

THE STORY

READ THE STORY. EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE.

AS YOU READ CHAPTER 4

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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

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.
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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.
6. Israel celebrated Passover annually, and we celebrate communion regularly to remind ourselves corporately of God's deliverance. What personal triggers could you initiate to celebrate what God has done in your life?
7. 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?

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?

PRAYER

God,
we ask you to give us a clearer vision of who you are. We pray that it will not be tainted by false understandings and childish images, but shaped by your Word of Truth. Help us to look to none but you for who we are, for our provision, and for our guidance. Even in the wilderness, you are our very life. Amen.



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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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. Moses said, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning." (p. 61). Describe what it means to "fear God" from what you read. Is this the same or different than what you expected? In what ways can you relate or not relate to the fear of God as described in The Story? What might God be telling you through this passage?
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? How could you seek it out? How could you do this for someone else?
3. 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?
4. Moses prayed to God on Israel's behalf (p. 65-66). Who in your life needs you to intercede for them? Make a list in your journal, and offer a prayer for them now.
5. God reminded Moses that children live with the consequences of their parents' sins (p. 68). Identify a sin or unhealthy tendency in your own family line that still affects you. What measures can you employ to stop the cycle? What ways have you seen God work at redeeming those unhealthy cycles?
6. Moses' face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord (p. 69). When have you experienced God's presence or heard his voice most clearly? What was your experience like?

PRAYER

God,
Thank you for showing us your way that fosters life through the Commandments and your law. Forgive us for how we have fallen short. Forgive us for choosing our own way and hurting others and ourselves. Help us hear again, the promise of life and rescue that Jesus wins through his sacrifice for us. Lead us to follow your way and your law of love. Amen.



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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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. Israel's complaining is a reminder of how easy it is to become ungrateful. When did you see the Israelites struggle with this the most? When do you struggle the most to have gratitude towards God? Why? What five things are you grateful for right now?
2. God punishes Miriam and Aaron for slandering Moses (p. 74). Have you ever had to deal with lies spoken against you? How did you handle it? How did Moses handle it, and what does God do in response?
3. How many examples of answered prayer can you find in this chapter? Which most encourages you and why?
4. The Israelites' journey through the wilderness is one with both great victories and terrible defeat. How do you see God relating to his people when they lose faith in His promises? Is he consistent? How do you relate to God in the midst of great times or great struggles in your own life? How have you seen God respond to you during these times?
5. 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 and promises to the next generation?

PRAYER

God,
With Fatherly love you disciplined the Israelites when they complained against you and wandered their own way. Yet, even then you were gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love to provide for them, and shepherd them back to you. May we receive your grace and your discipline when we wander so that we might experience the abundance of your life for the sake of sharing your love with this world. Amen.

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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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. When he passed on the mantle of leadership, Moses told Joshua to be strong and courageous. What did God provide in order for Joshua to do so? Is a lack of courage keeping you from becoming a leader? What might God be saying to provide you otherwise?
2. 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?
3. 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"?
4. How does the destruction of peoples and cities in the Promised Land square with God's Upper Story of redemption?
5. Observe the battle between Israel-Gibeon and the five kings of the Amorites (p. 95-98). What human factors and what divine factors led to victory? What parallels can be drawn between this battle and your own spiritual battles today?
6. Joshua is known for the statement "as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." What habits and attitudes do you practice in your family or have you seen in other families that are good examples of leading a household in serving the LORD? How can you claim or reclaim some of these practices in your family life routine?

PRAYER

God,
You command Joshua to be bold and courageous. Forgive us when we run away with fear. Give us a deeper love for reading and hearing your Word so we might experience your presence and strength. Give us a love for praying so you might fill us with courage to step into bold service of all those in need. Amen.



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AS YOU READ CHAPTER 8

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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

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? What do you see looking back on those experiences?
2. Deborah's military leader was named Barak. Deborah trusted that God would go before the Israelites and fight, Barak was fearful. Describe a time when fear held you back from trusting in God.
3. In the evil days after Joshua, "every man did what was right in his eyes" instead of following God's simple and clear commands. What commands from God have you ignored and what happened? How did that affect others?
4. 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.107-8). God demonstrated abundant victory through Gideon and a stripped down army. How has God provided for you through overwhelming odds, when everything seems to be against you? Do you tend to define yourself by your weaknesses or by the potential God sees in you because He is with you? Why?
5. Samson tended to rely on his own strength instead of acknowledging God as the source. What strengths or resources do you tend to rely on more than entrusting your life into God's care?
6. Look at some of the prayers in this chapter, such as Gideon's (p. 108-10) or Samson's (p. 118). What does this tell us about prayer?

PRAYER

God,
Give me the wisdom to recall Your saving and healing work in my life. Give my trust in Your faithfulness so I might put away fear. When fear overtakes me, help me cry out to You for deliverance. Fill me with Your Spirit so I might not forget you, and always follow your ways, which are good. Amen.



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AS YOU READ CHAPTER 9

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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. Neither Ruth nor Naomi had any reason to welcome each other as family. Social acceptability said that Naomi had no business having a Moabite daughter in law, and Ruth had no business staying with Naomi. When have you been tempted to follow the socially acceptable rules rather than doing the right thing?
2. 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. 125). How did God answer Boaz' prayer for Ruth? How does an "others-centered" life create blessings for the giver?
3. As you reflect on times of need in your life, when have you experienced divine providence and unexpected provision?
4. The theme of redemption is found throughout this story. Compare Boaz' redemption of Ruth and Naomi to how Christ has redeemed you.
5. Faithful Boaz and Ruth were great-grandparents to King David; therefore, they were also in the line of the Messiah Jesus. Given Ruth wasn't an Israelite but a despised Moabite, what does that tell us about the lineage of the promised Messiah?
6. Boaz risked his own reputation by showing compassion for a foreign woman. When have you put your reputation at stake to care for an outsider? When has someone else shown you kindness when you didn't deserve it?

PRAYER

God,
When I can't always see how You are at work in the details of my struggles, give me patience, endurance and strength to trust You are always at work behind the scenes guiding my path. Give me faith to follow my convictions, to seek out the help of those who are gracious, and to extend that help to others. Amen.



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AS YOU READ CHAPTER 10

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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. What do we learn from Hannah and Samuel about prayer? When have you poured out your heart before God? Has there been a time when you did more listening than speaking in prayer? Talking and Listening are both important elements of prayer; ask for God's help and try practicing both this week.
2. How did Eli help Samuel know when he was hearing the voice of God? How can you tell when God is speaking to you? Who has helped you to be more faithful in listening to God? How did they help?
3. Samuel was probably 12 year 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? What did you do and how was God present?
4. Samuel was hurt that the Israelites wanted a king, instead of remembering God was their king and trusting Him. Why was desiring a king such a temptation for the Israelites? When have you found it hard to trust God as your provider and leader?
5. Why do you think it was hard for Saul to admit to Samuel when he had disobeyed? (p. 142-143) Rate yourself from 1-10 on your ability to own up to your mistakes. What in your life is keeping you from admitting your mistakes and asking for forgiveness? Ask God for guidance.
6. God repeatedly chooses the least and the last to accomplish His will. This week, we see God use Hannah, a woman struggling with fertility, to bear the next wise priest to speak God's wisdom to the Israelites. What could God be doing through you today?

PRAYER

God,
 Help me to see myself and others not with the belittling eyes of this world, but only as You see me truly, as Your beloved, created just for what You intend. Give me courage like David to step with faith along the path You lead me, no matter how terrifying the challenge. Whether with fear or confidence, may I cry out, O God my fortress. Amen.

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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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. Contrast God's view of David with man's view of David. How would you say you are seen 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 God equip you to do this?
3. Think of a time when jealousy has somehow overtaken you. How can focusing on the Upper Story of God and his story of redeeming his people help conquer these feelings?
4. Review the exchange between David and Saul at En Gedi (p. 152-155). What does Saul's response to David's offer of grace teach you about God's grace?
5. "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." What words or acts of encouragement can you offer today to others (to both family and strangers) based on God's view of them?
6. 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?

PRAYER

God,
Help me to see myself and others not with the belittling eyes of this world, but only as You see me truly, as Your beloved, created just for what You intend. Give me courage like David to step with faith along the path You lead me, no matter how terrifying the challenge. Whether with fear or confidence, may I cry out, O God my fortress. Amen.

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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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. God used Nathan to confront David about his sin. Has anyone ever confronted you about a specific sin or habit in your life? Who has permission to be your "Nathan"? If no one, how could you change that?
2. Compare David's confrontation with Nathan to Saul's confrontation with Samuel (p.163 and p. 142). What does David seem to understand that Saul does not?
3. Psalm 32 (p.164) 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? Use Psalm 32 as a prayer for guidance in bringing your sin before God.
4. After David's baby died, he arose and worshiped (p. 165). What does this say about the nature of worship? Have there been times you haven't felt like worshipping? What does David's story teach you about those times?
5. King David grieved over his son Absalom's death, even though Absalom had betrayed him. Why do you think he reacted this way? What does this say about David's character?
6. David was excited to give his time, money and effort to building a temple he would not even live to see. Why do you think he felt this way? Is giving easy or hard for you? Why?

PRAYER

God,
When I am tempted, make me aware of all the hurt my sin might cause. Please place in my life people who can speak the truth to me in love. Give me the humility and wisdom to hear such truth. Help me know that your forgiveness is total and complete. Create in me a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within me. Amen.



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1. If the LORD offered you anything you wanted, what would you ask for? Why?
2. Solomon was only 20 when he became king. One of his first acts as king was to ask God to give him wisdom. The Queen of Sheba traveled a long distance to experience the wisdom of Solomon, because it was so great. Who do you go to for wise advice? How can you take better advantage of those relationships?
3. At the beginning of the chapter, Solomon is humble, and looks to God for everything. By the end of the chapter, he is using political power and slave labor to maintain his reign. What led to this change? How did Solomon's promise to stay faithful to God go astray?
4. Pages 179-183 are excerpts from Solomon's wisdom in the book of Proverbs. Have you ever read through Proverbs? If so, what aspects of the wisdom stood out to you the most? Pray that you could put them into practice through God's guidance.
5. Despite Solomon's choice to follow other gods, God still shows mercy to Solomon in the end (p. 192). Why do you think God still deals kindly with Solomon? Have you seen God's mercy show up in your life despite your own failings? When?
6. God's people have finally become established in the land during Solomon's reign. During that time, God's presence moves from the Ark of the Covenant to an established temple, accessible to only the high priests. In Jesus Christ, access to God no longer has restrictions (Hebrews 10: 19-22). What does it mean to you to have a "full access pass" to God because of what Jesus has done?

PRAYER

God,
Thank you for the abundance You provide in my life. Help me know the ways that You have already made me rich beyond measure. Grow me in wisdom more and more each day to discover and fulfill the purpose to which You have called me. Amen.



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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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

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? Who else would you like to include in this circle?
2. This chapter is full of stories of conflict. Do you tend to avoid conflict, provoke it or address it head on? What lessons about conflict and conflict resolution can you learn from the stories in this chapter?
3. 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?
4. When the man of God spoke against Jeroboam, the king was outraged (p. 196). How do you receive correction?
5. The anger of the LORD is mentioned four times in this chapter. 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. 62)?
6. In the midst of these stories of conflict and idolatrous kings, God's upper story still reveals that he relentlessly pursues his people. How do you see God pursuing you when conflict and chaos seem to be a part of your life?

PRAYER

God,
Save me from the myth of self-promotion and importance, especially when it hurts and neglects others. Help me to be aware of when I am being tempted to compromise my loyalty to You. Help me see when my actions are tearing my life and relationships apart. Give me the humility to confess, the wisdom to repent, and a craving in my heart for You and no other. Amen.



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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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

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 he began to fear for his life. Why do you think this miracle was not enough for him?
3. What role did prayer play in Elijah's life? Read James 5:16-18. What made Elijah's prayer honorable before God? How do you experience prayer in your life? (See 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Galatians 3:6 for further insight.)
4. 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? Or what can you do to seek help if it is you?
5. After a dramatic series of events, God revealed himself to Elijah in an undramatic way. Why would God choose to dwell in the whisper? When have you experienced God's whisper in your life?
6. 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 tell you about God?

PRAYER

God,
Thank you for the messenger prophets you have placed in my life who always point me back to you and your ways of grace and truth. Thank you for being a God who is faithful to never let us go, but always correct us and call us back home. Help us see how we rebel against you, and give us courage to trust nothing but you. Amen.



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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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. The reigns of kings Hoshea and Hezekiah overlapped for about six years. Which king trusted God to be provider and protector for him and his people? Which king was stuck in the ways of this world? How do you know? What was the result?
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 stress or fear?
3. Isaiah lists several analogies that show God's love for his people (p. 227-228). Which ones are most reassuring to you?
4. Consider Isaiah's vision of the Lord in the temple. What made Isaiah so aware of his own sinful condition?
5. Isaiah thinks he is unworthy to be God's messenger because he is a sinner, but that doesn't stop God from using him. When has God broken through your feelings of unworthiness to use you to show love?
6. God used Isaiah to warn Judah of an imminent judgment. God also provided the promise of restoration through Isaiah. What specific promises (p. 227-228) might bring you comfort when you need it?

PRAYER

God,
Sometimes I can feel so far lost that there is no hope for me, that I'm way beyond Your reach and don't deserve your grace even though You promise it fully. Even when things are dark, help me know in the depth of my soul that You want more than anything to rescue me, even from my own messes. Help me know that Your love alone is the wellspring of life. Amen.



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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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. Where did Manasseh set up his altars and Asherah poles?
According to 1 Cor. 6:19-20, where is the temple of God now? What are the implications for you personally?
2. What does Manasseh's redemption tell you about God?
What does Manasseh's redemption tell you about how God responds to people?
3. Look up 2 Chronicles 33:14-20, 23. What was Manasseh's response to the grace of God? What do you think led Manasseh to change his ways? Have you ever been misguided in your actions and had to turn around (repent), or change your ways?
4. God told Ezekiel, "You must speak my words to them, whether they listen or fail to listen, for they are rebellious," (p. 236). Have you ever been fearful to speak the truth, but felt compelled to do so? Did you follow through? What were the results?
5. After the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah grieved for his beloved city (p. 243-245). What did Jeremiah believe was God's saving plan for humans in the midst of all of the devastation? What can you glean from seeing Jeremiah's lament and praise all mixed together in the midst of troubling circumstances?
6. List the specific promises that God says he will do for Israel (p. 246). According to the text, what is the result of God's Spirit "in you"? How does it affect your life to have the Spirit in you?

PRAYER

God,
When Israel and Judah were destroyed, the people thought all was lost, but instead You entered their emptiness to discipline them and bring them back to You. Enter the adversity of my life, oh Lord, that I may not be lost, but instead drawn straight into Your own heart. Your love for your children, and even me, a sinner, is simply amazing. Thank you, Jesus. Amen.



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1. Jerusalem and God's Temple were in ruins, and most of the Jews were living in exile during the time of Daniel. It is easy to see how one could lose faith. What helped them hold on to faith? What helps you hold on to faith when you experience difficulties?
2. What did Daniel's prayer life entail? What does your prayer life look like right now? Are there things you could learn from Daniel's witness? What might you commit to trying in the week ahead to increase your habit of prayer?
3. Look back at God's covenant with Abraham (p. 13 or Genesis 12:1-3.) How was it fulfilled through Daniel and his three friends? Which other promises of God's can you recall at this point in *The Story*? If you can't recall, flip back through the chapters and see if you can find some. Have God's promises changed at all over time? How have they held up under the test of time?
4. Compare the story of Daniel with the story of Joseph (Ch. 3). Do you view difficulties the way they did? Why or why not? When have you grown stronger in faith during a time of trial?
5. List the various ways God revealed his supernatural power in this chapter. What message did God's actions send to the exiles? When have you been overwhelmingly convinced that God is alive and at work in your life or in the lives of others?
6. Jeremiah's message (p. 260-261) was sent in a letter from Jerusalem to the exiles in Babylon. What was God's promise to the exiled community? What hope does this give you for times when difficulty and trials seem to prevail?

PRAYER

God,
 Sometimes in a sea of pressure to follow the ways of the world, it seems like I'm the only one who wants to do the right thing. I wonder if it's even possible to do the right thing, or if it's just easier to go along with everyone else. Help me know clearly the difference between Your way and the way of the world. Give me faith to trust Your guidance and provision, no matter the cost. Amen.



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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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. How did the 70-year exile from the Promised Land affect the ways in which the people of Israel responded to God? Have you experienced personal changes as a result of a tragic circumstance in your life?
2. When the temple was re-established, some were overjoyed and some were heartbroken because the new temple was no match to the glory of Solomon's temple. According to Haggai's second message (p. 267-68), how can we miss God's call in the present when we linger on the past? Where have you seen this happen in your life? What resolved your fears?
3. What did Israel's enemies do to undermine their efforts to rebuild their temple (p. 265-66)? When have you experienced a similar situation where someone tried to undermine something important to you? How did you respond?
4. Read page 266 and list the reasons the temple work had ceased. When the Israelites were weary, what did they begin to focus on? Do you struggle with misplaced priorities when you are weary? What are some ways you can refocus when this happens?
5. Haggai, the prophet, encouraged the people to get back to work on the temple building project that had stalled for 16 years (p. 266). Are there areas of your spiritual growth that have stalled out? Is there someone you could partner with to hold yourself accountable in this area? Pray about it and take action.
6. Review Zechariah's message of hope and promise. What did God promise the Israelites he would do? List the ways they were to respond to God's grace (p. 268-70). Zachariah claimed that people of other nations would see the Lord's work through the Israelites and, therefore, seek out the Lord themselves. Read Matthew 5:13-16. How is your life a sign - a light - for others to see God's work in this world?

PRAYER

God,
Thank you, thank you, thank you for being a God who delivers Your people. May I never take lightly your deliverance of me. Let me cling to Your rescuing arms so tightly that You define my whole being. Now that You have brought me back to You, may I never want to be anywhere else, but shaped in Your love. Amen.



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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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. Choose a few of these characters to consider: Queens Vashti and Esther, Mordecai, and Haman. What motivates their behavior? In what power do they trust and root their identities? Consider what motivates your behavior.
2. Mordecai seemed to have God's Upper Story in view when he sent word to Esther, "And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" When has God most recently placed you in a position to serve a greater purpose than you desired or realized? How did that make you feel?
3. Review the correspondence between Mordecai and Esther concerning an appeal to the king. What is the relationship between God's providence and our responsibility?
4. The book of Esther has been called the "godless book" because God's name is never mentioned. Prayer, the law, sacrifices and temple worship are also conspicuously absent. Yet ancient Israel included this book in their scripture because they saw God's Upper Story at work all over. Where can you find God's hand and heart at work? Where might God be powerfully at work in your life in a behind-the-scenes kind of way?
5. Briefly list all that Haman boasted of to his wife and friends. Why then was he not satisfied? What does this teach you about pride and discontentment?
6. How does the Lower Story of Esther fit into the covenant that God made with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3)? How does it fit with God's Upper Story of redemption?

PRAYER

God,
Thank you for the ways in which you are always at work in my life, regardless if I recognize it or not. Lord, let your spirit lead and guide me daily, that I may be open to follow you courageously as Esther did. Jesus, help me lay down my life to follow you always. Amen.



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THE STORY

READ THE STORY. EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE.

AS YOU READ CHAPTER 21

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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. Ezra “devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel” (p. 292). How has your own devotion to the study of God’s word changed since the beginning of *The Story*? What have been aha moments along the way?
2. Why did Nehemiah and Zerubbabel respond differently to opposition? How are you most likely to respond when you face opposition?
3. Why would Tobiah and Sanballat have been so threatened by the return of the Jews? The Jews had nearly nothing and returned to a land left devastated. What kind of character and faith would these returning Jews need to make the journey and stand against the intimidation of those like Tobiah and Sanballat?
4. Compare the “first exodus,” Exodus 11:1-3 and 12:35-36, with this second exodus, when God brought Israel back to the promised land. How can you tell that this was clearly God’s response to Ezra’s prayer?
5. Nehemiah demonstrates that faith is a partnership with God when he prayed for God’s protection and also posted guards. What similar experiences do you have, depending on God’s work and also working yourself?
6. Years after the walls had been rebuilt, the prophet Malachi was sent to correct the priests and the people (p. 302). What were they doing that dishonored God? Why does it matter whether we honor or dishonor God?

PRAYER

God,
Thank you for always calling me back to your Word for guidance and direction. Thank you that your Word is “a lamp for my feet, a light for my path” (Psalm 119:105). Lord, help me to draw near to you and your Word in faithful obedience through prayer and my everyday actions. Amen.



THE STORY

READ THE STORY. EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE.

AS YOU READ CHAPTER 22

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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. These verses in the Gospel of John reveal one of the most important beliefs. How does John 1:1-14, 18 (p. 309), help clarify the relationship between God and Jesus? Why is this so important?
2. What does it mean to you that God came to inhabit human flesh in Jesus?
3. Compare Mary's song with Hannah's praise song in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 (p. 131). How would you describe these women's experiences of God's Upper Story entering their Lower Story?
4. Joseph had a hard choice: to follow the conventional rules of upright religion or trust God's instruction to him, even if it meant scandal. In what ways have you experienced what's "religiously proper" conflict with what God calls you to do?
5. Herod was not the first evil ruler to commit, or attempt, infanticide against Hebrew babies. What other examples can you recall? What does this teach you about God's Upper Story plan of redemption? What does it teach you about God's plan of redemption in your story?
6. The text tells us "everyone who heard [Jesus] was amazed" (p. 315). What do you suppose it was that surprised them? In what ways has Jesus amazed you this week?

PRAYER

God,
Thank you for never giving up on having a relationship with your people and for making it possible through your son, Jesus. Thank you, God, that you know I need a God of flesh and bones to redeem me and all the hurts and struggles of this earthly life. Help me to invite you into my life in courageous ways, just as Mary did in Jesus' birth story. Amen.



THE STORY

READ THE STORY. EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE.

AS YOU READ CHAPTER 23

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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. Review the temptation of Jesus (p. 322). Then look up Hebrews 2:14-18, 4:14-16. How does Jesus' temptation benefit you personally?
2. When Jesus went to John to be baptized, John's well-intentioned humility turned out to be limiting self-talk, and John almost missed an incredible event in Jesus' ministry. What limiting self-talk do you do that keeps you from experiencing God's power working through you?
3. Nicodemus gets caught up in technical language, yet with very simple words Jesus unfolds to him the deep wonders of God's Kingdom. What tiny technical religious things have been stumbling blocks to you experiencing the simple yet profound wonder of life with God?
4. Why is the Samaritan woman so taken off-guard and skeptical that Jesus would speak to her? What issues make you skeptical that Jesus would come just for you, or keep you from extending Jesus' love to others that may not be like you?
5. What do you make of Jesus' action toward demon possession in Jesus' day, and in our own day?
6. What sign does Jesus give John's disciples that Jesus is, indeed, the Messiah? What does that mean for the nature of God's Kingdom on earth, and for us, Jesus' church?

PRAYER

Gracious God,

It is amazing that you show up in such surprising ways. Help me to see the stories of Jesus' life as ways you responded to the world around you. Help me keep my eyes focused on you, so that I, too, can respond to all of my encounters in the world with your eyes and through your Spirit. Amen.



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AS YOU READ CHAPTER 24

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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. Review the story of the soils (p. 335-336). At what points of your life has your faith been each kind of soil? Where is your faith right now? (And, no matter what, take heart, because God relentlessly sows into all types over and over.)
2. Who do the shepherd and the woman in the lost sheep and lost coin parables represent? What do they value (p. 337)? Compare what God values in these parables to what the Pharisees value (Luke 11:42-43, 16:14). Has your heart aligned more with God's or with the Pharisees' in the past week?
3. Jesus' miracles were not random; they showed his power over different forces in this world. What forces did he conquer? What areas of your life do you need to surrender to Jesus' care and victory?
4. Jews and Samaritans in Jesus' day were NOT on friendly terms. What does Jesus do by using a Samaritan to demonstrate the ideal neighbor? What type of people are hard for you to imagine God using to demonstrate his love?
5. Jesus tells parable after parable to teach about the Kingdom of God and how participants in the Kingdom are supposed to live. Why does Jesus tell stories to teach instead of simply explaining in black-and-white terms? Which parable is most meaningful to you? What does it say to you?
6. What does The Lord's Prayer mean to you?

PRAYER

Lord God,

In Jesus you spoke words that weren't always received well or were misunderstood. Help me to tune my ears and my heart to hear you speak in my life, both in the places where I need to change and hear your hard truth, and in the places where you speak encouragement and unconditional love. Open my eyes and my ears to you always. Amen.



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AS YOU READ CHAPTER 25

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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. Jesus' audience thought he was going to establish his kingdom by force (how else would a Messiah overcome the Romans?), but he strongly rebuked Peter for such thinking and showed that his kingdom wields a much different power – the power of love to the unlovable and sacrifice.
2. What stories do you have of God transforming how you think about Kingdom power? During the Festival of Tabernacles, a celebration of God's provision while Israel wandered in the desert, Jesus claimed to be the way of salvation. Why would he choose this festival to make this claim? How has Jesus shown you that he is your provision for everything, even eternal life?
3. Look up 1 John 1:5-7, 2:8-11. What did Jesus mean when he said, "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (p. 357)? What does this look like for a Christian living a typical daily life? Does it mean that we will never experience pain or hardship?
4. Why did Jesus delay in going to Mary and Martha when Lazarus was sick? What does this tell you about God's timing and our ability to understand it? Does this relieve or intensify your own anxieties and concerns?
5. Three times Jesus predicted his death and resurrection (p. 354, 355 & 362; Mark 8:31, 9:30-31, 10:32-34) and followed each with a lesson on discipleship (p. 354; Mark 8:34-38, 9:33-37, 10:35-45). What principles of discipleship did Jesus teach, and why would he relate them to his suffering and death? What is the relationship between belief and following?
6. After Jesus entered Jerusalem as the rightful King of Israel, he cleansed the temple because some had turned it from a house of prayer into a place to extort the poor and a place so "holy" the lame and sinners were kept out, excluded altogether (p. 364). Suppose Jesus walked into our church. With what would he be most pleased? What corrections might he make?

PRAYER

Dear Jesus,

You spoke so many times about who you are: the Bread of Life, the great I AM, the light of the world, etc. Help me to see who you are more and more as I read more of your story. Help me to understand who you are in the Father, so that I can continue to see who I am in you more clearly. God, thank you for claiming me as your child through Jesus. Amen.



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THE STORY

READ THE STORY. EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE.

AS YOU READ CHAPTER 26

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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. While in the upper room with His disciples, Jesus knew his death was imminent. He was with the men, his friends, he'd spent three years teaching, yet he knew soon one would betray him, one who deny him and all would abandon him. Then he says, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." The disciples were anything but worthy, and still Jesus gives them this gift of life. How does reading this story impact what you experience in communion?
2. What was Jesus trying to teach the disciples when he washed their feet? What does this tell you about God's kingdom? Would it be easier for you to wash someone else's feet or for someone else to wash your feet? What is it, for Peter and for us, that makes the servant life of Jesus hard to accept?
3. What can we learn about prayer from Jesus' prayers at the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross?
4. Describe Peter's volatile relationship with Jesus. What lessons from him can you apply to your own relationship with the Lord?
5. Jesus' betrayal, arrest, trial, crucifixion and death are also known as the "Passion." Describe your most dramatic experience of the Passion. What was it? Scripture? A movie? A play? A Good Friday worship service? What did you think, and how did it make you feel? How does it feel to know that Jesus knowingly did all of this for you?
6. "It is finished," (John 19:30, p. 380) could also be translated as "fulfilled," "accomplished" or "brought to purpose." Very different than "It's over" in many ways, Jesus' last words are a declaration that something new is just beginning. What do you think this new thing is (see Jeremiah 31:34 and Ezekiel 36:26-28)? What new things has Jesus done in you through your faith journey?

PRAYER

God,
In your hour of darkness, you took my sin upon yourself. Forgive me, Lord, for the ways I have fallen into sin, and free me from the things that draw me away from you. Lord, shine your light and your grace into my life so that I may more wholeheartedly serve you as you did for your followers, even in your darkest hour. Amen.



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THE STORY

READ THE STORY. EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE.

AS YOU READ CHAPTER 27

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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. Read about the disciples on the road to Emmaus (p. 384-385). What part of that story stands out to you the most? How has Jesus' presence appeared out of the blue to you?
2. Thomas is frequently referred to as "doubting Thomas" (p. 386) because he refused to believe his fellow disciples' testimonies. Then, a week after the resurrection, he confessed, "My Lord and my God!" Do you think Thomas' reputation is justified, or do you think he has been labeled unjustly? Why or why not? How has doubt played a helpful role in your spiritual journey?
3. The night before He was crucified, Jesus taught Peter and the other disciples about abiding in him (John 15:1-5). How does this teaching relate to the fishermen's miraculous catch and Jesus' call on Peter's life (p. 386-387)? Reflecting on these events, how do you know that you can carry out the mission God has for your life? What is that mission?
4. What does Jesus' Great Commission on the mountain in Galilee require of all his disciples (p. 388)? What are the various ways you can obey this command? What is involved in making disciples? What is a disciple anyway?
5. What parallels can you find between Peter's denial story (John 18:17-27) and his restoration story (p. 387-388, John 21:15-23)? What does Peter's restoration reveal about Jesus' heart? How does that encourage your own ups and downs with Jesus?
6. Now consider how all the different people reacted to the news that Jesus was risen from the dead. When did the living Jesus become real to you? Do you have any treasured Easter worship traditions or memories?

PRAYER

Resurrected God,

Thank you for conquering death in your resurrection and providing an eternal relationship with you. Lord, help me to see the ways you are alive and active in my own life. Help me to see when you are present, just as you helped the disciples on the road to Emmaus. God, help me to be a witness to the ways you live in me through all that I do and say when I encounter others. Amen.



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THE STORY

READ THE STORY. EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE.

AS YOU READ CHAPTER 28

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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. Just 50 days earlier, Peter denied Christ and cowered in fear and shame. Now, in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost, we find Peter preaching in the first megachurch, facing down Jewish religious leaders and noticeably full of courage (p. 391-392). Describe the "new" Peter. How do you account for this change? When have you experienced this kind of power? And what prevents you from experiencing this kind of power?
2. Read Acts 2:44-45 (p. 392). The Christians were giving to those who had any kind of need. Notice that the Christians weren't giving to each other because they felt the need to "give to the poor," but because all the believers now viewed each other as family, and what else do you do with family but take care of each other? How does being brothers and sisters in Christ transform how you view others in need?
3. The early believers "enjoyed the favor of all the people" (p. 392) and "were highly regarded by the people" (p. 395)? Yet, Peter and the apostles clearly stated they only cared about what God thought of them, not people (p. 396). What are the results when we strive to please people? Why is it that when we strive only to please God, others around us are transformed, too?
4. Cornelius and his household's conversion dramatically changed the direction of the church. What began as a Jewish messianic movement would now cross ethnic barriers. Christians don't lose their earthly identity (Jewish, Greek, American, etc.), but our earthly identity is intertwined and superseded by our heavenly identity. How is it a blessing and challenge that together all Christians are united in Christ's body and yet mixed with a vast diversity of earthly identities?
5. The church grew rapidly from the beginning even in spite of growing opposition and persecution. What factors might account for such growth?
6. For most Christians, the Holy Spirit is the least understood person of the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Spirit). List all you learned about the Holy Spirit from this chapter. What did you learn about the empowerment of the Holy Spirit for your own life?

PRAYER

Dear Jesus,

Thank you for not leaving me alone but giving the gift of your Holy Spirit that lives and breathes in me! Lord, let your Holy Spirit guide me in all that I say and do on a daily basis. Help me to find ways to share your saving message with others. Provide the guidance and confidence I need to witness to others about you. Amen.



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THE STORY

READ THE STORY. EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE.

AS YOU READ CHAPTER 29

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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. As Paul and his companions traveled from city to city, many received their message that Jesus was the Messiah, but many did not. Trace each stop on the journey. How did those who opposed Paul feel? How did they act? Why? What were they afraid of? How does fear play a role in our own culture's experience of faith? Your faith?
2. What did you learn about the relationship between faith and suffering from Paul's life and the church at Thessalonica (p. 416-419)? How might this help you cope as you endure your own trials and suffering?
3. What differences do you find in Paul's message to the Jews in the synagogue (p. 408) as compared to his message to the Gentiles (p. 411)? Discuss applications we might make today for reaching different groups of people with the same gospel.
4. One of the key teachings Paul carried to each city was how we are "made free by Christ" (John 8:32). However, in places like Corinth, people were living quite "free" already, believing freedom means self-indulgence. How does Paul correct this misunderstanding of freedom by teaching about the body of Christ and love (p. 426-427, 431)? What do you think freedom in Christ means?
5. Paul says to the Galatians, "no one who relies on the law is justified before God" (p. 430) and, "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep step in the Spirit" (p. 431). What is the difference between trying to keep the law on your own power and letting the Spirit work the fruits of the Spirit and love through you?
6. Romans 5:1-2 (p. 433) is among the most powerful summaries of the good news of Jesus (Romans 5:8 isn't bad either!). What does having "peace with God" mean to you? How does it feel? How do you experience it?

PRAYER

Gracious God,

Thank you for providing Paul's life as an example of one who courageously lived out your call. Lord, help me to live faithfully as a witness to your work on earth. God, give me courage when I need it most to be obedient to your call in my life. Help me to live a life that follows you, not the world, in all I do and say, even when it is risky and there is resistance. Amen.



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THE STORY

READ THE STORY. EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE.

AS YOU READ CHAPTER 30

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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. Review Paul's personal testimony that he gave to the Jews from the steps of the barracks (Acts 21:37-22:21, p. 442-443). What's your story of God getting a hold of you? How do you feel sharing your story with others? What difficulties do you have sharing? What would help you to be more bold?
2. When Paul begins to speak to the Jews, they suddenly become quiet and listen intently. But then they soon fly into an outrage. Why do they listen? What makes them so upset?
3. Review Ephesians 2:1-10 (p. 453). Make a before and after list of those things that are true of all people before salvation and after salvation. Name at least three outwardly observable ways that you can apply these truths to your life because you are in Christ. "Now that I am in Christ, I am no longer _____."
4. Review Ephesians 5:21-33 (p. 455). What does Paul teach us about the relationship between Jesus and the church? Why is the image of a husband and his bride helpful to imagine Christ and the church? By Christ's example, how does Paul challenge human notions of power and authority in relationships (see also Mark 9:35)?
5. Look up Romans 5:3-5 (p. 433-434) and 2 Timothy 3:10-17 (p. 457). What has Paul's life taught you about perseverance? What might perseverance look like for you today? When have you received God's strength to persevere? Where do you still need it? What gives you courage and patience to keep going forward?
6. Much like in the story of Queen Ester, God is mightily at work behind the scenes in the details of Paul's journey. What evidence of God's grace and sovereignty can you find in Paul's arrests, trials and travels? What does that mean for you in your own journey of faith and life?

PRAYER

Lord,
You grow your Kingdom one relationship at a time. Thank you that Paul's connections to the churches he established continued in words of support, encouragement and challenge through his letters. God, help me to establish healthy relationships with individuals who can spiritually "parent" me and those whom I can support in their faith. Help me to build purposeful relationships that further your Kingdom work here on earth, just as Paul did. Amen.

THE STORY

READ THE STORY. EXPERIENCE THE BIBLE.

AS YOU READ CHAPTER 31

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. Bible readings that correspond with this week's reading can be found on pages 494-495.

1. As you study this final chapter of *The Story* throughout your week, develop a description in your journal of God the Father and of Jesus the Son. For example, on p. 462, Jesus Christ is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Skim through the gospels. What descriptions do you find there? What portraits and descriptions of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are most meaningful to you?
2. Jesus had a message for each of the churches in Asia (p. 459). Identify the problem and the solution in each church. What was promised to the one who overcomes it? How could we apply the messages to these Asian churches to ourselves today?
3. Read Matthew 24:29-44, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 and Titus 2:11-14. Do we know when Jesus will return? Can we be confident that Jesus has not abandoned us and will indeed return? Can we be confident that Jesus will be victorious, no matter how dark and chaotic the world around us becomes? In light of God's victory, what does it mean to you to "stay awake"?
4. Review Revelation 4-5 (p. 463-465). What strikes you about this scene of heavenly worship? What do you think it would be like to be there? What glimpses of that worship do you experience here on earth?
5. How does Revelation describe the New Heaven, New Earth and New Jerusalem? Compare that description back to God's first creation in Genesis 1-2. What do you look forward to the most when death and evil are no more (p. 467)?
6. Now reflect on the whole journey of *The Story*. How are you more familiar with the Bible? How are you more engaged in your faith life? How are you more connected with the church and God's mission for your life?
7. What is the next step after *The Story* for you?

PRAYER

God,
Thank you that you are the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end! Lord, thank you for the great gift of your story and the ways I have grown in knowledge of who you are and what you desire for each of us in the past 31 weeks. Lord, help me to lean on this new understanding of your story so that my life might reflect more and more of your story every day. Thank you that you continually reach out to us and provide an everlasting relationship with you through your son, Jesus Christ! Amen.