

Sean Gladding

The story of God,
the story of us

VIDEO CURRICULUM SERIES
Discussion Guide

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The Work Of the People is a community of artists who create visual media for the church to re-orient God's people around Jesus' good news and mission to make all things new.

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Introduction

Do you ever judge people without knowing their stories?

Perhaps it's the person in front of you in the checkout line at the grocery store. Or someone sitting quietly on the pavement holding out a hand. Or someone in designer clothes easing out of the seat of an expensive sports car. You look for a second or two and then pass judgment. And decide whether to make eye contact.

Do you ever make up stories about people to explain their behavior?

Perhaps it's a family member. Or an old friend you haven't seen for years. Perhaps someone you saw on Yahoo's homepage. A person who did something terrible or outrageous or even something wonderful. And you need to make sense of things; you need to know why it happened. Maybe you make up a story to explain that person's actions. Or you listen to someone else talk about what happened and you think, *That makes sense. That must be it.*

But then you get to know the real story. Maybe a mutual friend explains the situation to you. Maybe a reporter uncovers the truth. Maybe you sit down with the person over coffee and just ask. And you realize the story you chose to believe was way off base. Perhaps the story you chose to believe says more about you than it does about that other person.

Whatever the case, you want to know the story.

We all love stories. We love hearing them. We love telling them.

Stories guide us. Stories shape us. Stories aid us in making sense of the world. They help us make decisions about relationships, work, where we live, what we spend our money on—about what is important in life. Stories shape our identity. And many of the stories we tell are deeply rooted in the narratives of our culture, our family and our religious experience.

* * *

You've probably heard at least a few of those great Bible stories: David and Goliath, Jonah and the whale, Noah's ark. It's probably true that regardless of what story you heard, there was always a bigger story behind it. The most important story of all. The story of Jesus. Because in Jesus, God did something amazing, wonderful and outrageous: God became one of us—a human being.

It's a story that demands explanation: Why would God do that? And what does it mean?

Perhaps this was the story you heard to explain what God did:

Because of something called “the Fall” we are all born sinners, and a great gulf exists between us and God—a gulf so wide that we cannot bridge it on our own, no matter how hard we might try. And so God, who loves the world, became one of us in order to bridge the gap for us. Jesus died on the cross to save us from our sins, so that instead of going to hell, we could spend eternity with him in heaven.

Maybe you've heard that story—or even told it. Maybe you've rejected that story. It's a story many of us know. It's the explanation for the event that has divided history into *before* and *after*.

But what if it's not the whole story?

* * *

If you have a Bible, it probably has about a thousand pages that are full of stories. Stories that are confusing. And scary. And offensive. And weird. Stories that are contradictory at times. Stories that are beautiful. And hopeful. And messy.

Do we begin with all those stories and end up with the “big story”

just described? Or do we begin with the big story and filter all those little stories through that one?

What if our version of the story says more about us than it does about God?

Have we been judging God—and each other—without knowing the whole story? The “Story of God” that Scripture is narrating?

* * *

In this short video series, Sean Gladding, author of *The Story of God, the Story of Us*, discusses some of the questions raised within the Story that Scripture narrates. Some of those questions may be questions you’re asking whether you’ve read the Bible or not. This guide is offered as a resource for facilitating group discussion of the videos.

We suggest the leader first view the film, then read through the questions and suggestions we’ve provided. The leader can use the questions either to get discussion started or as a springboard for questions of their own.

It will be important for the leader to create a space in which it is safe to honestly explore the thoughts and feelings that arise from viewing the films—a space that encourages vulnerability while protecting dignity. The films will hopefully provoke a variety of responses, and the group experience will be richest when people are able to speak freely.

As you progress through the films the questions become more personal, inviting you to take a long, hard look at how you live. Some—if not many—of us would rather leave those things unexamined, especially when we’re in company with others. In a group that may be reticent to make themselves vulnerable, the leader can set the tone by being the first to offer reflection on the questions.

* * *

If you’ve ever felt lost when you open the Bible, you are in good company. And if you tend to come to the Scriptures knowing what you’ll find there, perhaps it’s time to let yourself get lost in the Story again . . .



story

for some of us, certain stories in the Bible are so familiar that when we come across them we barely notice the words on the page. Without even being aware of it, we come to such stories with our minds already made up concerning what they are about and what we can learn from them. Each time we pick up the Bible to read, we use many lenses through which we view and understand what we are reading: lenses given to us by our family, our culture, our church, our favorite authors. These lenses provide a particular way of seeing and appear to bring clarity, yet sometimes actually obscure what Scripture is trying to tell us.

Before viewing the film together, discuss what influences the way you read and understand scripture.

Next, read aloud the story found in Luke 21:1-4 and discuss what you think was going on in the Temple that day and what we can learn from this story.

Watch the film together.

After viewing the film, reflect on these questions:

1. What images, phrases or actions caught your imagination as you listened to this story again?
2. Where do you see this story being played out today? What type of

person would be the widow? Who would the disciples be? What would take the place of the Temple?

3. What kinds of people are you tempted to judge before you know their story?

Suggested for exploring further

N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999).



creation

The story of Scripture that many of us have heard begins with “the Fall” and ends in heaven. But the Story of God narrated in Scripture begins with creation and ends with new creation. It does not begin with sin but with a garden, with the first humans enjoying the fruit of the tree of life. And the Story does not end in heaven but on the new earth, with the nations gathered around the tree of life once more.

The story of creation tells us of a God of hospitality—a God who creates a place for a people, a place where all life can flourish. And this creation is good; indeed, it is very good. The only thing that is not good is for the first human—one taken from humus, from the soil—to be alone. We were created for friendship with God and with each other, and for partnership with God in caring for all creation.

Before watching the film together, discuss how you would summarize the Story of God that Scripture is telling.

Watch the film together.

After viewing the film, reflect on these questions:

1. What stories have shaped your view of the landscape of Scripture?
2. In what ways does the word *exile* resonate with you? In what ways do you experience being in exile?

3. Where have you seen people partnering with God in the work of new creation?
4. What might it look like for you to embrace the vocation of partnering with God in the work of new creation?
5. Who do you know that is living “East of Eden,” and how could you become the place that God is calling them home to?

Suggested for exploring further

J. Matthew Sleeth, *Serve God, Save the Planet* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).



covenant

When was the last time you moved? How much time do you spend in the car each week?

We live in a culture of hyper-mobility: some of us move apartments and cities more often than others move the furniture around. Some of us change churches almost as regularly, often for the same reason: that apartment/job/relationship/neighborhood/church isn't meeting our needs any more. So we move on to somewhere else or someone else in the hope of finding what we're looking for.

But what if what we're looking for can only be found by choosing to stay put? Choosing to commit to this neighborhood, this friendship, this marriage, this church—choosing to bind ourselves to a place and to a group of people. How many of us drive past churches in our neighborhood to get to the church where our needs are being met, while at the same time bemoaning the fact that we only see those people for an hour or two on Sunday? God has made covenant with us—so what might it look like for us to make covenant with each other?

Before watching the film together, begin with some questions along these lines:

1. What made you choose the church you call “home”?

2. How many churches do you drive by to get to your church's building, and why do you drive by them?
3. How many people in your church do you interact with regularly on a meaningful level? What might increase that number?

Watch the film together.

After viewing the film, reflect on these questions:

1. What does it mean to covenant with each other, to bind ourselves to others? Is there anyone you have bound yourself to?
2. "Seek the welfare of the city." What factors led you to live, work and worship where you do? How might thinking about the needs and strengths of a neighborhood affect those decisions?
3. How are you seeking the welfare of others around you?

Suggested for exploring further

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *The Wisdom of Stability* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2010).



Freedom

The exodus is the defining story of God's people, Israel. God tells Moses,

I've taken a good, long look at the affliction of my people in Egypt. I've heard their cries for deliverance from their slave masters; I know all about their pain. And now I have come down to help them, pry them loose from the grip of Egypt, get them out of that country and bring them to a good land with wide-open spaces. (Exodus 3:7-8 *The Message*)

God makes good on that promise. But in between slavery in Egypt and life in the Promised Land, there would be forty years of wandering in the wilderness. God had brought the people out of Egypt, but in many ways Egypt was still in them.

Some of us know all too well that it is possible to give your life to Christ/begin to follow Jesus/accept Jesus as your personal Savior and to experience forgiveness of sin, and yet not step immediately into the life of freedom we were created for. We remain in bondage to so many things: security, fear, consumption, addictions to substances, work, sex, people, food, approval.

Before viewing the film together, discuss these questions:

1. What would it take to begin to experience freedom from the things that keep us in bondage?
2. There are also many people who live in literal slavery. What would it take for them to be set free?
3. What comes to mind when you hear the word *freedom*?

Watch the film together.

After viewing the film, reflect on these questions:

1. Describe someone you know who has truly been set free from bondage of any kind.
2. What are you in bondage to? What do you need to be set free from?
3. What are you being set free for? How can you partner with the God of the exodus in your own freedom? How can you become free and remain free?
4. What can we learn from Alcoholics Anonymous and other twelve-step fellowships about walking into freedom together?
5. Slavery still exists today: in the sex industry, in immigrant forced labor, in sweatshops, in a host of other settings. Brainstorm ways to increase awareness of contemporary human trafficking, and work to bring an end to it.

Suggested for exploring further

The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous, 4th ed. (New York: AA World Service, 2001).

David Batstone, *Not for Sale* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007).



Descent

Free market economies hold out upward mobility as the ultimate goal of human development. We are encouraged to constantly aspire to things that are bigger, better, more prestigious. We are promised that when we achieve and acquire we will be happy—that we are just one job promotion, one new car, one large-screen HDTV away from the fulfillment we long for. For many who are denied access to the opportunities that lead to such things, they experience a life of feeling left out, left behind, abandoned—instead of fulfillment and happiness. And even for those of us who achieve upward mobility, the promised rewards often fail to deliver what we were led to believe they would. Whether from a place of abundance or a place of utter need, many of us cry out for someone to give us the life we so desperately long for. Are those cries heard?

Before watching the film together, come up with a group list of things you've aspired to over the years. Then talk about how those things landed on your list.

Watch the film together.

After viewing the film, reflect on these questions:

1. When has God felt distant and aloof to you?

2. When have you experienced God “coming down” to meet you where you were?
3. If you were honest, who would you think of as being “unclean”? From whom do you keep your distance?
4. What are the places in your life where you feel unclean, that make you think, *If people only knew about that, they would keep their distance*, places where you long to feel healing and acceptance?
5. God “came down and moved into the neighborhood.” In a culture of upward mobility that has left entire neighborhoods abandoned, what might it look like for the people of God to choose to relocate—into those neighborhoods?

Suggested for exploring further

Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).



Reconciliation

Part of the bitter fruit of life in exile is being estranged from others. Beginning with Babel, where humanity was scattered to the four corners of the globe, we remain distant from one another—perhaps even as we sleep under the same roof. Instead of living out of a sense of the common good, more often it seems we are pitted against one another, encouraged to remain in fear and suspicion of “the other.”

Sadly, the church is often no different from the wider society. Even as we proclaim that God has brought peace between us, we voluntarily segregate from each other and choose to worship with people “like us.” In a world torn apart by tribal and ethnic violence, in a culture still bedeviled by the legacy of institutional racism, is there a better story to be told? A story that inspires a different way of living together?

Perhaps those who claim the Story of God—which ends with the scattered fragments of humanity finally reunited around the tree of life, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations—can find hope and courage to live out that Story.

Before watching the film together, read this text from 2 Corinthians 5:

If anyone is in the Messiah, there is a new creation! Old things have gone, and look—everything has become new! It all comes

from God. God reconciled us to Godself through the Messiah, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:17-18, adapted from N. T. Wright's translation in *Paul for Everyone: 1-2 Corinthians*)

Where do you see the need for the ministry of reconciliation that Paul is talking about here?

Watch the film together.

After viewing the film, reflect on these questions:

1. How would you describe the ministry of reconciliation?
2. Where have you experienced reconciliation?
3. Where do you see God bringing people together who others would say could not (or should not) be friends?
4. Who are the people you know that are estranged from one another, and how could you begin to partner with God in the work of reconciliation between them?

Suggested for exploring further

Christopher L. Heuertz and Christine D. Pohl, *Friendship at the Margins* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2010).