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.

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.

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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.

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 Samual 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.

THE STORY

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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.

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.

THE STORY

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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.

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.

THE STORY

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ADULT DEVOTIONAL

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.

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.