

WHEN YOU DON'T LIKE YOUR STORY



study guide

LESSON 1: *May I please have a different story?*

As I mentioned in chapter 1, everyone loves a good story. Let's take some time this week to consider some of your favorites.

1. What was your favorite childhood story or fairytale? Who were the main characters? The villain? The hero? What was the plot twist that made the story interesting? What was the overall conflict in the story? How was the conflict resolved? Do you see any parallels to how your life story has played out?

2. Our lives come equipped with all the elements necessary for a good story: setting, characters, plot, conflict, and resolution or redemption. There is drama, adventure, romance, mystery, protagonists, and antagonists. Can you think of one story in your life that includes some of these key elements? If so, jot down what each element was in your story.



3. Write down the “titles” of three of the most difficult and most delightful chapters of your story. Note the elements of story from above. Share the titles with a friend or with your group if you feel comfortable.

4. What do you hope to take away from this study of *When You Don't Like Your Story*?



LESSON 2: *Why me? Why this? Why now?*

In chapter 2, we looked at several reasons as to why bad things happen. In today's lesson, let's delve into another story that shows how what looks like a bad story can turn into a great story.

1. Read John 11 all the way through. Then take a closer look at verse 6: "So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days." The sentence doesn't say, but Jesus stayed there two more days, as if it were a careless mistake. It says so, as if it were a calculated plan. Because it was. What questions does the word so stir in your heart?

2. Many Christians think that if we do A and B, then God will do C. But that's often not the case, and it certainly wasn't how things happened with Lazarus's sickness. Why was Jesus glad that he wasn't there to heal Lazarus? Why would God be glad that something that feels like it is tearing us apart has happened?



3. The name Lazarus means “the one who God helps.” How did Martha and Mary respond to Jesus’ lack of help (vv. 21, 32)?

4. Notice how Martha self-corrected her response to Jesus’ question when he arrived. What did she say in verse 22?

5. Read Matthew 8:5–13. Did Jesus need to be present to heal Lazarus? Can you think of other instances in Scripture where we see the far reach of God’s power?

6. Read John 11:38–57 and note what happens once Jesus arrives at Lazarus’s tomb. Who was present? What was the outcome for Lazarus, the onlookers, the religious leaders, Jesus, and his disciples?



7. Fill in the blanks of this sentence: If Jesus had healed Lazarus, it would have been a _____ story. Because Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, it was a _____ story.

8. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels, meaning they record similar stories and sequence of events. John wrote the story of Jesus to show who Jesus was, so some details are out of sequence in his account. John wrote the story of Jesus to show who Jesus was, so some details are out of order in his account. What does John tell us about Mary in chapter 11 that doesn't happen until chapter 12 (11:2; 12:1-8)? In the US, we sometimes use the term "Chapter 11" in reference to when someone files for bankruptcy. Here's our challenge for today: Can we believe that the chapter 12 of praise is on the way even when we feel we're in the spiritually bankrupt chapter 11 of life? Give an example.

9. Write down a difficult situation you are in today and how you truly feel about it. Then add, "Even now I know . . ." to the end of that story. Write down what you know to be true even though you can't see it with your eyes right now. End today's lesson with a prayer including the words "even now I know."



LESSON 3: *There's always a meanwhile*

In chapter 3 we saw that God is always working; there is always a “meanwhile” that we can’t see. Let’s put some puzzle pieces together to discover God’s meanwhile that reached from Hannah to King David.

1. Read 1 Samuel 1:1–20 and describe Hannah’s situation. Then skip over to 1 Samuel 2:12–36. What was the situation with the priests, namely Eli and his sons, at the same time Hannah was praying for a child?

2. Now, flip back over to 1 Samuel 2:21–28. If you’re using the NIV, NKJV, or NLT, note the word meanwhile in verse 21. After years of infertility, how did God bless Hannah, and what did she do with this blessing? Hannah wanted a son; God needed a prophet. How did God work in Hannah’s and Samuel’s meanwhile to raise up a prophet that would change the course of Israel’s history? Once the prophet was born, how did God continue to bless Hannah (2:21)?



3. Read 1 Samuel 2:1–10. List all the words of triumph in Hannah's prayer.

4. For those whose mother's heart breaks at the thought of Hannah relinquishing her son to Eli's care, read 1 Samuel 7:17 and note where Samuel visited often as an adult.

5. Let's fast-forward. Read 1 Samuel 16. What did God call Samuel to do in verse 1? Write down what you learn about the boy David. Where was David when Samuel asked to see Jesse's sons? What does the fact that Jesse didn't call David in from the fields when Samuel asked to see his sons say about what he thought of David?



6. Read 1 Samuel 16:14–23. Where did David go after he was anointed as Israel's next king (v. 19)? Did he wear a crown and take his seat on the throne? Why do you think that was the case?

7. Sometime later, David's preparation met God's invitation. Read 1 Samuel 17. How had God been working in David's meanwhile to prepare him for this moment (vv. 34–37)?

8. Now for the part your Sunday school teacher left out. What did David use to cut off Goliath's head (1 Samuel 17:51)? What two things did David take away from the battle (1 Samuel 17:53–54)?



9. Now fast-forward several years. After David killed Goliath, King Saul grew very jealous and sought to kill him for many years. In 1 Samuel 21, David is trapped in the town of Nob without a weapon. At the right place, at the right time, what did God provide for David (vv. 1–9)? How was God working behind the scenes to make sure that David had what he needed when he needed it?

10. Theologian A. B. Simpson said, “God is preparing his heroes; and when the opportunity comes, he can fit them into their places in a moment, and the world will wonder where they came from.” What do John 5:17 and Psalm 121:1–5 tell us about God working even when we can’t see it or feel it?

11. Consider praying Hannah’s prayer from 1 Samuel 2:1–10 in the midst of your meanwhile situation.



LESSON 4: *The scab you won't stop picking*

In chapter 4, the big question is, Do you want to get well? Do you want to stop picking at the scab and allow healing to happen? The Israelites were faced with the same dilemma. Did they want to take hold of the unknown of the promised land or stay stuck in the familiarity of the bondage of Egypt? Let's take a closer look together.

1. Read Genesis 45. How did the Israelites end up in Egypt (vv. 16–20)? What happened between the time of Joseph and the time of Exodus 1? Describe their plight.

2. Read Exodus 2. What did Moses do (vv. 11–15)? Did God call him to do this? What was the result?



3. From Moses' call in Exodus 3 to the day he led the Israelites out of Egypt and across the wilderness, he performed many miracles. When it came time for them to march into the land God had promised, Moses sent in twelve spies. Read Numbers 13 and 14. Describe the unbelieving report of the ten spies (13:26–29, 31–33) and the believing report of the two spies (13:30; 14:7–9). Who did the people believe? Where did they want to go back to and why (14:3–4)? What was the end result of their refusal to believe God and take hold of what he had already promised (14:20–25)?

4. How is what happened with the people of Israel similar to a Christian who is free from the penalty of sin but refusing to take hold of the promises of God? Can a person be saved from the penalty of sin but wander in the wilderness of unbelief? Explain.

5. Now fast-forward thirty-eight years or so, and read Joshua 1. What did God remind Joshua? What did Joshua remind the people? How many spies did Joshua send into Jericho (Joshua 2:1)? How does that compare with the number Moses sent in?



6. Read Joshua 2:8–11 and Joshua 6:1. Why were the gates of Jericho shut up so tightly? Note how Rahab mentions God parting the Red Sea and not the Jordan River. How does the truth of the Jericho people's fear of the Israelites compare with the ten spies' report in Numbers 13:31–33?

7. Read Joshua 6:3–5. What was God's battle plan? Even though the Lord had already given them the city, what did the people of Israel have to do (Joshua 1:3; 6:3–5)?

8. Think of a memory that has built a wall around your heart. God wants you to live free and take the territory that he has already declared to be yours. But you have a choice between being generation 1 or generation 2. Read Philippians 3:12–14. What does God require of us for the walls to come down in our own lives?

9. We are just starting this journey, so don't get frustrated if this lesson is still too hard to grasp completely. We'll come back to it again. For now, read and record Philippians 1: Put it on a card in a prominent place to remind yourself the journey and the One doing the work.



LESSON 5: *Changing the ending to your story*

Chapter 5 was a big step—a high step—toward having a better story. Let's dig a little deeper into the truths of forgiveness in order to make them a reality in our lives.

1. Read Hebrews 12:15, Ephesians 4:26–27, and 2 Corinthians 2:10–11. Unforgiveness makes us a slow-moving target for the enemy. What can happen to our hearts when we choose not to forgive?

2. Read Romans 12:17–21. What does the Bible teach us about exacting revenge for the wrong done to us?

3. Read Matthew 6:12–15; 18:21–35; and Luke 6:37. What did Jesus teach about forgiving others in these verses?



4. Read Colossians 3:13. What did Paul teach about forgiving others? Explain what that looks like.

5. While reading chapter 5 of this book, did God put a finger on any possible manifestations of bitterness in your life—emotional, physical, mental? Some examples might include holding grudges, withholding compliments or encouragement, jealousy, anger, negativity, ingratitude, being judgmental, or argumentativeness.

6. Record Jesus' words on the cross found in Luke 23:34. Now read Psalm 22:6–7 and Isaiah 53:3. How were the people who crucified Jesus described? Did Jesus wait for an apology before he forgave those who were torturing him?



7. Is there someone from whom you are still waiting for an apology before you forgive him or her? If so, what do we learn from Jesus' example on the cross?

8. Read John 13:15. What did Jesus tell us we should do with the example he has set? How did Stephen follow Jesus' example in Acts 7:54-60? How can we do the same?

9. When you choose to forgive, you move from being the victim in your story to the victor with Jesus as your hero. Ponder that sentence and note where you are in the process.

10. Did God reveal anyone that you need to forgive? An offense you've been carrying around that needs to be released once and for all? If so, turn to the Prayer for Forgiving Others on page 200, and live free.



LESSON 6: *Leaving the shame place*

God never intended for any of his children to live in the shame place. In this lesson we will look at a woman who went there and stayed there, and about a king who gave his life so we don't have to.

1. Read 2 Samuel 13:1–22. Record the main characters in the story and who they were in relation to David and each other. Since Tamar is a king's daughter, what does that make her? What else do you learn about her in those first verses? Her character? Her standing? Her appearance? Her trust in others?

2. Summarize what happened to Tamar.



3. What do we learn about the importance of crying out about this sort of crime from Deuteronomy 22:23–27? What was Tamar’s response to the rape (2 Samuel 13:18–19)? Tearing clothes, putting on sackcloth, and covering the head in ashes were all signs of mourning and grief in the Bible. (See Genesis 37:34–35; Joshua 7:1–9; and 2 Samuel 12:15–17.) In that culture, people didn’t have many clothes and the ones they did have were costly. What was the significance of Tamar’s robe, and what did tearing it signify?

4. What did Absalom tell Tamar to do? How does this relate to what we learned about shame in chapter 6?

5. What was David’s reaction to Amnon’s actions (2 Samuel 13:21)? What did he do about it? Now read 2 Samuel 13:23–34. How did Absalom avenge Tamar two years later? Who should have been the one to take control of the situation and punish Amnon?



6. Perhaps one of the saddest lines in this passage is verse 20: "And Tamar lived in her brother Absalom's house, a desolate woman." Even though her perpetrator was dead, she remained in her pain and suffering. Define the word desolate.

7. Tamar's earthly father was not there for her, and maybe yours wasn't either. But your heavenly Father is . . . and so is his Son, King Jesus. Read the following verses and look at what God the Father and God the Son did to remove your shame: Isaiah 50:7; Isaiah 53:1-10; John 3:16; Romans 10:9-11; Hebrews 12:1-3; and 1 Peter 2:6. In despair, Tamar cried out, "Where could I carry my shame?" (see 2 Samuel 13:13 esv). Friend, where will you carry yours?

8. After the abuse, was Tamar still a princess? Was she living like a princess? Why or why not?



9. Whether it's a traumatic event at the hands of another or the results from our own poor choices, God never intends for us to be stuck in the sackcloth and ashes of desolation. How is staying in a shame place ignoring or minimalizing what Jesus has done for you? How does staying in the shame place keep you stuck in a bad story?

10. If you could have visited Tamar during her time of desolation, what would you have said to her? Now, what do you need to say to yourself?



LESSON 7: *When forgetting is not enough*

In our last lesson we spent some time with Tamar, urging her to come out of the shame place. I'm sure that if you could have, you would have encouraged her to put the crown back on her head. There was someone else who could have done that but didn't.

Let's look at the difference he could have made if he had shared his story.

1. Do a quick review of the previous lesson. Now read 2 Samuel 11. Summarize the details of the story with the main characters, the plot, the problem, and the setting. List the sins that David committed.

2. What do we learn about the timing of this story in verse 1? Where should David have been (1 Samuel 8:20)?



3. Read 2 Samuel 12:1–25. Who sent Nathan to David? Summarize the scenario Nathan described and David's reaction to it. This is a wonderful example of the power of story. The way Nathan painted a story rather than pointed the finger allowed David to realize the weight of his guilt and pass judgment on himself. What did God say to David through Nathan (vv. 5–10)? Record David's response in verse 13.

4. Read Psalm 51, believed to have been written during the time of David's remorse. What does David say about his own personal sackcloth and ashes from his sin of sleeping with Bathsheba? What did David say he would do when God forgave him (v. 13)?

5. Read Psalm 31 and Psalm 103:1–12. What evidence do we have that God forgave David of his sin? How does this echo 1 John 1:9?



6. David's sin was removed as far as the east is from the west. So all was well . . . or was it? Now, let's go back to Tamar and Amnon. How are these two stories similar?

7. We have no indication that David told his boys about his sin with Bathsheba and the fallout of that sin. They would have been old enough to remember the rumors. But how could David telling his story to his boys possibly have averted the situation?

8. We have no indication that Bathsheba told her story to Tamar. Sure, it was a dark chapter, a humiliating chapter, a scandalous story, but how could Bathsheba telling her story to Tamar have helped her leave her place of desolation? What could she have said to her to blow those ashes away?



9. What did Jesus tell Peter in Luke 22:32? How does telling your story strengthen others?

10. I hope 2 Corinthians 1:3–5 has become stamped on your heart. As we end today, record that passage, putting a big circle around the words “so that.” What is your “so that” God is calling you to share?



LESSON 8: *Why your story matters*

In our last lesson, we saw how Nathan painted a story rather than pointed a finger at King David. You've got something better than a made-up story; you have a God-story . . . and it matters!

1. Read Acts 10:1–8, 22. What do you learn about Cornelius, this commander of more than one hundred men? Was he Jewish or a Gentile? Honorable or dishonorable? What had he been praying?

2. Read Acts 10:9–23. Describe Peter's vision. What was God showing Peter through the vision? How was God preparing Peter to minister to the Gentiles?

3. How is the story of Peter and Cornelius a “meanwhile” story? What was God doing simultaneously in both Peter's and Cornelius's lives?



4. What did Peter realize in verses 34–48?

5. Not everyone was accepting of Peter's new ministry to the Gentiles. Read Acts 11:1–3. How did the apostles and brothers in Judea respond?

6. What did Peter do in Acts 11:4–17 to assure them? I hope you answered, "He told his story." Write out verse 4. What was the result of Peter telling his story? How is this story a fulfillment of God's prophecy to Abram in Genesis 12:2–3?

7. Have you ever experienced someone's going from protest to praise because of your or someone else's story? If so, explain.



8. As we know, the Bible is one big story about God, often referred to as a “metanarrative.” Each book of the Bible is a story within a story of creation, the fall, redemption, and consummation. Read John 20:30–31. Why did John write his gospel? Did John write his gospel because he had heard about it or because he had actually witnessed it? How was John’s personal story part of God’s larger story? How is your personal story part of God’s larger story? How does that truth give your story great significance?

9. Look up and record what the following verses say about God’s plan for you: Psalm 139:16, John 15:16, and Ephesians 2:10. End today’s lesson by asking God to make you sensitive to who needs to hear your story.



LESSON 9: *Speaking up when you tend to clam up*

When sharing our stories, we aren't trying to win an argument, but inviting people into a relationship with God. That removes the pressure, doesn't it? Let's sit by the well and see how one woman who had clammed up became a woman who spoke up.

1. Read the story of a woman who had clammed up in John 4:1–42. Jesus didn't have to go to Samaria because of geography. In fact, the Jews did everything they could to avoid the Samaritans, often crossing the Jordan and traveling on the east side just to avoid them. So why did Jesus go to Samaria? How does John 5:19 shed light on his decision?

2. Why was the woman at Jacob's well during the heat of the day rather than in the cool of the morning or evening when the other townswomen went?

3. Briefly describe the conversation between Jesus and the woman. Who did Jesus tell her he was (4:26)? Note, this is the first time Jesus revealed his identity to any one person . . . and it was a woman.



4. Initially, who was the woman trying to avoid by coming to the well in the heat of the day? After her encounter with Jesus, to whom did she run to tell her story (4:28)?

5. Read John 4:27–38. What was the disciples' reaction to Jesus talking to a woman? What was Jesus' reaction to the woman running to evangelize her town? How did he use her actions as an object lesson?

6. What was the result of the woman telling her story to the townspeople (John 4:39–42)?

7. This was just the beginning of the evangelism in Samaria. Where did Jesus tell the disciples to tell their stories in Acts 1:8? Considering what we know about the Jewish history and their dislike for the Samaritans, what would this commission have meant to these Jewish Christians (Galatians 3:28)? Read Acts 8:1–14 and 15:3. How did God make sure that they went to this area that held a special place in his heart?



8. Ponder this paraphrase from 2 Samuel 22:25. "God rewrote the text of my life when I opened the book of my heart to his eyes" (the message). How did God rewrite the text of the Samaritan woman's life? How did he rewrite the text of your life?

9. In closing today, read Psalm 145 and note everything the writer tells us about sharing our stories. Consider using the words as a prayer of thanksgiving.



LESSON 10: *Disqualified? Says who?*

In chapter 10 we looked at our tendencies to feel disqualified because of our past circumstances. Today, let's see where those feelings come from and how to deal with them.

1. How is the devil referred to in Revelation 12:7-12? How do we see him in that role in Job 1? Define the word accuser.

2. The devil accuses and attacks our minds (our conscience) to convince us to shut up and shut down. Make a list of common accusations the accuser uses against God's people, such as calling them incapable, inadequate, a disappointment to God, sinful, stupid, too far gone, unforgivable, and others. Now go back and circle any you have felt about yourself. How are those accusations lies of the enemy geared to get you to shut up and shut down?



3. Going back to the four steps listed in chapter 10, what truths can you use to fight the lies you just listed? If you need help, refer to “My True Identity in Christ” on page 197.

4. What does Hebrews 9:11–14 tell us the blood of Christ cleanses? Define the word conscience, and then put that definition into the verse.

5. How does 2 Corinthians 1:2–7, Luke 22:32, and the story of the Samaritan woman contradict the idea that our past struggles, sins, or abuses disqualify us from telling our story to glorify God?



6. Read 2 Corinthians 3:4–6 and Colossians 1:9–14. Who has qualified you and made you competent?

7. What does 1 Corinthians 1:26–31 tell us about the kind of people God uses? Where do you fit into that verse?

8. Some people feel disqualified because of what others have said about them. Read 1 Samuel 17:32–37. Have you ever felt, “But, God, I am just a _____”? Fill in that blank and share it with a friend or your small group. What do you think God would say to whatever you put in that blank? I love that David told Saul, “I went after it” (v. 35). What is God calling you to “go after” today?



9. Read and record Acts 4:13, one of my favorite verses. What qualified this bunch of uneducated men? What qualifies you?

10. As Warren Weirsbe once said, "You can never be too small for God to use—only too big." If someone thinks that he or she is qualified in their own right, steer clear. What do we learn from James 4:10 about humility? Fill in the blanks:

Every person is simply a (2 Corinthians 4:7) _____
empowered, equipped by the (Ephesians 3:14–19) _____
_____, and qualified by (Colossians 1:12) _____.



LESSON 11: *Lens one or lens two? Which is better?*

We've all heard the phrase that someone is either a glass-half-full or a glass-half-empty person. That's a similar principle to what we considered in chapter 10.

In this lesson, let's see how Paul decided to look through the lens of providence and praise rather than the lens of problems and self-pity, and how that made the difference in the way he interpreted his story.

1. Read Acts 21:27–36. What happened to Paul in Jerusalem? What did he tell the people in Acts 21:37–22:21?

2. Briefly describe what happened to him in Acts 22:22–26:32. How much time passed between his appearing before Felix and Festus, and where was Paul that entire time (24:27)?



6. People want to attach a reason to your misery. Let's see how that faulty reasoning can lead to faulty conclusions. What did the island people think about Paul after the snake bit him (v. 4)? What did the island people think about Paul when he did not die from the snake bite (v. 6)? What does this tell you about the way humans incorrectly interpret others' situations? How is that a warning for us as we interpret our own stories, as well as the stories of others?

7. How did Paul make the most of his time in the place he never intended to be (28:7)? He could have spent his time looking through the lens of discouragement but chose to look through the lens of divine appointment. What does this teach us about looking for opportunities to glorify God even in circumstances of our stories that mystify us?

8. Paul spent his last two to three years of life in prison. While there, he wrote letters to the Ephesians, the Philippians, the Colossians, and to Philemon. Skim those letters and note ten verses of victory. How was he able to write verses on freedom while in chains (Galatians 5:1)?



9. While in chains, he also wrote, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4). We learn by putting into practice what we’ve put in our heads. Write out a declaration of how you will flip the lens of discouragement to a declaration of God’s goodness (Philippians 4:9; 1 Timothy 4:15).

10. What is one time when your best-case scenario crashed into the seemingly worst-case reality? Did you react in a positive or negative way? After the fact, did you begin to see the Romans 8:28 of it all?

11. Sometimes we can’t fix our situation, but we can fix our focus. And fixing that focus will help us see the difficult parts of our story from a different perspective. Is there a particular part of your story that you have been looking at through the wrong lens? If so, explain. End today’s lesson by praising God for a situation that you’ve never praised him for before.



LESSON 12: *The perfect ending to an imperfect story*

Most books end with the words THE END. However, this one encourages us to have a new beginning. The final page challenges you to tell your redemptive story with all the broken pieces fitted and fastened together with the golden veins of grace. Let's together look at how we might start doing that.

1. What are ten important truths you have learned from this study that you will apply or have already applied to your life?
2. Going back to lesson 1, are there any chapter titles of your story that you need to change?

3. Draw a timeline of your life, from birth to current day. Mark high spots and low spots along that journey. Note what you learned through each of those memorable moments or chapters.



4. A simple way to engage with others is: (1) ask them their story; (2) tell them your story; (3) share God's gospel story and the impact it had on your life. Take some time to write out God's gospel story so you can be prepared when the time comes. What do we learn about being prepared in 1 Peter 3:15?

5. Let's get out the praise party hats and celebrate! How have your worst chapters now become your greatest victories?

