

THE
STORY

READ THE BIBLE
AS ONE SEAMLESS STORY
FROM BEGINNING
TO END





The Story

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. 390-400.]

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

THE STORY

Personal Devotion Questions

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. 3). 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 feelings 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 that could hold you accountable for these things?



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?

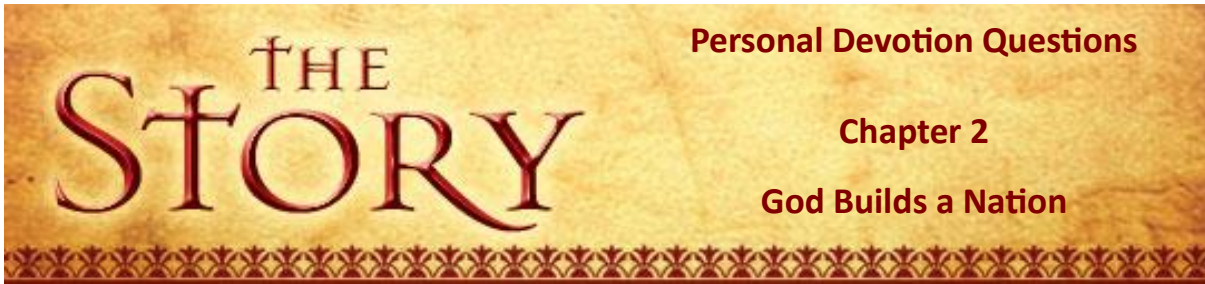
1. Chapter 1 shows that everything began with God creating and ordering. How is this different than other explanations you have heard of how the world began? How might knowing that life has purpose and direction affect your daily decisions?
2. What do think it means to be made in the image of God (page 2)?
3. 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? (page 3) 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." (page 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



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 One

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. (pages 13-15) 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 Two

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." 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 (p. 18) that they were estranged for more than twenty years. 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 Three

1. In the midst of a deep, personal crisis in Jacob's life, we read about a curious struggle in the wilderness (p. 19-20). 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?



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?

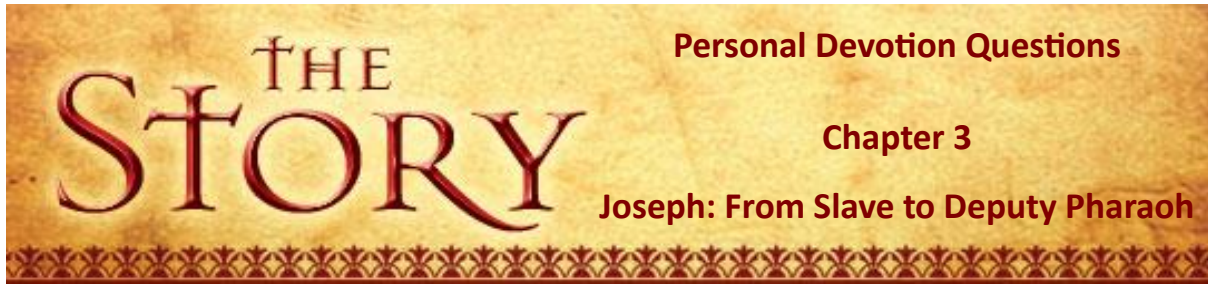
4. Chapter 2 of God's story opens with God calling Abram to make the sacrifice of leaving a comfortable life: homeland, friends, family and steady income. Describe an experience when God has called you to do something similar. What was required of you to obey His instructions? What were the results?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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?

11. Jacob said to Esau, “For to see your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have received me favorably.” (p. 20) 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



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 One

1. Compare the sin of Adam and Eve with the sin of Joseph's brothers. 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. 24-25) How might your boss describe your character? What is a trait Joseph had that you can improve on this week?

Day Two

1. How was Joseph able to resist the sexual temptations of Potiphar's wife? (p. 25). 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 Three

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?

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?



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, "What you intended for evil, God intended for good to accomplish what is now being done." (p. 34) 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.24-25)? 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. 33-34). 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

THE STORY

Personal Devotion Questions

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 One

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 Two

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 Three

1. Israel celebrated Passover annually, and we celebrate communion weekly to remind ourselves corporately of God’s deliverance. What personal triggers 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?



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 39 (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. 42) 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



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 One

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. 48). 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 Two

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. 53). Who in your life needs you to intercede for them? Make a list in your journal, and offer a prayer for them now.

Day Three

1. Could you be described like God: compassionate, slow to anger, gracious, abounding in lovingkindness? 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. 54). 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. 55). What evidence of your relationship with the LORD would others say they see in you?

THE STORY

Small Group Study Guide

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. 47) 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.54) 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 anyway 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?

3. What do the Ten Commandments reveal about the nature of God and His desire to have a relationship with us? (p. 49)?
4. What does it mean that God is holy? What are the implications of God's holiness as we seek Him?
5. 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. 48). How does the fear of God restrain sin?
6. The Lord spoke to Moses "as one would speak to a friend." (p. 53) 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.
7. God describes Himself as jealous. What does this tell us about God? Why is it okay for God to be jealous?
8. 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?
9. God reminded Moses that children live with the consequences of their parents' sins (p. 54). How have your parents' choices (good and bad) affected your life? How are your choices possibly affecting your children? What needs to change?
10. 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.)

11. 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?

12. God describes Himself as compassionate, slow to anger, gracious and abounding in loving-kindness (p. 54). 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



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 One

1. Israel's complaining is a reminder of how easy it is to become ungrateful. List five things you are grateful for. 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 Two

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 Three

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?

THE STORY

Small Group Study Guide

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. 56-58). 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. 61). 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. 59) 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. 68-71). 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



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. 78-80). 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." 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?



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. 73) 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 you will serve.*" Joshua stated he and his "*household [would] serve the LORD.*" (p. 83) Which 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?

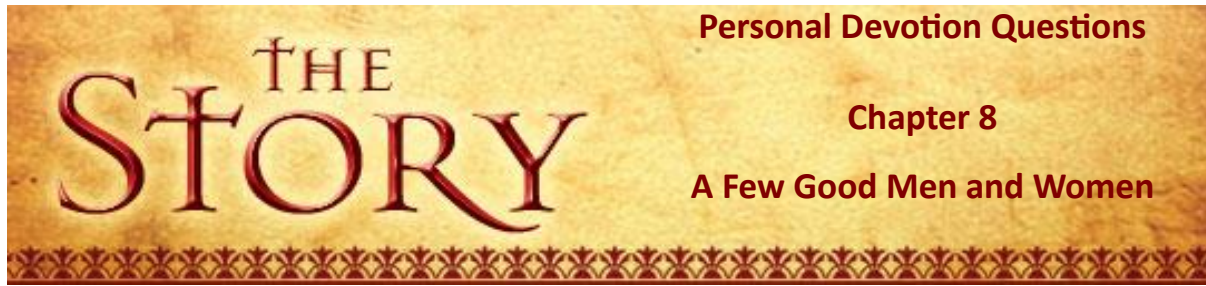
1. In the original languages both "Joshua" and "Jesus" mean "Jehovah saves." How is Joshua's relationship to Israel similar to Jesus' relationship to the Church?
2. What basis did Joshua have for being "strong and courageous" (p. 73)? Which assurances that God gives Joshua most strengthen and encourage 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.74). 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. 74) 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. 11) 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. 69, especially the last paragraph.)
8. Some people doubt the Bible because of miracles like Joshua's "long day." (p. 79) 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.83) 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



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. 89). 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?



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:

- Israel turned again and again to the worship of pagan gods.
- God brought divine judgment.
- Israel cried out for God's help.
- 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



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. 101). 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?



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. 100) 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' love for Ruth is a mirror image of the heart of God. Boaz steps in as a willing kinsmen 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' 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 (Deut. 25:5-10, Lev. 25:25, Lev. 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. 101, 102)

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



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?



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

THE STORY

Personal Devotion Questions

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 One

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 Two

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. 123-134). 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. 117). What words or acts of encouragement can you offer today to others (from family to strangers) based on God's view of them?

Day Three

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. 129-130). Praise God using your own words by writing a short Psalm.



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. 124) 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. 129). 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. 116), 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. 121). 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. 123-124)? 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.126-128) (For further insight, see Ex. 25:14 and Num. 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. 129) What specific covenant promises did God make with David? How is this covenant with David later fulfilled in Christ? (Lu. 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

THE STORY

Personal Devotion Questions

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 One

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.133 and p. 115-16.) What does David seem to understand that Saul does not?

Day Two

1. Psalm 32 (p.135) 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. 134). What does this say about the nature of worship? About David's ability to release the past?

Day Three

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?



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.129) pointed across a millennium to a sinless King of Kings; no end of righteousness, no end of peace, and the redemption of all things.

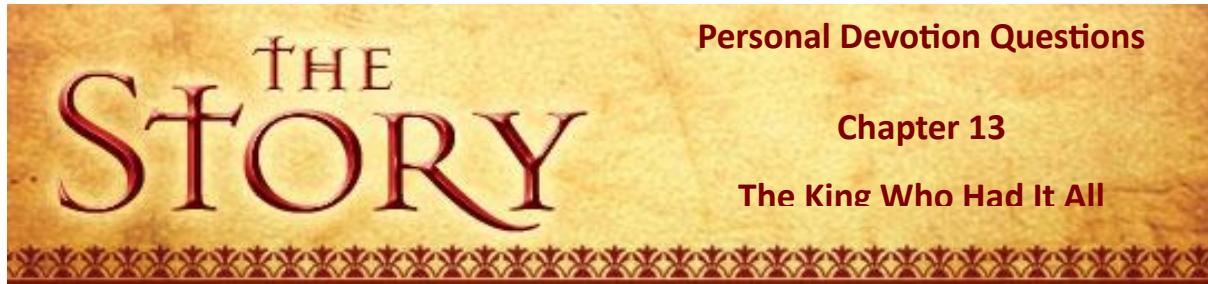
Icebreaker Question: Share a time when you made a wrong turn on a road trip and the results created a real hardship.

1. What were the steps in David's sin and cover-up? Compare David's steps leading to sin with Eve's (p. 4). 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. 135) 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 to his reaction when his son Absalom had died. 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. 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



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 One

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 Two

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 Three

1. The Queen of Sheba travelled 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?

THE STORY

Small Group Study Guide

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 forgive their sin and heal their*

land. (p. 154) 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's one of the smartest things you have 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, 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 146-150. 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 firsthand?
5. Compare God's promises to Solomon with His promises to David (p. 129). Which promise(s) had God faithfully fulfilled? What would Solomon and his descendants need to do to keep a successor on the throne (p. 144, 154)? How could Israel avoid captivity (p. 154-155)?

6. Solomon accumulated unprecedented riches. Look up Deut. 17:15-17 and Deut. 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

THE STORY

Personal Devotion Questions

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 One

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 Two

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. 162). How do you receive correction?
3. The anger of the LORD is mentioned four times in this chapter (p. 163 and 166). 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. 49)?

Day Three

1. Review the summary statements made about Kings Asa and Ahab (p. 165 and 166). 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.

THE STORY

Small Group Study Guide

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 way 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. 160) and so did Jeroboam (p. 161). 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. 162)? 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. 77 of *The Story* or Josh. 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



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 One

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 Two

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 Cor. 5:21 and Gal. 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 un-dramatic way. Why would God choose to dwell in the whisper?

Day Three

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?

THE STORY

Small Group Study Guide

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 sunk 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 Deut. 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. 170). 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. 174-175). 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

THE STORY

Personal Devotion Questions

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 One

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 Heb. 12:4-11. According to Hebrews, what should be the outcome of God's discipline? Has this been your reaction?

Day Two

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. 188) Which ones are most reassuring to you?

Day Three

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. 188-189) might bring you comfort in those times that you feel forsaken or forgotten by God?

