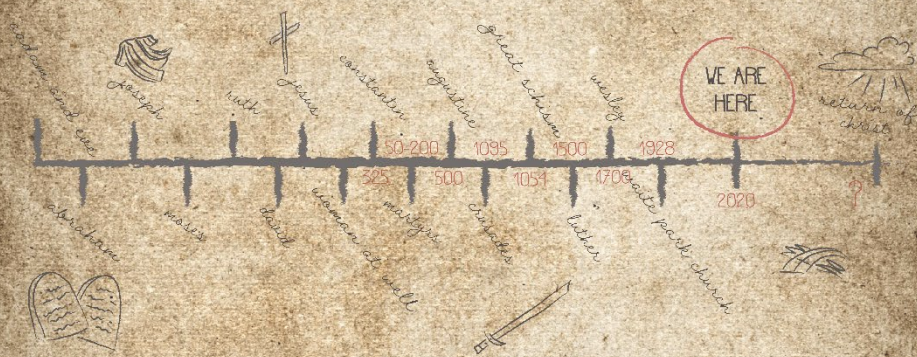


This is Our Story





This is OUR STORY

During the next six weeks our church will going through a Focus Season where we will be “focused” on both learning from the stories found in Scripture and using these stories to mold our own stories. This booklet allows us to take what happens on Sunday morning and use it as a foundation for the rest of the week.

Sermon Notes: Use this portion of the booklet to take notes during the sermon. You can watch the livestream online at <http://www.waiteparkchurch.org/livestream> or use our website sermon page, podcast, or YouTube channel to stay caught up on messages.

Small Group Questions: Respond to each question before you meet so that you can be prepared to share when the time comes. In doing so, you won't be caught off guard and you'll be able to offer thoughtful responses.

Dinner Table Topics: When your family eats dinner use these conversation topics to engage and grow in understanding our story together.

Daily Devotions: Use the devotionals provided to dive deeper into a Bible character each week. While learning from these Bible characters, we will spend time seeking God's to guidance to craft our own stories.

Additional Resources: Check out our *Conversations* podcast along with other supplemental resources to assist in guiding our story. Find these at <https://www.waiteparkchurch.org/our-story-resources>

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	7
Helping Kids See God in Their Story	12
WEEK 1 – SHAPED BY SCRIPTURE.....	15
Sermon Notes	16
Small Group Questions	17
Dinner Table Topics.....	19
Daily Devotions	20
WEEK 2 – CREATED IN GOD’S IMAGE	31
Sermon Notes	32
Small Group Questions	33
Dinner Table Topics.....	35
Daily Devotions	36
WEEK 3 – FALLEN.....	47
Sermon Notes	48
Small Group Questions.....	49
Dinner Table Topics	51
Daily Devotions	52
WEEK 4 – PURSUED BY GOD.....	63
Sermon Notes	64
Small Group Questions.....	65
Dinner Table Topics	67
Daily Devotions	68
WEEK 5 – TRANSFORMED BY GRACE.....	79
Sermon Notes	80
Small Group Questions	81
Dinner Table Topics.....	83
Daily Devotions	84
WEEK 6 – LIVING OUR PURPOSE.....	95
Sermon Notes	96
Small Group Questions.....	97
Dinner Table Topics	99
Daily Devotions	100

THIS IS OUR STORY

INTRODUCTION

We live at a time, you may call it modern, if you so desire, when we believe we should have no story, except the story we chose when we had no story... We call this freedom... Abundant life, the life that Jesus offers, is a storied life made possible by a common life that recognizes that before we were, we were storied by a story we did not choose. It is called creation. It is called redemption. And that story, the story of creation, the story of redemption makes possible friendships between strangers, just to the extent we learn that we share a common story that we have not chosen.

-Stanley Hauerwas

Today, people talk a lot about identity. In fact, you might be tired of it...or cynical...or fearful. But at the heart of the issue of identity is the question people have asked since the beginning of time, Who am I really? It's even a question David asks of all humanity in Psalm 8:4, "What are humans that you are mindful of us?" The Bible is the source that Christians go to in order to help us answer that question.

But the answer to that question is complicated. There are some people who believe that we *choose* our identity--that our identity and as a result, our destiny, is entirely up to us to decide. This is both an exciting and scary proposition--one that fills some people with hope and others with existential angst.

Now, there are some things about our identity that we *can* choose. Do I want to be a doctor, computer engineer or retail salesperson?

Do I want to be single or married? A musician or athlete? But the truth is, most of our identity is influenced by factors beyond our control and these factors give us common ground and make us unique. My professor likes to say that what makes us human (and unique) is that we all have:

- A body
- Relationships
- A story

There has never been a human without a body. Even Jesus was God incarnate--God “in the flesh.” We are embodied creatures--created by God, each of us unique in countless ways! Our bodies are the source of great freedom and great limitation. They’re a source of joy and frustration. Some people may look alike, but no two people have the same body.

Our identity is also formed by our relationships. We are all born into a family that shapes and sets our lives on a trajectory that is hard to deviate from. Over the years we choose friends and they choose, or reject, us. We have a myriad of relationships that play a part in shaping our identity, some of which fill us with joy and peace and others with turmoil, but none of them leaves us unchanged.

Finally, we all have a story. Our story is the combination of our body, relationships, circumstances and many other factors--some of which we choose and some of which we would never choose. This Focus Season, we are going to take a deep dive into our stories.

This may seem like an unusual way to do discipleship, but stick with us. Learning to know and love and be like Jesus is more than just learning to follow the rules. It’s about living faithfully in the story we were given by God. As Stanley Hauerwas said, *“Abundant life, the life that Jesus offers, is a storied life made possible by a common life that recognizes that before we were, we were storied by a story we did not choose. It is called creation. It is called redemption. And that story, the story of creation, the story of redemption makes possible friendships between strangers, just to the extent we learn that we share a common story that we have not chosen.”*

You see, as much as we would like to believe the modern narrative that we can be anything we want, it's simply not true. We all have limits. Modern westerners don't like limits, but limits are not all bad news. How many people have subjected themselves to a life of frustration trying to do or be something that was impossible? The Bible tells us that life itself is a gift from God and it's God that determines the plot of our story. The good news is that when we accept our God-given story, we are able to find both peace and purpose.

In the end, through this series, we would like you to see two overarching truths.

1. The Bible is not about you! You are not the central character in the Biblical story. (hint: God is)
2. You are a part of God's big story.

Let's unpack these truths. First, the Biblical story is not about you. As much as we would like to believe the Bible is God's love letter to us, that's actually not the case. Yes, God does love you and sent his Son to die for your redemption, but the Bible is there to tell us the truth about who God is, who we are, and what is our place in the world. So, we don't bend Scripture to fit into our story, our task is to align our story with God's story.

In broad terms, here is the story of the Bible.

- **Creation:** The universe is the intentional act of a loving creator. God did not make a mistake. Humans are God's masterpiece in creation--made in his image, which means we are given the responsibility of continuing the act of creation and care for creation--especially humans.
- **Fall:** From the beginning, we failed to reflect the image of God and instead tried to rule according to our own understanding, desires and wisdom. The result is that the world, including humans are now fallen--things are not as they were intended. All humans are both victims and perpetrators of sin.
- **Pursuit:** The majority of Scripture is the story of God's pursuit of humanity. God pursues us, not despite our

brokenness, but because of it. This pursuit culminated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

- **Transformation:** The purpose of God's pursuit is not to punish (though, that may happen) or just to forgive, but to redeem and restore us to relationship so that we may again reflect the image of God.
- **Purpose:** As redeemed and restored humans, we can now once again fulfill the purpose for which we were created, relationship with God and the flourishing of the world.

This is the broad story of the Bible. And while the story is not about any of us individually, we can see this story played out in each of our lives.

- **Creation:** You are the intentional act of a loving creator--made in God's image, with both gifts and limitations, to work on behalf of God in his world.
- **Fall:** You live in a fallen world. Neither you nor the world is as it was intended to be. We are all both victims and perpetrators of sin.
- **Pursuit:** Even in your sin, God pursued you in love to offer relationship, redemption and restoration.
- **Transformation:** God's grace doesn't just grant forgiveness, but the ability to be transformed into what God intended you to be.
- **Purpose:** Now, with both your gifts and limitations, God empowers you to live out his purpose through the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is what it means to live a life shaped by Scripture. So, over the next 6 weeks, we're going to look at each of these movements of Scripture, reflecting on how this story has revealed itself in your life. In the end, what we hope to accomplish is this:

- That you are able to see your story (and find your identity) in the Biblical story.
- That you be filled with gratitude for how God has been present in each season of your life.
- That you are able to share a testimony of God's faithfulness in shaping your story.

- That you would discover a purpose for your life that takes into account things like the Biblical story, your personal story, your gifts and limitations and season of life among other things.

So, be prepared to dive into Scripture, but also to take the time to prayerfully reflect on your own story and how God has been active along the way. Also, as you share your story with others in groups, you'll see how God has shaped and formed our stories into the story of Waite Park Church!

Enjoy!

Pastor Kory

HELPING KIDS SEE GOD IN THEIR STORY

Learning to see our story in light of God's story, share our testimony, and begin living into our purpose is a significant task for adults. It can be especially so for kids who are still in the earliest years of their life stories, but you can help them to begin even now to see God working in their lives. We're going to do just that during this focus season by writing down our "God sightings."

What are God sightings?

A God sighting is something you notice in your day-to-day life that is undeniably God's work. It could be:

- Something you learned from God's Word
- Part of God's creation that you noticed
- A prayer that was answered
- An unexpected miracle
- A blessing you're grateful for
- Something God reminded you of
- Or any other way that you noticed God at work in your day

How can I lead my family in looking for God sightings?

Make a plan. As a family, choose when and how often you're going to talk about your God sightings. It could be every night at dinner, on the day you celebrate Sabbath, on weekdays while you're having afterschool snacks, or whenever works best for you.

Go first. When you sit down together, talk with your kids about what a God sighting is. As they are learning what God sightings are, they will benefit from hearing you go first.

Here are some examples of God sightings you might share:

- In my Bible I read Philippians 4:6 and was reminded that I don't have to worry about anything.
- The snow today was so beautiful. It reminded me that God is so creative in how He made our world.

- We have been praying together for Grandma’s hip to heal and we found out today that she gets to come home from the hospital!
- I was feeling angry today with someone at work who said something unkind. Then, God reminded me that He has forgiven me, so I should forgive my coworker too.

Write it down. Consider writing down your God Sightings throughout the focus season so you can track how God works in your lives over the next few weeks. You might choose a journal to use, the Notes app on your phone, or sticky notes on a piece of paper you post on the fridge.

Pray. Involve God in the conversation as you talk about your God sightings. For example, after sharing about seeing a beautiful bird sitting near the window, you could say, “Thank you, God, for making so many beautiful creatures for us to enjoy.” You could also pray the following prayer before or after your God sighting conversations: *“God, open our eyes and our hearts to what You are doing around us. We want to see You working so we can thank you and give You glory. Amen.”*

Keep the pressure low. Don’t expect every person in your family to have a God sighting every time you sit down to record them. If one or all of you are struggling to figure out where God has been at work, that’s a great opportunity for you to pray together and ask God for help! God sightings take practice to notice regularly, so keep at it. You might be surprised at what your family begins to pick up on!

WEEK 1

SHAPED BY SCRIPTURE

Introduction

This week, we are going to follow the story of Joseph to see how his story fits into God's big story. But before we dive in, there is one thing we must remember...the story of Joseph is not really about Joseph. It's about how God pursued and protected Joseph's family to fulfill the promise he made to Abraham that "all the nations" would be blessed through him (and his descendants).

WEEK 1	SERMON NOTES	01/10/21
--------	--------------	----------

SHAPED BY SCRIPTURE	
DINNER TABLE TOPICS	WEEK 1

Invite your kids into the journey of discovering the big God story along with you this focus season.

- Build a blanket fort and join Pastor Abby for blanket fort story time on **Tuesday at 4 PM on Facebook Live** on the Waite Park Church Facebook page. She'll share the story of Joseph highlighted in this week's study so you can talk about it together.
- During dinnertime, use the conversation starters below to engage and grow in understanding our story together.
 - Why did Joseph's father give him a coat of many colors? Why did this make his brothers jealous? Have you ever felt jealous before? What were some of the things you felt or did when you were jealous?
 - Joseph went through a lot of hard things in his life, but he knew that God was with him. Can you think of a hard time you went through? Was it easy or hard to trust that God was with you?

Don't forget to talk about your God sightings (see pages 12-13) to help your kids begin to notice God at work in their day-to-day life.

CONTEXT FOR JOSEPH'S STORY:

When Adam and Eve sinned God's good creation was tainted. People were victims and perpetrators of sin and separated from life with God. But God pursued sinful humanity through a family--the family of Abraham. In Genesis, chapter 12, God called on Abraham to leave his home, his family and his tribal and territorial gods, to go to a land God would show him. God promised to bless Abraham and his descendants, but the ultimate reason for this blessing was not just for him. Abraham was blessed to be a blessing and to bring redemption to sinful humanity. As it says in Genesis 12:2-3:

²"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
³I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."

Ultimately, that blessing was fulfilled when God, through Jesus, took on flesh, lived among us taught and modeled what it means to be truly human, died for our sin and brokenness and was resurrected to new life to give us a glimpse of our future. However, in the meantime, there was much that God had to accomplish through Abraham and his family. Fast forward a few chapters (and couple of generations) and we find Joseph in Abraham's story.

Joseph was born into a messed up family. The generational sins of deception and favoritism are rampant in his story from Abraham and Sarah to Isaac and Rebekah, from Jacob and Esau to Leah and Rachel. Joseph was his father's favorite because he was the oldest son of his favorite wife, Rachel.

Read Genesis 37:1-39:23

At the beginning of the story, Joseph comes across as a spoiled and arrogant child. But while his family dysfunction and youthful immaturity obscured his value, in the end we see that God had created him with great gifts and a part to play in His story.

Read Genesis 41:1-43:34

In the end we find that Joseph was a gifted leader when he successfully oversaw an operation that gathered food in plentiful years and distributed it during a famine. His abilities and God's presence saved not only his family, but countless others. Even in his dark moments, the Bible tells us that God was with Joseph. (39:2, 21, 23)

The truth is, we are all created in the image of God. As we will explore next week, this means we have incalculable worth just by virtue of being human. It also means that God has given us the privilege and responsibility of caring for his creation and bringing order that allows it to flourish. It sounds like a daunting task, but God gives each of us unique gifts, abilities, interests and opportunities to accomplish this task. Most importantly, God is with humans in a way that is unlike the rest of creation. While not everyone will do "great things for God," like Joseph, our daily walk matters.

Do you pay attention to what God is doing around you and are you willing to be used to accomplish God's purposes rather than just your own?

PRAYER:

Lord, help us to see and understand the beauty of being created in the image of God. That our lives would reflect and honor who You are. We are willing and available to be used for Your purposes to be a light in the midst of darkness in the world around us.

FALLEN

The practice of primogeniture was a mainstay of traditional cultures. The firstborn son would receive a double inheritance. But the purpose was not just to favor the firstborn. When the patriarch died, the firstborn would be responsible to take care of the family. So, it was not just an honor, but a responsibility. By giving Joseph the coat of many colors and keeping Joseph home while his (older) brothers went out to tend the sheep, Jacob declared Joseph the primogeniture.

Read Genesis 37:1-36

Joseph's family was dysfunctional. His father, Jacob had two wives, Leah and Rachel. But Rachel was his favorite. Even though his oldest sons were from his marriage to Leah, his favorite son was Joseph because he was Rachel's oldest. By giving Joseph the coat of many colors and keeping him home while his (older) brothers went out to tend the sheep, Jacob declared Joseph the primogeniture out of order.

If you were Leah's sons, there would have been some jealousy, but mostly in a collectivist culture, you would have been concerned about your family. Joseph didn't seem to care much about his brothers, so if their father died, would he fulfill his responsibility to care for them and their families? Being uncertain of how to answer this question, Joseph's brothers took things into their own hands and got rid of him. With the favored son gone, primogeniture would return the oldest son-ensuring their safety.

What we see in Joseph's story is a great deal of sin and brokenness. Most of it revolves around his family. Abraham fathered a child with

Hagar at the encouragement of his wife, who then despised Hagar and Ishmael and sent them away. Isaac favored his son, Esau while his wife Rebekah favored the younger son, Jacob. The younger son, Jacob, with the help of his mother, swindled the status of primogeniture from Esau. Laban tricked Jacob into marrying both of his daughters and Jacob favored Joseph over his other sons.

What we see in this story is that Joseph and his brothers were born into sin and brokenness and continued on the cycle of sin and brokenness. Even at the end of the story, when Joseph is saving his family and other lives, he is not perfect. He plays cruel games on his brothers, seemingly to let them suffer for their sins. He saves the lives of many people, but also enslaves them in the process. He seems conflicted about whether to punish his brothers or offer grace.

This illustrates the truth that we are all both victims of sin and perpetrators of sin. No one is untouched by the damage of sin and no one is innocent of it. And unfortunately, we often sin in the same areas in which we are sinned against. Yet despite this cycle of sin, God is present in the story, working to redeem all situations for his purpose.

PRAYER:

Lord, just as Joseph is a sinner, so am I. Please forgive and wash away my sins. Help us to end the cycle of sin our lives. Renew and restore those areas of my heart and life that are prone to wander.

PURSUED BY GOD

Read Genesis 39:1-41:57

This season of Joseph's life was filled with struggle. Joseph's story did not start out on a good note--he seems arrogant and entitled and more than happy to flaunt his favored status to his brothers. In fact, if we look at things from his brother's perspective, there seems to be some poetic justice for Joseph to get cut down to size and removed from the family.

Whether it was just or not, Joseph did seem to learn his lesson. Throughout the negative circumstances, Joseph was humble, wise and disciplined. Most importantly, he seemed to recognize that he was playing a part in a story bigger than his own--though he surely didn't know where the story was leading. Even Potiphar recognized that there was something special about Joseph. God was with him and he was faithful to God in all things.

However, despite the fact that Joseph was faithful to God, circumstances never seemed to work in his favor. He was sold into slavery, falsely accused of rape, put in prison without evidence and forgotten for years at a time. And yet Joseph was patient and faithful, knowing that each step of the way, God was with him and was working things out according to God's purpose, not according to what Joseph wanted in the moment.

If we believe that we are the central figure of our story, when things don't go our way, we will wonder where God is and begin to take things into our own hands. However, when we understand that we are a part of God's bigger story, we will look for the presence and purpose of God when in good times or bad. The brokenness we experience in our past or present circumstances is not evidence that God is absent and our sin doesn't disqualify us from being loved by God. Each day is an opportunity to know that God is with us regardless of our circumstances. We don't have to know God's ultimate plan, only to believe that, in the words of the Apostle Paul,

“in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)

Are you able to trust that God is present even in struggle and hardship and to continue to live faithfully to him, knowing that you are serving God’s greater purpose?

PRAYER:

Lord, expand my trust in You to believe and know that You are working even when I can’t see it. Let me rest in Your faithfulness. Help me to continue to walk in faithfulness to You.

Read Genesis 42:1-45:28

In the story of Joseph, we see a great transformation. Out of family dysfunction and generational sin, we see a man who acts with integrity and fulfills God's purpose even during what, to many, would have seemed to be wasted years of his life.

When Joseph revealed his dreams to his brothers, he was quite self-centered--literally, he was the center of his dream. "Your sheaves of grain bowed down to mine!" But contrast that with two later conversations he has with his brothers. The first is in chapter 45, when Joseph first reveals who he is,

³Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.

⁴Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! ⁵And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you."

The second is after their father died and his brothers were afraid that their father had been the only thing keeping Joseph from taking revenge.

¹⁸His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said.

¹⁹But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? ²⁰You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

Somehow, through the events of Joseph's life, God had transformed him. What did that transformation look like? It wasn't just a shift to being nicer or reading his Bible more or quitting swearing. It was a shift from being self-centered to being God-centered. That shift will result in living differently, but this is the transformation God wants each of us to make. That doesn't mean we will do "great things for God" like Joseph. It might mean we become insignificant for God. But like it says in 1 Corinthians 10:31, "So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God."

Are you satisfied being insignificant if it is how God chooses to use you? Are you OK not having things your way so God can have his?

PRAYER:

Lord, let the walking out of my faith be worthy of your calling, so that your work in and through me would be brought to completion. You are worthy, the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!

LIVING OUT OUR PURPOSE

Read Genesis 5:1-20.

Oftentimes today when people talk about living out our life's purpose, our definition is self-centered. "My purpose is to be recognized as the greatest nurse ever!" We often believe that when we're living a life of purpose, things will fall into place - life will be easy, emotionally satisfying and rewarding every step of the way. But this is not what we see in the story of Joseph. While Genesis doesn't dive into Joseph's emotional state, we can assume he was much like any of us. He felt pride when he was put in charge of Potiphar's estate and felt abandoned, lonely and longing for home when he was rotting in prison.

The problem with believing the lie that if we're living our God-given purpose things will go our way, is that when hard times come, we will have the tendency to be discouraged, dejected and tempted to give up on God. But when we understand that God can use all things for his purpose, we can have a deep sense of satisfaction that God is using us even if we don't enjoy the journey.

Even when Joseph didn't know the plan, his trials were a part of living his purpose. That's because Joseph's purpose was God's purpose, Joseph's story was really God's story. When we understand this basic truth about God's purpose, it allows us to live with that sense of satisfaction even when things don't seem to be going our way.

We see a similar attitude in Philippians 1, where Paul writes to the church from house arrest in Rome,

¹²Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. ¹³As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. ¹⁴And because of my chains, most of the brothers

and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.”

The mindset that God’s purpose is my purpose is what allows us to have peace in the midst of trials and to continue to live faithful to God. We don’t need to know how the story will end, we only need to know that we get to play a part in it. Can you honestly say that your purpose is God’s purpose?

PRAYER:

Lord, align my purpose with Yours. Show me how to walk in faithfulness in all seasons, seasons of rejoicing and seasons of struggle. Let Your presence meet me in those moments of longing and wrestling to bring out transformation to accomplish what You ask from me.

WEEK 2

CREATED IN GOD'S IMAGE

Introduction

Now that you know the big picture, let's take a closer look at each movement in God's story. The creation story in Genesis is the foundation of what we believe about God, creation and ourselves. It's where everything begins. We can't truly understand our own story without knowing the Biblical story. But in order to truly understand the truth it communicates, we need to know the ancient and modern lies it counteracts. This week, we'll be diving into the creation account in Genesis to learn what the Bible says about who God is, who we are and how we relate to the world.

WEEK 2	SERMON NOTES	01/17/21
--------	--------------	----------

1. What stood out to you from the sermon? Consider what you agreed or disagreed with, what challenged you, what you wished you could hear more about, etc.
2. The Biblical creation story (pre-fall) describes God's "*shalom*," or *wholeness*. Everything was how it was intended to be and everything was in right relationship with everything else. With this in mind, what is the right relationship between God and creation?
3. What would you say are today's prevailing stories of human origins? What are the lies the other stories (ancient and modern) tell us about God? In what ways does their picture of God line up with the biblical account? In what ways does their picture of God contrast with the biblical account?

CREATED IN GOD'S IMAGE	
DINNER TABLE TOPICS	WEEK 2

Invite your kids into the journey of discovering the big God story along with you this focus season.

- Build a blanket fort and join Pastor Abby for blanket fort story time on **Tuesday at 4 PM on Facebook Live** on the Waite Park Church Facebook page. She'll share the story of Adam and Eve and creation highlighted in this week's study so you can talk about it together.
- During dinnertime, use the conversation starters below to engage and grow in understanding our story together.
 - What are some things you notice in Genesis 1-2 about the first humans, Adam and Eve? What did God say about them? What kinds of jobs did He give them?
 - What are some of the ways God made people different from animals?
 - What are some ways we can see God's image in each other? How does seeing God's image in each other help us understand what God is like?

Don't forget to talk about your God sightings (see pages 12-13) to help your kids begin to notice God at work in their day-to-day life.

WHO IS GOD?

For the purposes of this study, do not get hung up on the evolution vs. creation debate about age of the earth, etc. Some Christians believe biblical creation and evolution are not compatible, others believe God worked through some process of evolution. Both views believe the biblical account is true and is God's definitive revelation to humanity. Regardless of your view, the biblical creation story is more concerned with the purpose of creation, who God is, and who are humans than with how long it took God to create, what order things were created in, etc.

Read Genesis 1:1-2:25.

Don't underestimate the importance of Genesis 1-3. As Christians, everything we believe has its foundations in the creation story. It tells us who God is, the nature of the world, and what it means to be human. All theology begins in Genesis 1-3.

To understand it, however, we must recognize that the Biblical account of creation is not the only ancient origin story. (To be sure, we believe it is the only TRUE account). Other ancient cultures like the Egyptians, Babylonians or Canaanites have their own explanations. All early origin stories, including the Biblical story, have some similarities.

- They all begin with chaos. Chaos means disorder. It's something to be feared.
- The gods preexist the material world and the material world comes out of the spiritual world.
- They all try to explain where humans come from and why they exist.

But this is where the Biblical account separates itself from the others.

What is different?

- The pagan myths all include multiple gods with multiple wills that war against one another. The Genesis account has only one God, one will and ultimately, harmony.
- In the pagan myths, the material world is almost always the byproduct of or unintended consequence of their wars. The Biblical account describes the world--especially humanity--as the intentional act of a loving creator.
- The pagan gods are immature and self-absorbed. The Biblical God is holy, loving, creative, purposeful and delights in his good creation.
- In the pagan stories, humans are an accident at best and a nuisance at worst. In Genesis, humans are the pinnacle of creation and made in the image of God.

While the creation story was not written to counter the modern origins story of the blind forces of evolution, there are many similarities between the origin story of blind evolution and the ancient pagan stories. First, in both stories, chaos is never really restrained. Second, there is no purpose or divine will. Third, humans are not special. There is nothing intrinsically more valuable about humans than any other creatures or aspect of the universe.

The Biblical story stands alone when it says there is ultimate purpose beyond the material world, that God is knowable, loving, personal and purposeful. This is why the belief in universal human rights finds its foundation only in the biblical story. It is our commitment to this story that allows us to live for something greater than ourselves.

PRAYER:

Lord, thank you for Your beautiful creation, for the lakes, trees, painted skies each morning and evening. Use Your creation to remind me of how great You are each day.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE
WORLD?**Read (or reread) Genesis 1:1-2:25.**

Genesis 1 and 2 are actually two views of creation. Genesis 1 views creation “from afar” and Genesis 2 from “up-close.” While the *from afar* version focuses on creation as a whole and only briefly mentions humans, the *close-up* version focuses on them. Genesis 3 tells us what went wrong with the world.

Genesis 1 describes the process of creation when God takes chaos and creates order by separating things--light from darkness, ground from seas, plants and animals “according to its kind,” and even humanity itself into male and female. As he does this, God says it is “good.” (vs 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, and 31) The Hebrew word translated as good is the word *tov*--which can mean “pleasing” but also describes the state where “everything is as it should be.” In essence, everything was how God intended.

Shortly after the time of Jesus, a system of philosophy known as “Gnosticism” became popular. Gnosticism was based on the philosophy of Plato who said that the material world is only a shadow or a cheap substitute for what is really real--the spiritual. Gnosticism took this idea and expanded on it. In its Christian form, gnostics taught that the spiritual world is good and the material world is evil. (Of course, one of the implications of this is that Jesus himself couldn’t be human (physical) because then he would be evil or corrupted.)

Christians today sometimes believe a form of gnosticism when they say that what really matters is the spirit and the physical world is unimportant or even evil. Some go so far as to say that someday God is going to destroy the earth so it doesn’t matter how we treat it now.

But this is not what Genesis teaches. Genesis teaches us that the physical world is the good act of a loving creator. While it has been corrupted, creation itself is not evil. Throughout Scripture the word that is used to describe the original (and intended) state of creation is “*shalom*.” We usually translate it as “peace,” which is not wrong, but the idea behind it is more like our word “harmony” -- everything is whole (the way it was intended) and in right relationship with God, creation and creatures.

Why does this matter? It matters because humans are not *just* spirit--not even *primarily* spirit. Our bodies are physical, they are good and they are critical to being human. There has never been a person without a body. Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances show us that even our resurrected bodies will be, in some sense, physical. A great deal of being satisfied in God’s story is learning to be satisfied with the physical body God gave us--even if it’s not the one we would have chosen. God can and will accomplish his purposes through our physical bodies. After all, he accomplished his purpose through Jesus’ physical body!

PRAYER:

Lord, thank you for creating our bodies beautifully. Thank you for my body with all of its imperfections. Help me to care for it well. God, if there adjustments that I need in how I view my body or in caring for my body, please show me. Help me to find people to assist me make any of the changes that You reveal.

CREATED // WEEK 2	DAY 3
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN?	

Read Genesis 1:26-31.

Genesis 1:26-31 is one of the most important passages in the entire Bible--and one of the most debated. It is these six short verses that form the foundation for what Christians believe about what it means to be human. It forms the basis of Christian morality and our purpose on earth. In summary, these six verses tell us that while humans are creatures, we are unlike any other creature in God's creation. It tells us we are made "in the image of God."

But what does that mean? Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says "It is now generally agreed that the image of God reflected in human persons is after the manner of a king who establishes himself [by placing statues of himself throughout his kingdom] to assert his sovereign rule where the king himself cannot be present." In the ancient world, kings were considered to be in the image of the gods, but the average person was not. But in contrast, the biblical story tells us that ALL humans are created in the image of God. A radical claim in its day!

Biblically speaking there are two general outcomes of the idea that humans are made in the image of God. **The first is that all humans have intrinsic worth.** Our worth is not dependent on our race, age, ability (or lack thereof), our social status, political affiliation, guilt or innocence or location (inside or outside the womb). EVERY human has intrinsic worth.

The second outcome is that humans--as God's representatives to creation, have a responsibility in the world. In 1:28, God's blessing and command to humanity is to "fill the earth" with descendants and "subdue" it. Filling the earth is self-explanatory, but the word the NIV uses--subdue--has been subject to

great misunderstanding. People have sometimes translated the word subdue as justification to exploit the natural world for selfish purposes. But the word for subdue means to “order the world toward flourishing.” In other words, humans are to impose order on the world so that a good creation (including humans) can flourish. This ordering is a continuation of God’s work or ordering creation.

Most plants will grow naturally, without any help. They do what they were created to do. But when humans “subdue” plants in gardens, they can help them flourish. By ensuring they have the right amount of sun and rain, soil and pruning, humans can bring out the best in the raw materials of nature.

This is our task as God’s representatives on earth and it’s true not just for plants, but for humans. We are called to bring order to the world that allows humans to flourish. Do we value humans the way God does? Do we see their intrinsic value regardless of how they look or how useful they are to society?

PRAYER:

Lord, I am in awe that You created people in Your image. Let this truth sink deeper into my soul today. Let this truth not just be something I know, but something I live. People around me see how I value others through my words and actions.

CREATED // WEEK 2	DAY 4
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO FLOURISH?	

Genesis 1:4, 1:10, 1:12, 1:18, 1:21, 1:31, 2:18, and 2 Corinthians 5:16-21.

If the task of being made in the image of God is to order the world toward flourishing, then we need to ask the question, “What does it mean to flourish?” Is it physical comfort and pleasure? Is it emotional peace and satisfaction? Or is it something different?

Well, the answer comes when we consider the fact that humans are not solitary creatures. We are made to be in relationship. All through the creation story, Genesis tells us that God saw that it was “good.” The Hebrew word it uses is the word “*tov*” (pronounced “*towb*”) *Tov* is satisfying. It’s wholeness. While “good” is a fine translation, it doesn’t catch the richness of the word. It means that not only are individual items or creatures as they were intended, but the whole system of relationships are working the way they were intended. It has to do both with individual wholeness and right relationship with God and others.

After God made humans, he said it was “very *tov*.” (1:31) In other words, everything was the way it was intended to be. But in Genesis 2:18, there is one thing that God said was not *tov*. “*The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”*” Now, while this has an obvious application for marriage, it also speaks to a larger truth. For humans to experience *tov*, we must be in right relationship...with God and each other.

In its original state, the task of facilitating right relationship with God, creation and each other was easy. But at the risk of getting ahead of ourselves--today in our sin-soaked and broken world this task is much more difficult, but also much more critical. God is continually working to restore broken relationships and has also

given us the responsibility of partnering with him. Of course, while we do this imperfectly, this is what it means to bring about flourishing--to join God in his task of restoring *tov* in people's relationships with God and each other.

This is why it's critical to understand Jesus as both God and human. Colossians 1 says about Jesus, "¹⁵*The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶For in him all things were created (and re-created): things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible. . .*" Jesus, as the perfect, unbroken human being fulfilled this task of restoring right relationship between God and humanity.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 says, "¹⁶So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation (*tov*--creation as God intended it) has come: The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness (right relationship) of God."

To find our identity "in Christ" is to live in right relationship with God and each other. In what way does your life reflect the purpose you have been given of communicating to others that God wants to be in right relationship with him and each other?

PRAYER:

Lord, thank you for being a God that is innately good; who came to reconcile all things to You. Move us towards repentance, healing, and forgiveness in our relationships.

REFLECTION

Today, we will consider what it means that you are made in the image of God. The purpose of this exercise is for you to recognize the way God has created you and how you fit into God's story.

How has your family shaped your identity? How has your family relationships shaped how you view and interact with others?

In what ways has your physical body (both its abilities and limitations) shaped your identity?

How has your gender shaped your identity?

How has your race or ethnicity shaped your identity?

What gifts has God given you that reveal your potential? How might these gifts help you understand your place in God's story?

What limitations do you have that help you understand your place in God's story? How can embracing these limitations give you freedom?

YOUR STORY

Now, it's your turn to write your story. Review your answers to the reflection questions on Day 5. As you reflect on your story, how does the knowledge that you are created in the image of God impact how you view yourself and your place in the world? In what unique ways, can you help order the world towards flourishing?

WEEK 3 FALLEN

Introduction

While it's critical to understand that God created the world good and that humans are made in his image, we also have to understand that all is not now what it was intended to be. In other words, while we can still see the hand of God in creation, and glimpses of God's image in humanity, we also experience sin and brokenness. This sin and brokenness reaches to every area of our lives--from our bodies, to our families and the institutions that are supposed to bring about flourishing. As much as we'd like to deny it, this is the reality of the story in which we find ourselves.

While Christian theology since the Reformation has done a good job of highlighting human sinfulness, it seems we sometimes neglect the other side of the coin--the part the brokenness of the world plays in our very sinfulness. This week, we will explore the cycle of sin and brokenness that plays such an important role in our story.

WEEK 3	SERMON NOTES	01/24/21
--------	--------------	----------

1. What stood out to you from the sermon? Consider what you agreed or disagreed with, what challenged you, what you wished you could hear more about, etc.
2. In what areas of your life are you tempted to not trust God and instead decide for yourself what is right and wrong?
3. How does our broken relationship with God impact our relationships with other people?

F A L L E N	
DINNER TABLE TOPICS	WEEK 3

Invite your kids into the journey of discovering the big God story along with you this focus season.

- Build a blanket fort and join Pastor Abby for blanket fort story time on **Tuesday at 4 PM on Facebook Live** on the Waite Park Church Facebook page. She'll share the story of Adam and Eve and the fall highlighted in this week's study so you can talk about it together.
- During dinnertime, use the conversation starters below to engage and grow in understanding our story together.
 - Would you rather decide what is right and wrong or let God tell you what's right and wrong? Is it easy or hard to obey God when He tells you to do something you don't want to do?
 - What changed in our world after Adam and Eve sinned?
 - We all hurt people with our sin and are also hurt by other people's sin. Can you think of a time you did something wrong and it hurt someone else? How about a time someone else did something wrong and it hurt you?

Don't forget to talk about your God sightings (see pages 12-13) to help your kids begin to notice God at work in their day-to-day life.

THE TEMPTATION

Read Genesis 2:8-17, 3:1-24.

We don't have to look very far to see proof that we live in a broken world. From broken bodies to broken relationships to broken systems, we all feel that something is wrong. Things are not now what they are supposed to be. But if God created everything and it was *tov*, how did it get to the place where everything is not *tov*? In the Christian story the answer, of course, is found in the story of Adam and Eve.

Genesis tells us that humans were created in God's image with intrinsic value, great potential for good and a responsibility to know and represent God to his creation. When God created humans, he said it was "very *tov*". When considering the story, it's important to realize that humans were created innocent, not perfect. To be perfect would imply there was no chance of failure or corruption. And yet we know that's not the case.

This truth is illustrated by the story of the two trees. God filled Eden with countless trees--all of which they were free to eat from. The plethora of trees is the evidence of God's provision, even abundance.

But God also placed two special trees in the garden--the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Tree of Life represents trusting God's provision and wisdom. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good (*tov*) and Evil (*ra*) represents our desire to do our own thing. Rather than relying on God, we want to take the place of God. Rather than relying on God's definition of good, we define good and evil for ourselves. In other words, humans were created to be in a loving relationship of trust in God and to partner with him in the continued ordering of creation. But real love must include the ability to not love. Trust must come with the choice not to trust. That is the test of the trees. Would Adam and Eve trust God's provision and wisdom or try to become independent?

They chose independence and as a result, sin and brokenness entered the world. Genesis 3:1, tells us that the serpent came to Eve to deceive her. His goal was to sow seeds of mistrust. *“Did God really say you must not eat from any tree in the garden?”* As the conversation continues, the serpent lies, exaggerates and misleads in order to create disorder (uncreation). Can God really be trusted? Will he really provide? Is he keeping something from you? God really wants to keep you from reaching your potential! You could be gods! You don’t have to be limited to God’s story, you can write your own!

Christian theology has long said that the root of other’s sins is the sin of pride--the temptation to view ourselves as greater than we are--to create our own ultimate purpose. Pride is the ultimate kind of idolatry--to put ourselves in the place of God, to decide for ourselves what is good and bad. When we do this, we separate ourselves from God and his wisdom. But unmoored from the foundation of God’s wisdom, what promises freedom and power ends in the cycle of sin, which lends to chaos and suffering.

The source of pride is a lack of trust in God’s provision, abundance and wisdom. In what areas of your life are you tempted to not trust God and instead decide for yourself what is right and wrong?

PRAYER:

Lord, reveal where pride has a hold or is creeping into my heart and mind. I lay down my life to You, Lord. I choose to trust You, and let go of control of my life. Lord, give me the strength to focus on who You are in the midst of temptation.

WHY CHOOSE SIN?

Read Genesis 3:1-24.

If Adam and Eve had everything they needed and experienced *tov*, why would they choose sin? While we can't know for sure, we do have a clue in the text and it has to do with our bodies.

Once the seed of mistrust of God had been placed in Eve's mind, the next step was to trust her *senses* and *desires*. In verse 6, it says, "When the woman saw that the fruit was pleasing to the eye, [in addition to being] desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it..."

While our bodies are not evil, our senses and desires are powerful influences when it comes to our behavior. Our senses are how we experience the world. Our desires are the direct result of our body's physiology. We are spiritual creatures, but we experience life with our bodies. Our body can be the source of great joy and goodness or pain and evil. James tells us, for instance,

"With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness." (3:9)

And in chapter 4, he writes,

"¹What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? ²You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight." (4:1-2)

People have always had a complicated relationship with our bodies and Christians have not always known what to do with our senses or desires. When gnosticism was popular, there were two answers to the question of what to do with our body. Some reasoned that if the body is unimportant, then it doesn't matter what we do with our body. We can indulge every lust or desire. Others reasoned that if

the flesh is evil, then true spirituality is to deny its every desire, choosing instead to abstain from sex, live on as little food as possible and try not to enjoy any of it.

But our body is part of us. It is neither evil, nor unimportant. The key is living in the tension of receiving good things from God through our senses and desires, but not allowing them to control us. This is why Christians have a complicated relationship with sex. Sex is necessary to fulfill God's original command to fill the earth, but because of its pleasure, it can easily overrun its banks, which has led many to believe all desires ought to be denied.

However, in our bodies we also experience godly desires like love and compassion that motivate us toward acts of kindness. Because our bodies contain such great potential both for good and evil, it's critical that we don't rely on our senses and desires to tell us what is right and good, but instead to rely on God's wisdom.

In what ways have your senses and desires led you to sin? In what ways does your body experience brokenness? In what ways has your body led you to righteousness? In what ways do you experience the goodness of God through your body?

PRAYER:

Lord, through Your Word, we are reminded that our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Let us care for our bodies. Help us to see Your goodness in and through our bodies.

THE CURSE

Read Genesis 3:8-19.

The Bible doesn't teach that sin is passed down from generation to generation like a gene. If that were the case, then Jesus himself would be sinful. But, all the same, sin and brokenness are passed down from generation to generation in a self-perpetuating cycle. We don't suffer because of Adam and Eve's sin, we suffer because of our own. Genesis 3 is the description of the effects of sin, what has traditionally been called "the curse" or "the fall."

Whether the curse is God's punishment or just the natural result of sin has been debated for years. On the one hand, we do see language in verses 15 and 16 that would suggest that God is imposing a penalty. On the other hand, the consequences of sin (shame, blame, and broken relationship) take effect even before God pronounces the curse. Regardless of which view you take, one thing is clear, the world today is not what it was intended to be.

First, human's relationship with **creation** was damaged. God pronounced hostility between the serpent and humans (vs 15). The pains of childbirth would be greatly increased (vs 16) and work--which existed before the fall--rather than feeling purposeful and joyful, would become difficult and tedious (vs 17-19).

Second, **human** relationships were damaged. When God confronted Adam and Eve with their sin, their first response was to blame. Adam blamed both Eve ("she gave me some fruit...") and God ("the woman that YOU put here with me..."). Eve blamed the serpent.

Verse 15 describes the broken relationship between man and woman where God tells Eve, "You will want to control your husband, but he will rule over you." (Traditionally, the NIV says "your desire will be for your husband" but "control" now seems to be a better

translation than “desire.”) This shows that patriarchy and male-domination was not God’s original intent, but the result of the fall.

Finally, the relationship between humans and **God** is damaged. We see this when, for the very first time, Adam and Eve hid from God. Rather than trust God, they feared him. Instead of mutual delight, shame.

From Genesis 3 all the way to the end, the Biblical story paints a picture of people and a world, impacted by sin. In fact, the Apostle Paul refers to this state when he writes in Romans 8, “²²For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers together until now. ²³Not only this, but we ourselves also, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we eagerly await our adoption, the redemption of our bodies.”

While we should work in this world to minimize the suffering due to our fallen, broken world, we should also know that ultimately, it will be God who will set everything right. In fact, God’s story is the story of him working to redeem a fallen world through Jesus Christ.

PRAYER:

Lord, thank you for Jesus, who provides life and restoration from the impact of sin. Break our heart for what breaks Yours. Use Your people and me to bring about healing and hope to the world around us.

Read John 4:1-54.

Our world today often paints people as either sinners or victims--as oppressors or oppressed. But in the Biblical story, we see that all of us are both. We are both victims of sin and perpetrators of sin. We also see that sin is not just isolated acts of rebellion committed by individuals, but a cycle of destruction that not only cuts a path of brokenness, but seems to beget more sin and brokenness.

The story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman is a perfect illustration of this truth. The woman was raised in a world where there was ongoing animosity between her people and their cousins, the Jewish people. She was a woman in a highly patriarchal society where women were powerless and could be divorced for any reason or no reason at all. It was also a world where people were often blamed for their hardships regardless of what they were. Evidence of a broken world was all around.

Most biblical scholars believe the fact that the woman was drawing water by herself at noon--the hottest time of day--is significant. She was there because she was avoiding the other women. Later in the story we find out why--the woman had been married five times and was now living with a man. We don't know what happened in her previous marriages--did her husbands die or was she divorced? Either way, her society most likely would have blamed her for her plight. Obviously, in their minds, there was something wrong with her!

Certainly, the woman had her own share of sin, but she was also a victim. Because of this, the woman was surprised when Jesus, a Jewish, male rabbi initiated a conversation with her. Jews weren't supposed to talk to Samaritans, men weren't supposed to talk to women in public, rabbis weren't supposed to speak to "sinners."

Yet, Jesus knew there was more to the story than society let on. Yes, she might have been a sinner, but the problem was not just her

individual sin. She was the victim of and participant in the system of sin and brokenness. Sin begets sin. Society didn't recognize that. Jesus did.

The truth that being a victim of sin causes us to sin doesn't excuse our sin. We are still responsible for what we do with our life. We can either perpetuate the cycle or stop it. But that truth *does* change how we deal with sin. Jesus did not condemn the woman, instead, he offered her a way to escape the cycle--participating in the way of the Messiah.

When we interact with others, do we see that people's sin is often a response to a broken world and look to heal at the source or do we settle for condemnation? Romans 2:4 tells us that God's kindness and patience is intended to lead us to repentance. While condemnation may sometimes be necessary when sin is especially damaging, it sometimes perpetuates the cycle of sin. Grace stops it.

PRAYER:

Lord, transform our understanding of sin. Reveal our sin and the ways that we continue to perpetuate sin. Lord, use me as a vessel of grace to those around me to lead us to repentance.

REFLECTION

The Biblical story shows us that sin is not just isolated individual acts, but once sown, the seed of sin permeates society. We also see this in everyday life. Children of divorced parents are much more likely to get divorced, children of alcoholics are more likely to be alcoholic, same with abuse. Even things like poverty--though poverty is not sin, it is "brokenness"--not the way it's supposed to be. What modern people call "systemic" evil or injustice, the Bible describes generational sin (we see this in the family of Abraham in Genesis), the "patterns of this world" (Rom 12:1-2), or "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:12). What is clear is that sin is not just isolated, individual acts. We are sinned against and become sinners ourselves.

In what ways have you been the victim of sin or sinful patterns? In what ways has this caused you to continue the cycle of sin?

Sometimes, we experience brokenness, not as a direct result of our sin, but because we live in a broken world. How has brokenness shaped your story? (think: in your body/health, your family, your neighborhood, race/country, financially, etc.)

In week 1, we saw that God used the brokenness in Joseph's story for good--to bring about his purposes. How has God used the brokenness in your life to bring about good?

YOUR STORY

Now, it's your turn to write your story. Review your answers to the reflection questions on Day 5. In what ways, has sin and brokenness shaped your story? Share how God has used these areas to bring about good.

WEEK 4

PURSUED BY GOD

Introduction

Shame can be debilitating. While it's natural and good to feel guilt over sin when it leads us to repentance, when it lingers and we can't accept God's forgiveness, it becomes a weight on our back that keeps us from moving forward. Our problem is often that we believe God is mad at us, is reluctant to forgive and would rather punish. While sin has consequences, the Biblical story tells us that God's ultimate goal is not to punish, but to restore.

But the news is even greater than that. The God of the Bible is a God who doesn't wait for sinners to seek him out, but he initiates, he seeks us out and pursues us to offer forgiveness. This truth is what prompted the English poet Francis Thompson to write the poem that called God the "Hound of Heaven." John Wesley called the tendency to pursue us, "prevenient grace"--the grace that goes before us. This week, we will explore God's continued pursuit, even in our sin.

WEEK 4

SERMON NOTES

01/31/21

P U R S U E D B Y G O D	
DINNER TABLE TOPICS	WEEK 4

Invite your kids into the journey of discovering the big God story along with you this focus season.

- Build a blanket fort and join Pastor Abby for blanket fort story time on **Tuesday at 4 PM on Facebook Live** on the Waite Park Church Facebook page. She'll share the story of King David highlighted in this week's study so you can talk about it together.
- During dinnertime, use the conversation starters below to engage and grow in understanding our story together.
 - Think about what you know about King David. What are some of the things he did to serve and honor God? What are some of the things he did that were wrong? Do you think God loved David more when he did the right thing? Do you think God loved David less when he did the wrong? Do you think God loves you more when you do the right thing or loves you less when you do the wrong thing? Why?
 - Read Romans 5:8. This verse tells us that God loves us so much that, even when we were sinning and far away from Him, He still sent Jesus to die on the cross to pay the price for our sin. What do you think about that?

Don't forget to talk about your God sightings (see pages 12-13) to help your kids begin to notice God at work in their day-to-day life.

HOW GOD DEALS WITH SIN

Read Genesis 3:1-24.

Adam and Eve sinned by eating the fruit. They succumbed to the temptation to decide for themselves what is right and wrong. Immediately, they felt the effects of their sin--shame, blame, broken relationship and the impulse to hide from God. Yet, even in this story, we see a God who did not wait for Adam and Eve to come to him. Knowing what they had done, he went looking for them.

The first thing he did was expose their sin. God knew what they had done, but allowed them to come to the point of confession. When they knew they could no longer hide, they resorted to blaming. He didn't ignore it or allow an "elephant in the room," but brought their sin to light.

Second, God did not tell them it's no big deal. Clearly, it was a big deal. Their sin had long-lasting consequences for themselves and the world around them. As much as we would like to ignore sin, excuse it or say it's no big deal--making light of sin allows injustice to fester. Excusing sin robs the one wronged of dignity.

Third, God did not protect them from the consequences of their sin. Sin does have consequences and protecting people from the consequences of their sin makes light of a serious situation. Consequences should be appropriate and proportionate to the sin.

Finally, God sought to maintain the relationship through an act of kindness toward them. After pronouncing the curse on Adam and Eve, God made clothing for them that would be better and longer-lasting than the fig leaves they made for themselves. As much as God would have liked for them to be "naked" (transparent and vulnerable) again, that ship had sailed. The damage was done, but God, in his grace, showed kindness to them by helping them deal with the consequences. Even though their burden was self-imposed, he didn't make them carry it alone.

This is a foreshadowing of what Jesus would do centuries later. The Bible tells us that the wages of sin is death. This is a heavy price to pay. But it also tells us that while we were still sinners (deserving death), Jesus went to the cross and died in our place. Isaiah 53:5-6 says it this about Jesus,

“⁵But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

⁶We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.”

The story of God is the story of a God who pursued us in our sin and helped us carry the burden. One of the most freeing truths of the Gospel is that God does not abandon us to our sin, but he continues to pursue us and when we respond in faith, he will walk with us as our good father.

PRAYER:

Lord, thank you for Your compassionate heart towards us in spite of our sin. Please expose areas of sin in our hearts. Help us to believe exposure of and any consequences for sin lead us to repentance, healing, and wholeness. Restore our relationships with You and one another.

Read 2 Samuel 11 and 12, Psalm 51, Acts 13:22.

Christians revere David as one of the heroes of our faith and rightfully so! The Biblical writers did as well. However, the Bible also paints a complicated picture of David. On the one hand, he shows great faith and reliance on God in defeating Goliath, shows his faithfulness to God by refusing to kill Saul and become King of Israel prematurely. He is considered one of the few good kings of Israel and he loves God so much he offers to build him a Temple. God promises that his throne will endure forever. Scripture calls David, “a man after God’s own heart,” a phrase which is repeated in a sermon by the Apostle Paul in Acts 13:22.

Yet in 2 Samuel, chapters 11 and 12, we see his great capacity for sin as well as the impact it has on his kingdom. In fact, “great capacity for sin” is a huge understatement. David’s sin against Bathsheba, Uriah, and God is heinous and certainly greater than any sin you and I are likely to commit. To a society that loves to “cancel” people for past sins and injustice committed, David should certainly be cancelled. And yet, David endures as a towering figure of Scripture. How can this be?

The answer comes in the fact that the Bible tells us that we are all made in the image of God (Genesis 1&2) and we are ALL sinful and broken (Genesis 3). If God could only use perfect people to accomplish his purpose, he would be down to only one--Jesus.

We cannot make light of what David did. God didn’t make light of it. The Bible doesn’t make light of it. David himself didn’t make light of it. (see Psalm 51). And yet, David’s sin did not disqualify him from God’s continued pursuit or from using him to accomplish his purpose.

June 2nd, 2010, pitcher Armando Galarraga was one out short of pitching a perfect game. A feat which has only been accomplished 23

times in over 150 years of major league baseball. Galarraga was a middling pitcher for most of his career, but a perfect game would earn him a spot in the baseball hall of fame.

Galarraga wound up and pitched a ball that was grounded to the infield. The fielder caught it and threw it in time to easily get the runner out. However, first umpire, Jim Joyce inexplicably called the runner safe, blowing the perfect game opportunity. The home crowd was furious as replays clearly showed the runner was out. Yet, without instant replay, the call had to stand. One more batter and the game was over.

With a sinking feeling, Joyce rushed to the umpire room to watch the replay. After seeing it, he was devastated. He immediately called for Galarraga to come to the umpire room. When he arrived, with tears in his eyes all he could get out was the word, “lo siento,” Spanish for “I’m sorry.”

During the press conference after the game, Joyce owned up to his error, no excuses. When Galarraga was asked about the missed call, he graciously replied, “no one’s perfect.”

Sports Illustrated chronicled the events a few days later with the headline, “A Different Kind of Perfect.” The subtitle: Armando Galarraga lost a place in history, but he and Jim Joyce gave us something sweeter: a lesson in sportsmanship. While we always want to aim for perfection, we do so with the understanding that God can bring something good even out of imperfection.

PRAYER:

Lord, help us to grasp the extent of Your love and the cost You paid to have a relationship with us. Make us men and women that respond to Your love by pursuing You.

THE GENEROUS FATHER

Read Luke 15:1-32

In Luke 15, Jesus tells three parables that reveal the heart of God toward sinners. He told the parables in response to the calloused attitude of the Pharisees toward sinners. The pinnacle of the chapter comes in verses 11-32--what has come to be known as the parable of the Prodigal Son. In reality, The Generous Father would be a better title since the central figure in the parable is the Father rather than either son.

The parable begins with the younger son rejecting his father and family to go out and sow his wild oats. He went to his father and in essence, told him that he wanted his inheritance, but couldn't wait around for him to die, he wanted it immediately. Though the request was insulting and hurtful, the father complies, gives him his inheritance and says goodbye.

The son quickly burns through his money and during a time of famine is on the verge of starvation. As he is working a demeaning job, he considers going back home--though this time not as a son, but as a slave. He rehearses his speech and heads for home.

But Jesus says that while the son "was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him, he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." The picture is not one of a distant father who carried a grudge, but since he saw him while he was still a long way off, it shows a father who went out every day, hoping his son would return. When his son did return, he welcomed him back--not as a slave, but as a son--threw a party for him in celebration of his return.

In the meantime, the older son, who stayed and dutifully served all along, was angry. Why should the irresponsible son be welcomed back? His recklessness didn't just hurt him, it hurt the whole family! And now, father welcomes him back without any penance? In the

oldest son's eyes, it's actually the father who is the reckless one. He should know better! He's just breeding irresponsibility!

In this parable, Jesus paints a picture of God that is counter-intuitive for most religious people. The father represents God, who is gracious, eager to forgive and runs out to meet the sinner who returns home. The sons represent two types of sinners. The younger son represents "the sins of the flesh" debauchery and wastefulness. These are what we normally think of as sin.

However, the older son has his own kind of sin, what we might call the "sins of religion"--self-righteousness, judgment and condemnation and unforgiveness. Both categories, the "sins of the flesh" and "sins of religion" are destructive, but the sins of religion are often more dangerous, because they come disguised as righteousness.

But like the father in the story, God is gracious toward both sons. He invites both sons into the party to celebrate their status as children of the father. The father is gracious at great personal cost--both financial and the cost of his reputation with those who don't understand the depth of his love. Is this picture of God your picture of God?

PRAYER:

Lord, mold our hearts and minds to see You like this gracious and generous Father. Heal any wounds from my father or parental figure that did not reflect this kind of love and desire to restore the relationship when we go astray.

LAW ENFORCEMENT OR
PHYSICIAN?**Read Mark 2:13-17.**

Growing up, I was taught that because God is holy, he cannot stand to be around sin. That's why Jesus had to die--to get rid of our sin so God could stand to be in the same room (heaven) with us. Like Superman and kryptonite or vampires and garlic, sin was God's weakness. Not only was God repulsed by sin, God was repulsed by me. Yet over and over in Scripture, we do not see God running *from* sinners, but running *toward* them. The God of the Bible is a God who rushes toward sinners, but there are different reasons for rushing.

Think of the difference between police and a physician. Of course, police don't have to be (and are not) always the "bad guy." But the central part of their very difficult--and very necessary--job is to maintain the peace through the enforcement of laws. That's why we refer to them as law enforcement officers. Laws are good (at least most of them) and they do much to protect. However, encounters with police are often met with punishment.

Mark chapter 2 sets up the ongoing struggle between Jesus and the Pharisees, who on many occasions would not see eye-to-eye. The Pharisees seemed to view themselves as law enforcement--and, of course, the law is good when applied appropriately. Jesus, however, doesn't seem to view himself as law enforcement as much as a physician. But the divide goes even deeper than that.

The Pharisees believed in guilt by association. Anyone caught eating with "sinners" was in danger of becoming one of them. So, they kept their distance. Jesus, however, didn't seem to be repulsed by the "tax collectors and sinners." He was drawn to them and intentionally sought them out. When the Pharisees questioned Jesus about this, he challenged both their practice and theology.

"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Mark 2:17)

The fact, that Jesus did not run away from sinners, but lived and ate among them show us that God is not afraid of our sin. God doesn't have to flee or cover his eyes when he sees our sin. He isn't afraid of being infected. Instead, he sees our sin-sickness and moved toward us like a physician, to forgive and heal.

Many of us have a hard time believing this is true. The natural sense of guilt and shame often leads us to run from God, ashamed and sure he will not want to have anything to do with us. The truth is that even in our sin, God is pursuing us, not as a law enforcement officer to accuse and convict, but as the great physician who diagnoses and heals. Do you treat God more as law enforcement or a doctor?

PRAYER:

Lord, expand our hearts to know and believe that You run after us from a heart of love and compassion. Heal our areas of brokenness, hurt, and diseases. Let us reflect Your heart to bring healing and compassion to those around us.

REFLECTION

Do you find it difficult or easy to believe that God wants to maintain a relationship with you even when you sin? Why?

Why do you think God does not remove the consequences of sin?
What good might experiencing consequences serve?

Think of a time that you experienced the consequences of your sin.
Did the experience change you in any way? If so, how?

Sin is serious and has consequences--both physical and spiritual, for us and for the people around us--but it doesn't have to disqualify us from participating in God's story. What have we learned about the right attitude toward sin?

Think of a season in your life when you were caught in sin or experiencing brokenness. Looking back, how can you see that God was pursuing you during that time?

PURSUED // WEEK 4	DAY 6
YOUR STORY	

Now, it's your turn to write your story. Review your answers to the reflection questions on Day 5. How you have experienced God pursuing you to heal and forgive?

WEEK 5

CHANGED BY GRACE

Introduction

Have you ever heard the phrase, “I’m just a sinner saved by grace?” On one hand, this is a true statement. We are all broken and sinners in need of grace. That grace is what saves and sustains us. Remembering that we are sinners in need of God’s grace is the appropriate attitude that keeps us humble.

On the other hand, the statement is incomplete because while we are sinners saved by grace, we are not JUST sinners saved by grace. You see, God’s intent is not just to *save* us, but to *restore* us. Though he sanctifies us (sets us apart for his service), we must also allow him to change us so we can more effectively serve his purpose.

God’s grace is not just a one-time thing so that when we are saved, grace has done its job and we no longer need it. Grace is continually being poured out in our lives. Grace continually forgives our failures and allows us to get up and try again. God’s grace is God’s continued presence through the power of the Holy Spirit that enables us to change. Most importantly, God’s grace enables us to fulfill the Great Commandment--to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. That is the real transformation God wants to do in all of us.

WEEK 5	SERMON NOTES	02/07/21
--------	--------------	----------

CHANGED BY GRACE	
DINNER TABLE TOPICS	WEEK 5

Invite your kids into the journey of discovering the big God story along with you this focus season.

- Build a blanket fort and join Pastor Abby for blanket fort story time on **Tuesday at 4 PM on Facebook Live** on the Waite Park Church Facebook page. She'll share the story of Paul highlighted in this week's study so you can talk about it together.
- During dinnertime, use the conversation starters below to engage and grow in understanding our story together.
 - What do you know about Paul's life before he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus? What do you know about Paul's life after that encounter? What do you think the people who knew Paul thought about the change in his life? If you were Paul's friend, what would you think?
 - God wants to help us become more and more like Jesus. We can't make it happen on our own, but we can invite God to work in our hearts by doing things like reading the Bible and praying. Can you think of something you used to do that you don't do anymore because God helped you see that it was wrong? Or is there something good that you learned to do because God showed you that it was the better way?

Don't forget to talk about your God sightings (see pages 12-13) to help your kids begin to notice God at work in their day-to-day life.

SAUL TO PAUL

Read Acts 9:1-19.

Outside of Jesus perhaps no one has had as great of an impact for God's Kingdom than the Apostle Paul. But if you knew Paul when he was younger, you probably would never have believed the change that took place in him.

Paul's original name was Saul--a good, Jewish name. He was raised as a devout Jew and a Roman citizen. He was a person of some privilege, which enabled him to have a top-notch education, learning from the best Jewish rabbis around. We are introduced to Saul in Acts, chapter 7 during the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. "Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul." And then in Acts 8:1, it tells us, "And Saul approved of their killing him."

For the next bit of time, Saul had a successful career as a persecutor of the church on behalf (he thought) of God. Yet, in Acts, chapter 9, we find that God had been pursuing him. As he was on his way to Damascus to persecute the Church, a light flashed from heaven, blinding him, and he heard what he immediately recognized as the voice of Jesus, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Jesus then gave him instructions to go into the city of Damascus to meet with a believer there named Ananias.

While this was, no doubt, a traumatic experience for Paul, it was an act of grace. Someone as zealous as Paul needed a dramatic wake-up call. But in a way only God can do, he didn't confront Paul just so he would stop persecuting the church, nor did he do it only so Paul could be saved. He did it to enlist him into his service. But for that to happen, he needed to change. Paul knows that it was the grace of God that accomplished this. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 15, "9For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect.

No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, *but the grace of God that was with me.*”

So, how do we access the grace to change? It’s not simply by trying really hard to change. We do it by creating the environment in our lives where the seed of God’s grace can grow in us. Taking his cue from the Apostle Paul’s analogy of sowing and reaping, Richard Foster, writes, “Paul’s analogy is instructive. A farmer is helpless to grow grain; all he can do is provide the right conditions for the growing of grain. He cultivates the ground, he plants the seed, he waters the plants, and then the natural forces of the earth take over and up comes the grain.”

How do we allow God’s grace to change us? By making our lives fertile ground for the Holy Spirit’s work of grace to take hold. This means ridding ourselves of sin and distractions that keeps us as slaves to the world and sitting in the presence of God through soul training like getting into Scripture, prayer and developing spiritual relationships with other believers. As we do this, we become fertile soil where godly character can flourish and bear fruit.

Have you settled for being “just a sinner saved by grace,” or do you believe the kind of transformation God made in the Apostle Paul can happen in you? How are you making space in your life for the grace of God to do its work?

PRAYER:

Lord, what an incredible gift of grace! Stir a deeper desire to respond to Your grace, so it will transform our hearts and minds. We would pour out this grace to those around us. Our demonstration of Your grace to others would help others to see You and be drawn to You.

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

Read: Galatians 5:16-26, Luke 15:11-32.

In the Biblical story, sin is a problem that needs to be dealt with--not just the *guilt* of sin, but the *power* of sin. Some people say that when someone becomes a Christian, sin is no longer an issue. While this is true in the sense that we have already received forgiveness, it is possible for sin to continue to be a problem for Christians. In fact, there are two categories of sin in which Christians can fall prey. As we saw earlier, there are the two types of sin incarnated in the two sons in the parable of the prodigal son.

The first are the sins of the younger son--what might be called “sins of the flesh.” We find these types of sin in lists like Galatians 5:19-21, “¹⁹The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like.” In a sense, these sins are easy to identify because they are the kinds of sins that immediately come to mind when most people think of sin. And of course, Christians sin in these ways, but we often know when we do and feel guilty about them.

But the second type of sin may be even more dangerous than the first. They are the sins of the older brother. We may call these, the “sins of religion.” Sins of religion are dangerous because they’re difficult to recognize, are sometimes encouraged because they disguise themselves as righteousness. We’re talking about sins like self-righteousness, judgmentalism, and neglecting what Jesus called “the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy and faithfulness.” (Matthew 23:23). Even while the older brother played the role of the dutiful son, his heart was no nearer to the father than the son who ran away.

When someone is freed from one type of sin, it’s often easy for them to overcorrect and fall into the other type. Those who grow up in

legalistic churches prone to judgmentalism will sometimes reject the faith of their youth and instead give in to a life of sinful indulgence that they believe is freedom from their previous overly-strict life. Others, who have spent years living “according to the flesh” will turn from that life to a faith with little grace for those who haven’t seen the light the way they have. The Apostle Paul calls this becoming a “slave to the law.”

But what does a life free from sin look like? We find one description of such a life in Galatians 5. While not an exhaustive list, it paints a vivid picture of the ideal character of a believer. Paul contrasts the “acts of the flesh” with the Fruit of the Spirit.

Verse 22 says, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.” Notice that Paul does not say that these are new laws as if we ought to try very hard to do them. Instead, he tells us that these are the fruit of “living by the Spirit.” In other words, like a tree doesn’t try to bear fruit, when we live by the Spirit, our lives will exhibit these characteristics rather than the sins of the flesh or the sins of religion.

What does it mean to live by the Spirit? It simply means to develop a life of reliance on God. Though the answers seem simplistic, there is truth. A life of prayer, time in the Word of God and intentional spiritual friendships with other believers creates an environment where we become attentive to the Holy Spirit. So, a good way to evaluate whether you are being led by the Holy Spirit is to go to Galatians 5:22 and take an inventory. Is this what your life looks like?

PRAYER:

Lord, move in our lives to embody Your fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Draw us into deeper dependence on You each and every day knowing the life of the Spirit flows to those around us.

Read: 1 Corinthians 13, Matthew 5:43-48, 22:38-42.

What does it look like when we are transformed by the grace of God? People answer that question in different ways. Some say that we'll have a greater knowledge of Scripture and understanding of Christian theology. Some believe that the evidence of transformation is that we will be more generous in giving to the poor. Others, that we will stand up for justice. Yet others say we'll manifest supernatural spiritual gifts like prophecy or speaking in tongues. While all of these have an important place in the Christian life, they are not the core.

Instead, over and over, what we see in Scripture is to grow in Christian character is to grow in love. The love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, tells us explicitly that even if we have knowledge, spiritual gifts, faith that moves mountains and are even persecuted for our faith, but do not have love, the whole thing is pointless. Jesus teaches us in Matthew that when we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, we are like our heavenly father. And when Jesus is asked the most important commandments in the law of Moses, his answer is "love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself." Some scholars even tell us that in Paul's list of the fruit of the spirit, all the other characteristics are simply aspects of the first--love.

This makes sense in God's big story. If the problem is separation from God and hostility toward each other, then love--especially love for our enemy - would be the antithesis. But of course, when the Bible talks about love, it's talking about something specific. It is more than good feelings. It's not (necessarily) romantic. It IS a way of life of people who are willing to give our lives for the sake of others. It's a life that is patterned after Jesus himself who "demonstrated his love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)

If we are called to align ourselves with God's story; if we are called to be a part of the community that is the body of Christ; then our community should look like Christ. It's often easy for us to get sidetracked by secondary things and forget about what is most important. The most important growth is growth in love.

PRAYER:

Lord, we desire to look more like You through pouring out Your love. Help us to run from all the sins of the flesh and righteousness. Replace these areas of sin in us with love. Please forgive us for the ways that we have not loved well. Empower us to love others the way that You do.

Read: 1 Corinthians 12.

When God's grace transforms us, he doesn't change us into a different person. Now, in one sense--we are a "new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17) as we are transformed from the sins of our past, but much of what makes our story unique is transformed for his purposes. What we formerly used to serve ourselves are now used in service to God's story. God can not only transform our character, but he redeems our gifts, passions and story.

Our Gifts: The second week, we learned that we are made in the image of God. And while that means we all have the same responsibility to care for his creation, we all do it in different ways according to the unique mix of gifts he has given us. Ephesians 2:10 says, "for we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." In 1 Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul expands on this idea when he speaks of spiritual gifts. God doesn't give us gifts for our own sake, but the for the common good. In the same way, God has gifted us in many ways that we might once have used for our own gain, but can be transformed for his purpose.

A wise businesswoman who once used her wealth to live lavishly develops a gift of generosity to care for those in need and fund the advance of the gospel throughout the world. A man with gifts in marketing uses his gift to help promote a non-profit ministry that serves single moms. A musician who has played in bars for years serves leading his local church in worship. Whatever your gift, God can use it for his purpose.

Our Passions: The same can be said for our passions. Oftentimes our passions come from our God-given personality or our personal experiences. When we are able to serve God in the area of our passions is often when we feel a sense of purpose and satisfaction. Whether we're passionate about children or sharing the Gospel or

racial or economic justice, God can use these as motivation to do the work of his kingdom.

Our Story: God can use the experiences that form our story for his purposes. Sometimes these experiences are positive, like a trip to a developing country that instills in us a passion for overseas ministry or it might be a chance encounter with a homeless man on the bus that buds into a friendship that changes our perspective on people in need.

But God can transform difficult experiences for his purposes as well. This was the Apostle Paul's perspective in Philippians 2 where he wrote from house arrest in Rome, "Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear." Whether it's a battle with cancer, infertility, or a job loss, we can develop compassion for others who are dealing with the same thing.

God does not need to make us into someone else. Instead, he transforms who we've been and who we are and uses us for his purposes. What gifts, passions or story might God want to transform to use for his purpose?

PRAYER:

Lord, we lay down our gifts, passions, and story to be used for Your glory and expanding Your kingdom. Thank you for using the good gifts and experiences. Thank you that You can also use and redeem the difficult places in us and experiences.

CHANGED // WEEK 5	DAY 5
REFLECTION	

If you grew up in the Church how has God transformed you as your faith has grown over the years?

If you didn't grow up in the church (or wandered away), how would you describe your life before you met Christ? What changed about your life when Christ found you?

What is God currently working on transforming in your life?

What do you do on a daily basis to make space for the Holy Spirit to work in your life?

CHANGED // WEEK 5	DAY 6
YOUR STORY	

Now, it's your turn to write your story. Review your answers to the reflection questions on Day 5. In what ways, has you been change by God's grace? How is God transforming your character? What gifts and passions are He transforming for His purposes?

WEEK 6

LIVING OUR PURPOSE

Introduction

It's not uncommon in our society to be told to "live out your purpose." The Bible also tells us something similar. The Biblical word that is often used is the word "calling." For instance, in Ephesians 4:1, the Apostle Paul writes, "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." As a believer, you are not only saved, but you are called to a purpose.

But this is where the similarities end. When people today encourage us to live out our purpose, it is usually so that we can live a happy and fulfilling life. The Bible is not against finding fulfillment, but it's not the primary reason for our calling. In fact, trying to live a fulfilling life can sometimes keep us from living God's real purpose--to be a blessing to the people around us.

The other difference is that living your purpose is often viewed through an individualistic lens. The Bible encourages us to see ourselves as part of a bigger community and a bigger picture. We do have unique gifts, talents, interests, resources and circumstances, but we are all a part of the family of God--the Church. It is through this family that God chooses to fulfill his purpose. In fact, the Church exists for this very reason. This week, we will explore the theme of living out our purpose.

WEEK 6	SERMON NOTES	02/14/21
--------	--------------	----------

4. Our passions can rise from some of our most difficult circumstances. God can use the healing in us to help and comfort others in a similar situation. Is there an area of your life that God has brought restoration where you can use it to serve and support others? How could you grow by using this healing as an opportunity to serve?

5. What aspect of Jesus being our blessing is most inspiring and impactful in living faithfully?

LIVING OUR PURPOSE	
DINNER TABLE TOPICS	WEEK 6

Invite your kids into the journey of discovering the big God story along with you this focus season.

- Build a blanket fort and join Pastor Abby for blanket fort story time on **Tuesday at 4 PM on Facebook Live** on the Waite Park Church Facebook page. She'll share the story of Esther highlighted in this week's study so you can talk about it together.
- During dinnertime, use the conversation starters below to engage and grow in understanding our story together.
 - Wonder together about what Esther's life might have been like before she was taken to the king's palace. What would have changed in her life when she was brought to the palace? How would you feel if you were in Esther's shoes?
 - Esther had to make some brave choices in order to save her people. Have you ever had to be brave before? Talk about it with your family.
 - Sometimes it turns out we are just the right person at just the right moment to help someone. Have you ever had an experience like that? Tell your family about it.

Don't forget to talk about your God sightings (see pages 12-13) to help your kids begin to notice God at work in their day-to-day life.

Read Genesis 12:1-4.

What we see on a personal level in Genesis 3, we see on a grand level in Genesis 12. Chapters 4-11 of Genesis are stories that show the sinfulness of humanity and brokenness of the world. From Cain and Abel, to Lamech, to the tower of Babel we see example after example of people creating disorder rather than order (*tov*). Things get so bad, God is tempted to scrap the whole project and start over--and he does...almost. God saves a remnant of humanity by saving Noah's family from the flood. But it was through another family, that God brings about his blessing--the family of Abraham.

Abraham lived in or near the city of Ur in modern-day Iraq. He would have worshipped tribal gods and lived on the same land as his father and his father's father and his father's father, etc. In other words, Abraham had deep roots, but there was one thing he didn't have--children. In our culture, when a couple cannot have children, it can be devastating, but for Abraham and Sarah it was everything. Children were not just a personal desire, they were your identity, your place in life.

But like the other stories in the Bible, the story is not about how God fulfilled Abraham and Sarah's dreams to have children. It's about a God who is faithful to his promise to use Abraham's family to bless the nations. In our individualistic way of thinking, we believe the most important thing is that God fulfilled Abraham's dream. But in the story of the Bible, Abraham's feelings and desires are among the least important details. What matters is that God has chosen Abraham's family to bless the world. In other words, Abraham's election was not for his sake, it was for the sake of the world.

In our society, when we think about living out your purpose, we often sell it as fulfilling Maslow's hierarchy of needs. "When you live your (individual) purpose, you will be self-actualized!" You'll live a

fulfilling life. But if we want to be shaped by Scripture, we need to realize that the Biblical story is not about our self-actualization, it's about the actualization of God's desire to bring his blessing and redemption of the world. As a believer, finding your purpose is about understanding how God has uniquely gifted you so that you might be a part of what he is doing in the world.

The story of Abraham (and Joseph!) is the story of God's faithfulness to his family so that they could show his blessing and kindness and redemption to all the other families of the world.

The family of Abraham became the family of Israel. The family of Israel has become the Church family through faith in Jesus Christ. When we think of family, we tend to think of a closed circle. Our family exists to provide for and protect each other. But the family of God is different. Yes, we do support and protect one another, but our very existence is to bless those around us.

So, for most of us, there are two shifts we need to make when it comes to living our purpose. The first is that followers of Jesus find our purpose in God's greater purpose. You do have individual gifts and interests, but they are not simply for your fulfillment, they are to accomplish God's purpose of blessing the world through his family. The second shift is that when we do realize that we are a part of God's family, to remember that even God's family--the Church--doesn't exist for itself, but we exist to be a blessing to those around us, so they might know the God we know!

PRAYER:

Lord, thank you for how You provide and protect through our families and the church family. Let Your blessing be seen, heard, and felt through our church family. Move us to be a greater blessing to the world around us.

Read Esther 1:1-2:18.

Today, we are introduced to Esther, a young Jewish woman, living in the city of Susa. The story opens with King Xerxes and Queen Vashti, a good indicator of the story of Esther is not about her.

King Xerxes flaunts his wealth to the kingdom through opulent banquets first to leaders and military in his kingdom and then to anyone in the city of Susa. The ornate nature of the banquet demonstrates the king's generosity. On the last day, the King gets a great idea to show off his beautiful wife, Queen Vashti, to all his guests during this wonderful celebration. Queen Vashti refuses to come when summoned.

Her refusal infuriated King Xerxes. Gathering his advisors, they became concerned that women throughout the kingdom would stop obeying their husbands if there were no consequences for her refusal. The King determined to remove her crown and privileges while making a statement to ensure men would get the proper respect from their wives.

The story turns towards Mordecai, Esther's cousin, who took her in as his daughter after her parents died. Mordecai or Esther might not have had much choice on this arrangement. Mordecai could have simply been the closest of kin to bear this responsibility. Mordecai and Esther are the minorities in their city and did not feel comfortable sharing their ethnicity publicly.

The king's officials wanted to cheer up the king possibly after a failed military advancements. They propose searching for beautiful young women to be the next queen. Esther is one of the beautiful women carried off to the harem, where each woman receives twelve months of beauty treatments. She was taken from her home along with the most beautiful women in the land.

Esther responded with humility. She listened and took the advice of her leader, and found favor with him. He gave her special treatment with additional attendants. However, Mordecai was concerned about Esther. He daily entered the courts to hear news about Esther.

These young women were groomed to spend a night with the King. During this evening, the young woman would need to be memorable by name to have a chance at becoming queen. After the evening, she was ushered off to join the other concubines in the palace to wait to be summoned. As Esther had found favor with those around her, she also found favor with King Xerxes. He made Esther the queen. He threw a banquet to celebrate her as queen.

Perhaps the idea of being queen was appealing to Esther, but would she have chosen to lose her parents at an early age? Would she have chosen to be carried away from family to be groomed for a night with the King?

We often believe that we have to choose our purpose or that when we know our purpose, we have to orchestrate the circumstances around us. And yet, throughout Scripture we find that people like Esther end up serving God's purpose in a situation they did not choose. She was used by God, not because she manipulated her situation to suit her, but because she was (finally) able to see opportunity in the circumstances she would not have chosen, but that she found herself in. In fact, we sometimes miss out on opportunities because we are busy orchestrating our situation to our liking that we don't recognize how God wants to use us for his purpose. What circumstance are you in that you didn't (or would never) choose? How might God want to use you through this circumstance?

PRAYER:

Lord, I lay down my own purpose to take up Your purpose for my life and our church family. Give us Your vision and heart as we embrace our story in a more profound way. Let our stories be used to point to You and Your glory.

A SYSTEM OF INJUSTICE

Read Esther 2:19-3:15.

As we begin to understand how this horrendous story unfold, our focus shifts to Mordecai. While most Jews, as the people of God, would have gone to great lengths to distinguish themselves from the people in Babylon, the readers know that Mordecai was a Jew of the tribe being Benjamin, yet he hides this part of his identity and encourages Esther to do the same.

In our passage, Mordecai learns of a plot to kill King Xerxes while he sitting at the palace gate waiting for an update on Esther. Though Esther was the one who told the king, she gave the credit to Mordecai. A righteous act of saving the king's life certainly should receive some type of reward. No reward was given to him for his loyalty to the king.

In chapter 3, we are introduced to Haman, who rises to second in command. The author tells us Haman was an Agagite which is a signal to the Jewish readers that he is a mortal enemy of Israel. Agag was the king of the Amalekites, the nation that attacked Israel unprovoked while they were wandering in the desert on their way to the Promised Land.

The tension rises when Mordecai refuses the king's order to bow to Haman. Scholars are not certain about the reason Mordecai refused. It could have been for righteous reasons, but most believe it was the ethnic feud that motivated his obstinacy.

Haman is offended and inquires about Mordecai. When he learns Mordecai is a Jew, he is determined to kill, not just Mordecai, but all the Jews. Being an opportunist, he uses his position to plot his revenge.

⁸Then Haman said to King Xerxes, "There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your

kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them.

⁹If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will give ten thousand talents of silver to the king's administrators for the royal treasury." ¹⁰So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews.

The future of God's chosen family is at stake. If Haman succeeds in his plot, what would come of God's promise to Abraham? Like the story of Joseph, the story of Esther is actually the story of God providing a way to protect his people when things seemed hopeless. God will be faithful to fulfill his promise. But like the story of Joseph, God uses flawed people in difficult situations as vessels of his deliverance. While Esther and Mordecai hid their identity as God's people and Mordecai harbored hatred against Haman and the Amalekites, it only took a small act of courage for him to save his people.

While you've probably never been faced with the death of your entire family, have you faced difficult situations when you didn't know how God was going to work things out and yet he came through in the end? How did he use you in the process?

PRAYER:

Lord, thank you that You are a just judge that protects Your people. Stir in us to stand against injustices in our world. Let us be beacons of light while being kind and respectful in how we communicate in our stand against injustice.

Read Esther 4:1-17.

Esther and Mordecai are in an incredibly difficult situation. Mordecai has deep sorrow and rejects Esther's initial attempts to soothe him. His mourning is echoed by the rest of the Jewish community. Their collective response is fasting, weeping, and wailing.

Esther only learns of all the details of the decree and the fate of her people after the rest of the kingdom. If that was not heart wrenching enough, Mordecai urges her to beg for mercy from the King, which means she would have to reveal her identity, risking her own life. How could she approach the King when it would likely lead to death? Queen Vashti was banished for not honoring the King's command. Requesting to enter the presence of the King is against the law.

Up to this point in the story, Esther has listened and followed her authority figures. She has seemed to do exactly what they ask of her without questioning it. Her strategy has been to go along to get along and she reminds Mordecai of the cost of his suggestion to approach the King. These are the moments that test our character. The NIV Application Commentary puts her struggle like this:

“To save her people would mean revealing her own identity as well. She would be admitting that she had not been living as a devout Jew should live. Furthermore, she would be identifying herself as a target of destruction under Haman's decree and an easy mark in the treacherous Persian court. In this moment, Esther has to decide who she really is.”

In the end, Esther rises to the challenge despite her fear. She makes a plan and sends out a call to her people to join her in a fast. Scholars reference Joel 2 as highlighting the heart of their response.

¹²“That is why the LORD says, ‘Turn to me now, while there is time. Give me your hearts. Come with fasting, weeping,

and mourning. ¹³Don't tear your clothing in your grief, but tear your hearts instead.' Return to the LORD your God, for he is merciful and compassionate, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. He is eager to relent and not punish.”

Esther faced the decision to choose her own safety or take a stand against the injustices of God’s people. She rallied her people to cry out to God asking Him to intervene on their behalf to prevent the wicked scheme of Haman from their destruction. We also live in a culture and city that does not embody the values of God and faith. How we live grows from what we choose and believe our identity is. How and who are you living to please? How do your day-to-day decisions reveal what you truly love?

“The gospel confronts us with the decision either to continue to live as pagans or to identify ourselves with God’s people, the church. Our choice defines who we are and with what people we identify. The decision to be identified with Christ energizes our lives. It gives us a purpose bigger than our own concerns and problems and a hope that goes beyond our own death. It transforms us into people moved by the Holy Spirit, human agents of God’s grace and love in the world. . . It is followed by a continuous sequence of defining moments throughout life as we daily face decisions that demand we choose either to identify ourselves with Christ by obedience to his Word or to live as pagans in that moment. Only if we live as Christ commands, in every moment and every decision, will we be the agents through whom the promises of the new covenant are fulfilled. By the winsome testimony of our words and our lives, others are called to come to Christ and to identify with his people.”

The NIV Application Commentary on Esther

PRAYER

Lord, give me the courage to consistently walk out my identity in Christ. Pleasing other people or accolades of this world align behind the desires of Your heart and how You show us how to live.

JESUS IS THE BLESSING

Read Galatians 3:16, Philippians 2.

If what we are learning about the story of God is true, then Abraham is a towering figure in God's story. Out of all the people on earth, God chose him and his family to be the one to carry his blessing to all the families of the earth. There are a number of aspects to this. One aspect is that God chose to reveal himself through a special relationship (a covenant) with a particular group of people--the people of Israel. Second, Israel was to be a "nation of priests" to the nations--to show the nations what it means to live out God's story. But the third aspect is most important.

You see, any cursory reading of Scripture will show that Israel failed miserably in their task. Israel failed to live as the distinct people of God, often turning away from God and to idols. God invited them into a special relationship that they didn't seem to want. But they also turned away from God's law and participated in the same sins as the nations around them. They rejected their identity as the bearers of God's blessing to the nations.

And yet, as we've seen, God did not give up on them. Instead, through the line of Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David and Esther, God himself entered into the story. Jesus not only became human, he did so through the family of God. In Galatians 3, the Apostle Paul is making this connection when he writes, "¹⁶The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ." In other words, Jesus IS the blessing to the nations.

- The Apostle Paul says that Jesus is THE "image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation."
- The book of Matthew portrays Jesus as the faithful Israel, who succeeded in the desert when Israel failed. (Matthew 4:1-11)

- Jesus walked among the people and valued them as creatures made in the image of God (John 4) with incalculable worth (Matthew 6:26) but also a responsibility to lives of righteousness, mercy and justice. (Matthew 23:23)
- He knew people were fallen and broken and needed someone to deal with our sin problem, so he pursued sinners, not in order to judge or punish, but to save. (John 3:17)
- Though he himself had no sin, he willingly embraced the cross so that we may be made righteous. (2 Corinthians 5:21)
- Through his life, death and resurrection he made a way for all nations to be reconciled to God (John 12:32) and each other. (Ephesians 2:14-15)
- Now our purpose as the family to God is, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to bear witness to Jesus as God's blessing to the world (Acts 1:8) and to live faithfully to God's story. (Matthew 5:13-16, Ephesians 4:1)
- When Christ returns, he will set up a renewed and restored heaven and earth where God will restore the *toiv* of creation. (Romans 8:18-21)
- There will come a day in the future when people from all the nations will gather together in the presence of God, giving praise to Jesus. (Revelation 7:9-10)

Now that you know God's story, will you live faithfully in it?

PRAYER:

Lord, thank you for Jesus! Thank you that you love us enough to sacrifice through Your life, death, and resurrection to bring restoration to all people. As Your people, we commit to be faithful in living our lives to honor what You have done for us.

PURPOSE // WEEK 6	DAY 6
REFLECTION	

What did you learn through this focus season? Which of the movements was the most encouraging? Which was the most challenging? Why?

What did you learn about your story as it is and has been shaped through Scripture? How will these insights impact your walking in faith?

What ways can your story be formed to be shared to encourage and strengthen the church family or share who God is with your neighbors and what He has done?

