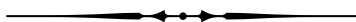


EPIC



FACILITATOR'S GUIDE

JOHN ELDREDGE
with CRAIG McCONNELL



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INTRODUCTION

E *pic* is a little book about a Big Story. It's an overview, like a trailer for a movie, of the Story behind all stories. It's God's Story, which sheds light on your story and mine. Life is a story, after all. That's how it comes to us. But like a movie we've arrived at forty minutes late, life doesn't make sense until we understand the whole Story. That's just as true for people *with* faith as it is for people who have no faith—yet. We all need to understand the Story of this life we're living, and find our place in it.

Epic comes at the question from a Christian perspective—hopefully a far more refreshing perspective than what you might have been *told* Christianity was all about. There's no steeples here, no incense, no religion. Just an understanding of why God made us, what he is up to, and how we can find the destiny of our lives by living more fully in his Story.

First, an explanation. Of all the different movements on this earth, Christianity might be the most fractured. It's a sad story in itself, but it bears noting that not all so-called “gospels” are the same. The folks who beat themselves with whips during the Middle Ages would be a good example. That had nothing to do with the teachings of Jesus. The folks who beat *others* would be another example. They were badly mistaken as well.

Many contemporary versions of Christianity were badly hurt by the Modern Era, the age in which truth was thought to be found most clearly in principles and propositions. The mind became central, not the heart, and we lost the Great Story in exchange for a handful of tips and techniques, rules and regulations. Yes, you can learn a lot about a rabbit if you dissect it—but when you are finished, what you have before you is nothing like a real rabbit at all. The life is gone.

The faith the Bible offers us *is* a great Story, one in which the heart plays a central role. *Epic* comes from that tradition, a long history of the friends of God who understood the Drama and the life of the heart, which is our destiny.

Before beginning this study as a facilitator, you should read the book *Epic* and watch the Epic DVD—both the 1 Hour Full-length Version and each segment of the Six-Part Curriculum Version. But start with the full version—after all, you want to know the Larger Story before you break it down into segments! Take a look at the Epic website at www.epicreality.com for a wealth of additional resources. On the website there are creative ideas and information that both you and those attending your church or group will find stimulating and helpful. For additional reading, we'd also recommend *The Sacred Romance* and *Waking the Dead*, both of which will help you, as facilitator, to be a step or two ahead of your group or class!

We strongly recommend that you encourage each person going through this curriculum—be that in a Sunday school class, a high school group, or a home fellowship—to read the book *Epic* as well before the first session. Provide copies of *Epic* for your group at your first meeting, with the assignment to read it through before your next meeting. That way—and pardon the pun—everyone is on the same page.

USING THIS TOOL

John Eldredge presents *Epic* live to a theater audience on the DVDs included in this kit. The performance is offered here in three formats: a Full Length Version (running about seventy minutes), a shorter 38-Minute Version, and a Six-Part Curriculum Version. Each version has its own merit, depending upon the time and place where it is used. The Full Length Version is the, well, fullest expression of *Epic*. Of course, in many environments—such as a church service or class setting—you may not be able to watch

seventy minutes in one sitting, and so we created the 38-Minute Version for those settings to allow folks to take in the whole story at once. Groups with more time to go through *Epic* can get the most out of it by using the Six-Part Curriculum Version. (The Curriculum Version is the Full Length Version divided into six parts, roughly fifteen minutes in length, with commentary by John at the conclusion of each session.)

Our recommendation for a group study would be that you give seven meetings to this program. In the first meeting, we suggest you view the DVD and catch the whole story straight through. We recommend the 38-Minute Version for this. It will help everyone take in the whole story at once (which is usually the best way to take in a story). The six subsequent weeks would then involve going through the six curriculum chapters on the DVD and talking through the corresponding chapter in *Epic Study Guide*.

Epic Study Guide consists of six sessions, each corresponding to a chapter in the book *Epic*. Each weekly meeting will be a combination of viewing a section of the DVD and discussing the Study Guide questions based upon the weekly reading of a chapter of *Epic*. Prior to each meeting, participants should prepare by reading the session to be discussed in *Epic Study Guide*.

YOUR PART

You don't need any experience to lead a group through *Epic*. Remember, the story of God is the story of how he uses ordinary men and women to accomplish the extraordinary. "But Lord, I'm just a common man, a fisherman, a sinner," is how most react when God calls them. We hope you find that encouraging because God is going to use you to do something really amazing. In the following pages, we've laid out a game plan for each session, including the goal for that session, the key Scriptures to focus on, recommended film clips to use as supplemental material, the theology behind the session, and a series of questions for group discussion.

As facilitator, you should read through the chapter and work through the exercises yourself. If you're planning to use the Epic DVD sessions or suggested film clips, we'd suggest you preview those first as well. Then read through our recommended game plan.

When you gather, you simply follow the plan we've laid out for the session. You light the fuse, and God will do the rest.

Youth Leader Tip

Every one of us either doubts there is a larger story to live in or is looking for a story to live in . . . and many of us settle for a very small one. Your kids are no different. Presenting to them the Epic story of life is to orient them to the realities of life at a crucial stage of their lives. We've inserted a few comments and thoughts for you in this guide, but for the most part our counsel to you is . . . please adapt, modify, and edit our suggested films, questions, and direction according to the ages, maturity, and culture of your youth group. Since you know your group best, we encourage you to interact creatively with our material and prayerfully determine the most relevant and meaningful way to help your audience understand the Epic story they play a significant role in.

Do not be surprised that the Enemy fears this study and opposes it in any way he can. Heads up. Be prepared for hassles, set backs, opposition, and spiritual attack. You'll feel totally unprepared and unqualified for this. You'll hear accusations that it's going badly, that you're just not connecting with the attendees, that you're disqualified. It's all a pack of lies, from the Father of Lies. Take the attack as a backhanded compliment. The more opposition you encounter, the more assault you feel . . . well, then, you must be that dangerous! PRAY! Pray that God will come through for you and your group. Pray through every obstacle—and then watch what God will do!

Session One

THE EPIC STORY GOD IS TELLING

*I had always felt life first as a story—
and if there is a story there is a story teller.*

—G. K. CHESTERTON

THE GOAL

1. For the group to meet one another.
2. To lay out the seven-week plan for the study.
3. To introduce your group to the idea of Christianity as an epic Story.

Story is the nature of the world in which we live. Story is the language of the heart, it's the way we understand things. As Eugene Peterson said, "We live in narrative," we live in story. Life has a story shape to it, there's a beginning and an end, there's a plot, characters. The Scriptures are given to us in the form of a story."

YOUR INTRODUCTION

Depending upon the setting, you may want to have refreshments available (especially at the first gathering).

If those attending do not know one another—and this is a small group—allow some time for informal introductions. If you’re doing this as a class, and you aren’t breaking into small groups, skip the introductions. They’ll easily eat up an hour of your time.

Surprise and intrigue them. When we teach *Epic* ourselves, we’ll often start the meeting by showing a trailer from a popular film that captures the themes of *Epic*. This both disarms the group (*Wow—this is going to be cool!*) and sets the stage for the power of story. For the opening night, we recommend using any one of the trailers from The Lord of the Rings trilogy of films (they can be found in the special features section of the DVD for that movie).

Welcome the group and set the stage for your time together by laying out your vision. If you use the movie trailer, share a few thoughts about the trailer: *I think that’s a powerful analogy or metaphor for the Christian life. An epic story.* Then go on to explain your reason for getting together for this study, and tell them that this is a seven-part commitment. The plan is to watch one part each week, discuss it as a group, do some at-home reflection, and then share your thoughts as a group. Most important, share your desire for this group and your times together. Tell them what’s on your heart. If you have the book *Epic* and the Study Guide for your group, pass them out and ask them to read it before your next meeting. Explain that tonight, you simply want to take in the Story all at once.

SHOULD YOU OPEN WITH PRAYER OR WORSHIP?

Well, that’s your call, but may we offer a warning: You don’t want this to feel like a “religious” event. You are introducing a new way of looking at the Christian faith. You want these folks to feel comfortable, to be themselves, and be honest and willing to share some of their story. That won’t happen if the “feel” is that of a Sunday school class.

ROLL THE 38-MINUTE VERSION OF EPIC DVD.

As you watch the Epic DVD and other suggested movie clips, please note: The quality of your technology is *very* important. Most of the folks in your class are used to watching DVDs in a setting with great technology—at the

movies, in a home theater, or on a big-screen television. **DON'T SCRIMP ON THE TECHNOLOGY!** Also, personally check the equipment before your sessions to make sure that everything works properly.

What do you need? Obviously you'll need a color TV monitor—the bigger the better—and a DVD player. A 30-inch TV hooked up to a stereo system works great for a group up to about twelve.

For larger gatherings, you'll need:

1. A video projector of at least 2,000 lumens
2. A DVD player you can tie in with the projector
3. At least a 10' x 12' screen (or a big white wall of a house or classroom).

Again, don't compromise. You'll need a good sound system to patch your DVD player into for audio. Don't rely on the speaker that is included in the projector. The quality is poor and may be hard to hear.

GO THROUGH THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS.

Note: In this Facilitator's Guide, we have provided several questions for the first session. Discussion questions for the following six sessions can be found in the *Epic Study Guide*.

Group discussion can be the most powerful part of the *Epic* experience, helping participants to process what you are discovering, what God is teaching you. The questions we recommend are only a guide. Trust your instincts. If you feel you want to head in another direction, go for it.

- This may be the most important question; thus we're asking it weekly, for it gives the opportunity for each person to quickly express how God may be using this series, or what he may be saying to each one on a weekly basis. So, don't take this question lightly. Try to cultivate an atmosphere where each person feels comfortable sharing.

Ask:

- So briefly, what did this DVD segment stir up in you? (Excitement? Intrigue? A new thought? A question about your understanding of God or Christianity?)

Youth Leader Tip

Again, depending upon your kids, you may find it helpful to reword the questions we've written throughout the series or create your own. Don't feel constrained to ours.

- If your life is a story, what has this last chapter of your life felt like for you? A comedy, drama, tragedy, soap opera? Why?

Youth Leader Tip

A caution here, don't dismiss their stories because of their youth. Though their years are few, their stories contain all the components of someone much older.

- What are the stories (books, movies) you love? What is it about them you love? Who in that story would you want to be?
- John says, "Story is the language of the heart." React. Is that true for you? How does understanding Story affect your understanding of your life? Of Christianity?
- John shares the story about a person coming home to find the damaged car his best friend or teenage daughter borrowed to make the point that if we don't know the full story we can jump to the wrong conclusion. What conclusions have you jumped to regarding God and his heart toward you, regarding life and your role that may be the result of you not knowing the full story?

- Practically, how have you viewed Christianity? Have you viewed it as being all about Sunday behavior, rules, tips and formulas, or have you viewed it as an Epic story—a story unfolding through the ages you’ve been caught up in, something dangerous now unfolding, something waiting for you in the future to discover, and some crucial role for you to play? Which would you prefer? Have you lost heart from the modern model Christianity that has lost its story?
- Does the Christianity you know stir in you a passion, a powerful faith, and wild hope? If so, how has that happened? If not, is that something you’d want? Would you be comfortable asking God for that?
- So, what kind of tale have you fallen into? What kind of tale have you hoped for or dreamed of living in?

CLOSING

Thank the group for coming tonight, and remind them of the meeting time and place next week. Point out that next week you’ll begin the DVD series and ask them to read through the Prologue part of the Study Guide before coming.

A LITTLE ADVICE ON FACILITATING SMALL GROUPS

Start with general, less personal questions, and then progressively move to the deeper, harder, more personal questions.

Lead by example. This is a personal journey. Share your reactions, thoughts, and new frontiers.

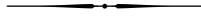
Stay focused. Pick a couple of questions, and stay focused on them. You may not get through all the questions. But you certainly won’t make headway if you let the conversation wander. Keep it on track with kind but firm direction.

Deal with the nonstop talker. Inevitably, some groups are going to wind up with a person who will want to dominate the conversation, take it off track, and talk about their life for an hour—or who simply cannot make a point in under thirty minutes. With love and firmness, you will need to cut them off when it becomes apparent that he is going on and on. Say something like, “Jim, excuse me, but our time is running short and I know you want the other folks to have a chance to talk tonight, so please finish your thoughts in just a sentence or two.”

Regarding the Doctrinal Cop: No doubt at some point you’ll encounter the person who doesn’t really want to learn from this series; he wants to make a doctrinal point or take a stand or pick a fight. With kind firmness, say something like, “You know, Jim, this just isn’t the right forum for holding a theological debate or trying to sort through our doctrinal differences. We respect your convictions, but we ask you to respect ours as well. Tonight, we’re focusing on [whatever the topic is], and I’m going to have to end this so we can get back on track.” To help you deal with any doctrinal questions, we have provided a little guidance on the theology of each segment to assist you.

Session Two

PROLOGUE



“I wonder what sort of tale we’ve fallen into?”

—J. R. R. TOLKIEN, *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

THE GOAL

To help your group see how central Story is to understanding Life . . . and God.

To prepare, simply review Prologue on the Epic DVD and in the book *Epic*. Chapter Two in *Waking the Dead* might also be helpful to you.

YOUR OPENING

Welcome the group for returning to this the second session. Ask how reading the Prologue went and what got stirred up in them.

We use a lot of movie clips when we teach *Epic*—scenes from popular movies that reinforce the points.

We wanted to include them in the DVD itself, but couldn't get those rights from Hollywood studios. So, what we'll do is recommend the clips we use for each segment. In this DVD segment—the Prologue—John suggests that “life for most of us feels like a movie we've arrived at forty minutes late.” A film clip you may want to use to illustrate this is from a bizarre movie called *Brazil*, chapter seven (time codes are 26:10—27:49) on the DVD. Roll the clip without setup or explanation, other than to say, “this is a great illustration of the way life feels for most of us, most of the time.” Start at the top of chapter seven on the DVD of *Brazil*, and show about two minutes, then just turn it off. Your point: Something important seems to be going on . . . but we have no idea what it is. This is how most people live their entire life.

Youth Leader Tip

The film clips we've suggested have worked well for us with adult audiences. Most of them will work well, if set up, with younger audiences too; however, in any of these sessions you may think of a film clip that would more effectively make the point to your kids... use it!

ROLL THE EPIC DVD SIX-PART CURRICULUM VERSION, PROLOGUE.

GROUP DISCUSSION

Group discussion questions can be found in the *Epic Study Guide*.

THEOLOGY

In the Prologue, the idea is simply that life is a Story. That in fact Story is the nature of the world in which we live. This shouldn't be too startling, though it may come as a new

idea to most people. Notice that the Bible is written primarily as stories, and that Jesus teaches primarily through stories (parables). The Gospels themselves are also *stories* about Jesus, which apparently is the best way to get to know him! As Eugene Peterson (who translated the version of the Scriptures called *The Message*) said, “We live in narrative, we live in story. Existence has a story shape to it. We have a beginning and an end, we have a plot, we have characters. The Scriptures are given to us in the form of a story.”

Now, by using the concept of Story, John is not saying Christianity is untrue. Yes, there are teachers out there who try and reduce Christianity to “one of the world’s great myths, or legends.” That is not what John mean. *Story* does not equal *untruth*. *Story* means, “a narrative account of unfolding events; a drama.” And *epic* means, “a dramatic story on a grand scale.”

Further, John is not saying that biblical truths cannot be stated as propositions. They can, and in many places in Scripture, they are. But historically speaking, the church has only recently fallen to the use of proposition as its *primary* means of communicating truth. That happened as a result of the modern era. (For a better understanding, read “Science and the Story That We Need” on www.epicreality.com). Proposition is important, but it is inadequate. The Bible reads far more like a great story than it does an encyclopedia, or the yellow pages.

Bottom Line: God has created a reality for mankind to live in, and that reality unfolds like a great story. And quite often, when God chooses to communicate with man, he does so through story (as in the many stories of the Old and New Testaments). Reality is a Story, and the best way to appreciate it, to understand it, is through story.

SUPPORTING SCRIPTURE

He has planted eternity in the human heart . . . (Ecclesiastes 3:11 NLT).

CLOSING

Thank the group for coming tonight, and remind them of the meeting time and place for next week. Point out that next week you’ll be discussing Act One. Encourage them to read that chapter in the book and do the corresponding chapter in the Study Guide prior to next week’s gathering. You may choose to close with prayer.

Session Three

ACT ONE: ETERNAL LOVE

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.*

—JOHN 1:1, 2 NIV

THE GOAL

To give everyone an opportunity to share his or her reflections about last week's topic.

To point out and discuss:

1. Life is not all about *you*. You're precious, important and valuable; you have a crucial role to play . . . but this story is about something bigger than you. Someone has gone before you and has invited you up into something larger than yourself.
2. That Someone who has gone before us is good, he's relational, his invitation is into a heroic fellowship, into Life.

To prepare, simply review Act One on the Epic DVD. Note your personal reaction(s) to the material. What impact, new thoughts, questions, and feelings does it stir in you? We'd also strongly suggest you read the corresponding chapter in the book *Epic*. Also, prior to your meeting, take the time to do the *Something to Ponder* exercise from last week (you want to set a good example).

YOUR OPENING

Welcome the group. Ask how reading Act One went. What impressed them about this chapter?

In this DVD segment—Act One—you may want to use the film clip John refers to in this segment: the opening scene from *The Last of the Mohicans* (chapter one, time code 0:14–3:37). We start with chapter one on the commercial DVD, and show it right from the beginning of the movie to just before they shoot the deer.

Your point: This clip represents a picture of the Trinity, heroic fellowship on a shared mission.

ROLL THE EPIC DVD, ACT ONE.

GROUP DISCUSSION

Group discussion questions can be found in the *Epic Study Guide*.

Youth Leader Tip

At this stage of life the kids in your group certainly know the longing and pressure to belong . . . to be invited in a group. You may want to spend a bit more time on the relational longings of your kids . . . and that they're from God.

THEOLOGY

God is Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, God is relational. (For further study on the theology of the Trinity, see Matthew 3:16, 17; Matthew 28:19; John 15:26; 1 Peter 1:1, 2.)

Every person longs to belong. We crave relationship, and we yearn to be invited into relationship—whether that’s in a family, a group, a marriage, a church. That core human longing for relationship is evidence of what we are created for as image bearers of the God who is Trinity.

And God the Trinity longs to invite us into relationship with him. (See Jeremiah 24:7; John 17:3, 24.)

Finally, either we believe God is worthy to be the center of the Story and in Him we’ll find the life we’re looking for, or we’ll look for life somewhere else.

SUPPORTING SCRIPTURE

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. (John 1:1-3 NIV)

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1 NIV)

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image . . .” (Genesis 1:26 NIV)

“Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.” (John 17:24 NIV)

Life itself was in him. (John 1:4 NLT)

CLOSING

Thank the group for coming tonight, and remind them of the meeting time and place for next week. Point out that next week you’ll be discussing Act Two in the DVD series and by now they should have the book, so suggest they read/review Act Two and do that chapter in the Study Guide.

Session Four

ACT TWO: THE ENTRANCE OF EVIL

And there was war in heaven.

—REVELATION 12:7 NIV

THE GOAL

To give everyone an opportunity to share his or her reflections about last week's topic.

Discuss Act Two:

1. Every story has a villain. (Including yours!)
2. Most of us do not live as if we have a villain. If you live as if there are only two characters on the stage: you and God, then one of you is going to have to take the blame for all the tragedy and sorrow of your life; however, if the Story has a villain, well then, that's a whole different situation.
3. God's intentions are good, but if we want the life God has for us, we're going to have to fight for it.

To prepare, take the time to do the *Something to Ponder* exercise prior to your meeting. Review this week's chapter and watch the corresponding section on the DVD

segment at least once and note your personal reaction(s) to the material. What impact, new thoughts, questions, and feelings does it stir in you?

Pray! Given that we do have an enemy who would love to disrupt, distract, discourage and diminish you, your facilitating, and the powerful impact of this series upon those in your group, it would be wise for you to pray for each person with the admonitions of Peter and James in mind. Pray that the Thief could not steal all that God has for them through this session and from the series.

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. **Resist him**, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. (1 Peter 5:8–9 NIV)

Submit yourselves, then, to God. **Resist the devil**, and he will flee from you. (James 4:7 NIV)

YOUR OPENING

Welcome the group back to week four of your seven-week journey. Ask the group about their initial impressions of Act Two.

A vivid picture of betrayal and mutiny that can help present the violence of the Devil's rebellion is a scene from *Last of The Mohicans* (chapter seven, from the beginning of the scene to 21:10). Magua, a scout for the King's army, betrays the King and leads his army into an ambush. Though beaten, the traitor Magua escapes.

ROLL THE EPIC DVD, ACT TWO.

GROUP DISCUSSION

Group discussion questions can be found in the *Epic Study Guide*.

Youth Leader Tip

The two extremes on spiritual warfare John addresses in the “Something to Ponder” section of the Study Guide seem true to youth as well. The extremes in your group will guide you on what course/emphasis to take on this subject with your group.

THEOLOGY

God created angelic beings (see Hebrews 1). One of them, Satan, betrayed God and led a revolt against Him (see Revelation 12). Defeated, Satan and his angelic allies were cast out of heaven. This foe of God is our adversary. Described as a thief, murderer, and destroyer (John 10:10), the accuser of the faithful (Revelation 12:10), the devil, he is no impotent imaginary character. Rather he is a present and real enemy who seeks only defamation, death, and destruction for believers. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, many believers do not take his existence or scriptural warnings and instructions about him seriously; thus his activity is often attributed either to God or us. To live the life God has for us demands that we deal with our enemy.

There is a teaching circulating around the church right now which says we must *not* “fight back” or do anything to resist the devil—that such activity puts too much emphasis on Satan, and should be left to God. This is very dangerous teaching, and very unbiblical as well. In James 4:7 and in 1 Peter 5:8, 9, we are *commanded* to resist Satan. In Ephesians 6:10–18 we are told to put on the armor of God because we will be doing battle against the enemy. Certainly we have Christ as our example, who dealt firmly and directly with foul spirits (see Mark 5:1–17; Luke 4:31–37). We also have the example of Paul in Acts 16:16–18.

A note of clarification: The “war in heaven” referred to in Revelation 12:7 clearly

takes place in Act Three, at the time of Christ's birth. It is not the same war John refers to taking place in Act Two. It is a biblical *example* of war between holy and unholy angels. Now, we know Satan must have fallen *prior* to Genesis 3, because at this point he is the enemy of God, looking to deceive and destroy Adam and Eve. Exactly how he fell, and when he fell is not directly referred to in Scripture, but only through inferences such as in Ezekiel 28. This we know: Satan is now the enemy of God and God's people (Revelation 12:17; 1 Peter 5:8, 9), he has many fallen angels in his army (Luke 8:26–31) and we are going to need to actively resist him (James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:9).

SUPPORTING SCRIPTURE

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10 NIV)

And the LORD sent an angel, who annihilated all the fighting men and the leaders and officers in the camp of the Assyrian king. So he withdrew to his own land in disgrace. And when he went into the temple of his god, some of his sons cut him down with the sword. (2 Chronicles 32:21 NIV)

So the LORD sent a plague on Israel...and seventy thousand of the people from Dan to Beersheba died. When the angel stretched out his hand to destroy Jerusalem, the LORD was grieved because of the calamity and said to the angel who was afflicting the people, "Enough! Withdraw your hand." (2 Samuel 24:15, 16 NIV)

"Release the four angels who are bound at the great river Euphrates." And the four angels who had been kept ready for this very hour and day and month and year were released to kill a third of mankind. (Revelation 9:14, 15 NIV)

"You were the model of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God;

*every precious stone adorned you: ruby, topaz and emerald,
chrysolite, onyx and jasper, sapphire, turquoise and beryl.
Your settings and mountings were made of gold;
on the day you were created they were prepared.
You were anointed as a guardian cherub,
for so I ordained you.
You were on the holy mount of God;
you walked among the fiery stones.
You were blameless in your ways
from the day you were created
till wickedness was found in you.” (Ezekiel 28:12–15 NIV)*

“I drove you in disgrace from the mount of God, and I expelled you, O guardian cherub, from among the fiery stones. Your heart became proud on account of your beauty, and you corrupted your wisdom because of your splendor.” (Ezekiel 28:16, 17 NIV)

On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, as I was standing on the bank of the great river, the Tigris, I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of the finest gold around his waist. His body was like chrysolite, his face like lightning, his eyes like flaming torches, his arms and legs like the gleam of burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of a multitude. I, Daniel, was the only one who saw the vision; the men with me did not see it, but such terror overwhelmed them that they fled and hid themselves . . . I had no strength left, my face turned deathly pale and I was helpless. (Daniel 10:4–8 NIV)

CLOSING

Review the key points covered in this session:

1. Every story has a villain. (Including yours!)

2. Most of us do not live as if we have a villain.
3. God's intentions are good, but if we want the life God has for us, we're going to have to fight for it.

Remind the group that next week you'll be discussing Act Three. Suggest they read/review Act Three and do that chapter in the Study Guide.

Session Five

ACT THREE: THE BATTLE FOR THE HEART

*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy;
I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full.*

—JOHN 10:10 NIV

THE GOAL

To give everyone an opportunity to share his or her reflections about last week's topic.

Discuss Act Three:

1. No wonder we long for beauty, adventure, intimacy. We were made for Eden. It isn't wrong to long for those things. Of course we have these desires for life, for real life . . . that's what we were created for.
2. Our story doesn't begin with sin—it doesn't begin in Genesis 3—but begins in Genesis 1 with a glory and a dignity bestowed upon you. Sin is not the deepest thing about you. The Image of God is, and that's what makes you so valuable and gives you such honor. It's also what makes sin so tragic.
3. Christianity is not about going to church, saying our prayers, and minding our manners . . . it's a love story set in the midst of a life and death battle for our hearts. That explains our days. If we take that understanding into our daily lives, it will shed

light on so many things. God is still coming for us as our hero, and there are still so many places we still need him to rescue us. And the villain is still coming after us.

To prepare, review this week's chapter in the book and view the DVD segment at least once. Note your personal reaction(s) to the material. What impact, new thoughts, questions, and feelings does it stir in you? Read the corresponding chapter in the book.

YOUR OPENING

Welcome the group back to week five of your seven-week journey. Begin your time with a few questions to the group:

- John warned us that this study would be a battle! Has it been for you? How?
- It seems there are two extremes when it comes to the devil. We either live as if he doesn't exist or we are so focused upon him that we see him under every rock. What extreme have you been more prone to?
- What in your life, your story, do you now understand may very well have been the work of the villain? What has he tried to rob, murder, and steal from you in the past? What currently is he assaulting you with (lies, accusation, shame, guilt, temptation, etc.)? What are you going to do about it?

It would be good following this sharing to pray for the evening inviting God to come, fill the room, and fill your hearts.

Given that there may be some questions about the enemy's power over the believer, here are some references to the victory of Christ over the enemy and the authority we have as believers. You may want to share these verses with your group and discuss the questions that follow:

He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. (1 John 3:8 NIV)

According to 1 John 3:8, why did Christ come?

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.
(Colossians 2:13–15 NIV)

According to Colossians 2:13–15, what happened to all of Satan’s evil forces at the cross?

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” (Matthew 28:18 NIV)

How far does the authority of Jesus Christ extend, according to Matthew 28:18?

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. (Colossians 1:13 NIV)

What does Colossians 1:13 say that God has done for you?

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:6 NIV)

According to Ephesians 2:6, what sort of position of authority do you have now?

I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. (Luke 10:19 NIV)

How much authority has Jesus given you over the devil, according to Luke 10:19?

Two film clips that can help us grasp the death and resurrection of Christ are a scene from *Braveheart* (scene 20, 2:37:23—2:50:26) and a scene from *Gladiator* (scene XXVII, from the beginning of the scene to 2:28:00).

ROLL THE EPIC DVD, ACT THREE.

GROUP DISCUSSION

Group discussion questions can be found in *Epic Study Guide*.

Youth Leader Tip

The perennial challenge thrown at Christians is, “If God is good why did he...” is answered here. Addressing this issue with the insight of the C.S. Lewis quote will strengthen your kids’ faith.

THEOLOGY

Creation is a glorious event we all too often rush through, as if it were a brief parenthesis to get to Genesis 3 and the Fall, where we mistakenly think our story really begins. But we must linger on the wonder and beauty of the world and life God intended for us to enjoy, to see the good intentions of his heart for us before we hastily jump to the Fall. Created as Image-bearers, we are designed for a heroic intimacy with God, endowed with a dignity, a freedom, and a glory that made a passionate loving relationship with Him possible.

Furthermore, God is a passionate lover who seeks our hearts. As devastating as the Fall was to humanity, God pursued us, inviting us to choose Him and the life he offers. He pursues us still! (See Isaiah 54:4–8; 57:7–11; 62:1–5; 62:12; Jeremiah 3:1; 24:7; 31:31–34.) Notice also the progression of metaphors Jesus uses to teach us about our

relationship with Him. It moves from clay and potter through sheep and shepherd to bride and bridegroom!

SUPPORTING SCRIPTURE

Darkness over the deep and God's breath hovering over the waters.
(Genesis 1:2 *Alter*)

. . . while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy.
(Job 38:7 NIV)

*Then God said, "Let us make a human in our own image, by our likeness, to hold sway over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the heavens and the cattle and the wild beasts and all the crawling things that crawl upon the earth." And God created the human in his image. (Genesis 1:26, 27 *Alter*)*

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. (Genesis 3:1–6 NIV)

The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. (Genesis 6:5, 6 NIV)

Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. (Proverbs 4:23 NIV)

*When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—
the moon and the stars you set in place—
what are mere mortals that you should think about them,
human beings that you should care for them?
Yet you made them only a little lower than God
and crowned them with glory and honor. (Psalm 8:3–5 NLT)*

The LORD is a warrior . . . (Exodus 15:3 NIV)

I long to be gracious to you. You are precious and honored in my sight, because I love you. But you are the offspring of adulterers. You have made your bed on a high and lofty hill, forsaking me, you uncovered your bed, you climbed into it and opened it wide. You have been false to me. (Excerpts from Isaiah)

*I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me . . .
What fault did you find in me that you strayed so far from me? You are a swift she-camel running here and there, sniffing the wind in her craving—in her heat who can restrain her? Should I not punish them for this? Should I not avenge myself? I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving kindness. What have I done to make you hate me so much? (Excerpts from Jeremiah)*

I will answer you according to your idols [your false lovers] in order to recapture your heart. (From Ezekiel)

“Their hearts are always going astray . . .” (Hebrews 3:10 NIV)

*“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.”
(John 15:9 NIV)*

“I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart.” (Jeremiah 24:7 NIV)

*“... the Son of Man ... [came] to give his life as a ransom for many.”
(Matthew 20:28 NIV)*

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:13, 14 NIV)

“Surely this man was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:39 NIV)

CLOSING

Review the key points covered in Act Three:

1. We were made for Eden. Of course we have desires for life, for *real* life—that’s what we were created for.
2. Your story doesn’t begin with sin in Genesis 3; it begins in Genesis 1 with a glory and a dignity bestowed upon you. Sin is not the deepest thing about you—the Image of God is.
3. Christianity is not about going to church, saying our prayers, and minding our manners . . . it’s a love story set in the midst of a life and death battle for our hearts. That explains our days. If we take that understanding into our daily lives, it will shed light on so many things. God is still coming for us as our hero, and there are still so many places we need Him to rescue us. And the villain is still coming after us.

Remind the group that next week you’ll be doing Act Four and ask that they complete *Something to Ponder* prior to next week’s gathering.

Session Six

ACT FOUR: THE KINGDOM RESTORED

*See! The winter is past;
the rains are over and gone.
Flowers appear on the earth;
the season of singing has come.*

—SONG OF SOLOMON 2:11, 12 NIV

THE GOAL

To give everyone an opportunity to share his or her reflections about last week's topic.

Discuss Act Four:

1. Heaven is more than harps, halos, wings, and a never-ending church service in the sky . . . it is the Kingdom Restored, the Great Restoration of all that was lost in the Fall, all that's been stolen by the thief. It is the restoration of the life we long for.
2. Go back and put yourself into the ending of the stories you love. Say, "This is my story. This is how life is going to turn out for me very soon." It will do your heart a world of good.

To prepare, take the time to do the *Something to Ponder* exercise prior to your meeting. Review this week's chapter, view the DVD segment at least once and note your personal

reaction(s) to the material. What impact, new thoughts, questions, and feelings does it stir in you? Read the corresponding chapter in the book.

YOUR OPENING

Welcome the group back to week six of your seven-week journey.

In this DVD segment, John cites an incredible scene that may be one of the best pictures of the Great Restoration ever presented on film. We'd suggest you show this clip (which may require you watching the whole movie "to get it"). The clip is found in the film *Titanic* (scene 30).

Another great scene John cites is from the film *Apollo 13* (scene 52, 2:2:35–2:10:19). You may want to use the *Titanic* scene early in your time together and close with this scene, or you may want to view both.

John also refers to the endings of *Gladiator* and *The Lion King*. These films are also powerful glimpses of Act Four.

ROLL EPIC DVD, ACT FOUR.

GROUP DISCUSSION

Group discussion questions can be found in *Epic Study Guide*.

Youth Leader Tip

John states that, "Most of us do not live with a deep-rooted excitement about the life to come." With so much of "Life" here-and-now ahead of them, your youth may find it difficult to think of heaven. You may want to discuss what "life happily ever after" elicits in their hearts and imagination as a way to surface some of their thoughts.

THEOLOGY

This Act may be the one we know the least about—heaven. Most of us do not live with a deep-rooted excitement about the life to come. It’s absolutely amazing how little is taught or preached about heaven. It begins with a party, a feast—more specifically, a wedding reception party beyond what many of us would be comfortable partaking of in this life. (See Revelation 19:6–9; Matthew 26:29; Isaiah 25:6–9).

John challenges a treasured notion in the church, that heaven is unending worship of God. This idea might have been drawn from Revelation 4:8, but note that it is not the saints who “never stop saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy,’” but the four creatures, and the twenty-four elders. We know that we are to reign over kingdoms (see Matthew 24:45, 46; Matthew 25:14–23; Matthew 25:31–34; Luke 19:11–19)—clearly, we are to be about a great deal of activities in the life to come, in addition to worshiping God!

Heaven is the restoration of all that was lost, stolen, or missed in this life. If we’re unaware of the life God intended us to live, we live with a minimum of disappointment and unfortunately, hope. We were meant to live a life we haven’t fully lived . . . but we will one day. The difficult task with this subject is really beginning to believe that this life *isn’t* all there is. We have been so completely blinded to this truth most believers practically do not believe or live as if there is a heaven. On restoration, see Matthew 19:28 and also Revelation 21:1; Isaiah 65:17; Revelation 21:5; and Romans 8:22, 23.

SUPPORTING SCRIPTURE

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth . . . (Revelation 21:1 NIV)

“Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth.” (Isaiah 65:17 NIV)

“I am making everything new!” (Revelation 21:5 NIV)

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8:22, 23 NIV)

Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?” But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. “Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples . . . He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” (Mark 16:2–7 NIV)

But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died. (1 Corinthians 15:20 NLT)

God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored.
(Romans 8:29 MSG)

“Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb.”
(Revelation 19:9 NLT)

“The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. Then he sent some more servants and said, ‘Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner . . . Come to the wedding banquet.’ But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business.” (Matthew 22:2–5 NIV)

“Mark my words—I will not drink wine again until the day I drink it new with you in my Father’s Kingdom.” (Matthew 26:29 NLT).

“[The LORD] is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” (2 Peter 3:9 NIV)

I have set before you life and death . . . Now choose life . . . (Deuteronomy 30:19 NIV)

“ . . . come to me to have life.” (John 5:40 NIV)

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” (John 10:10 NIV)

“And this is the way to have eternal life—to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth.” (John 17:3 NLT)

Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life. (Revelation 22:17 NIV)

“Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.” (Matthew 25:34 NIV)

“Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.” (Matthew 24:45–47 NIV)

The created world itself can hardly wait for what’s coming next. Everything in creation is being more or less held back. God reins it in until both creation and all the creatures are ready and can be released at the same moment into the glorious times ahead. (Romans 8:19, 20 MSG)

. . . creation looks forward to the day when it will join God’s children in glorious freedom from death and decay. (Romans 8:21 NLT)

“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me” (John 14:2, 3 NIV).

. . . a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. (2 Corinthians 3:15, 16 NIV)

We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God’s throne. (Hebrews 12:2 NLT)

CLOSING

Review the key point covered in Act Four:

Heaven is not harps, halos, wings, and never-ending church service in the sky . . . it is the Kingdom Restored, the Great Restoration of all that was lost in the Fall, all that’s been stolen by the thief—the restoration of the life we have longed for.

Remind the group that next week you’ll be doing the Epilogue and ask that they complete *Something to Ponder* prior to next week’s gathering.

Session Seven

EPILOGUE: THE ROAD BEFORE US

*The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with eager feet,
Until it joins some larger way.*

—J. R. R. TOLKIEN

THE GOAL

To give everyone an opportunity to share his or her reflections about last week's topic. To encourage each one to play his or her part well. To do that, they must know their role. As facilitator, prompt your group with the following questions:

1. Start with your dreams and desires of your heart.
2. Think of the characters you love in Scripture, in the movies and stories you love. There's something about their life, calling, role that speaks to you. Something true of you is why you identify with them.
3. Ask God to reveal to you your true name. The one God has for you. Your true identity from God that will give clarity to your life purpose and calling.

To prepare, take the time to do the *Something to Ponder* exercise prior to your meeting. Review this week's chapter and view the DVD segment at least once and note your

personal reaction(s) to the material. What impact, new thoughts, questions, and feelings does it stir in you? Read the corresponding chapter in the book.

YOUR OPENING

Welcome the group back to your final week of this journey and set up your time by saying asking the following question: How has this experience been for you?

In this session you may choose not to show a film clip, choosing to give more time to your experience of the series. If you do want to show a clip, we'd recommend showing any one of the trailers from The Lord of the Rings trilogy of films (they can be found in the special features section of the DVD for that movie), or reshow a particular clip that seemed to capture the hearts and imaginations of your group.

ROLL THE EPIC DVD, EPILOGUE.

GROUP DISCUSSION

Group discussion questions can be found in *Epic Study Guide*.

THEOLOGY

We live in a Larger Story. That should be clear by now.

1. Things are not what they seem. The snake in the Garden was more than a snake! The carpenter from Nazareth was more than a woodworker! (See 2 Corinthians 4:18.)
2. We are at war. Yes, it's a love story . . . set in a life or death battle. Satan is seeking to steal, kill, destroy. Jesus is bringing us life. (See John 10:10.)
3. You have a crucial role to play. (See John 15:15–17; John 17:18; Ephesians 2:10).

SUPPORTING SCRIPTURE

. . . a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. (2 Corinthians 3:15,16 NIV)

We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne. (Hebrews 12:2 NLT)

CLOSING

Thank the group for their faithfulness to this study over these past seven weeks. Review the key points covered in the Epilogue:

May you play your part well. To do that, you must know your role.

1. Start with your dreams and desires of your heart.
2. Think of the characters you love in Scripture, in the movies and stories you love. There's something about their life, calling, role that speaks to you. Something true of you is why you identify with them.
3. Ask God to reveal to you your true name. The one God has for you. Your true identity from God that will give clarity to your life purpose and calling.

We live in a larger Story. That should be clear by now.

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3. You have a crucial role to play. (See John 15:15–17, John 17:18, Ephesians 2:10.)

LEAVE THEM WITH THESE THOUGHTS:

Who are the people in your life you would love to share this Epic story with?

How can you share it with them? Give them the book? Invite them to watch the DVD with you? Hold your own small group study of the *Epic* curriculum with some non-believers?