

8-SESSION TEEN BIBLE STUDY

REVISED BY

MIKE & DANIEL BLACKABY

EXPERIENCING
GOD

Knowing & Doing
the Will of God



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About the Authors



MIKE BLACKABY grew up in Alberta, Canada, where he learned to snowboard and play hockey on frozen ponds. At 18 years old, Mike felt God calling him to do something that terrified him: become a pastor. He enrolled and graduated from Ambrose University before moving to North Carolina to get a master's degree from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. From 2010-2018, he was a pastor for young adults near Atlanta, Georgia, while also completing his PhD in Worldview and Apologetics from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He and his brother, Daniel, have co-authored two books together: *When Worlds Collide: Standing Up and Stepping Out in an Anti-God Culture* and *Seven Steps to Knowing, Doing, and Experiencing the Will of God: for Teens*. In 2018, Mike and his family moved to Vancouver Island in British Columbia to start a new church in the beautiful city of Victoria. He loves fantasy books, espresso, and playing music, as well as watching cooking shows with his wife, Sarah. Mike and Sarah have three young sons and a baby daughter.

ABOUT THE ORIGINAL AUTHORS

Experiencing God was originally published in 1990 and written by Henry Blackaby and Claude King. Henry is Mike and Daniel's grandfather. Their father, Richard Blackaby, has also made revisions over the years. *Experiencing God* has sold over seven million copies and been translated into over forty-five languages.



DANIEL BLACKABY is a storyteller and a lover of the creative arts. He is passionate about encouraging Christian artists to leverage their God-given creativity for His glory. He currently serves as the Director of Online Classes and NextGen Initiatives at Blackaby Ministries International. He speaks on cultural engagement, apologetics, and reaching the younger generations. Driven by his passion for pop culture and the arts, he launched The Collision—a multimedia ministry aimed at equipping Christians to navigate, engage, and contribute to today’s culture. He has authored several books, including *When Worlds Collide: Stepping Up and Standing Out in an Anti-God Culture* and the imaginative fantasy trilogy *The Lost City Chronicles*. He holds a PhD in Christianity and the Arts and a ThM in Philosophy, Worldview, and Apologetics from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He currently lives near Atlanta, Georgia, with his wife, Sarah, twin boys, Emerson and Logan, and a scruffy dog named Bilbo.

How to Use

Experiencing God provides a guided process for individuals and groups. This Bible study book includes eight weeks of Group Discussion and seven weeks of Personal Study. A leader guide is also provided to prepare those who are leading students through this journey.

FOR STUDENTS

Right away you will notice that this study might be different from other studies you've participated in. It is not designed for you to sit down and read from cover to cover. It is designed for you to study carefully, understand, and apply biblical principles to your life. It is about experiencing God, day by day, moment by moment.

To get the most out of this book, take your time by studying only one day at a time. Don't try to rush through several days at once. Try not to get behind and play catch-up by cramming a full week into one day. You need time to let the new information and ideas sink in. You are wanting to experience a person—Jesus. Time, focus, and meditation are the best way to allow the Holy Spirit to work in your life.

FOR LEADERS

Regardless of the day of the week your group meets, each week concludes with a group discussion to review the material from the four days of personal study and to unpack what students have been learning. This group time is designed to include video teaching and group discussion. Videos are available for purchase or rent at lifeway.com/experiencinggod.

Each group study uses the following format to facilitate simple yet meaningful interaction among students with God's Word and the video teaching.

WATCH

Begin by watching the video teaching. The first week will serve as an introduction to the study. The videos that follow will expand on the material students have been learning in their personal study throughout the week. The following weeks will each cover one of the Seven Realities of Experiencing God.

DISCUSSION

Each week you will have an opportunity to discuss what students have learned in the video teaching and in the personal study days throughout the week. We've provided questions to help encourage discussion. Don't feel obligated to ask them all, and be open to discussing elements of the video or personal study not presented in the questions.

GOING DEEPER

This section includes Scripture, questions, and group activities that invite students to explore the content on a deeper level.

PREVIEW VIDEO

At the end of each group discussion, be sure to watch the preview video for the next week. This helps build anticipation and introduces students to the next reality that they will be exploring in the personal study days.

PRAYER AND DISMISSAL

Close each week with prayer. Take note of any prayer requests and ask students to give updates about how they've noticed God at work in their lives.

PERSONAL STUDY

Four days of personal study are provided each week to take students deeper into Scripture and to introduce the content that will be discussed in the Group Discussion. With Biblical teaching, interactive questions, relevant quotes, and creative activities, these sections challenge individuals to grow in their understanding of God's Word and will make the realities of experiencing God come alive.

LEADER GUIDE

At the back of this book, you'll find a Leader Guide that will help you prepare for each session. Use this guide to gain a broader understanding of the content and to learn ways you can engage with students at different levels of life-changing discussion.



INTRODUCTION TO
EXPERIENCING
GOD

In C. S. Lewis's book *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, three children are staring at an image of a ship at sea. The picture is unspectacular. It is just hanging on a wall, still and distant. Suddenly, it comes to life and the three characters are magically drawn into the frame. They are no longer staring at an inanimate portrait; they are inside it. They've gone from observers to characters in the story.

When you think about your faith, you may feel like the children staring at a picture. Perhaps it seems unspectacular and lifeless. God may feel distant. How do you go from being an observer of Christianity to an active participant in the rich world of faith you find in the Bible? You do so by experiencing God personally.

You might then ask the next logical question, "How do I experience God?" We're glad you asked. That's what this Bible study is all about.

Thirty years ago, our grandfather Henry Blackaby wrote *Experiencing God*. He developed it throughout years of walking with God in his own life and ministry. The truths in his book have impacted people across the world, from remote villages to professional sports teams to the White House. Now we want to help you discover those same timeless truths.

Experiencing God in your daily life is not something you observe from a distance; it requires participation. It's not a formula or an algorithm. God cannot be manipulated or predicted.

Take Moses. He spent the first forty years of his life in luxury, a Hebrew slave who was adopted into the royal family as a prince of Egypt. Then he killed a man and fled for his life into the wilderness.

Forty years later, God used a burning bush in the desert to get his attention. Unprepared and unqualified, Moses obeyed God and followed Him back to Egypt. The task God called Moses to do was too big for him to accomplish on his own. He could never be successful by staying on the outside. He had to be ready and willing to obey and follow God.

We're excited for you to join us on this journey. These next eight weeks can change your life. They can transform you from a passive observer in your faith into an active participant in the most exciting adventure of your life.

Are you ready to experience God? Let's jump into the picture and see what spectacular story God is unfolding.

WHILE YOU WATCH

As you watch the video, use the space provided to take notes or write down any thoughts and questions you may have.

DISCUSSION

Each week you will have an opportunity to discuss what you have learned from the video and in your personal study days. Spend time discussing the questions below as you prepare your hearts and minds to begin this Bible study.

What are the differences between knowing about something and experiencing something?

How would you describe the way your generation approaches religion, faith, and spirituality?

What about your family?

What about yourself?

What are some questions, doubts, or other obstacles that keep people from experiencing God?

What do you think keeps you from experiencing God?

What are some ways to overcome these obstacles?

What are you hoping to get out of this Bible study over the next eight weeks?

GOING DEEPER

As you begin this journey toward experiencing God, let's look at how several characters in the Bible began their own journeys following Jesus. John 1:35-42 tells the story about how Jesus called His first followers:

³⁵ The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, ³⁶ and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" ³⁷ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸ Jesus turned and saw them following and said to them, "What are you seeking?" And they said to him, "Rabbi" (which means Teacher), "where are you staying?" ³⁹ He said to them, "Come and you will see." So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. ⁴⁰ One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. ⁴¹ He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which means Christ). ⁴² He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John. You shall be called Cephas" (which means Peter).

What stands out to you when you see how Jesus responded to the first two disciples that approached Him?

Why do you think Jesus told them to "come and see" rather than giving them a direct answer to their question?

Is it helpful for you to picture your personal faith as a journey you take with Jesus? Why or why not?

Continue reading the story below (John 1:43-51):

⁴³ The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." ⁴⁴ Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵ Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." ⁴⁶ Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." ⁴⁷ Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" ⁴⁸ Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." ⁴⁹ Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" ⁵⁰ Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." ⁵¹ And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

What are some common themes or similarities you notice between the two Bible stories you just read?

Why do you think Philip told Nathanael to "come and see," rather than just explaining everything himself? Why might this be better for Nathanael?

What would it look like in your own life to "come and see" who Jesus is? If you are already a believer, what did it look like for you to "come and see" who Jesus is?

What are the benefits of going on a faith journey along with other people, like these first disciples did and like you will be doing with your group during this Bible study?

PREVIEW VIDEO

Watch the short preview video introducing *Reality 1: God is Always at Work Around You*.

PRAYER & DISMISSAL

As a group, share any prayer requests and spend time in prayer. You may want to write these requests below as a reminder to pray for the people in your group throughout the week.



REALITY #1

God Is Always at Work

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it."

GENESIS 28:16

Then Elisha prayed and said, "O LORD, please open his eyes that he may see." So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

2 KINGS 6:17

But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working ... Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing."

JOHN 5:17,19

PART OF A BIGGER PICTURE

As a teenager, I (Daniel) suffered from severe insomnia. I'd lay awake until almost five in the morning and would sometimes go three to four days without sleep. I tried everything. I was even examined by sleep doctors at professional clinics. Nothing helped.

Several years went by. I was exhausted, lonely, and confused. Didn't God love me? Didn't He want me to sleep? Couldn't I serve Him better if I was well-rested? One night at 3:00 a.m., I broke down and cried out to God, asking Him to reveal Himself and show me He hadn't forgotten me.

A few days later, I received a letter. A friend had written to encourage me and let me know that God loves me. I later discovered that on the same night I had prayed, she had awakened from a deep sleep and felt compelled to write to me—at exactly 3:00 a.m. Not only had God heard my prayer, but He was answering at the same time I was asking.

Her letter ended by wondering whether this was all part of a bigger picture that we couldn't see. Several months later at summer camp that picture was revealed a little more clearly. Our church gathered to share and pray and I asked everyone to pray for my insomnia. Right away, several people spoke up.

One guy had struggled with crippling depression all year. Early one morning he was preparing to commit suicide, but he decided to reach out to at least one person before he followed through. He called the only person he thought might still be awake at that hour—me. He concluded, "If Daniel hadn't been awake to answer my call, I would be dead today."

A sixteen-year-old girl shared next. Late at night, after a bad breakup, she had been consumed by suicidal thoughts. She needed to talk to someone, but who? Then she saw that, surprisingly, one person was still active in her online messenger. Me, again. She concluded, "Had Daniel not been online that night, I might not be alive today."

Several others shared similar stories. I had been focused on my own needs. I had prayed for God to do what I thought was best, and when He didn't, I wondered whether He was real or cared about me. That night at summer camp, I realized God had been at work all around me the entire time. His plans were far bigger than I could see at the time. I wanted better sleep; God wanted to save lives! God was at work, even when He seemed absent, and He wanted to include me. As we will see in the first reality of this Bible study, He wants to include you too.

Who Is God?

“And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

John 17:3

DAY 1

IS ANYBODY OUT THERE?

There is a scene in the film *The Avengers* where the Incredible Hulk grabs the villain Loki—a deity in both the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Norse mythology—and smashes him around like a toy doll. Afterward, with a laugh, the Hulk says, “Puny god!”¹ The idea that we, with all our scientific advancements, could replace God is not a new concept. In 1966, a now-famous *Time* magazine cover asked, “Is God Dead?” Many people believed that as society became more technologically advanced, we would leave God behind like an ancient artifact: something to admire from a previous historical age, but not necessary for the present.

Actor Daniel Radcliffe once said, “I’m an atheist, but I’m very relaxed about it. I don’t preach my atheism, but I have a huge amount of respect for people [...] who do.”² Radcliffe is most famous for starring in the Harry Potter films and seemed to be expressing a view that it might be fun to pretend to live in a magical world, but real life just isn’t like that. He is not alone in how he feels.

Despite all of this skepticism, a general belief in God remains high in North America. In many parts of the world, Christianity is rapidly growing. How can there be both deep skepticism and growing faith happening in the world at the same?

What do you believe about God?

Ask yourself two crucial questions:

1. Does God exist?
2. If so, what kind of God is He?

FAITH DIAGNOSTICS

We encourage you to answer the questions throughout this book honestly. Don’t worry about what you think the “right” answer is. Write down what you really think.

Let's begin by taking a quick diagnostic of what you do (or do not) believe:

1. On a scale of 1-5, how open are you to the possibility that there is a spiritual world beyond what you can see, taste, or touch?
1 2 3 4 5
2. If there is something "out there," what do you think it's like?
3. On a scale of 1-5, how confident are you in what you currently believe?
1 2 3 4 5
4. Do you live in a home where religion, faith, or spirituality is valued?
Y/N If yes, how?
5. Do you wish your family was *more* or *less* religious or spiritual? Why?
6. What do you think this phrase means: "Spiritual but not religious."
If this statement describes you, why?

A GOD-SHAPED HOLE

Belief in a God or gods is the human default. Cultures throughout history always started out religious and only later became atheistic (sometimes by force). What is it within us that desires to know a reality beyond what we experience every day?

Blaise Pascal was a famous scientist and philosopher who invented and built the first calculator in 1642 when he was just a teenager. He believed that each person has a God-shaped space in their heart that only He can fill, like the perfect piece to a puzzle.

In Romans 1:19-20, Paul said we can know some things about God simply by observing the world around us:

¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

"At this moment it seems as though science will never be able to raise the curtain on the mystery of creation. For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries."³

—Robert Jastrow

"There is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary position."⁴

—Blaise Pascal

If there is a God, and if He created the world, then what “clues” can you see in His creation that point to Him? List the first three that come to mind:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Sometimes we encounter things that make us feel small in comparison, take our breath away, or inspire us to be a better person. Have you ever experienced a feeling like these? When was it?

WHO IS GOD?

The Bible is not simply a manual on “how to be a good person.” Instead, it is largely the account of how God has revealed Himself to people in history. The biblical God is radically different from what other cultures believed about their gods. Genesis 11:1-9 tells the famous “Tower of Babel” story. This tower was likely a ziggurat, a tall, hollow building shaped like a stair-stepped pyramid. It was meant for gods to use as a stairway to descend from heaven to earth. It was empty inside except the room on top, which might contain a bed, food, and other items to entice a god to leave heaven and visit earth. But the God we read about in the Bible took the initiative and came to people without being summoned in any way.

God most fully revealed Himself in a personal way through Jesus in the New Testament. Colossians 1:15 tells us that Jesus was the “image of the invisible God.” If nature gives us clues that God exists, then Jesus shows us more specifically who this God is. If you want to know what God is like, you should look to Jesus. Jesus Himself claimed, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

IN SUMMARY

- People are naturally religious or spiritual.
- Nature provides clues to God's existence.
- The God of the Bible is unique among the other religions of the world.
- Jesus reveals to us most clearly what God is like.

PREPARE FOR THE GROUP DISCUSSION

One thing that stood out to me today is:

One question I have based on today's study is:

CLOSING PRAYER

God, if You are there, please reveal Yourself to me this week. Help me to experience You as I pray and read verses from the Bible. Help me to have an open mind as I search for what is true.

God's Grand Narrative

I remember the days of old; I meditate on all that you have done; I ponder the work of your hands.

Psalm 143:5

A DIVINE DIRECTOR

I (Daniel) once toured the backlot of Warner Brothers Studios. It was amazing to see the different sound stages, props, and sets that were used to create so many great movies. The highlight came when I glanced across the lunchroom to see director Christopher Nolan (*Dark Knight* trilogy, *Inception*, *Tenet*) eating just a few tables away.

A skilled movie director has a vision for a story and the ability to oversee the cast and crew to fulfill it. A blockbuster film requires as many as three thousand crew members all working together to achieve the director's goals.

God is like a director of a massive story playing out on a universal scale throughout history. He created the world with the intention that humanity would live in harmony with each other and their Creator. But humanity rebelled against their Creator, desiring to sit in the director's chair (see Gen. 3). Here's the good news: God did not abandon His creative project! The Bible tells us how God has been drawing people back to Himself, all leading up to Jesus—the hero of the whole story. Jesus's death paid the penalty for our rebellion and His resurrection means the end of the story is one of hope. Ultimately, His sacrifice brings us back into a right relationship with God.

BIBLICAL STORYBOARDING

Part of the process of making a movie is creating a “storyboard,” sketches that demonstrate how the whole story fits together from start to finish. We've listed some of the big “scenes” in the biblical story. In the space provided on page 22, sketch out a simple storyboard for three to five of the scenes listed. Pick the ones that stand out to you the most. Don't worry if you're not a great artist!

- 1 God creates the universe (**Gen. 1–2**).
- 2 Humanity rebels against God (**Gen. 3**).
- 3 God judges humans using a flood, but saves Noah’s family in an ark (**Gen. 6–9**).
- 4 God reveals himself to Abram and promises to make his family a great nation (**Gen. 12:1–9**).
- 5 Abram’s ancestors become slaves in Egypt. God hears their cries and, in the form of a burning bush, calls Moses (**Ex. 3**).
- 6 God does miracles through Moses to rescue His people and parts the waters of the Red Sea bringing His people through safely (**Ex. 7–14**).
- 7 God delivers the Ten Commandments as laws for His people (**Ex. 20:1–20**).
- 8 Joshua leads the people into the promised land and conquers the city of Jericho by marching around it seven times (**Joshua 1–7**).
- 9 God chooses a teenage shepherd named David to become king, and his faith leads him to defeat a giant (**1 Sam. 16–17**).
- 10 David’s son Solomon builds a great temple to worship God (**1 Kings 6**).
- 11 God’s people are defeated by the nations of Assyria, then Babylon, and many of them are taken captive to these foreign lands (**2 Kings 17; 25**).
- 12 God sends an angel to a young girl named Mary to tell her that she will give birth to the Son of God (**Luke 1:26–38**).
- 13 At the age of 30, Jesus gathers twelve disciples and spends three years healing and teaching (**Matt.; Mark; Luke; John**).
- 14 Jesus is crucified on a cross but is miraculously raised from the dead three days later (**Matt. 27–28; Mark 15–16; Luke 23–24; John 18–20**).
- 15 The disciples take the message of Jesus (the gospel) around the world (**Acts**).

“Literally everything in the Bible is about [Jesus]. The Bible can only be understood if it is seen to be about him.”⁴

—Timothy Keller

Take a look at your artistry! Can you see how God has been telling one big story throughout history? Based on these scenes and pictures, what major themes do you see?

In what ways does the whole story fit together and point towards a single goal?

GOD'S WILL

All of these stories ultimately point to Jesus (John 5:39; Luke 24:27). Jesus knew His place in God's great story: "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my will, but the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38). Jesus's purpose was to accomplish His heavenly Father's will. The word "will" means the desires and goals that direct someone's actions.

What was God's will? Jesus tells us that too: "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:40). God's will is to bring people back into a relationship with Himself.

We often start with the question, "What is God's will for me?" rather than simply, "What is God's will?" Unlike Jesus, we tend to make it all about us rather than all about God. This self-centeredness can cause us to miss what God is doing. It also fails to acknowledge God as the director. Your personal story is important, but it is also part of a bigger story that stretches all the way back to the beginning of time. God is the director of the greatest story ever told, and it is still unfolding all around you.

Do you see yourself as having a role in God's story? Why or why not?

IN SUMMARY

- God has been active throughout all of history.
- The stories in the Bible all point to Jesus.
- Your life is part of a much bigger story that began at creation and continues today.
- God's will is to bring people back into a relationship with Himself.

PREPARE FOR THE GROUP DISCUSSION

One thing that stood out to me today is:

One question I have based on today's study is:

CLOSING PRAYER

Thank you, God, for the amazing story You have been directing since the beginning of time. Open my eyes to see this story unfolding around me this week.

Characters In a Story

"...where have you come from and where are you going?"

Genesis 16:8

DAY 3

STORIES AND STORYTELLERS

Humans are naturally drawn to stories. From the ancient cave drawings to the latest hit novels and movies, we've been telling stories for thousands of years. Stories give people something in common, and they have allowed us to come together to accomplish more than any other species on the planet.⁵ In fact, even when we go to sleep, our brains continue to tell us stories.

If you had to describe the Bible in just two or three words, what would they be?

You may have heard the acronym: Basic Instruction Before Leaving Earth. But the Bible is far more than just a dull instruction manual. It's a thrilling drama filled with dynamic characters, shocking plot twists, and page-turning adventures!

Did you know that more than sixty-percent of the Bible is written in the form of narrative or story? Jesus was a storyteller. The Bible says that when Jesus spoke to the crowds, "he said nothing to them without a parable" (Matt. 13:34).

Why do you think God gave us the Bible predominantly in the form of stories instead of a long list of "dos" and "don'ts"?

An instruction manual can tell you what to do (or not do). It provides information. A story allows you to experience something. We are created to view the world in terms of a story because God did not intend for us simply to learn about life, but to experience it.

When you read the stories in the Bible, you are reading earlier chapters of a bigger narrative. And guess what? The narrative is not over. You are a character living out the later chapters of that same story.

NOT JUST AN OBSERVER

Are you familiar with a man in the Bible called Zacchaeus?
This is his story:

¹“He [Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through. ² There was a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector, and he was rich. ³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but he was not able because of the crowd, since he was a short man. ⁴ So running ahead, he climbed up a sycamore tree to see Jesus, since he was about to pass that way. ⁵ When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down because today it is necessary for me to stay at your house.” ⁶ So he quickly came down and welcomed him joyfully. ⁷ All who saw it began to complain, “He’s gone to stay with a sinful man.” ⁸ But Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, I’ll give half of my possessions to the poor, Lord. And if I have extorted anything from anyone, I’ll pay back four times as much.” ⁹ “Today salvation has come to this house,” Jesus told him, “because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost.”

Luke 19:1-10 (CSB)

Where is Zacchaeus at the start of this story and what is his goal?

Why do you think he made such an effort to see Jesus?

What questions do you think went through his head when he heard Jesus call his name?

Psychologists have conducted studies showing the benefit of understanding your life as a unified story. This principle is particularly evident when we experience pain or trauma. They found that those who could write out and understand painful experiences within the context of their life story actually experienced better physical health up to a year later.⁶

“You are perfectly cast in your life. I can’t imagine anyone but you in the role. Go play.”⁷

—Lin-Manuel
Miranda

Circle the emotions below that you might have felt if you were in Zacchaeus's position (you can choose more than one):

Excited

Terrified

Confused

Angry

Panicked

Curious

Other _____

How does Zacchaeus change by the end of the story?

Zacchaeus had heard about Jesus. Many of the rumors circulating—miraculous deeds, supernatural healings, casting out demons—would have been hard to believe, but they were enough to compel Zacchaeus to climb a tree just to catch a glimpse of this interesting man. When he went up the tree, he was just an observer; when he came down, he was a participant.

CALLED TO JOIN GOD'S STORY

Mike's friend Brad was once given tickets to see his favorite band. Halfway through the concert, the band always invited a musician from the audience to come on stage and play guitar with them for the next song, and they chose Brad. He went from being an observer to a participant and discovered that those are completely different experiences!

We asked how you would feel to be in Zacchaeus's place. The truth is that you are in his place. No, you're probably not sitting in a tree right now, but just like Zacchaeus, God doesn't want you to be a passive observer. God's story is happening all around you.

Are you ready to climb down the tree and be part of it?

IN SUMMARY

- Humans are naturally drawn to stories.
- Jesus taught primarily using stories.
- We are all characters in a bigger story God is creating.
- God wants us to be active participants, not just passive observers, in His story.

PREPARE FOR THE GROUP DISCUSSION

One thing that stood out to me today is:

One question I have based on today's study is:

CLOSING PRAYER

God, please open my eyes to Your story all around me. Show me how I fit into that story so that I might be an active participant, not just a passive observer.

God's Story and Your Story

For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

Ephesians 2:10

DAY 4

THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSPECTIVE

Michelangelo's *David* is perhaps the most famous sculpture ever made. However, if you visit the gallery in Florence, Italy, where it is displayed, you might notice something shocking. It's flawed! The proportions are off. The head and upper body are too large. Is Michelangelo overrated?

Actually, the sculpture was originally created to be displayed along the roof of the Florence Cathedral. When viewers looked up at the sculpture, the proportions would appear correct. Far from being a mistake, the enlarged proportions actually show Michelangelo's true genius. The problem is not with the artwork but the location. It is not positioned where it was created to be.

Earlier this week we spoke of God being a master storyteller. Yesterday you learned the amazing truth that you are called to be an active character in that story. Just like *David*, God has created you for a specific place, so that when people look at your life, they will be amazed by the One who created you (Matt. 5:16).

UNFINISHED MASTERPIECES

Ephesians 2:10 (NLT) says, "For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago."

Do you feel like a masterpiece? In the left-hand column, list the ways you do feel like a masterpiece. In the right column, list the reasons you do not:

I Do

I Do Not

According to Ephesians 2:10, what is your purpose?

You are a masterpiece, but an unfinished masterpiece. Hebrews 10:14 (NIV) says, “For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.” God made you a masterpiece, but He is not finished yet! As you live out God’s purposes for you, He will continue to grow your character throughout your entire life. One day, when we come to live with God in heaven, He will complete everything He started in us (Phil. 1:6).

COMPETING STORIES

The message we often get from western culture is that you should be the author of your own story. Most video games today offer a staggering number of customization options and gameplay flexibility, so that the gaming experience can be fine-tuned to the player’s exact preferences.

The Bible offers a different perspective.

“The one who loves his life will lose it, and the one who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (John 12:25, CSB).

What does Jesus mean when He says a person should “hate” his life?

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt. Open wide your mouth and I will fill it. But my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices” (Ps. 81:10-12, NIV).

What is the consequence of choosing our own story instead of God’s?

“Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!” (Matt. 25:21, NIV).

What is the reward for choosing God’s story over ours?

WHAT SORT OF TALE HAVE YOU FALLEN INTO?

There is a wonderful moment in *The Lord of the Rings* when heroes Frodo and Sam, two small Hobbits, reflect on their circumstances:

“The brave things in the old tales and songs, . . . the tales that really mattered, or the ones that stay in the mind. Folk seem to have been just landed in them. . . . I expect they had lots of chances, like us, of turning back, only they didn’t. And if they had, we shouldn’t know, because they’d have been forgotten. We hear about those as just went on, and not all to a good end, mind you; at least not to what folk inside a story and not outside it call a good end. . . . I wonder what sort of a tale we’ve fallen into?”⁸

Their tale would be difficult, challenging, exciting, terrifying, and everything in between. Later, as the two Hobbits rest on the side of Mount Doom, the evil ring destroyed and their adventure coming to an end, Sam sighs, “What a tale we have been in, Mr. Frodo, haven’t we?”⁹

What sort of tale have you fallen into? Will you press on or turn back? Revelation 20:11-13 describes a “book of life” in heaven that contains the works and deeds of your life. What sort of story will it tell?

IN SUMMARY

- We are each an “unfinished masterpiece.”
- God has planned “good works” for each of us.
- We are each writing a story with our lives.
- We have a choice to accept or reject God’s story for us.

PREPARE FOR THE GROUP DISCUSSION

One thing that stood out to me today is:

One question I have based on today’s study is:

CLOSING PRAYER

Thank You, God, for including me in the bigger story You are telling. Thank You for the good works You have planned for me to accomplish. Help me to choose Your story for my life this week.

WHILE YOU WATCH

As you watch the video, use the space provided to take notes or write down any thoughts and questions you may have.

DISCUSSION

Based on what you learned in the video and in your personal Bible study days throughout the week, spend time discussing the questions below.

Mike and Daniel describe Christianity as being a character in the exciting story that God—the Divine Director—has been telling since the beginning of time.

Why do we, as humans, connect so much with stories?

What are some reasons why God might have chosen to give us the Bible as a book of many stories, rather than a more straightforward instruction manual for life or a theology textbook?

Have you ever thought of your life as part of a bigger story? Why is it sometimes difficult to see the bigger picture beyond our immediate circumstances?

On page 22 you drew out a “storyboard” for the unified narrative of the Bible. Which stories in the Bible do you relate to most? Why?

At the beginning of the week Daniel shared about his insomnia (page 15). Why can it be so difficult to see God when we are hurting?

Has God ever worked in your life in ways that surprised you or didn't fully make sense at the time? Can you share an example?

At the end of each day this week you wrote down one main takeaway and one question you had. Take turns sharing one of your takeaways or questions with the group.

GOING DEEPER

For many people today, Christianity is seen as a myth or fantasy. People of faith can even be mocked or made to feel foolish for believing that what the Bible teaches is actually true.

Have you ever been made to feel this way? What was your response?

If this God doesn't exist, or if He is not at work in the world, how would this change your outlook on life?

If a loving God does exist, and if He is working in the world, how should this affect the way you look at life?

Christianity is an exciting story, but it's not just a story. The reason the gospel is called the "good news" is because it's a true story. The apostle Paul even saw clues in nature that pointed to the truth of the Christian story. Read Romans 1:19-20:

¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

What clues do you see in nature that point to God?

What might God's creation tell us about His personality and character?

What are the limitations of learning about God through nature (what can't it tell us about God)?

The disciple Peter understood that people would be skeptical about the story of Jesus. People back then, just like people today, did not want to just believe anything. They wanted to have good reasons to believe. Read what Peter wrote in 2 Peter 1:16-21 (CSB):

¹⁶ For we did not follow cleverly contrived myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ; instead, we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased!" ¹⁸ We ourselves heard this voice when it came from heaven while we were with him on the holy mountain. ¹⁹ We also have the prophetic word strongly confirmed, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. ²⁰ Above all, you know this: No prophecy of Scripture comes from the prophet's own interpretation, ²¹ because no prophecy ever came by the will of man; instead, men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

How could Peter share the story of Jesus with such confidence?

Peter claimed that the prophecies in Scripture were not made-up by people, but were actually inspired by the Holy Spirit. How should this affect the way we read the Bible?

How do these verses give you confidence in your own faith to share the story of Jesus with other people?

PREVIEW VIDEO

Watch the short video introducing *Reality 2: God Pursues*.

PRAYER & DISMISSAL

As a group, share any prayer requests and spend time in prayer. You may want to write these requests below as a reminder to pray for the people in your group throughout the week.