scene in your mind. How can we live lives of praise 24/7? Consider what Paul wrote in Romans 12:1-2. What would it look like if your life was a living sacrifice?

Even as we refocus our lives to revolve around him, we see that everything on earth is limited (see Romans 8:18-25). There has to be more than this! There has to be more than the heartaches and frustrations of this world; more than the sorrow and pain all around.

The good news is there is more! From the beginning of *The Story*, God has had a place prepared for those willing to follow him. God has pursued you for an intimate, personal relationship designed to last forever!

Read John 14:1-6. Do you think much about the end? How do Jesus' words make a difference to you day-by-day? How would having heaven on our minds make a difference as we go about our daily lives? Jesus' words of hope and comfort are for those for whom he has prepared a place. According to verse 6 of this passage, who are those who have a place waiting for them? Do you have a place waiting for you? This is available to all who will believe Jesus (Romans 10:9-13), but only for those who believe in Jesus. As you look to the end, be certain that you know where you are heading (1 John 5:11-12).

Take away: Jesus! He will be the focus of our forever. He should be the focus of our today.

Prayer:

Father, thank you for our journey though The Story. Thank you for words of hope and encouragement. Thank you for showing us how to live. Thank you for making it possible for us to know you. I pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Thank you for journeying through *The Story* with us. It has been our great joy to have guided your steps during these days together. It is our hope that you will continue to spend time with God in his Word each and every day.

During our time together you have discovered the Bible is a book you can understand, learn from and even love. You now have a sense of the big picture and have seen all of God's Word is really telling one story – *The Story*. We also hope you have come to find out more about your story in the pages of the Bible.

The heart and soul behind all of this is a bedrock belief that God has revealed himself to us through his son and his Word. We firmly believe that your life will be changed as you meet with God in the pages of the Bible.