

The Bible is good and beautiful. Its vast and historical recognition not only establishes its authority in our collective lives, but also shows us how its story and storytellers lead us to something bigger than ourselves.

In today's contexts, it can be easy to reduce this ancient text to a set of brief take-aways, or moral to-do lists. But when we choose to see the Bible in this way we miss out on the fullness of what these stories can be—something wholly sensory and embodied. Instead, we can look to early traditions of storytelling as a guide to engaging with the Bible today. The first faith communities gathered around sacred Bible stories, learning to embody those stories from generation to generation.

We looked to those early traditions as a guide to designing this Bible study. Inside, we focus on 30 stories from the Bible and—through guided reading, reflections, curated art, and prayer—we invite you to engage with these Biblical stories anew. Let there be joy, kinship, and an abounding connection with goodness and all of creation. Amen.

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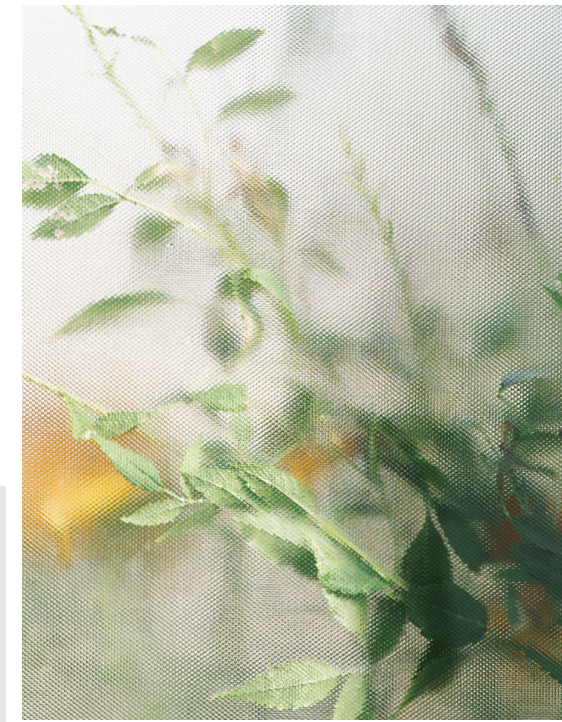


THE GOOD AND BEAUTIFUL BIBLE STUDY

 ALABASTER

The Good and Beautiful

Bible Study



*Experiencing Stories From the Bible
& What It Means for Our Lives Today*

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Cultivating conversation between art, beauty, & faith.

Founded in 2016.

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The Good and Beautiful

Bible Study



An Introduction & How to use this book

The Bible is good and beautiful. Its vast, historical recognition not only establishes its authority in our collective lives, but also shows us how its story and storytellers lead us to something bigger than ourselves.

Hearing stories has always deepened our understanding of our world. In early Jewish traditions, we see storytelling as a foundation for the flourishing of relationships, knowledge, and culture. Deuteronomy 11 (NLT) invites its audience to “commit yourselves wholeheartedly to these words” and “Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up.” These early traditions invite us to hear stories as an enduring, generational, and immersive experience.

This invitation from Biblical storytellers is often overlooked in our modern society. In today’s contexts, it can be easy to reduce this ancient text to a set of brief take-aways, or moral to-do lists. But when we choose to see the Bible in this way we miss out on the fullness of what these stories can be—something wholly sensory and embodied.

We can look to early traditions of storytelling as a guide to engaging with the Bible today. The first communities gathered around sacred Bible stories, learning to embody those stories from generation to generation. Art has played a prominent part in this process, transmitting biblical stories and making them meaningful for each new generation. There is wisdom in following the steps of this method—noting how things transpire, and allowing them to speak, without rush or force. We used this as a guide in designing The Bible Study and invite you to engage with its story two-fold:

READ

Whether it’s heard aloud or in silent reading, hearing the story in its presented form is a bedrock for curiosity, conversation, and relationship.

I.

Each chapter’s reading section begins with a designated theme, synopsis, and reading list. We invite you to begin your chapter experience by investigating these resources.

II.

The chapter starts with an outline retelling of the story’s events. We then move into the today section, where we ponder the story and inspect its qualities and themes as they exist in our modern world today.

REFLECT

Through thoughtful curation of artwork, guided-prompts, questions, and design, we invite you to integrate the story into the present and embody a full sensory experience. Looking to early traditions, we encourage gathering and sharing in this experience with others.

Each chapter’s reflect section is structured with prompts that will guide you through a process: Pause, Ponder, and Pray.

I.

Pause: Bring awareness to your response to the story. Contemplative artwork and sensorial prompts help guide you into the following steps.

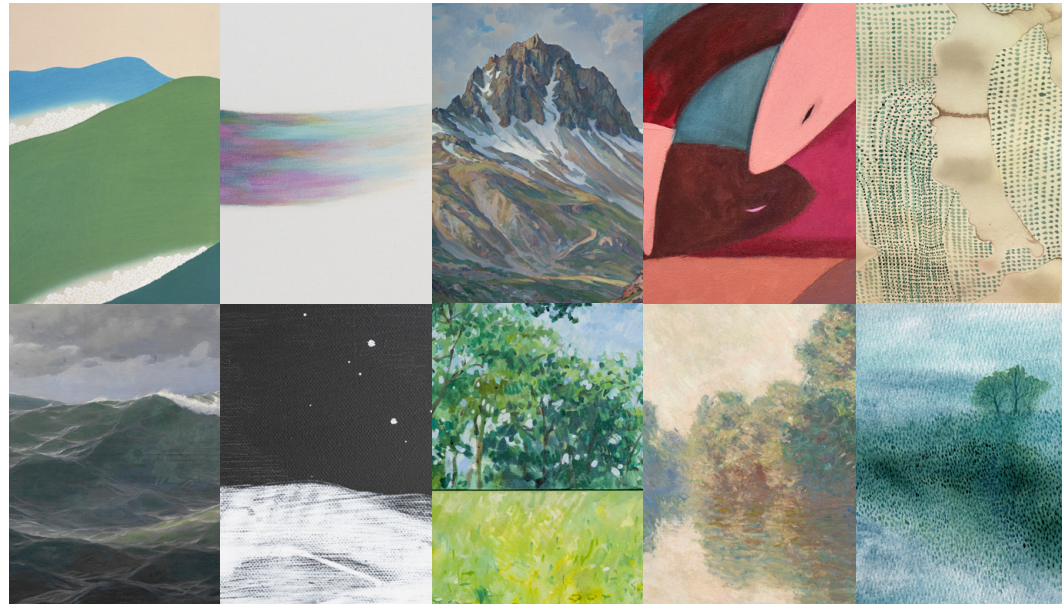
II.

Ponder: Deepen your understanding of the story with questions to reflect and/or discuss with your community.

III.

Pray: Close your time with a written prayer, uniquely crafted for each chapter.

Through the stories of the Bible—let there be joy, kinship, and an abounding connection with goodness and all of creation. Amen.



12	<i>The 5000</i>	Need
22	<i>Abigail</i>	Decisive Action, Subverting Expectations, Non-Violence
30	<i>Boy Jesus</i>	Exploration, Growing Up
38	<i>Canaanite Woman</i>	Agency
46	<i>The Daughters of Zelophehad</i>	Advocating in Community, Connecting to Our Needs
54	<i>Deborah</i>	Bravery
62	<i>Elizabeth</i>	Waiting With Hope
70	<i>Esther</i>	Courage, God's Providence
78	<i>Hagar</i>	Seeing Others, Value
86	<i>Hannah</i>	Sorrow, Cultivating Hope

94	<i>Jacob & Esau</i>	Accepting Grace
102	<i>Jethro & Moses</i>	Wisdom Amidst Successes
110	<i>John the Baptist & The Crowd</i>	Repentance
118	<i>Jonathan</i>	Loyalty
126	<i>Josiah</i>	Radical Change
134	<i>Lazarus, Martha, & Mary</i>	Grief, Hope
142	<i>Lydia</i>	Hospitality
150	<i>The Man Born Blind</i>	Shame, Discernment
158	<i>Miriam</i>	Survival, Watchfulness
166	<i>Naaman</i>	Openness, Counsel From Unexpected Places



174	<i>Naomi</i>	Loss, Community
182	<i>Nehemiah</i>	Slowness, Going to God for Repair
190	<i>Onesimus</i>	Liberation & Freedom
198	<i>Peter & Cornelius</i>	Unexpected Gatherings, Trust, Listening
206	<i>The Preacher</i>	Futility, Fleeting, Meaning of Life
214	<i>The Samaritan Woman at the Well</i>	Alienation, Belonging
224	<i>Stephen</i>	Servant
232	<i>Tamar</i>	God's Surprising Care & Justice
240	<i>Wisdom</i>	Relationship with Wisdom
248	<i>The Woman Who Anoints Jesus</i>	Generosity, Beauty

Bravery

Deborah



The Story of Deborah

SYNOPSIS

As a brave prophet, Deborah guides the people of Israel from the front lines of a battle to end their suffering.

KEY MOMENT:
Judges 4:4-24

FULL READING:
Judges 4-5

Read

OUTLINE

The story picks up in a time where the people of Israel forego their commitment to live in step with God. Choosing this straying path—evil over love, selfishness instead of mercy—leads them to suffer under the oppressive rule of King Jabin and his commander Sisera.¹

In this time comes the prophet and leader, Deborah. Deborah’s role in her community was to speak wisdom into situations of injustice. Day after day, she’d sit under a large palm tree, and tend to men and women seeking wisdom and sound judgment.²

One day, Deborah summons the military commander Barak, relaying God’s message to prepare for battle and to gather the troops. It was time for the people to break free and fight Sisera’s army!

The enormity of the situation overwhelms Barak; while he trusts Deborah, he wants her to go with him to rally the troops. “If you go with me, I will go; but if you don’t go with me, I won’t go.”³ Deborah bravely says she will, but also calls out Barak’s wavering spirit and responds with a prophetic promise—it won’t be him, but “the hands of a woman”⁴ who will defeat Sisera.

Barak and Deborah begin to gather a large army to wage battle for the flourishing of their people. Word gets back to Sisera that they are preparing for battle, so Sisera gathers nine hundred iron chariots. Deborah strategically tells Barak to get ready, knowing that, by the grace of God, this oppressive army will lead themselves right where Barak needs them. She is full of assured confidence in God, telling Barak: “Go! This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands. Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?”⁵

And that's exactly what happens. The armies of Israel are given prime opportunity to strike. Victory is theirs. No soldier from Sisera's army is spared, and Sisera himself *flees*, running for his life and taking shelter within the tent of one of his nation's allies—Heber and his wife, Jael.

Jael welcomes him and agrees not to alert anyone. That night, Sisera falls asleep and seeing an opportunity, Jael kills him by driving a tent peg through his temple.⁶ Thus, she fulfills Deborah's prophecy to Barak—a woman's hand will kill Sisera.

Deborah and Barak celebrate! A joyous song is sung to usher in forty years of peace in the land, and is etched into history as one of the oldest written excerpts of Scripture.

TODAY

Like Deborah, we too are invited to be people of bravery even amidst insurmountable odds. She had every reason to have doubts—whether it was the 900 iron chariots lined before her, having to deal with intense quarrels among her people, or needing to garner command over numerous men in power. But instead of fear, Deborah exemplifies the complete opposite. She *exudes* confidence and authority as she boldly listens to God, wielding her courage to free her people.

We are reminded of many leaders of the civil rights movement rooted in these qualities, like Fannie Lou Hamer. As a devoted faith leader and Black woman in the 1960s South, Fannie Lou Hamer was part of a marginalized community living under oppressive and racist systems and structures. Though she was threatened, arrested, and subject to violence, it never deterred her from her life's work. She was brave,

continually putting her body on the line with civil acts of disobedience to expose inequities and inequalities.

When dire times call for bravery, how do we respond? God does not leave us, even when we are most afraid. We can trust that the Spirit will empower us in truth and righteousness when we need to be brave. Barak wavered to rally the troops—but Deborah was there, ready, trusting God—and so was Jael. Contrast Barak's trepidation with Deborah's confidence. As she commands Barak she says: "Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?" Such a rhetorical question reveals her assuredness in God, and she gets to experience that assuredness fully realized in victory.

When we choose fear we miss out on opportunities in life; we shrink and diminish below what God intends for us. But when we choose bravery we get to live in step with God and experience the fullness that life has to offer. What is stirring your soul, spurring you on to act bravely? Be brave; perhaps it will lead to a wondrous chorus.

Reflect

PAUSE

Sit up straight.

Take a deep breath.

Using the art element (on the previous page), take a moment to reflect on the story.

PONDER

Invite God to speak to you:

- I. Where are you invited to be brave? How can you rise to God's call for bravery?
- II. What stirs your soul and makes you sing? How can it help you live bravely?
- III. How can we wield our courage from God to bring freedom to ourselves and others?

PRAY

You alone, God, are my strength.
Each step with You
my soul is stirred and my heart sings.
Grant me bravery
when I am faced with hardships.
And may I join in
the divine melody of life
with You.
Amen.



Großes Marinestück
MAX JENSEN, 1880

OIL ON CANVAS