

THE BOOK ABOUT GOD

SUMMARY

In this week's lesson, participants will explore how the entire Bible revolves around God and telling us the story of God. Specifically, we'll focus on the Book of Psalms and the way it helps us to understand the nature of God.

OVERVIEW

- Imagine what it means for something to keep its focus on single point, much like the Bible focuses on God.
- Sketch the ways that the Bible, especially Psalms, talks about who God is.
- Reflect on the different ways the Bible helps to tell us who God is.
- Create a representation of God using some of the passages from the Book of Psalms that talk about God.
- Exhibit the ways we can keep our focus on God when reading through our Bibles.

IF YOU'RE LEADING THIS LESSON

1. Meet with your youth leader.

It's probably the first or close to the first time you've ever taught your peers like this, so it's important to not do it alone. Be sure to meet with your youth leader a few times in the weeks leading up to your lesson to prepare.

2. Be prepared.

Read all the way through the lesson a few times, and be sure to read the Commentary at least a handful of times before you lead your lesson. On the day of the lesson, make sure you have all the supplies you need.

3. Make your choices.

As you work through the lesson in preparation, make your choices about which activities you think work best for your class. Use the Notes page to lay out your lesson and to highlight important points you want to make.

4. Remember: You don't need to know everything, and everyone is on your side.

Leading a class for the first time can be stressful, but remember, it's OK if you don't know something. Everyone wants you to succeed, and they will be there to support you and help you if there are any bumps in the road.

5. Pray, and let God do the work.

Too often, we trick ourselves into thinking that we're the ones doing the teaching, but in truth, it's the Holy Spirit teaching through us. As you pray this week, keep that in mind, and let God use you as you lead this lesson.

Commentary

All About God

Scripture, from the very first words to the final period, is about God and God's actions. Scripture is a witness to the God who created all that is—"heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water" (Revelation 14:7)—and whose creation was good (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, and so forth). It is also a witness to the God who, in the face of human rebellion, worked to redeem humanity and all of creation.

The God Who Is

This redemption plan focused first on a man named Abraham. Abraham acknowledged God and heeded what God said, and God blessed Abraham and his family. After many generations, Abraham's descendants found themselves enslaved in Egypt. To these descendants of Abraham, God became a deliverer, crushing the power of the oppressor and leading the captives into freedom.

God made a covenant with this nation, calling for their loyalty and obedience as gratitude for their rescue. Through this nation, these children of Abraham, God sought to establish a people who would witness to the one God, the "I Am" (Exodus 3:13-15), the God "who is" (Revelation 1:4), in a world filled with idols and false gods. Through this nation, and through the Messiah that would arise among them, God continued to work for the redemption of all nations, bringing humanity back to the one God who created and sustains all, and calling them to live justly before God.

The Psalms

We could choose almost any part of Scripture and discover portraits of God and claims about what God does. However, for a particularly focused reflection on God, it is hard to do better than looking to the Psalms—the worship songs our ancestors in the faith sang about God. To this day, these songs remain a staple of worship in many Christian traditions. The Psalms, in particular, show us that God is not only discovered through reading and studying, but by encountering God in worship, an encounter that texts like the Psalms are meant to facilitate.

Psalm 95 was a staple of Jewish worship. God is understood in this song as both the Creator of the land and the sea and the Creator of the people who gather to worship. This forms the basis for the claim that this God is greater than all of the other “gods” out there in the ancient world. God is a “rock,” a potent image for the stability and protection that the worshippers experience as “the people that God pastures and the flock that God leads” (Psalm 95:7, author translation). However, God’s greatness, God’s goodness, and God’s claims have to be recognized. The second half of the psalm reminds worshippers of the fate of the Exodus generation. This group, after being led out of slavery and experiencing God’s deliverance, stopped celebrating and started provoking their deliverer.

God and the Psalmist

Psalm 103 becomes more personal as the psalmist considers God’s character and God’s actions on behalf of human beings. God is presented, above all, as generous—intervening in the lives of the worshipping community to heal the sick, rescue the distressed, and bring justice to those facing oppression. A lot of emphasis is placed on God’s patience with human beings who often find themselves in need of forgiveness. The psalmist reminds worshippers that “the LORD is compassionate and merciful, very patient, and full of faithful love” (Psalm 103:8). This psalm also invokes an image for God that will become increasingly prominent in early Judaism and in the ministry of Jesus: God as Father. In Psalm 103:13, the psalmist writes, “Like a parent feels compassion for their children—that’s how the LORD feels compassion for those who honor him.”

God the Shepherd

One of the most familiar and beloved texts in all of Scripture is Psalm 23. Here, we turn from the way that God is personally involved in creating, sustaining, and governing the cosmos, to the way this same God is personally involved in the life of an individual at the most intimate level. The image of God as a shepherd is found in other psalms, but the experience of God’s work as shepherd—and God’s skill as shepherd—is best expressed here. Psalm 23 speaks about the way God governs every little part of the cosmos and how God works to give the psalmist rest, renewal, and reliable guidance. God gives the psalmist assurance and boldness in the face of life’s darkest fears, and makes a safe and refreshing haven for the psalmist even in the midst of an enemy assault. The psalmist’s relationship with God brings with it a deep and abiding hope. No matter what dark valleys still lie along the path ahead, God goes in front of the psalmist, and goodness and mercy follow behind.

Beyond the Old Testament

While we've largely focused on passages from the Old Testament, it is vitally important to recognize that when we turn to the New Testament, we're still reading and learning about the same God. God is still the creator. God is still at work redeeming, guiding, and shepherding. God is still the judge of all and the champion of justice, to whom all remain accountable. However, in the New Testament, we begin to experience God in a new way through the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

The people who wrote the Scriptures did so as a minority voice speaking to the vast majority of people who had their own gods and thought they knew all they needed about these deities. The testimony, first of Israel and then the early church, was, "If you want to know about the 'God who is', look here." The divine is not what you think you know. We also are called to keep encountering God over and over in Scripture, in worship, and in prayer. Even more, we should always be ready to release the image of God that we've fashioned in favor of a sharper view of "God who is."

Leader Devotional

God seeks to be known by us and to relate to us, God's creation. At the same time, God is categorically different than us, what theologians sometimes call "the Holy Other." As a result, our knowledge of God will always be incomplete, at least in this life. Since God is not confined to our categories, we should be prepared to have some difficulty when attempting to put together all the facets of God into a simple portrait.

Consider just two of the images of God that Jesus offers. In one picture, we see a father who allows a son to act foolishly and live recklessly. After his son leaves, the father watches for his son's return home and, when he sees him, runs out to embrace him and celebrates his return like he had done nothing wrong (Luke 15:11-32).

In another portrait, we see God as a man who forgives a slave an enormous debt, but when that slave fails to forgive a fellow slave, reinstates the debt and hands the slave over to the torturers until the impossible debt is repaid (Matthew 18:23-35). Both are portraits of the one God and, if we wish to know this God, we are not free to choose between them and worship the God whom we like better.

God welcomes and forgives unconditionally, but God's forgiveness must change us so that we do the same for others or we will find ourselves unforgiven! Many scriptural portrayals of God immediately work together, while others stand in tension. Either way, these views of God reflect the real dynamics of relating to God as a complex, living entity and not merely as disconnected theology.

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Notes

Imagine

High-Energy Option: Keep Your Focus

Summary: Throughout the Bible, God is at the center and is the main focus of the story. Sometimes, though, we can get distracted and think other things are at the center of the story. In this activity, participants will practice keeping their focus on one thing while trying to do a second task.

Supplies: light bulb, string, tennis ball, Ping-Pong ball, soccer ball

Instructions

1. Have the participants stand around in a circle. In the middle of the circle, hang a light bulb from a string.
2. Tell participants they need to keep their eyes on the light bulb at all times. They are allowed to blink, but they are not allowed to look anywhere else.
3. As the participants keep their eyes on the light bulb, tell them they will need to use their peripheral vision to pass a soccer ball around the circle. If the soccer ball hits the ground, the leader will have to decide whose fault it is, and that person will be out.
4. After a minute or two, introduce a tennis ball into the circle as well, with the same rules.
5. If the game continues without a clear winner, introduce a Ping-Pong ball alongside the soccer ball and tennis ball.
6. The winner of the game will be the person who keeps their focus on the light bulb, while also keeping the various balls from hitting the floor.

Questions

1. How hard was it to keep your focus when you didn't have to do anything else?
2. What was the most difficult part of the game for you? Why was it so hard for you?

Imagine

Low-Energy Option: Story Chain

Summary: Though the Bible was written by multiple authors over thousands of years, it still works together to tell the same story about God and how God relates to the people God created. In this activity, the participants will work together to tell their own shared story, one word at a time.

Instructions

1. Have participants sit together in a circle.
2. Tell them that, together, they are going to cooperate and tell a story, but that each of them will only be able to add one word to that story when it is their turn.
3. Pick a volunteer to begin the story with the first word.
4. The story can be about whatever the participants want, but they must work together. Everyone must work toward telling the best story possible.
5. When the story feels like it has reached a natural stopping point, whoever is up should say, "The end."
6. If you have extra time, try and tell a second story.

Questions

1. Did the story go in the direction you thought it would? How long did it take you to understand what the story was about?
2. Once you realized what the story was about, was it easier or more difficult for you to join in?

Sketch

Option #1: What Makes a Good Shepherd?

Summary: Unpack what it means to call God a good shepherd and what language we can use today to share the same idea.

Supplies: Bibles

Instructions

1. Divide the class in half.
2. Assign the first group to read Psalm 23. The other group will read the parable of the good shepherd in Luke 15:3-7.
3. Have each group respond to the question, “What does the shepherd metaphor mean about who God is?”
4. Have everyone partner up. Each pair must have one partner from each of the original groups.
5. Each pair will share about the passage they read with their partner.
6. Together, each pair will discuss what it means for God to be a good shepherd in both the Old and New Testaments.
7. Challenge each pair to come up with a modern-day analogy to replace the idea of God as the Good Shepherd.

Questions

1. Why is the shepherd a good analogy to help explain God’s nature?
2. Why is it important that God is not only a shepherd, but a good shepherd? What is the added importance?
3. What other analogies can we use for the way God takes care of God’s people?

Sketch

Option #2: Worship Words

Summary: Explore the words we use to talk about God in worship and compare them with the words used in worship in the Book of Psalms.

Supplies: Bibles, white paper, marker, pens/pencils, sticky notes, hymnals

Instructions

1. At the front of the room, hang a sheet of white paper and label it, “How We Talk About God.”
2. Give everyone a handful of sticky notes.
3. Invite everyone to brainstorm for two minutes about words they’ve heard to describe God in worship. Make hymnals available.
4. Remind everyone that it’s important we understand who God is so we know who we are worshipping.
5. Explore how others have worshipped God traditionally, by reading through Psalm 95.
6. Invite a volunteer to read Psalm 95:1-7.
7. Discuss the following question: “What words does the psalmist use to worship God?”
8. Invite a volunteer to read Psalm 95:8-11.
9. Discuss, “Is this part of the psalm present in our worship today? What does it tell us about who God is?”

Questions

1. How do the words we use influence the way we worship God?
2. How did the words we used today differ or evolve from the way the psalmist talked about God?

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Reflect

Instructions: Choose three of the questions below, and invite participants to respond in the space provided on the following page. Give them about seven minutes to respond. Invite them to form groups afterwards to share their responses.

1. One prominent portrait of God in the Scriptures focuses on God's activity as "creator of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen," including us. What does this claim mean to you? How does this claim help you orient your lives as you follow God the Creator?
2. God's intervention to deliver the Hebrews when they were slaves in Egypt is a defining moment in Israel's understanding of "the God who is." What does the Exodus story reveal about God and God's commitments? What does this say to us as we consider oppression and injustice in the world?
3. Read Psalm 23. What do the psalmist's images communicate to you about God and about the psalmist's experience of God? In what ways have you had experiences similar to the psalmist?
4. Read Psalms 95 and 103. What do these psalms say about God and how God invites human beings to relate to God? What connections do you observe between the two ways these psalms portray God?
5. What is your go-to image of God? What characteristics and activities do you tend to ascribe to God? How does this image affect the way you interact with God? How do the images of God culled from the Scriptures this week confirm, complement, or correct your image of God?

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Create

Option #1: Drawing God

Summary: The Psalms contain a number of different ways to describe who God is. In this activity, participants will utilize these descriptions to create artwork that attempts to show who God is.

Supplies: Bibles, paper, colored pencils, markers, pens, crayons

Instructions

1. Divide participants into three groups.
2. Assign each of the groups to read one of the following Commentary sections:
 - a. The Psalms
 - b. God and the Psalmist
 - c. God the Shepherd
3. After reading the Commentary section they've been assigned, invite each participant to draw a picture based on the way God is defined in the psalms mentioned.
4. Provide participants with Bibles so they can read the psalms in question.
5. Invite participants to use their imaginations to create their drawings. For instance, if God is defined as a "rock," they do not need to draw a literal rock. Instead, ask them to draw a picture about what it means that God is described as a rock.
6. After ten minutes, invite participants to share their drawings with others.

Questions

1. How did some of the drawings you saw from other participants connect with you?
2. What descriptions of God speak to you the most strongly? Why are these descriptions so powerful to you?

Create

Option #2: Psalms: The Remix

Summary: The Psalms contain many powerful images of God, but they are also written for a different people in a different time. In this activity, participants will work together to reimagine the Psalms and rewrite them using more modern symbolism.

Supplies: Bibles, pens/pencils

Instructions

1. Divide participants into three teams.
2. Assign each of the teams to read one of the following Commentary sections:
 - a. The Psalms
 - b. God and the Psalmist
 - c. God the Shepherd
3. After reading through the assigned Commentary section, tell each team they will be working to rewrite the psalm discussed in that section using modern-day language and symbolism. They should, however, try and maintain the same message
4. Provide participants with Bibles so they can read through their assigned psalm.
5. Give each team ten minutes to write a remixed version of their psalm.
6. After their time has expired, invite participants to share with the rest of the class.

Questions

1. How did rewriting the psalm in question open up its meaning for you?
2. Why is it important to preserve the symbols and descriptions of God found in the Psalms?

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Exhibit

Instructions: Invite participants to try an Exhibit activity this week. Arrange to send them a reminder about this activity during the week.

At Home

Try to read at least one chapter out of your Bible every day. At the end of each chapter, reflect on what you've read and ask the question: How is this story about God? Consider the following questions:

1. What do we really mean when we say the entire Bible is about God? Does that mean each story is about God specifically?
2. How can a story that doesn't include God help us to understand who God is? (For an extra challenge, read the Book of Esther.)

At School

Pick one verse about God and post it in your locker this week. When you read it, think about how God is moving in your life today. Reflect on these questions:

1. How would you describe God in a sentence or two?
2. What does your description of God say about the role God plays in your life?

Prayer

Instructions: Lead the students in the following prayer.

Almighty and eternal God, you are the creator of all. You are the deliverer of the oppressed, the redeemer of the rebel, our rock, our shepherd, our parent. You are known to us in so many ways and for so many things you've done.

Help us to know you more fully. Help us to let go of what we think you are and to grasp more of what you truly are. Help us to know you and encounter you in all the life-giving, transforming ways the Bible speaks about so that we may love you more completely, rest in you more securely, witness to you more compellingly, and serve you more worthily.

We ask all this in the name of Jesus, who brought us back to you. Amen.

