

him in the middle of a complicated situation? What does God's selection of the smallest and youngest of Jesse's sons say about what God values? Does that sound like good news or bad news to you?

10. Have you ever been like the people of Israel and chased after something everyone else had, even though you were warned it was going to be bad for you?

## EXPERIMENTS IN STORY

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The backstories of characters in a narrative reveal where people come from and what motivates them. This week, watch a movie, TV show (a pilot works best), read a short story, see a play, or listen to a song (like Johnny Cash's "A Boy Named Sue") and pay attention to how the storyteller employs backstory. Note how the backstory affects the unfolding narrative and what truths it reveals about the characters.

What could you learn from this about how to tell your own story? Make a note of these things in your journal to share next week.

## EXPLORING THE STORY FURTHER

This week we have been talking about the way our past sheds light on our present. The language we have used to describe this reality is “backstory.” A backstory is what good storytellers include in their narrative so that the audience can understand and relate to the characters. As we have seen from our study of 1 Samuel, characters like David are deeply affected by what has come before, but what about the Bible’s main character, God? What can we learn about God by digging deeper into the backstory of the Bible? This week, we will reflect on that question.



### Day 1

#### GENESIS 1:1-2

In the beginning, God created *everything*: the heavens *above* and the earth *below*. *Here’s what happened: At first* the earth lacked shape and was totally empty, and a dark *fog* draped over the deep while God’s spirit-wind hovered over the surface of the *empty* waters.

(\*Read Genesis 1:3–30 as well)

#### GENESIS 1:31

Then God surveyed everything He had made, savoring *its beauty* and *appreciating* its goodness. Evening gave way to morning. That was day six.

Read the scripture for today and consider:

☒ What is a common theme you find in each act of the creation story?

☒ What does it say about the God who created all things?

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, everything was good. The air, water, land, plants, animals, and people were all created perfectly. This is the design and dream of God. This goodness is the way God wants things to be. It is reality when it is right-side-up.

In our reality, we see a world that is broken and upside down. We see the effects of the fall as told in Genesis 3. It is important to remember that the creation story doesn't start there. Our story does not begin with sin; it begins with goodness, and this impacts how we tell God's story. It can also make a difference in how we tell our own stories. Genesis 1 asks us to consider where we think God's story and our stories actually begin. Does the story begin with blessing or curses? The answer to that question may affect more than we realize.

- ❏ Do you think beginning God's story in Genesis 1 (with goodness) instead of Genesis 3 (with sin) impacts the way we see God?
- ❏ Does it affect how we see what God is doing in the world?
- ❏ When you think about your own story, do you start it with a Genesis 1 orientation or a Genesis 3 orientation? How does your answer to that question influence how you see God, yourself, and the world?



## Day 2

### DEUTERONOMY 7:6-7

**Moses:** Remember; you're a people set apart for the Eternal your God; He is your God and has chosen you to be *His own possession*—His special people—out of all the peoples on the earth. The Eternal didn't become devoted to you and choose you because you were the most numerous of all the peoples—in fact, you were the least!

Read the scripture for today and consider:

❏ Why did God choose Israel to be his people?

❏ Why would this matter to God?

When good fortune falls on religious people in our culture, they sometimes say, "God has blessed me." This can make it seem like the evidence of God's favor can be found in our success. It can lead us to believe that the "haves" in this world are somehow more special to God than the "have nots."

The passage in Deuteronomy reveals that this idea is often the reverse of how God actually works. In verse 7, God tells the people that he picked them because they were small. He picked them not in spite of their insignificance, but because of it. He did this in order to show the world his power. When Israel came into the land of promise, there was no doubt that God had been the one leading them, because they were too weak and small to do it themselves.

❏ Do you see God's "blessing" as being the same thing as having strength, resources, and success?

❖ What does Deuteronomy 7:6–7 say about those chosen to work with God?

❖ How can your weaknesses be an opportunity to show God's strength?



## Day 3

### MARK 1:1–4

This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus, the Anointed One, *the Liberating King*, the Son of God.

Isaiah the prophet told us *what would happen before He came*:

Watch, I will send My messenger in front of You  
to prepare Your way and make it clear *and straight*.

You'll hear him, a voice crying in the wilderness,

"Prepare the way of the Eternal One,  
a straight way in the wandering desert, a highway for our  
God."

*That messenger was John the Baptist, who appeared in the desert near the Jordan River preaching that people should be ritually cleansed through baptism with water as a sign of both their changed hearts and God's forgiveness of their sins.*



Read the scripture for today and consider:

- ❑ Why do you think the account of Jesus' life begins with a story about someone else?

Mark begins his gospel about Jesus with stories of John the Baptist because even Jesus has a backstory. Through John, God was fulfilling promises and assurances that had been made generations before. God's story would reach its climax with Jesus, but those who wanted see it had to get ready. That's where John came in.

John the Baptist invited people to a baptism of repentance. Repentance means more than just feeling sorry for the bad things you've done. Instead, it means searching your life for where you have gone off track, stopping that behavior or pattern, turning around, and then going in the other direction. This is a great way to deal with any regret you carry from your backstory. To be free from it requires first acknowledging that it is there, and then turning around and walking in the other direction. Is there anything

you need to turn and walk away from in order to be ready for what God is going to do next in your life?

☯ Is there anything in your past you need to leave behind?

☯ What could make that difficult? What could make it easy?

☯ Pray. God is near.



## Day 4

### MATTHEW 1:20-23

Now when Joseph had decided to act on his instincts, a messenger of the Lord came to him in a dream.

**Messenger of the Lord:** Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to wed Mary *and bring her into your home and family* as your wife. *She did not sneak off and sleep with someone else*—rather, she conceived the baby she now carries through the miraculous wonderworking of the Holy Spirit. She will have a son, and you will name Him Jesus, *which means “the Lord saves,”* because this Jesus is the person who will save *all of* His people from sin.



Years and years ago, *Isaiah*, a prophet of Israel, foretold the story of *Mary, Joseph, and Jesus*:

A virgin will conceive and bear a Son,  
and His name will be Immanuel  
(which is a Hebrew name that means "God with us").

Read the scripture for today and consider:

❏ Who chose Jesus' name?

❏ Is there anything that makes you wonder if Jesus' names have a backstory?

Both of the names given in this passage have a connection to the Hebrew Bible. The first, Jesus, is a cognate of Joshua. In the Old Testament, Joshua led Israel out of the desert and into the promised land. God kept his promise through Joshua and what he did through Jesus was similar and yet much, much bigger.

The other name given is Immanuel. This is a reference to Isaiah 7:14, when God assured the king that he cared for his people even

when they were being threatened. Jesus' name, Immanuel, is meant to evoke that whole story and communicate again that what God did through Jesus was both similar and much, much bigger.

❁ Can you think of examples where Jesus acted to save people during his ministry?

❁ Can you think of examples where Jesus protected people during his ministry?

❁ How did both of these names come together on the cross?

❁ What does your name mean? Are any parts of your character revealed in your name?