

Inspired

Introduction

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, speak to us during this study. Inspire us with your holy breath as we seek new perspectives on interpreting scripture for our lives today. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.
- **Rachel Held Evans Bio**
 - 1981-2019
 - Spent late teenage years in Dayton, TN where the Scopes Monkey Trial occurred in 1925...
 - 1925 – Tennessee Butler Act prohibited teaching human evolution
 - John T. Scopes accused of violating the Butler Act
 - Scopes wasn't actually sure he had taught evolution, but he intentionally incriminated himself in order to stage the trial
 - William Jennings Bryan prosecuted
 - Clarence Darrow defended
 - Scopes was found guilty and fined \$100, but the case was later overturned on a technicality (the jury should have decided the fine, rather than the judge)
 - Tennessee repealed Butler Act in 1967
 - Supreme Court ruled such bans as going against the First Amendment
 - Evans worshiped as an Episcopalian
 - Eventually denounced evangelicalism due to its association with the Christian right
 - Worked as a newspaper journalist including a humor columnist for *The Herald-News* in Dayton
 - Wrote six books, including *Searching for Sunday* and *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, and maintained a Blog on faith issues
 - Served on President Obama's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships
 - Died from encephalitis after being treated in the hospital for an infection
- **YouTube Video – [Greg and Rachel Held Evans](#) (4:44-17:05 [up until she says “women...some lament...the other side of human cost of things”]; then play 22:00-25:24)** Discussion with Greg Boyd (pastor/author)
 - Have you had similar reactions to Bible stories?
 - Is the church guilty of fascism?
 - What does Evans mean by “God stoops”?
- **Introduction**
 - How have your thoughts and feelings about the Bible changed over the years? What were some crucial turning points in your experience with the Bible?
 - Did you have any trepidation about reading a book about the Bible? Why might that be?
 - What was your favorite Bible story as a child?
 - Do you now read that story differently as an adult?
 - Is there a Bible story that has always struck you as strange or troubling, one that perhaps stirs up questions and doubts?
 - Consider the following words:
 - *Inspired*
 - *Inerrant*
 - *Infallible*
 - *Trustworthy*
 - *Authoritative*
 - *Sacred*

- *Oppressive*
 - *Outdated*

 - Which ones strike you as appropriate ways to describe the Bible?
 - Which ones strike you as unhelpful? Why?
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- **Closing Prayer (ask a volunteer to offer this)**

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- [*Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible*](#)

(page numbers from the text are noted in brackets [#] preceding quotes or relevant passages; note that e-book page numbers can differ from hardcopy books, but should be close)

Italics imply important points or example answers the leader can convey

The Temple / Origin Stories

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we marvel at your wondrous Creation, and are blessed to be part of it. Speak to us anew as we revisit the Biblical story of Genesis. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

- **Scripture – Have a volunteer read aloud:**

- Genesis 1

- **The Temple / Origin Stories**

- What are some of the stories (family, religious, or cultural) that have shaped who you are?
- What “origin stories” were told to you to describe the nature of creation?
 - In what ways have these stories been harmful or helpful to you?
 - Some origin stories protect us from uncomfortable truths (e.g., stories about the Pilgrims & Native Americans). Can you think of other examples?
- How have you traditionally understood the nature of the Bible’s creation stories? As scientific, historical accounts? As myths?
 - How does considering context of the Babylonian Exile change or inform your interpretation?
 - [7] “...all this emotional suffering produced quality literature”
 - [8] “meant to answer then-pressing, ancient questions about the nature of God and God’s relationship to creation”
- [9] Evans points out a major trap to avoid with the Bible – putting ourselves and our interests at the center of the story
 - How are you guilty of falling into this trap?
- Considering what we’ve discussed, what do *you* think the Genesis 1 creation story is meant to convey?
- Fundamentalists and atheists alike share the conviction that any trace of non-factual embellishment renders a story untrue.
 - How much of our current history would be rendered as such if held up to the same light?
- [22] What are your thoughts on the Jewish practice of “midrash”
- [24] “While Christians tend to turn to Scripture to *end* a conversation, Jews turn to Scripture to *start* a conversation.”
 - Thoughts?

- **Scripture – Have volunteer read aloud:**

- Genesis 32:22-32

- **The Temple / Origin Stories (Con’t)**

- What might it mean for you to wrestle with the Bible until God gives you a blessing?
 - What sort of blessing are you seeking?
- Other reflections?

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The Well / Deliverance Stories

- **Opening Prayer**

Lord God, life is full of challenge, struggle, and suffering. Yet, you remain steadfast in delivering us from these obstacles. Open our minds today to this deliverance and help us better recognize your work in our lives. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

- **The Well**

- Have a volunteer read Genesis 16
- The chapter is Hagar's story retold from the first person
 - How does this dramatic interpretation change your perspective on the story?
- [30] "I placed my hands on my belly and felt the sudden certain impression of a heel. No woman can prepare for the awe of it, the overwhelming surge of joy and fear."
 - Would any mothers in the group care to recount similar experiences with their children?
- [32] Hagar gives a name to God – "El Roi" – the God who sees
 - What are the cultural implications of daring to name God?
 - Are there times in your past when you might have given God a name?

- **YouTube Video - [Deliverance Stories by St. Andrew Lutheran Church](#) [0:00-9:47]**

- What might God be working to deliver you from, or what has He delivered you from? What is/has been your wilderness?
- Have there been times where you've seen God "make a way when there seems to be no way"?

- **Deliverance Stories**

- Jews have the seder meal to remember their deliverance from Egypt.
 - What Christian practices might similarly reflect our deliverance, and from what?
 - [39] "They tried to kill us; we won; let's eat!" - Why are Jewish holidays so closely tied to meals?
- What comes to mind when you hear "The Law" in reference to Scripture? Positive/negative?
- African Americans found the Bible as both a healing balm and a poison book.
 - In what ways was it a balm? A poison book?
- [42] "Sometimes God knows the kind of deliverance you need the most is deliverance from your own comfort."
 - What does this mean to you? Can you provide examples?
- [45] "Did Mary ever doubt what she'd been told by the angel?"
 - What do you think?
- [51] Exodus 21 always does Rachel Evans in. "And if an ox kills a slave, then the ox must be stoned and its owner ordered to compensate the slave owner thirty silver shekels. *So what's streaming on Netflix right now?*"
 - How do you approach these parts of the Old Testament?
"This is a God who cares about every detail of their new life together, right down to the management of their oxen."
- [55] "As Elton Trueblood put it, 'The historic Christian doctrine of the divinity of Christ does not simply mean that Jesus is like God. It is far more radical than that. It means that God is like Jesus.'
 - What's the difference here?
- [56] *It's a matter of what you're looking for – because that's what you're going to find.*
 - *Support slavery...abolish slavery*
 - *Oppress women...honor women*
 - *War...peace*
 - *Outdated irrelevant ancient text...truth*

- Reflections?
- **Closing Prayer (ask a volunteer to offer this)**

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The Walls / War Stories

- **Opening Prayer**

Father of Peace, we have such a hard time with war – and an even harder time when war is attributed to religious practices. As we look at war in the Bible, shine a new light of understanding on its placement and the message you have for us today through it. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

- **The Walls**

- Have a volunteer read Joshua 6:15-21
- What's your reaction to "the city and all its inhabitants were to be devoted to the Lord" in verse 17?
- [59] "It depends on who tells the story"
 - "History is written by the victors" – attributed to Winston Churchill
 - How has this influenced us as a country?
- [60] "Only God, who holds every story, knows [who took the walls of Jericho down]"
 - Do you find comfort or dissatisfaction in this statement?

- **YouTube Video – [Religion Doesn't Cause as Many Wars as You Think](#) [0:00-7:29]**

- Solzhenitsyn quote – "dividing line of good and evil runs through every human heart"
- Read James 4:1-7
- Why are humans prone to war?
- Is action like that taken against Osama bin Laden justifiable?

- **War Stories**

- What are some of your favorite or least favorite war stories in movies/books/plays? *Private Ryan; The Great Escape; Schindler's List*
- [61] John Underhill's quote – "Sometimes the Scripture declareth women and children must perish with their parents... We had sufficient light from the word of God for our proceedings."
 - Do you see any parallels with this rationalization in events of today?
- What sort of justifications/explanations have you heard regarding Biblical conquests?
- What's your reaction to the Lord "hardening the hearts" of Pharaoh or the Canaanites as recorded in scripture?
 - *Rachel Held Evans observes that outside of scripture, we would immediately condemn this as a weak defense against genocide*
- *3 Types of Responses to these stories*
 - *Those who accept without question God ordered these campaigns*
 - *Those so troubled by it that it strains their faith or compels them to abandon it*
 - *Those who can name all the Kardashian sisters [i.e., ignore it completely]*
- Evans points out competing convictions:
 1. Every human is of infinite value
 2. The Bible is the infallible Word of God
 - How do you reconcile these two?
- [65] Reformed pastor John Piper in 2010 – "It's right for God to slaughter women and children anytime he pleases. God gives life and he takes life. Everybody who dies, dies because God wills that they die."
 - What might lead people to this conclusion?
- [66] "When you can't trust your own God-given conscience to tell you what's right...you lose the capacity to engage the world in any meaningful, authentic way...I tried reading Scripture with my conscience and curiosity suspended, and I felt, quite literally, disintegrated. I felt fractured and fake."
 - Reactions?
- [68] "The hardest part about doubt is feeling isolated from your community."

- Do you ever fear this isolation?
 - Evans claims that if you want to know what makes a community tick, ask them what they believe is worth dying for.
 - What do you believe is worth dying for?
 - Evans describes the hyperbolic nature of humans retelling stories like that of Jericho's Fall (Jericho being a small, six-acre military outpost)
 - How do we still fall into this trap ourselves today?
 - [76] "if God became flesh and blood in the person of Jesus Christ, ...then God would rather die by violence than commit it."
 - Does this ring true to you?
 - Evans finds perspective from the war stories by
 - Paying attention to the experiences of biblical women
 - Keeping humble about our own culture's violent tendencies
 - Seeing in Jesus a God who would rather die by violence than commit it
 - Do you find any of these perspectives helpful? Do you have others that help?
 - Other reflections?
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The Debate / Wisdom Stories

- **Opening Prayer**

Dear Lord, help us to glean the wisdom you intend for us as we read the Bible. Shine your light in a new way on these stories to provide the perspective we need to better serve you. In Your Holy Name we pray. Amen.

- **YouTube Video – [The Book of Job's Wisdom on How God Runs the World](#) [0:00-6:03]**

- **The Debate**

- *Alfred, Lord Tennyson called the book of Job “the greatest poem of ancient and modern times”*
- *Written between 7th and 4th centuries BC*
- *Job is one of 25 prophets mentioned by name in the Quran*
- What are your recollections of the book?
- What was your take on Rachel Held Evans’s screenplay?
 - Job, Eli [Eliphaz], Bill [Bildad], Father Z [Zophar], Cafeteria Lady [God]
 - Card saying “Remember, God will never give you more than you can handle.”
 - Why isn’t this any comfort?
 - Why choose the Cafeteria Lady to represent God?

- **Wisdom Stories**

- [on whiteboard if available, or do as a [Word Cloud](#)] What comes to mind when you hear the word “wisdom”?
- [99] “In many ways, the Bible of my youth was set up to fail.”
 - How does this apply to you?
 - How does it apply to our children?
- Have you ever felt angry with God?
 - If so, how did you express that anger?
 - Did you feel guilty about it?
 - Were you aware of the “angry psalms”? (Read Psalm 13:1-6; 22:1-2; 35:17-18; 42:9-11)
- Think of some examples of “wise sayings.” For each, can you think of circumstances in which it would not be considered wise?
 - *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*
 - *Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise*
 - *Make as much as you can, Save as much as you can, Give as much as you can*
 - *Honesty is the best policy*
 - *Don’t go to bed angry*
- Why might God’s people trend toward the principle of “reward and punishment”?
- Evans talks about God’s response to Job, not really giving a straightforward answer to why he must suffer (theodicy), but conversely describes the unknown furthest reaches of the universe and the minuscule barbs of an ostrich feather.
 - Why doesn’t the Bible give us straight answers?
- [96] “The aim of wisdom literature is to uncover something true about the nature of reality in a way that makes the reader or listener wiser”
 - What does Job uncover for you to make you wiser?
 - *Good things don’t necessarily happen to good people*
- When have you experienced what Evans describes in situations where people relied on the Bible alone for help [with depression, anxiety, addiction] when professional help was in order?
- How do you deal with the contradictions in the Bible?

- Can you give an example of you or someone you know “holding space” for someone going through a difficult time?
 - Other reflections from the chapter?

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The Beast / Resistance Stories

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we know the Beast is with us today, just as it was in Biblical times. Help us to recognize and resist the Beast in all that we do. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

- **The Beast**

- What visions come to mind when you think of “the beast”?
- Read Revelation 13:1-10
- What relevance, if any, does this scripture have to you today?

- **Resistance Stories**

- What acts of resistance are memorable to you?

Examples:

- *Bree Newsome on 30-foot flagpole of SC Capitol building – June 27, 2015*
- *Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington*
- *Flower Power anti-Vietnam movement*
- *Ghandi's peaceful resistance to British rule*
- *Moral Mondays led by Rev. William Barber in NC*
- *Woman's suffragettes*
- *Boston Tea Party*
- *Arab Spring*
- *Gay Pride*
- How do we recognize “the beast” in need of resistance?
- [117] “The Bible was written by oppressed religious minorities living under the heels of powerful nation-states”
 - How does this affect your perspective on Scripture? *In this case, history is written *not* by the victors*
- *prophet – one who sees things as they really are and reveals this to listeners*
- [122] “prophets deliver what is perhaps the most subversive element of any resistance movement: hope.”
 - In what ways is hope subversive?
 - Who are the prophets of our time, who challenge the powerful and give the marginalized hope?
- *apocalypse = unveiling; prophets use apocalyptic literature to offer hope to resistance movements*
- [124] “The fact is, the shadow under which most of the world trembles today belongs to America”
 - Do you agree/disagree? Why?
 - How are America and Rome alike? Different?
- *Evans says that harkening back to the good old days of a “Christian nation” is a fallacy*
 - *Throughout our past, greed for “more” results in oppression of the underprivileged*
- *We continue to be convicted by the prophets today*
 - *Income inequality, mistreatment of immigrants, oppression of the poor, worship of money, sex, and violence*
- Book of Esther
 - Rabbis urge Jews to shout and scream when Haman's name is read, to drown it out
 - How do you see the book of Esther as prophetic or apocalyptic?
 - “The story of Esther pulls back the veil on the empire to reveal that behind the golden chairs and packed harems and patriarchal edicts are a bunch of insecure, weak men whose attempts to puff themselves up only make them look silly.”
 - In what way might this apply to our leaders today?

- Sometimes the best way to kill the Beast is to laugh at it
 - How are we laughing at our Beast?
 - Do you agree that this is an effective resistance tool?
 - Do you ever consider doing something “in the name of Jesus” as resistance rhetoric against “by the authority of the president”?
 - Other reflections from the chapter?
-
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The Water / Gospel Stories

- **Opening Prayer.**

Lord God, like the Samaritan woman at the well, we ask you to give us that holy water so that we may never thirst again. Amen.

- **YouTube Video – [John 4: Jesus and the Samaritan Woman](#) [0:00-4:00]**

- **The Water**

- What reflections do you have on Rachel Held Evans's retelling of this story
- Water is a prevalent theme in the Bible
 - What stories involving water can you recall? *Baptism, Red Sea, Water to Wine, Walking on Water, Moses striking stone in Wilderness, Creation, Great Flood, Elijah calling on the rain*
 - Why do you think Evans names this chapter The Water? – *emphasizing Jesus' gift which he symbolized using the word water*

- **Gospel Stories**

- What are your favorite stories from the gospels? Why?
- [147] "It's funny that many of us who identify as 'born-again Christians' can hardly remember our born-again experience"
 - In what ways would you describe yourself as born again?
- [148] "*News that started as local gossip in a few sleepy fishing villages in ancient Palestine*" has reached us today
- Evans talks about the nitty gritty details of the gospel stories – "smells like mud and manger hay and tastes like salt and wine."
 - How do these details affect your reading of gospel stories? *Authenticity; more engaging; relational*
- How would you respond to someone asking you "What is the gospel?"
- Evans says it is fruitless to boil the gospel down into a single statement/tweet.
 - Do you agree?
 - Is this need for elaboration at odds with our culture which tends toward info in short snippets
- [151] "So when someone asks, 'What is the gospel?' the best response is, 'Let me tell you a story.'"
 - What story might you tell? "*Who is my neighbor?*" – *Jesus replies: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho..."*
- [153] "kingdom terminology refers not to some faraway paradise filled with disembodied souls, but rather to the will and reign of God, unleashed into the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus... Heaven, in the Bible, is not a future destiny but the other, hidden dimension of ordinary life"
 - Reflections?
- Evans discusses how modern Christians focus on how "Jesus came to die" – "In this view, Jesus basically shows up to post our bail."
 - What's the trap here? "*Jesus did not simply die to save us from our sins; Jesus lived to save us from our sins.*"
- [157] "*The church is not a group of people who believe all the same things; the church is a group of people caught up in the same story, with Jesus at the center.*"
- Evans portrays Jesus as a man who could spin a good story
 - Who are your favorite storytellers?
 - What draws you to them?
- [160] Amy-Jill Levine: "We might be better off thinking less about what [the parables] 'mean,' and more about what they can 'do': remind, provoke, refine, confront, disturb."

- What do the parables “do” for you?
 - Evans finishes the chapter with “Why Christian” stories
 - How might you complete the phrase “I am a Christian because...”?
 - Other closing reflections on the book?
-
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