

What's the Story?



A Teaching Series on God's
Storylines in the Bible

REACH CHURCH

WHAT'S THE STORY

A Teaching Series on God's Storylines in the Bible

by Reach Church

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

WEEK 1

From the First Breath (Adam) 07

WEEK 2

Rest While I Rock the Boat (Noah) 23

WEEK 3

Little Rock. Big Heart. (David) 39

WEEK 4

Liar Liar, Your Family Tree is on Fire (Jacob) 55

WEEK 5

How Many Coats Does It Take (Joseph) 69

WEEK 6

Formed in the Desert (Abraham) 85

WEEK 7

A Weakling in a Winepress (Gideon) 101

Bibliography 117



From the First Breath

WEEK 1

INTRODUCTION

HOW PERFECTION MADE ROOM FOR IMPERFECT PEOPLE

For a few glorious years in my early twenties, I lived in the Dominican Republic and taught fourth grade to a crowd of exuberant, joyful nine-year olds. I loved it—all of it. I felt like I was living the exact life I should be, like God had tailor-made the story for me. It was beautiful. It was challenging. It was fruitful. I thrived.

And then, God asked me to leave, to move home to the US. It's hard to explain. It didn't make sense in my mind and certainly didn't line up with the desires and feelings of my heart. Nonetheless, somewhere in my gut, I felt strong conviction that God was leading me back home.

Truth be told, I'd had a plan for a long time—I had moved to a tiny, tropical mountain town that I loved. I planned to stay and enjoy it and work my little heart out for years and years to come, for the good and glory of God's Kingdom. God's direction to leave and go home to the US just didn't fit into *my* plan. I loved my story, the people I lived and worked with, my little neighborhood, the adventure ushered in every single day. What's more, I felt so called to the work, work that I knew was precious to God's heart. I couldn't imagine that God could possibly mean what he was speaking to my spirit—to leave a thriving community, and calling, and go to a place where I couldn't see either.

Why would God ask me to leave a life and story that felt so tailor made—so perfect for me?

I couldn't make sense of it and I didn't want it. So I resisted Him and refused to accept what He spoke to me. I talked at God, instead of *to* God, much less listening to him. I got mired up in my own thinking. I told God that what he was asking me made absolutely no sense. I was noisy and insistent (I tend to be, when I think I'm right) instead of attentive and receptive to his promises of what obedience would bring.

For a handful of miserable months, I argued and argued with my Creator. I begged. I cried. I thought if I could just see *why*, then I would obey. I just didn't want to do what God was pointing me to.

Eventually, I caved and obeyed. Choosing to leave my Dominican home was an act of surrendering my own right to write my own story, and let God write it instead. And right after that moment of surrender, it became painfully clear why God was calling me home and what he was calling me to.

God suddenly gave me a job that felt like a miracle. I had fought him, ignored him, told him he was wrong for months. I had been a royal pain. And yet, as soon as I stopped fighting him, he showed me the provision and calling he had been holding out to me for all of those confusing, agonizing months. In my most stubborn, most resistant, and therefore most painful season, God showed me grace. He gave me a job to do. He planted me in the middle of a new story, with provision and purpose.

When I read the story of Adam in the Bible, I can't help but think, "why oh why didn't he just *listen* to God? How could he have doubted?" But I am just like Adam—he wanted to do his own thing, like I want to do my own thing. Adam and I, we both try to grab the pen out of his mighty hand to scribble our own lines into the story. Trusting God can be fruit-sized or it can be international-move sized, but if it's trusting *God* that we're talking about, does it matter if we're talking fruit or countries? Adam's storyline is one of a trustworthy God who remains faithful in the face of a waffling distrust and defiance.

Character: Adam | **Plot:** Fall | **Action:** Multiply

STORY RANGE: Genesis 1:36-3:24

NT: Romans 5:14, 1 Corinthians 15:45

Adam had a good thing going. He was one of the first and only human beings to be cast in a storyline that was untouched by sin. However, when sin tried to steal the storyline, God revealed his first rule of biblical storytelling: *always create life where only death should be*.

STORY THEME: Adam's story reveals God as a Master Storyteller—he creates a Story and writes each of us into it, giving us a place and a purpose in it, and promises to live the story along with us, every step of the way, as we find our way home to glory.

CHARACTER SKETCH: Adam is the first human God created. He is formed out of the dust and becomes a living creature when God breathes his own breath into his lungs.

CHARACTER FLAW: Adam trusts his own judgment over God's love—he chooses to write his own story, instead of trusting God as his Master Storyteller.

FAMOUS WORDS: I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid. Genesis 3:10

FAMOUS ACTIONS: Adam disobeyed God when he took a bite of the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. His disobedience introduced sin and brokenness into God's story.

CUTTING ROOM FLOOR: Adam shows us who we were meant to be, and he also serves as a kind of opposite to Christ. He is the first man; Jesus is the True Man.

Meet this chapter's author,
AMANDA ALBRIGHT



Through Adam's act of defiance—that famous bite of rebellion—human sin and brokenness entered the world. Adam's disobedience introduced sin and brokenness into the story God wanted to write for humankind. But this is my favorite part of the story—in Genesis 3:8-9, God went looking for Adam.

In the darkest moment, on the heels of their rebellion, God went looking for his kids. He entered into their brokenness. He made them clothes and food—provision. He promised he would send victory over the enemy. Just like God met Adam with provision and promise, God meets all of us with provision and promise. Even in our darkest moments and our fiercest rebellion, God meets us with plans for new, abundant life.

Because this is how God writes stories: He creates life where only death should be.

BREAKING DOWN THE BIBLE

In these first two chapters of Genesis (Genesis 1:26-2:25), God makes people and immediately charges them with calling and purpose. On day six of his wild spree of creation, God made man. Genesis 2:7 says “Then the Lord God formed the man out of the dust from the ground and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, and the man became a living being.” God declares man as his image-bearer and creates human life with his own breath. There is intimacy here, a nearness that we see only in God's creation of his image-bearers.

In Genesis 1:28, Adam is created and immediately given a role to play in God's story. After creation, Adam is instantly bestowed authority and power to live and act meaningfully in God's story. God extravagantly displays his power and creativity, creating and speaking the universe into being, but chooses to share his power with Adam, this new Image Bearer. He invites Adam to *join* him in his work and storytelling.

In verses 1:18-22, God and Adam go on a quest together—a quest for a helper. God says Adam needs “a helper corresponding to him,” so God brings all the animals he has made to Adam. It says God brought each of the animals to Adam, “to see what he would call it.” This is another picture

of intimacy, of nearness, of a choice to be with his created image. God could have orchestrated this work from afar.

He could have sent Adam alone on the quest for a partner, giving him instructions to follow. He could have just made Adam's partner right away. He's God, after all. He knew who Adam *wasn't* going to find his helper until she was made. But instead, God works alongside Adam, watching him, working with him. Together, they enact the story of finding a partner for Adam.

When Eve enters the scene, they are both invited to live and create and enjoy the story God is writing for them. In Genesis 3:1-7, Adam and Eve decide to start their own journey—their own quest. In Genesis 3:6-7, Adam steps across the line God had drawn for him. His act of defiance shows a lack of trust and a desire to be in charge. Instead of living within the story God was writing for him, Adam attempts to start writing the story for himself.

We know the consequences. We live with them every day. We carry the brokenness, the trauma, the separation, and the death that Adam's choice introduced into our lives. Nonetheless, God is still the Storyteller.

THE MASTER STORYTELLER

Through Adam's story, what do we learn about God and the stories he writes?

God creates with purpose. We see in the story of Adam that God is the originator of life. With the words of his mouth, he speaks life into being. He intentionally and masterfully creates. He is not a haphazard storyteller. He is deliberate, powerful, and eternally committed to breathing stories of life into existence.

God delights in being *with* his creation. We see God working alongside Adam to name the animals. We see him walking with Adam and Eve in the cool of the garden. We see him choosing to be with his children, inviting them into the story he's writing. God delights in co-creating purposeful work with us and for us. He knows we can only be fully alive in his story when we're living out an intimate relationship with him. Surrendering to God as the Master Storyteller does

not mean passive observance; God invites us into active participation. And our participation and co-authoring the story leads to greater depth of relationship, trust, and intimacy. God is not a removed, distant storyteller. He writes with nearness. He chooses to be *with* his beloved.

God knows our needs and provides for them abundantly, without restriction. God's story begins with abundance and provision. God shows off what he can do—his world is intricate and complex, and teeming with possibility. Everything Adam and Eve needed was found in the garden before they chose the apple and rebelled against God. And after their rebellion, God meets them and clothes them and feeds them. He provides because *he* is faithful, whether we are choosing rebellion or relationship.

Even when death came to try to derail God's best, God gave his fallen creation a powerful promise in the curse of the serpent, "I will put hostility between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring. He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel." In the middle of cursing sin, God promises that one day the Son of Man will come and strike the head of the snake. One day, the serpent will be totally overcome.

God has a rescue plan!

Even when death came to try to derail the new thing God was doing, his intentions and desires for life were clear: God created his story to empower new beginnings. In the darkest moments of all of our lives, God still creates life where only death should be.

Notes:

WE ARE MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

Read Genesis 1:26-27. Consider the 25 verses that come before this small passage: what do those verses show us about who God is? What do those 25 verses suggest about what it means to be “made in the image of God”?

WE ARE MADE TO INTERACT WITH GOD


How does the curse found in Genesis 3:17-19 interact with the idea of being made in the image of God?

WE ARE MADE FOR RECONCILIATION WITH GOD

Read Genesis 2:19-20 and Genesis 3:8-10. What’s different about the way God and Adam interact in these two passages? What’s the same?



**“God is the
originator of life.”**



With the words of his mouth, he speaks life into being. He intentionally and masterfully creates. He is not a haphazard storyteller. He is deliberate, powerful, and ultimately, is eternally committed to breathing stories of life into existence.

How does the biblical narrative describe Adam? What makes him a unique character? What makes him a realistic character?

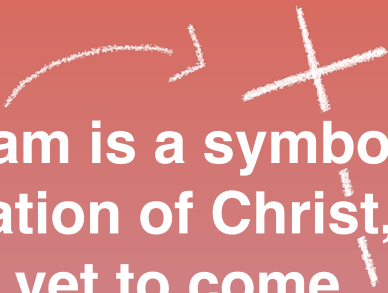
1

In what ways do you see similarities between your story and Adam's story?

2

From this story, what stands out to you about who God is?

3



**Now Adam is a symbol, a
representation of Christ, who
was yet to come.**

Romans 5:14b NLT

1

How are you tempted to take over the storyline God has begun?

2

What is your greatest temptation/struggle when it comes to trusting God with your storyline?

3

What would you change about how your life has been written so far?

PRACTICE THE STORY

Pray together about your temptations and struggles with trusting God as the Master Storyteller. This week make one distinctive choice that goes against what your flesh desires, choosing what God desires instead. Journal about what happens after you made that choice. What events followed?



Rest While I Rock The Boat

WEEK 2

INTRODUCTION

HOW TO BUILD A BELIEVABLE STORY IN UNBELIEVABLE TIMES

Noah was a man who chose to move in a direction with God that was contrary to the world. He found rest at a time in history when the community and world around him was restless. The account of Noah may be more commonly known as a man who built an ark, who housed animals two of every kind, male and female. Noah was known as the man who survived the great flood (Genesis 6:5-9:28) and saw a rainbow at the end of the storm.

But that's just the surface of the story.

There is a greater narrative that takes us much deeper. Noah's unexpected journey reveals the plan that God has for each one of us—that when trouble floods our world and when our lives get a bit rocky, God protects us from drowning. God will be faithful to us when we are in need of rescue and peace. He is the giver of grace and fulfiller of promises. We can build a better life in Christ and be a significant part of God's redemptive story.

Jesus said we are living in the days of Noah (Matthew 24:37-38, Luke 17:26) Our culture is defined by unprecedented times. The global pandemic has many people anxiously indoors coping to find lasting solutions in stressful environments. There is civil and urban unrest that is interrupted by

the agendas of violent rioters. When the world you live in gets chaotic, where do you find rest for your soul?

At the heart of this story a beautiful truth is revealed, loving God more than anything in the world will move you in the right direction.

In the early chapters of Genesis, God establishes a covenant with Noah, and tells him to build an ark that will save him and his family from the global flood. Sin was everywhere and God was hurt that his creation made a choice to go the other way. The world was corrupt, people were suffering, chaos and violence was the norm (Genesis 6:11).

Noah went against popular opinion, and obeyed God which allowed him to find favor in the eyes of the Lord (Genesis 6:22, 8:15-19). Evil dominated the hearts of the human race. Sin had separated people from God's presence and God saw that people were willing to do anything to get ahead. The choice to sin and ignore God, would cost them everything. This would only lead them in the wrong direction as they would move further away from God's provision.

Devastation is inevitable when we choose to edit and delete God out of our story.

UNDER CONSTRUCTION

Noah was a blameless man who had character and integrity. He honored the truth and walked close to God (Genesis 6:9). He and his three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth, were busy constructing and preparing a shelter because of God's judgement over sin.

For the next *100 years* they followed through on detailed instructions, making this ark of gopher wood (450' length x 45' height x 75'width), having one window, and one door.

This boat was a rectangular box with no sail, or rudder, but somehow Noah would trust that if he did his part on the journey then God could certainly keep his family of eight and a variety of livestock afloat. He was aware that God had a plan that would change the world and he wanted

Character: Noah | **Plot:** Flood | **Action:** Build

STORY RANGE: Genesis 6:5-9:28

NT: 1 Peter 3:20-22

Noah's name means 'rest', which is an ironic name for a character whose plotline is built on devastating destruction. While Noah's storyline is entrenched in God's judgment on the entire world, it also points us to Jesus who came to take the judgement of the entire world on himself. Noah is a man who chose to move in a direction with God that was contrary to the world. He finds rest at a time in history when the community and world around him is restless. Jesus said we are living in the days of Noah (Matthew 24:37-38, Luke 17:2), so we can find rest when God rocks the boat.

STORY THEME: God's ability to save us from destruction.

CHARACTER SKETCH: Noah was obedient (Gen. 6:22, Gen. 8:15-19) and righteous, and blameless. He was a man who walked faithfully with God (Gen. 6:9), but he was also subject to human frailty. Despite his shortcomings, he was someone who God used to give rest to his people during the largest natural disaster the world had seen.

CHARACTER FLAW: Noah becomes drunk in his tent and curses one of his sons and descendants. (Gen. 9:18-27)

FAMOUS WORDS: *"Where's Home Depot?"* (Just kidding.) "You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you." (Gen 6:19)

FAMOUS ACTIONS: Noah obeys God by building an ark, bringing the animals two of each, male and female, and shutting the door to save them from the coming flood. God sent a promise with the sign of a rainbow.

CUTTING ROOM FLOOR: Later in life after the flood, Noah became drunk and lay naked in the tent. When his son Ham saw his nakedness, Noah was shamed and responded by cursing him and his descendants. (Gen 9:18-27)¹

WRAP UP: The narrative shows us how God wants to redeem mankind from the devastation of sin. Through a life of faith and obedience, Noah is able to weather the storm and keep his family and future secure. In Christ we can choose to submit to his redemptive story, one that is able to deliver us from eternal destruction and promises an eternal hope.

Meet this chapter's author,
EILEEN HUNTER



to move in the same direction God was moving.

LOSING MY WAY

There was a time when I felt rudderless, directionless in my own way.

I had returned home to Boston and wanted to spend a couple of hours exploring a city that meant so much to me. Boston is as full of historical architecture as it is unannounced one way streets and edgy northeast drivers that will make you want to “park your car”.

That day, I felt like a stranger in a town I used to know well. My mother and I took some unfamiliar roads and my GPS kept re-calibrating. My mom lowered the volume on the device and proceeded to direct me along the path. It seemed to her that there was a better way to get to our destination than the GPS was giving.

At one point, I remember my mom saying, “Please listen to me!” There was a choice before me. I could continue to look at the GPS or I could *listen to wisdom*. I was behind the wheel, but my mom had traveled on these roads before and she also knew me. Looking back, I realized she was definitely the one doing the navigating that day—not me and not even the map. Nevertheless all the tension subsided as we arrived safely at our destination.

I wonder if there is a commonality between this story and Noah’s? Noah could have listened to the “experts” in his town giving him wrong directions or he could have chosen to worry about how a rudderless boat would be directed safely to an unknown destination. Instead, he listened to wisdom. He trusted the voice of God to tell the story.

NOAH RESTED IN GOD’S INSTRUCTIONS

God has big plans for us, but it takes small steps of faith if we hope to embark on what’s never been done before. It takes faith to build a boat when there’s never been a drop of rain. It takes faith to believe God will gather all the animals and navigate you safely in a storm. We must do what is possible and trust God for the impossible. Faith allowed Noah to take a step in God’s direction and

experience the hope that he and his family would be saved.

By faith, Noah built a ship in the middle of dry land. He was warned about something he couldn't see, and acted on what he was told. The result? His family was saved. His act of faith drew a sharp line between the evil of the unbelieving world and the rightness of the believing world. As a result, Noah became intimate with God. (*Hebrews 11:7, The Message*)

The rain fell for forty days and nights as he lived in close quarters with his relatives. Noah spent a little over a year hearing unwanted opinions, managing and caring for smelly animals, but somehow chose to believe that the boat was a place of refuge in the storm. Faith writes God into our script and helps us to see that Jesus is the hero in each of our stories.

At some point, the storm hits everyone—those inside and outside of the boat, but your final destination is contingent on whether or not God gets to be the author and the finisher of your story (*Hebrews 12:2*).

I was serving and living for Christ for over ten years when my struggle turned into a catastrophic storm. My boat was rocked when my late husband was diagnosed with colon cancer. We all face hardship, but encountering a storm without Christ can destroy you. Christ redeemed my story as he allowed me to receive comfort and peace through a loving Christian community. His presence healed me from the grief and I was able to give comfort and strength to others, including my little children.

Several years after my perfect storm, I married my now husband, Larry. He too was a widow and understood that we needed to continue to trust God to direct our steps and our lives. It is a blessed new day as I moved forward with my blended family into a new season.

This is how God carries us through things that feel like they are going to destroy us.

If your faith is in him, Jesus has rescued your soul and will redeem the painful parts of your story. As we can see, Noah's life of obedience did not exempt him from a conflict free life, but it did

protect him from a devastated life. Jesus wants to rescue your soul and redeem the painful parts of your story.

We each have a choice to follow Christ no matter how hard it gets. He wants to save you and also give you an opportunity to have a brand new life in Him (2 Corinthians 5:17). Jesus always had the same plan no matter the route: to redeem us and rebuild something new.

Who's writing your narrative? Don't settle for an autobiography when God wants to perfect your journey and rebuild your life. He has a great story to write about you, one that includes faith, conflict, redemption, and hope.

Notes:

SMALL STEPS FOR BIG CALLINGS

Read the entire account of Noah -Genesis 6:5-9:28. How does Noah not get overwhelmed in fulfilling what God asks him to do? Read Romans 10:17. Hint: Take note of the small steps it took to follow through with the task given him.

BIG WAVES FOR BIGGER TRUST

Conflict is a part of the storyline: but unlike the world, how does Noah and his family weather the storm? (Genesis 7:7-9, Genesis 7:17 -24). Also, read Mark 4:35-41.

LONG WAIT, FULFILLED PURPOSE

When everything in the world is going bad, how does Noah embrace God's purpose? (Genesis 8:8-17). Also read Romans 8:26-39.

**“God has big
plans for us, but
it takes small
steps of faith.*”**



It takes faith to build a boat when there's never been a drop of rain. It takes faith to believe God will gather all the animals and navigate you safely in a storm. We must do what is possible and trust God for the impossible.

How does the biblical narrative describe Noah? What makes him a unique character? In what ways do you see similarities in Noah's story and your own?

1

Are you experiencing struggles because you have tried to make life decisions without consulting God?

2

Why do you think God chose Noah to build the boat and save God's people from utter destruction?

3

What small steps of faith are you currently taking to move in the right direction? In what ways have you already seen God redeeming your story?

4



But God remembered Noah...

Genesis 8:1a NIV



1

Do you ever try to avoid the work of building the boat God has called us to because the scope seems too absurd or audacious to receive it as God's storyline for you?

2

When the storms of life hit, what do you need to remind yourself about God's love and purpose?

3

What was God's promise to Noah? How has God been faithful to you?

PRACTICE THE STORY

Discuss some ways that God has encouraged you during a devastating time. This week, journal some ways that you can embrace a long suffering and hard working season and remain faithful to God's storytelling in the process.



Little Rock. Big Heart.

WEEK 3

INTRODUCTION

WHY GOD PICKS THE UNEXPECTED AND OVERLOOKED

I don't know about you, but I desperately need the reminder that God uses *all* of our seasons. Especially the ones that feel like they've been tossed into life's dusty corner.

Perhaps you look around and feel the sting of disappointment from cancelled plans and paused dreams. It's difficult trying to make something meaningful from this forced halt that is life right now. As humans, we deeply connect our identity and worth to what we're doing, accomplishing, or the title we possess. Many of us know about King David in the Bible: his rise to glory, epic battles, and undeniable legacy. But what about shepherd boy David? His shepherd season was one of the most important in his life, and also the least visible.

David was the young, scrawny, little brother who was passed over time and time again. It's hard to believe that the quiet and unseen years of David's life are what laid the foundation for his humility, grit, and obedience, but those things were what carried him the rest of his days. David's unseen preparation season set him up to be one of the most important characters in God's storyline.

However, when David first appears in the text one thing is certain: *he doesn't look like a king*. In fact, he is completely unthought of when the time comes for Samuel to anoint the next king of

Israel.

Why is that? Why wasn't David recognizable as the next king right off the bat? Why does God often hide or disguise those whom he calls to have great impact in the world? What does obscurity and authority have to do with one another in the kingdom of God?

Furthermore, what if David's most important years weren't the ones he spent on the throne? What if his most important years were those he spent in the field? David not only learned to shepherd his flock and worship his God during those years, he also developed a dependency that would ultimately carry David all of his life.

Let's break down the scriptures and pull out some possibilities for the way that God prepares his characters for epic storylines. Maybe there is some truth to the "longer the hidden season, the more glorious the visible season."

BREAKING DOWN THE BIBLE

We can gather from scripture that David was anointed and called by God, but in order to be prepped for the palace he was sent to the fields first. King David needed to develop a shepherd's heart. If he had gone straight to the palace he wouldn't have ruled the way God needed him to.

David's time of preparation in the field affirms that it doesn't matter where you come from or how long it takes to get to where God is leading, He is faithful to prepare us for the work He has for us to do. And, oddly enough, God's preparation seasons may be the most beautiful and fruitful part of the call there is on your life.

It wasn't just the waiting or working in the fields that developed David's character; it was also how he spent his time in that season. We aren't told if David had a desire to be a shepherd. We don't know if he preferred to be in the field with the sheep or secretly resented it, but we do know he wasn't making daisy crowns in the fields while he waited for God to crown him. Instead, he was working on his craft of music and fighting off lions who came to attack his flock—with *his bare*

Character: David | **Plot:** Anointed | **Action:** Victorious

STORY RANGE: 1 Samuel 16:10-24, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings 1:-2:12, Isaiah 9:7

NT: Matthew 1:1-17, Mark 12:35-37

David didn't look like a king. In fact, he was completely overlooked when the time came for Samuel to anoint the new king of Israel. He was nothing but a shepherd boy who could play a mean fiddle (ahem, lyre). David was anointed and called by God, but he wasn't making daisy crowns in the fields while he waited for God to crown him. Instead, he was working on his craft of music and fighting off lions who came to attack his flock. King David teaches us that it doesn't matter where you come from or how long it takes, God is faithful to prepare us for the work he has for us to do.

STORY THEME: "David wasn't a perfect leader or a perfect man, but his years alone with God, humbled and crumbled in the dark, developed the soul of a legendary philosopher-king, and forged a legacy that endures to this day."¹

CHARACTER SKETCH: "David (c. 1035 - 970 BCE) was the second king in the ancient United Kingdom of Israel who helped establish the eternal throne of God. A former shepherd, David was renowned for his passion for God, his touching psalms and musical abilities, his inspiring courage and expertise in warfare..."²

CHARACTER FLAW: King David seems to deal with sexual sins in various points of his life, causing further dishonesty, cover up, and tragedy.³

FAMOUS WORDS: David's key to success was his humility in acknowledging that if God did not ordain his steps, his efforts would be in vain; "David inquired of God, 'Shall I go up against the Philistines? Will you give them into my hand?'" And the Lord said to him, "Go up, and I will give them into your hand" (1 Chronicles 14:10).

FAMOUS ACTIONS: David's most famous acts were mainly rooted in a specific posture he had towards himself and people in regards to sin and forgiveness. "In particular, David was a great man because he was willing to overlook others' sins but unwilling to overlook his own."⁴

CUTTING ROOM FLOOR: Perhaps the most uncomfortable part of David's story is when he turns a deaf ear when his son, Amnon tricks, rapes and shames his half sister Tamar. (2 Samuel 13: 1-19).

Meet this chapter's authors,
SHELBY HENDRICKS + MEGAN JOHNSON



hands mind you (1 Samuel 17:34-37). His musical skill would eventually warrant him an invitation to the palace where he'd be positioned to rule, and his time spent fighting off predators would ultimately inform his battle plans for saving the kingdom of Israel.

While David waited for God's word to come to pass, he committed himself to growing in skill and strength. How often do we treat hidden seasons with contempt, tempted to despair or sleepwalk our way through it?

Preparation wasn't the only thing David was experiencing in that season. He was also experiencing the real-life power dynamics of being the littlest kid in a family of older, able-bodied brothers. If you've ever felt overlooked or passed over I don't think there is a more encouraging passage than this one in the Bible,

When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed stands here before the Lord." But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7)

David's oldest brother, Eliab, was the sure choice. He looked like a king. Even the prophet Samuel thought so. "But the Lord said, 'Do not consider his appearance.'" Whenever we see the word *but* in the Bible, we should grab our journals and pay attention. This word is incredibly valuable because it gently lets us know that something is out of alignment between the way we function as humans and the way God functions as holy.

In this case, God corrects our human instinct when it comes to picking those we assume are fit to lead.

Appearances aren't bad, even the Bible says that David was "glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features" (1 Samuel 16:12b). The point here is that we do well not to demonize or idolize appearances. We are told through God's instruction to Samuel that the obvious choice in this scenario isn't the right choice. *Do not consider his appearance.*

God then put Samuel through quite the narrowing process of going through seven other older brothers before he even got to David. And David wasn't even in the room at all when he finally asked, "Are these all the sons you have?" "There is still the youngest," Jesse answered. "He is tending the sheep" (1 Samuel 16:11). Perhaps David's own father had decided that David was nothing more than a sheep tender.

Regardless of parental favor, birth order, appearance, job title, or even physical proximity to being in the right place at the right time—God pursued David. He brought him to Samuel, not first, but last. Not because he was the obvious choice, but because he was the right choice.

THE MASTER STORYTELLER

It's worth considering what would have happened if David had gotten sick of being treated like the littlest brother stuck with the sheep and went looking for something more important to do? What if he wasn't working in the field when Samuel sent for him? If David hadn't stayed put until God called him from his ordinary, everyday, unimpressive job would he have been anointed that day? Who knows? For those of us who are weary of feeling like we're invisible or unimportant, may this be a reminder that God sees the heart.

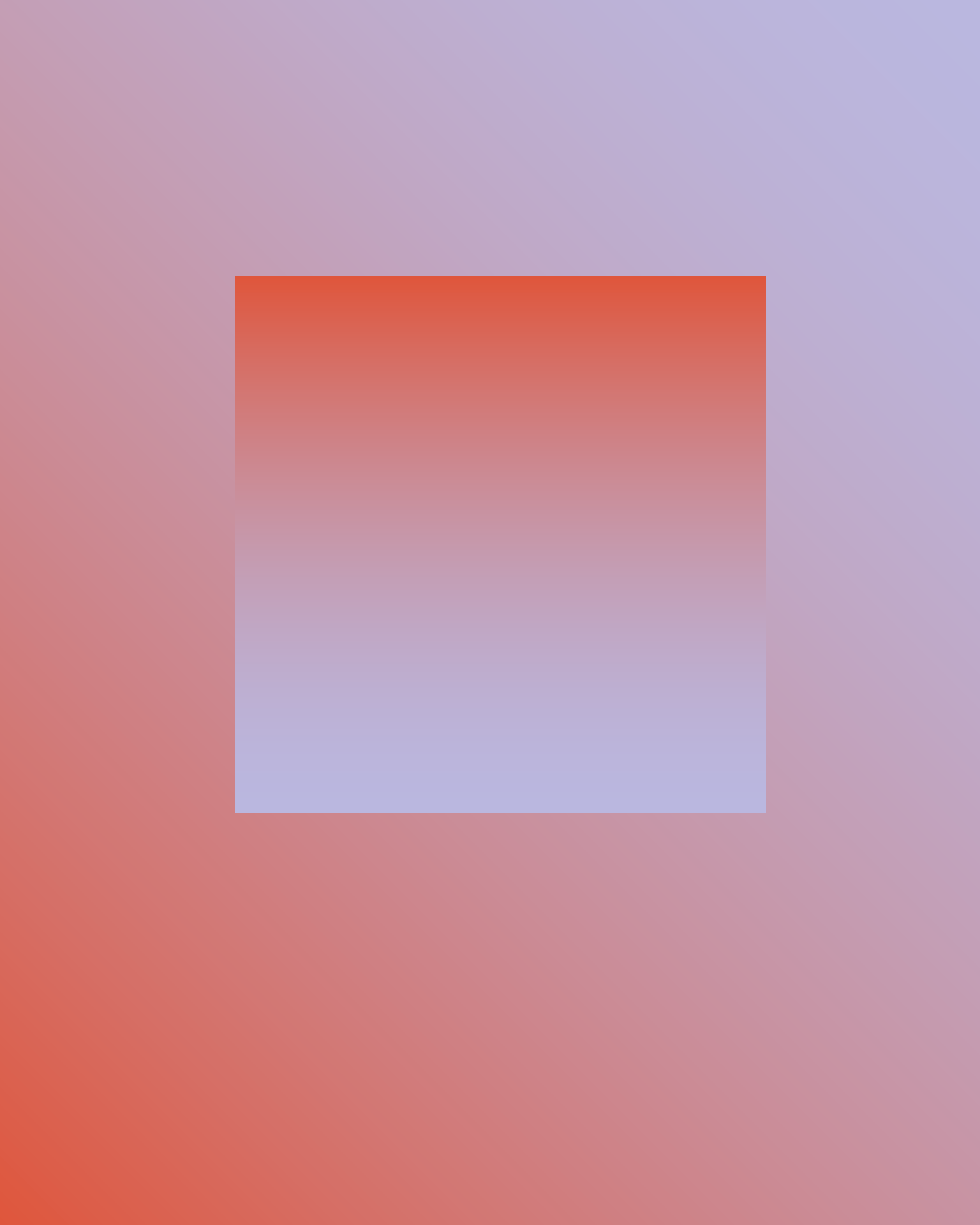
God doesn't focus on the activity you are doing, he looks at the way you depend on him no matter the field. Jesus himself admonishes the Pharisees for focusing on the appearances of things, "The greatest among you will be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Matt. 23:11, CSB).

Here's the best news for those who feel like they've always been picked last in the eyes of others: God doesn't look at you the way you look at you. He doesn't see your current position the way you do. He doesn't see things like you do. The heart is his barometer for blessing because he chooses to raise up people he knows will partner *with* him, not someone who will look the part and then do their own thing when the time comes.

When it comes to furthering the storyline of God, your heart and your willingness to love God with whatever skill you have or whatever field you have been placed in is of most importance. David's identity was built in the field with sheep, hidden from man-made praise and glory. It was because of this start that God would always have the final say in David's heart.

We see early on in David's story that God sees what human's never could. We see David's beginning as a lost cause. We see him as hardly memorable (even by his own dad), the scrap gatherer, the one forgotten in the field.

But God, through the stench of sheep and sweat, saw the very one who would carry out his ordained Kingship with an everlasting, eternal legacy. It is God who reminds Samuel (who I'm sure was wondering if God Himself was a bit misled) that the heart truly is the greatest territory of all.



Notes:

GOD SEES SOMETHING DIFFERENT

What humans saw as lowly sheep babysitting, God saw as preparation for battle and kingship. In 1 Sam 17:34-37, how do you see David's refusal to believe a human narrative serve him well?

GOD DOES SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Read 1 Samuel 16:10-12. What strikes you most about the process of anointing David as the next king? How is it different than how humans make choices?

GOD WANTS SOMETHING DIFFERENT

Read Psalm 78:71-72. What qualities are outlined in verse 72? Why do you think God wants someone who shepherds and guides to lead his people? What does it mean to have an upright heart?

“God pursued David.”



David's time of preparation in the field affirms that it doesn't matter where you come from or how long it takes to get to where God is leading. He is faithful to prepare us for the work He has for us to do.

How does the biblical narrative describe David early on in his life? If his family were asked what his life would have become, how do you think they would have answered?


1

What voices and narratives are you listening to when it comes to your purpose, worth and destiny?

2

David, through his deepest and darkest failures still chose to believe God's purpose, redemption, and identity for his life. Where has failure drowned out God's voice and purpose over you?

3



**For the Lord sees not
as man sees: man
looks on the outward
appearance, but the
Lord looks on the
heart.**

1 Samuel 16:7 ESV

1

Where in your story have you been tempted to seek out your own path to glory or recognition?

2

How does David's story refresh the purpose of our hidden or forgotten seasons? What are the promises we can cling to?

3

How does God's pursuit of David give you hope? Read Matthew 18:12-14 and the parable about the lost sheep. What does this further reveal about God's character as a pursuer of our stories?

PRACTICE THE STORY

Pray specifically this week that Jesus reveal himself in the mundane. Ask Him to breathe life and truth into the deflated, tired attempts to live by the world's standard of self-deemed glory and worth.



LIAR, LIAR, YOUR FAMILY TREE IS ON FIRE

WEEK 4

INTRODUCTION

HOW TO FIGHT FOR YOUR FAITH WHEN THINGS SEEM UNFAIR

I love and trust God. It has taken many years for me to rest in that. My constant struggle is that I'm often tempted to run ahead of God. As an Enneagram One, I'm the *get it done* person. As a dreamer, I am often inspired to be creative—so when these two things combine, I wind up with big plans that borderline fantasy. *Whoops.*

An example of this happened in the early years of my marriage. We needed to find a new place to live. I found a cute condo, but my husband didn't think it was right for us. However, fear and urgency caused me to run ahead. I went to the property management office and put an application in. Not to mention, I paid the initial fee for the application and background check. Yikes! Shortly after, my husband received a promotion and a relocation. Needless to say, my actions did not put us in a very good position.

But God gave me another chance when my husband and I were prayerfully considering moving from our home state of Arizona up to the beautiful Pacific Northwest. We felt God pulling us, and we were following the open doors. A few months in, my husband received a job offer in the Portland area. We were both so excited!

What we didn't expect was for the offer to not work out. I was convinced that the Lord had a Pacific Northwest future in store for us, so I was so incredibly confused and upset when we turned the offer down. *Lord, we feel your call. What are you doing?*

This time, I didn't run ahead. I waited and went to the Lord like the persistent widow¹ and shared my heart with Him. After a year of prayer and remaining faithful to allowing the Lord to move, my husband not only received a promotion to Seattle, but our relocation offer was far beyond what we prayed for or expected. In the right time, the Lord brought His plan to fruition.

BREAKING DOWN THE BIBLE

If you are familiar with the Bible you might think of Jacob as a deceiver or a wrestler. But let's take a step back. Let's start with his birth.

In Genesis 25, we read that Jacob and his twin, Esau, were very active babies in the womb. It had gotten so bad that Rebekah went to the Lord and asked what was up! The Lord shares with her that the struggle in her womb are two nations and that the older child will serve the younger.²

From before Jacob's birth, it was determined that Esau would end up serving Jacob. Fast forward, the boys grow up and Esau comes in from a hunt completely famished³. He noticed Jacob making a killer pot of chili, and he wanted some. Jacob's first recorded act of deception is manipulating Esau out of his birthright in exchange for a bowl of food.

We don't know if Jacob knew what the Lord spoke to Rachel while she was pregnant, but we do see God's words prove true through this event.

As time passes and Isaac (Jacob's father) is coming to the end of his life (Gen. 27), he calls Esau in and tells him to hunt some delicious game, make him a meal, and he would give him the blessing of the firstborn. Rachel overhears this conversation and even though she *already knew* God prophesied the older would serve the younger, they made a plan to steal the blessing.

Character: Jacob | **Plot:** Renaming | **Action:** Wrestle

STORY RANGE: Genesis 25:19-49:33

NT: Hebrews 11:20, 27

Jacob was obsessed with getting more than his fair share. The issue wasn't that God was trying to withhold from him, it was that he doubted God would give him what he wanted. Jacob had a scarcity mindset which led him to fudge the numbers in his own faith. What can Jacob's story teach us about being people of faith instead of people who force the version of the story we want onto God?

STORY THEME: Even in Jacob's striving to bring about God's plan in his ways and his time, God still prevails by using Jacob's actions and story to bring about His kingdom purposes and continue the promises given to Abraham.

CHARACTER SKETCH: Jacob (He who grasps the heel)/Israel (God prevails); Jacob began as the deceiver and yet "God prevails" through his desire for control and redeems him as Israel.

CHARACTER FLAW: Jacob is known as the deceiver in action, and yet his true character flaw was not trusting God's will to come to fruition in perfect timing. It was as if Jacob intrinsically knew his divine call and yet wanted it to come now rather than wait on God to bring it about.

FAMOUS WORDS: Jacob has a before and after in his life, so I felt that he had two "famous words." As Jacob the deceiver: "Sell me your birthright." (Gen. 25:31) Yet, in "God prevailing," his famous words were "I will not let you go unless you bless me." (Gen. 32:26)

FAMOUS ACTIONS: Jacob has, again, two famous actions that align with his before and after of his life; Jacob is known for his deceit of Isaac in claiming the blessing of the first-born son. He is also known for being blessed for persisting with the Lord in wrestling and being re-named to Israel.

CUTTING ROOM FLOOR: Jacob (Israel) favors his 11th son, Joseph, higher than the others and they know it; it's akin to his father's favor of Esau.

Meet this chapter's author,
ERIN SANCHEZ



This causes Esau to become very angry, and he plans to kill Jacob. Rebekah tells Jacob to flee to her uncle Laban “for a few days.”⁴ Well, that few days turns into years! This act of deceit further breaks the family apart.

Later in Genesis⁵, Jacob is en route to approach Esau’s camp and is very afraid; the night before, he mysteriously wrestles with God. *Physically*. As in, Jacob acquires a limp from an injured hip during this encounter. During the struggle, the “man” asks Jacob to release him, but Jacob says, “Not until you bless me.” Through this, the Lord blesses Jacob by changing his name to Israel, which means “God prevails.”

After this, Jacob blesses the wrestling place because, “I’ve seen God face-to-face, and my life has been saved.”⁶ Jacob meets with Esau and he is received with joy and tears. Their relationship was healed, and God prevailed through Jacob’s sin and running ahead of God’s plan.

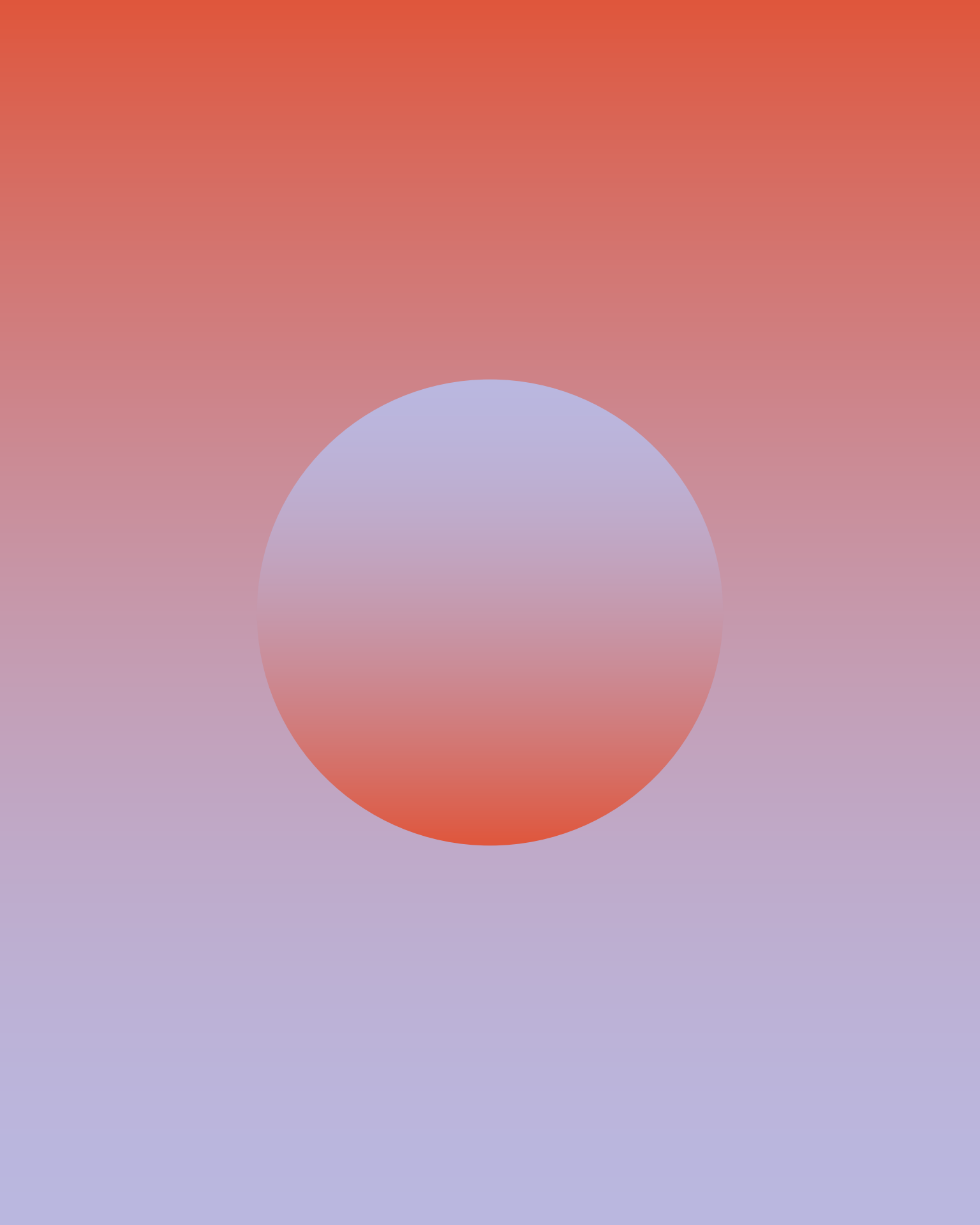
THE MASTER STORYTELLER

We could look at this story and see how we can learn from Jacob’s mistakes. Don’t rush ahead of God. Don’t deceive people. Don’t trade your integrity for chili just because you’re hangry. But we can also see how we’re given a role in the blessing God has for us.

Much like I ran ahead of God with going beyond mine and my husband’s choice to pass on the condo, Jacob and Rebekah made choices out of anxious and urgent hearts to accomplish what the Lord had already promised and set in motion. It created hurt for my husband and I, and likewise created tension between Jacob and Esau and hurt came about. When we make things happen in *our* time, it will cause pain.

But as I was reading this and studying it myself, I feel like the Lord revealed something else to me that I missed.

Jacob missed out on a different kind of miracle. You see, in my first story, I ran ahead of God to receive the blessing *on my terms*. Jacob and Rachael ran ahead of God to receive the blessing on



their terms too.

The miracle that Jacob missed out on, that we all miss out on, is the miracle of what it means to trust God before we make those choices, before we run ahead of Him.

Jacob missed out on intimacy with the Lord and being able to partner with the Lord in what He was doing. He turned out to be the *recipient* of the miracle and blessing instead of being a *co-creator* of the miracle and blessing by obeying and listening to the Lord and letting the Lord bring about the promise in Jacob's life in His intended way.

I missed out on partnering in the story God was telling during our relocation too. Surely God takes *every* part of our lives and brings about his purposes and good⁷. Yes, and amen. But, I missed out on the miracle of partnering with God and watching for what came next. I missed out on a front row seat to the miracles God had when I thought there were no answers. The miracle of *trust*.

God is so amazing! He will bring about His will and plan even when we mess up. And let's not miss out on that different miracle, the one that allows us to co-create with God.

How wonderful that we get to be both the recipient of the blessing and are given an active role in giving it.

Notes:

GOD KEEPS HIS PROMISES

Read Genesis 26:23-25 and 28:10-15, what does the Lord repeat to Jacob in these passages?

GOD BESTOWS HIS BLESSINGS

Read Genesis 25:19-26 and Genesis 48, how does Isaac's blessings on his sons parallel and somewhat foreshadow Jacob's blessing to his grandsons?

GOD CHANGES OUR HEARTS

Read Genesis 25:19-35:26, how do you see God change Jacob's character over the life of his story?



**And he dreamed, [and behold,
there was a ladder set up on
the earth, and the top of it
reached to heaven.]**

Genesis 28:12 KJV

1

Have you ever run ahead of God for something you felt you were called to? Are you ever tempted to take over the storyline that God has begun?

2

What is your greatest struggle when it comes to trusting God's timing?

3

What painful experiences do you have that God could still use to bring about blessing in your life?

Pause. Close your eyes. Take 3-4 *slow* deep breaths. I want you to sit in your body for a moment. Let go of distractions and just allow your spirit to be open. Now I would like you to consider if you are running ahead of God in any way. Notice the emotion that is tied to it (i.e., fear, anxiety, need for control, etc.). But don't look at those things with judgement or shame! Just notice it! Then, pray this:

God, I see some ways that I have run ahead of You. I know that this comes from a place of (insert your emotion you noticed here: i.e. fear, anxiety, control, etc.). I ask that You forgive me for this, and I thank You that You don't look at my (fear, anxiety, control, etc.) with frustration but with understanding. Help me to relax in knowing that You are in control and have a plan. You complete the good work in me⁸, and take all my experiences and use them for good in my life⁷. Thank you for your delight and love. In Jesus' name, amen.



How Many Coats Does it Take?

WEEK 5

INTRODUCTION

WHY GOD TAKES LONGER THAN YOU THINK HE WILL

We are thrown into a spiral of consistent change every day.

From the beginning of time, there have been circumstances outside of our control that have affected our daily lives without asking us for permission. In the most recent months, coronavirus has been the epicenter of such circumstantial chaos.

With the first death just a few miles from our church's gathering space, it was a mad dash for our region to move church to online platforms, which meant stretching teams to develop and respond quickly. Schools were shut overnight, leaving students and teachers with the loss of not seeing each other again. Businesses closed doors and employees were placed on standby. The unknown and fear washed over us and threatened to constantly control our lives.

Where is the light? When will this end? How long is this going to take?

Consistent, unwelcome change reminds me of the life of Joseph. He was the favored son of Jacob whose story took longer to fulfill its purpose than I'm sure he would've liked. His story isn't perfect. Nor was Joseph. He had moments where he was filled with pride, he experienced

betrayal, greed and learned the value of personal sacrifice. However, after years of long and hard situations and neverending faith in God, his story was restored and filled with forgiveness, humility and generosity.

What does the story of Joseph teach us about God's storytelling nature? Why does he tend to take the long, unpredictable, uncontrollable route?

BREAKING DOWN THE BIBLE

Joseph was his father's favorite, but he was hated by his brothers. Is it any wonder why with words like these?

"He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it." His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said" (Genesis 37:6-9).

That hatred grew into a murderous plot that ended with Joseph being thrown into a pit and then sold into slavery. He was sold again to Potiphar and became a slave in his home. Despite such a cruddy start, all seemed to be going well for Joseph in Potiphar's house, because "the LORD was with him and that the LORD made everything he did successful..." (Gen. 39:3)

As a result of unmerited favor, Joseph was put in charge of all that Potiphar owned and his household, which then caused the house to be blessed by the Lord (v. 39:5-6). His good standing in the palace of which he was formerly a prisoner, was a direct result of God's promise to bless him personally, "...the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor..." (Gen. 39:21).

Character: Joseph | **Plot:** Sovereignty | **Action:** Restore

STORY RANGE: Genesis 35:24-50:26

NT: Acts 7:9

The story of Joseph is one of pride and humility. Betrayal and forgiveness. Greed and generosity. Ultimately, Joseph's story didn't primarily benefit him. His gift of dream telling didn't fast track him to a palace to be served. His story was long and hard so that he could humbly serve an entire nation and be reconciled with a family who betrayed him.

STORY THEME: Joseph rose to a place of power in Egypt to show how God works through the good and bad for a kingdom focused story.

CHARACTER SKETCH: Joseph means "he will add" in Hebrew. However, his story consists of many personal losses. Joseph faced many difficult and life altering setbacks before he was seated in a place of power over Egypt. It was the continual faith he had through the hard times which matured him into a man capable of redemption and forgiveness.

CHARACTER FLAW: Joseph was prideful. He shared his dreams with his brothers and lacked the wisdom needed to navigate those relationships with compassion (Genesis 37:6-9).

FAMOUS WORDS: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20).

FAMOUS ACTIONS: Saving his entire kingdom from famine (Genesis 47:13-26).

CUTTING ROOM FLOOR: Even though Joseph had favor from God he still struggled to trust those in his family. In fact, Joseph treated them roughly, accused them of being spies, put them in prison, and then demanded their younger brother be brought to him.¹

WRAP UP: Joseph's story reveals that God loves to restore broken storylines. What Joseph went through "were meant by others for evil turned out to be for good."²

Meet this chapter's author,
TAYLOR ANN



But wait! Things change yet again. It was long afterwards that Joseph found himself in another pit of a different kind. Joseph was a well-built and handsome man (v. 39:6) and since he was spending his time in the household where Potipher's wife was, she began to notice him with desire. She repeatedly asked Joseph to sleep with her but he continued to refuse because "he would not betray his master's confidence or sin against God."³

Then one day she found him alone in the house and caught him by his garment. He was able to escape her but left his garment with her. With the garment in her hand she was able to use it against him to claim he assaulted her and fled as she screamed for help. Joseph was ordered to prison even though he was in charge of the household because the wife of Potipher had power over him.

It wasn't until all of these events took place that Joseph was finally put in the position that God had planned for him. He had to go through all of these terrible things before he could become the man who would rule the kingdom with compassion and justice.

So let's do a quick tally on Joseph's timeline so far:

1. Thrown into a pit.
2. Sold into slavery.
3. Thrown into prison.
4. Promoted to a great job.
5. Thrown back into prison.
6. Finally, given the position God had planned for him.

Are there places in your life that feel like this? Is there an ebb and flow or back and forth—do you see any patterns of demotion and promotion? Why do you think God's storylines do this? What is the Master Storyteller doing when it seems like he's taking the long way around?

This season of life has felt like that for me. At the beginning of the year I was let go from a job I had for many years. A job that brought so much joy, friendship, and memories to my life. It was my identity and my whole life revolved around it. Unemployment and loss was what my whole world felt like. Heartbroken and discouraged, I leaned into my faith more and learned along the way that

my identity needed to be in God. My purpose in life was to not be successful at my job, but to live into what God has called us to do.

Then, with my new knowledge under my belt, a month later I was offered the first job I applied to at a hotel in Kirkland. The interview process was quick and I was hired in a week. It felt like an answer to prayers! However, the day before I started the job, the first person in the United States died of COVID-19 in Kirkland, WA not far from the hotel. My first day was full of training and excitement, but there was a layer of panic and unrest across the team.

In those moments I tried to remember that my identity was in God and that I had more purpose than my job. I tried to channel that as I came to work for the next two weeks. More and more personnel were laid off each day. Then my day came, two weeks after I started, and what seemed like the next chapter in life closed. I was furloughed.

I spent the next five months unemployed, but also having a job. It was not easy! I had issues with my unemployment that forced me to lean on others for help, which is not easy for me. Many days I felt like a failure. There were days that I didn't get out of bed till noon and others where I was up and baking bread all day. I prayed more in this time than I ever did before. Then in July I was officially laid off forever from my new job. I had felt it coming and was more prepared for it, but remained confused on what God was doing. I was disappointed.

Today I have a new job, but still feel unsure if it will last. In those moments I focus on what is true from the scriptures, that God is forever faithful (Psalm 146:6), he is always with you (Isaiah 41:10), he is holding you (Psalm 73:23) and he is our hiding place (Psalm 32:7). No matter if my new job lasts or I get laid off tomorrow, I know God is with me and my story is being used for good. Similar to Joseph—except much less prison time.

Joseph's faith and calling on his life did not save him from wickedness and sin, and it won't save us from ours either. But God continued to work in his life in the background. So even though in the story we find Joseph in prison that was not the end for him. He had more to come in fulfilling the calling that God had on his life and the continuing lesson of his story that "things that were meant

by others for evil turned out to be for good.”⁴

THE MASTER STORYTELLER

Joseph’s story foreshadows the sacrifice that Jesus gave for us. Jesus willingly laid his life down for sins he did not commit. He went through unimaginable circumstances for us, even if that included betrayal—he faced it all with forgiveness. These stories are not about us, they come from the master storyteller preparing us for life on earth.

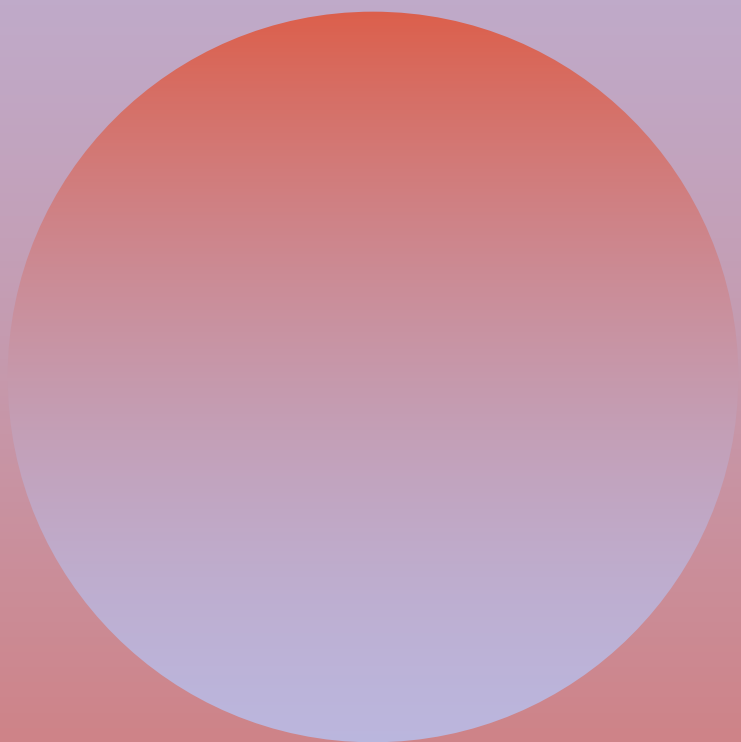
So friends, as we look at the world we might feel like we are in a prison after prison. We may feel stuck working at home, homeschooling children, or facing cultural injustices each day. We just want it to end. We want the good and shiny parts. We want to rush to the happy ending. We long for a time when we can go back to normal.

But friends, what if this is normal? What if this is the time we are called to? Joseph went through a few more circumstances where he gained power and then was forgotten about or lost his power again. What didn’t change; is that God was with him. And the same is true right now, God is with us.

With the hard and pressing circumstance he faced it put him in the place to give forgiveness to his brothers. “But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.” (Gen. 50:19-21)

It may be your worst season, but God restores. He restores our stories either here on earth or in heaven. But there’s one thing I can promise you, God is with us right now. He is in the hard moments and the happy moments. It might take a few more hard moments to reach full restoration, but I bet if you look closely you can see God working right now.

So look closely.



Notes:

NOTHING IS EASY ANYMORE

Read Gen. 39:7-19. What injustices do you see Joseph face? How do you see Joseph handle these circumstances?

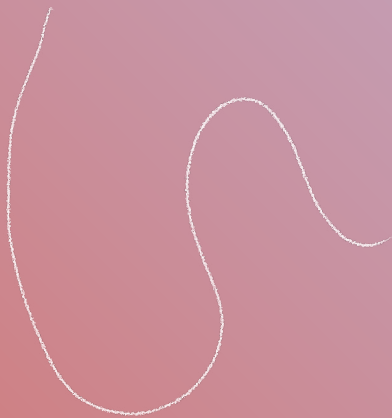
BRING IT ALL BACK

Read Gen 37:26-28 & 44:18-34. What major plot twist do you see between the first passage and the last?

CHOSEN, FAVORED, AND WISE

Why do you think reconciliation with Joseph's family is a major theme of his story?

“Are there places in your life that feel like this?”



Is there an ebb and flow or back and forth—do you see any patterns of demotion and promotion? Why do you think God’s storylines do this? What is the Master Storyteller doing when it seems like he’s taking the long way around?

What character flaws do we see in Joseph at the beginning? How are those flaws redeemed?

1

Do you have situations where you have been shut out or “sold” like Joseph?

2

Why do you think you can be favored and still experience suffering?

3

he rescues!

**But God was with Joseph
and rescued him from all
his troubles.**

Acts 7:9 NIV

1

Have you felt that God may not be with you in a hard season?

2

What helped restore your story?

3

If it is not restored, what areas should you look for God to be working in?

Take some time to write down hard things right now. The things that keep you up at night. Walls that just don't move. Then, reflect on the things God is teaching you, providing you with or how this is preparing you for the future.

(These could be unexpected visits from friends. Coffee gift cards. A sweet note from you child. Your spouse or roommate putting the dishes away. Or it could be something bigger! Like answers to big and risky prayers. Or steps in new directions. God is in them all, let's all look closer.)



Formed in the Desert

WEEK 6

INTRODUCTION

THE ONLY WAY OUT IS THROUGH

Do you remember that children's song "We're going on a bear hunt"? It goes:

We're going on a bear hunt.

We're going to catch a big one.

What a beautiful day!

We're not scared.

The song imagines obstacle after obstacle on this bear hunt – long wavy grass, a deep cold river, thick oozy mud, a big dark forest, a swirling whirling snowstorm, a narrow gloomy cave – and proclaims:

We can't go over it.

We can't go under it.

Oh no!

We got to go through it!

It's true what they say about learning all of life's most important lessons in Kindergarten. Be nice.

Wash your hands. It's impolite to pass gas in public. And when you're trying to grab ahold of something grand, like a bear, you can't ignore or try to shortcut the hard stuff that shows up along the way.

I must have been daydreaming when they taught that last one in Kindergarten, because I find myself having to learn the lesson over and over again. I'm the type of person that hates the process. I just want the prize. I tend to jump right to the end of the story, assuming I know how it'll all play out. And since I know how the story goes, I don't need to live through the gory details, right?

Unfortunately for me, that's not how worthwhile things are attained. In fact, the prize at the end of a journey can feel cheap if there is no waiting, no anticipation, no hard-fought wrestling turned into joy.

In God's economy, the prize at the end of our journey is guaranteed when you put your faith in Jesus. We know we'll get to rest, eat, laugh, and dance with him for eternity. But that's not the only prize. Here on earth, God gives us opportunities to build our character and better reflect him, so we can experience him more fully and share his love with others.

Here's the thing. These God-given, character building opportunities often take us through the desert. The wilderness of life has a way of stripping things away so we have space to grow closer to God. The desert is a gift. It's God's way of drawing us out of our self-centered lives and into relationship with him, but we can't go around the desert. We have to go through it.

BREAKING DOWN THE BIBLE

Moses is one of the most well-known characters in the Bible. His story spans across four books (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy) and his 120 years of life contain some of the most exciting stories in the Old Testament. While his personal journey with God is peppered with hits and misses, his faithfulness in the desert had him knowing God face-to-face (Deut. 34:10).

Character: Moses | **Plot:** Captivity | **Action:** Faithfulness

STORY RANGE: Exodus 1-15

NT: Acts 7:20-21, Hebrews 11:23

The Exodus from Egypt “expresses the ultimate challenge to the covenant promises”.¹ God led his people out of slavery into a wilderness to give them the promised land. Only one problem: no land, only wilderness. How do we reconcile God’s faithful promises and our current realities? Moses was appointed to call God’s people out of captivity, but for freedom to take place we must deal with the enslaved parts of ourselves first.

STORY THEME: God draws us out to draw us in², but the only way out is through.

CHARACTER SKETCH: Moses³ lived much of his roller coaster life as an outsider and was frequently weighed down by fear and doubt. But God, seeing Moses’ compassion and humility, drew Moses out of Egypt and into relationship with him. God called Moses the most faithful person in all his house (Num. 12:7) and knew him face-to-face (Deut. 34:10).

CHARACTER FLAW: Moses was a fearful man who frequently said “no” to God.⁴ But Moses never hid his emotions or questions. Instead, he brought his doubts to God and obeyed even when his heart didn’t want to.

FAMOUS WORDS: Moses delivered what Jesus later called the “first and greatest commandment” – *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.* (Deut. 6:5)

FAMOUS ACTIONS: Splitting the Red Sea. Spending 40 days on Mount Sinai where he received the ten commandments and the Mosaic Covenant, and encountered God’s glory with his own eyes (Exod. 33).

CUTTING ROOM FLOOR: Moses lived an incredible, movie-worthy life. But in the end, he didn’t get to see the fulfillment of the covenant that God promised through him. The Israelites were right outside the promised land, but God wouldn’t let Moses enter because he “didn’t trust me, didn’t treat me with holy reverence in front of the people of Israel.” (Num. 20:12, MSG) In fact, as Moses is close to death God tells him that the Israelites will rebel again (Deut. 31:16).

WRAP UP: In an earthly sense, Moses was a total failure. He wandered around the desert for 40 years and the Israelites constantly rebelled against him. But Moses knew God and was with God, which is the true definition of success.

Meet this chapter’s author,
SANDY JEONG



Here's Moses' story: Moses was born a Hebrew slave in Egypt, but was rescued from certain death by the Pharaoh's daughter and raised as royalty (Exod. 2:10). As a young man, Moses had a temper and a strong sense of justice – he killed an Egyptian whom he saw beating a Hebrew slave (Exod. 2:12) and, fearing for his life, he fled to Midian where he lived as a shepherd for 40 years.

During this time, the Israelite slaves groaned because of their difficult labor. “God saw the Israelites, and God knew,” (Exod. 2:25) so he called Moses to action. God spoke to Moses from a burning bush, and though Moses hesitated out of fear and feeling unqualified, he eventually obeyed God's command to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses went on to free the Israelites and they escaped a pursuing Egyptian army by walking across the floor of the Red Sea, with walls of water surrounding them. Moses then led the Israelites on a 40-year journey in the desert towards the promised land.

In Exodus 24, God used Moses to establish a covenant with the Israelites and even though the Israelites broke their side of the deal within weeks, God showed grace by renewing his promise to them (Exod. 34). This is remarkable because the Mosaic covenant appears to be works-based, but our just God forgave freely. God was able to be so gracious because “he looked forward to the coming of his Son and the sacrifice that repairs all the injury done to God's honor...there could have been no covenant with Abraham, no covenant with Moses, and no new covenant without the coming of Jesus Christ. What was freely given under Moses was purchased by Christ.”⁵

Moses' story reads like a screenplay, and most of us have seen that movie (Charlton Heston, anyone?) But we often recall Moses' more glorious moments and forget that he was already an old man when he freed the Israelites, and he spent the remainder of his life wandering the wilderness. In fact, most of his walk with God was in the desert and he never entered the promised land.

Why would God ask the Israelites to spend 40 years in the desert after 400 years in slavery? Why would God ask Moses, the “most faithful in all my house” (Num. 12:7) to experience such hardship?

THE MASTER STORYTELLER

When Moses was called to free the Israelites from slavery and bring them into the promised land, I'll bet he didn't plan on spending the rest of his life wandering in the desert. Surely there was a shorter route to the land flowing with milk and honey, some sort of expressway that didn't involve so many years of struggle.

Here's the thing God knew that the Israelites didn't – they had to shed some things they had held onto from spending 400 years in another land before they could move into the promised land. While they were slaves, the Israelites belonged to somebody else. God wanted them for himself – to be in relationship with them – and he knew he had to do some work on their hearts first.

The Israelites were quick to grumble, they wanted to go back into slavery because things seemed better (Exod. 16), and they created idols at the first sign of trouble. God knew these things about the Israelites, and that they needed to be in the wilderness where they would be stripped of self-reliance so they would pray, reflect, and repent. And in this process, God revealed that their inheritance was never the land – it was always the Lord.⁶ Through the Mosaic Covenant, God showed the Israelites that they were special to him (“you shall be my own possession”, Exod. 19:5). God gave them access to himself in the desert, he called them to be holy like him, and he showed them grace and forgiveness.

The desert may not seem like it's part of God's story for your life, but it's actually God's grace for you. As we journey through wilderness on our way to the promised land, we aren't promised physical comfort (though God provides for us while we are in the desert). We are promised refining fire that will burn off our enslaved parts and form us into God's likeness (Zech. 13:9). And in the process, we'll see God face-to-face.

So, what is our primary job while we're in the desert? Like Moses, we are called to remain faithful and to lean on the Holy Spirit. Our inheritance is the Lord himself and was purchased by the blood of Jesus. This is never as clear as it is in the desert, where God calls us his own, gives us access to himself, makes us holy, and gives us grace.

The desert may be hot, dusty, and hard, but it might also be the most life-giving place you can be.

We can't go over it.

We can't go under it.

Oh no!

We got to go through it!

Notes:

GOD MEETS OUR PHYSICAL NEEDS IN THE DESERT.

Read Exodus 15:23-25, 16:2-4, 16:11-12, and 17:2-7. How does God provide for the Israelites in the desert? What parallels do you see between God's provision in the desert and what he provides us through Jesus?

GOD CALLS US HIS OWN AND GIVES US ACCESS TO HIMSELF IN THE DESERT.

Read Exodus 19:3-9. How can we access the same promises God made to the Israelites?

GOD SHOWS US GRACE IN THE DESERT.

Read Exodus 32:7-14. How is God able to so freely forgive the Israelites after they broke their side of the covenant?

**“Surely there was a
shorter route to the
land flowing with
milk and honey.” ✨**

...some sort of expressway that didn't involve
so many years of struggle.



Here's the thing God knew that the Israelites
didn't – they had to shed some things they had
held onto from spending 400 years in another
land before they could move into the promised
land.

How does the biblical narrative describe Moses? What makes him a unique character?

1

In what ways do you see similarities in Moses' story and your own?

2

Why do you think God chose Moses to free the Israelites and lead them to the promised land?

3

**At that time Moses
was born, and he was
no ordinary child.**

ACTS 7:20 NIV

1

Do you ever try to avoid the desert or deny it as God's storyline for you?

2

What is your greatest temptation when it comes to trusting God in the desert?

3

What are some ways you can embrace a desert season and see it as a gift?

Discuss some ways that God has encouraged you through what seemed like a dry, dusty, desert season. This week, journal some ways that you can embrace a desert season and remain faithful.



A Weakling in a Winepress

WEEK 7

INTRODUCTION

WHY GOD SENDS THOSE WHO'D RATHER STAY BEHIND

Gideon is a second guesser.

If he were alive today, he may challenge that statement and say, “Nah, I’m just humble,” or “I’m naturally cautious.” Throughout Gideon’s story it is proven that left to his own devices, he would rather hide away and do his work quietly in fear. He didn’t want to risk being used by God.

So why did God even bother with him? Why did he go out of his way to call him out of hiding?

The narrator in Judges leads us to believe that Gideon didn’t want to be challenged or pushed—not because he’s lazy or stubborn, but because he really struggles with fear and insignificance. We read earlier in the scriptures that God has rescued the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. God took care of them in the wilderness for 40 years (with daily bread, manna, and water). He then brought them to the land of Canaan, the promised land He prophesied about to Abraham.

God equipped the Israelites to conquer all the other tribes residing in their new land, but they began to get comfortable and disobedience kicked in. Judges 6:1 tells us this, “The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. So the Lord handed them over to Midian for seven years,

and they oppressed Israel.”

When the Israelites called out to the Lord for mercy, Gideon was the guy who God decided should get the message. And what message did he deliver? “When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior” (Judges 6:11-12, NIV).

There Gideon was minding his own business, and in actuality hiding wheat from the Midianites deep in a winepress. Gideon “a mighty warrior”? He was a second guesser, a winepress hider, and a bit of a coward. What an unlikely guy for God to call on for battle! But that’s where the good news begins for you and I.

When God finds us afraid, he doesn’t leave us there. Instead, our Father chooses to speak identity and courage over us. He sees our needs and instead of moving onto the next person who looks a bit more like the person you’d expect, we get a new identity—one of warrior and not weakling. God reminded Gideon that he was equipped, not because he was naturally gifted, but because his Dad was with him (Judges 6:16).

He does the same for us.

BREAKING DOWN THE BIBLE

Have you had a season where God has found you hiding in fear?

My personal “Gideon season” (and I have had many) is when God calls me out to speak. I love to hide in my own personal “winepress” of encouraging others in their giftedness of the spoken word, but not stepping out with my own. I love to share wisdom with my clients and friends, and I can *preach* on a Marco Polo, but every single time someone asks me to share in a large group setting I want to shrink back.

“Go in the strength that you have” (Judges 6:14). This phrase has been my personal verse for a couple years now because they are the same words God speaks over Gideon when he calls him

Character: Gideon | **Plot:** Strength | **Action:** Go

STORY RANGE: Judges 6-8:32

“Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian, do not I send you?” Gideon may have considered himself, “the least likely person for such an assignment”¹. But by now we have established a pattern of unlikely heroes in God’s plots. Gideon is one to pay attention to because God is patient with him as he learns the lesson that “going” requires trust in God’s protection not his own.

STORY THEME: “Gideon was the first of the judges whose history was circumstantially narrated, and a man who God used to defeat the Midianites.” (Judges 6-8) (Reference: Bible study tools Salem communications)

CHARACTER SKETCH: Hebrew meaning is the name Gideon is “hewer.” A Hewer is a person who cuts wood, stone, or other materials. Also Wikipedia says a hewer is a miner who loosens rock and minerals in a mine.

CHARACTER FLAW: Gideon was fearful, he was hiding in a winepress threshing wheat and believed his family was the weakest in Manasseh, and he was the youngest. (Judges 6:11-15 CSB)

FAMOUS WORDS: “Then Gideon said to God, “If you will deliver Israel by me, as you said, I will put a wool fleece here on the threshing floor. If dew is only on the fleece, and all the ground is dry, I will know that you will deliver Israel by me, as you said.” Judges 6:36-37 CSB

FAMOUS ACTIONS: Gideon was used by God accompanied by a small army of 300 to defeat the Midianites.

CUTTING ROOM FLOOR: Gideon was a doubter. From the beginning he cried out to the Lord in judges 6:13. Hrs asked why if the Lord was with them why all this was happening to them. He was skeptical about the miracles his fathers spoke of and he believed that God had left them. He also believed that the Lord was going to deliver them into the hands of the Midianites.

Meet this chapter’s author,
LAUREN MULLEN



out of the winepress and into battle. God doesn't only call Gideon out, he also says, "I will be with you, you will strike Midian down as if one man" (Judges 6:16). God knows Gideon needed to be reminded that he doesn't go alone. However, Gideon still desires a sign from God to prove that the Lord really is speaking to him.

Gideon doesn't ask for a sign just once, he asks for one, *three times*. Gideon knew what he was supposed to do, God had already told him, but each time he asks God to be patient with him, and He shows up.

The first thing Gideon wanted to know, "Is the angel talking to me? Really, God?" So he brought out an offering to the Lord, of meat and bread (6:17-20). The angel of the Lord touched the food that was sitting on a rock with his staff. Immediately fire arose from the rock, and "the angel of the Lord departed from His sight." That was his sign that he had indeed been conversing with the Lord (Judges 6:21).

The second time Gideon wanted to confirm that he really was the one to save Israel in battle (6:36). So he sets out a fleece of wool, and asks God for dew on the fleece and a dry ground (6:37). He is confident *then* he will know. He awoke the next morning to just that, but it was not enough for him.

Thirdly, he boldly says "Let me make one more request" (7:39). This final time Gideon wants a reversal of his request the night before: *dry fleece, wet ground*. And God does it. Can we pause here? It's so easy to judge Gideon for coming across so needy. Was he disbelieving God? Why did he keep asking when God had already confirmed twice that Gideon was the man for the job?

Well, because he was human.

How often do we second guess what God says to us? Even though we may not "ask" God for tangible signs, we can still remain uncertain inside even if we sense God's calling us out. When I am afraid to do what God is calling me to do, I also need multiple affirmations that God is with me. And if I look at this story, I can see that God answered what Gideon requested. In God's stories he gives to those who ask (Matthew 7:7).

THE MASTER STORYTELLER

So what was Gideon called to? Battle. What's interesting about that is that God actually told Gideon to *minimize* his troops (Judges 7:2-7), and He gave him a dream for his battle plan that required interpretation (Judges 7:13-15) and equipped his army not with weapons, but with a ram's horn, an empty pitcher, and a torch. The army yelled out by Gideon's request, "For the Lord and for Gideon!" (Judges 7:16-18). Against all odds, they defeated the Midianites. God was proven faithful and Gideon was proven stronger than he thought he was.

God uses Gideon's life to reveal that he takes great delight in using the most "unlikely" people for big things. His power is made perfect in our weakness. God is reminding us that we are *not* the hero of our story but He is. I believe God loves to use the underdogs, the doubters, and the skeptics. We see it all throughout scripture. How fortunate are we that He would use us in our brokenness to shine His glory throughout the Earth.

In closing, I invite you to read this poem of mine inspired by Judges 6-8:32. Scripture is God-breathed and Holy Spirit animated, and I believe that time and time again I can trust God when he is calling me out, because the battle is already mine (1 John 4:4).

*When God's presence invades your hiding place,
The tree you're under is sacred ground.
He calls you out to bring you up,
He speaks identity and purpose over your life.*

*He asks the hard questions,
That challenge our doubting minds
He tells us he is with us,
"Have I not sent you?"*

*He listens to the excuses and the fears,
And pierces through with more love,*

"Surely I am with you."

He confirms that we are victorious through Him,

"You shall defeat the Midianites."

Then He commissions us with the mantle he places on our lives,

"Go in the strength that you have."

Allowing us to ask for signs and wonders,

The kind we believe we need to convince our futile minds,

God show up again,

He speaks life to erase all confusion.

He never gives up on us,

"Peace be with you, do not fear, you shall not die."

God empowers us to take down the idols in our life,

And when we ask for signs and wonders

He makes himself known through fleece.

He equips us for the battle with instruments,

Gideon worshipped and trusted,

God strengthened and the battle was won.

Notes:

GOD REPLACES OUR FEARS WITH STRENGTH

Read Judges 6:14-16. What fears does God speak to in Gideon's circumstance?

GOD ACKNOWLEDGES OUR WEAKNESSES

What stands out to you about the way God addresses Gideon's concerns?

GOD WANTS US TO KNOW HE'S WITH US

Why do you think God wanted Gideon to experience victory over Midian "as if one man"?

“God reminded Gideon that he was equipped.”



God sees our needs and instead of moving onto the next person who looks a bit more like the person you'd expect, we get a new identity—one of warrior and not weakling. God reminded Gideon that he was equipped, not because he was naturally gifted, but because his Dad was with him. He does the same for us.

Have you had a season where God has found you hiding in fear?

Read Judges 7:2-7. Why do you think God wanted to minimize his troops?

1

Why does our lack of strength actually increase God's strength?

2

Do you struggle to do things in your own strength?

3

**Go in the strength you
have and save Israel out
of Midian's hand. Am I not
sending you? →**

1

Where has God found you hiding in fear? What are you doing? How are you responding?

2

What has God minimized in your life, so that He can show His strength in your weakness?

3

Where is God saying to “go in the strength that you have?”

PRACTICE THE STORY

What has God said to you that you are doubting?

Pray about where you need confirmation. He wants to show you.

NOTES

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3. 2 Sam 11:2-6 (Bathsheba adultery), 11:6-27 (David tries to cover it up, killing Uriah), 12:15-25 (Bathsheba/David's baby dies).
4. What Made David Great? Kevin DeYoung Jan 14, 2015 <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/what-made-david-great/>

WEEK 4

1. Luke 18:1-8
2. Genesis 25:23
3. Genesis 25:27-34
4. Genesis 27:44
5. Genesis 32:22-32
6. Genesis 32:30
7. Romans 8:28
8. Philippians 1:6

WEEK 5

1. Believer's Bible Commentary pg. 75
2. Believer's Bible Commentary pg. 73
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4. Ibid.

WEEK 6

1. According to Plan, Graeme Goldsworthy, Pg. 131
2. The Village Church. "Exodus." <http://exodus.thevillagechurch.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/sermons-exodus-study-guide.pdf>, page 4, 2016.
3. Moses comes from the Hebrew verb masha meaning "to draw out of water"
4. Evidence of Moses' fearfulness and tendency to say "no" to God: He fled when Pharaoh found out that he killed an Egyptian and then he hid in the desert for 40 years (Exodus 2). He was afraid when he saw the burning bush (Exodus 3:2). He gave excuse after excuse (five, to be exact) when God told him to rescue the Israelites (Exodus 4). When the Israelites complained about the lack of water at Rephidim, Moses told God he was afraid they would stone
5. Piper, John. "God's Covenant Through Moses." <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/gods-covenant-through-moses>. December 11, 1983.

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