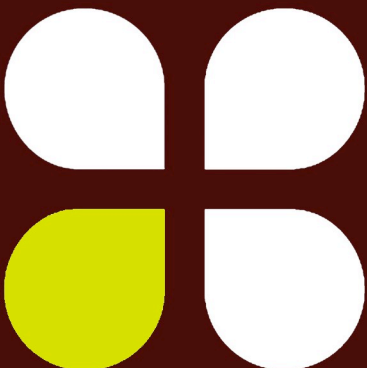


COMMUNITY STUDY GUIDE

JESUS WANTS TO SAVE CHRISTIANS

ROB BELL & DON GOLDEN



SCRIPTURE
REASON
EXPERIENCE
TRADITION

INTRO TO COMMUNITY STUDY GUIDES:

How do we know what we know? How do we come to find what is good and true? People have wrestled with these questions throughout human history. It's the study of *epistemology* and it's no small chore.

The people of God have wrestled with epistemology throughout Judeo-Christian history. How can we know that God is real, that He loves us, that He is working in the world today? These are huge questions, and many different Church leaders have attempted to answer them over the centuries, to explain how we as Christians can know what is true.

John Wesley, the eighteenth-century preacher and pioneer of Methodism, articulated epistemology in a way that still resonates with us today. In his ministry Wesley taught something that would later be named the *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*. We determine what is true using *Scripture, reason, experience and tradition*. By holding these "truth meters" in community and tension with one another, we are best able to hear and learn those things which God is communicating to us.

FOLLOWING THE QUAD

We find that, nearly 300 years after Wesley brought it on the scene, the Quad is still helpful to Christians who want to learn what is true about humanity, God, the Church, and our present and future hope.

In *Scripture* we have the most tangible expression of God's revelation. For this reason, Scripture is the starting point of our Quad. Scripture provides us with the narrative of Israel and some of the earliest communities that followed Jesus and built his Kingdom. The Bible explains to us God's character and articulates what it looks like to become part of the people of God. As God's Spirit illumines it, we're able to use Scripture wisely today in our own context.

God has given us intelligence and welcomes us to use it. We naturally bring our cognitive ability and framework (our *reason*) into our handling and application of Scripture and our understanding of God. We want to worship God with our thoughtfulness, as we love Him enough to observe and meditate on His work in this world.

The Holy Spirit is available to Christ-followers as a Helper – consulting, convicting, encouraging, ministering, and illumining truth through all different kinds of mediums and situations. As individuals and as church communities we are called to remain sensitive to the Spirit's personal and particular guidance. Through a deep *experience* of God's Spirit we gain the wisdom and discernment needed to serve God in our culture and context today.

We're connected to the *tradition* of God's people throughout the centuries and around the globe. As we pursue truth, it's important that we look beyond our own context and learn from the wisdom of other faithful believers. By seeing how other Christians have understood truth, we're able to affirm and adopt many of their conclusions. We're also free to recognize and correct misguiding thoughts of past Christians – moving forward into a healthier understanding of, and relationship with, God.

By holding the four components of the Quad together in dynamic community, we continuously learn and grow in our understanding of who we are, who God is, and what is going on in the world.

SETTING THE STAGE

Those of us who grew up in church likely know the exodus story as one small section of the Old Testament, albeit one that makes for a good flannelgraph lesson or children's movie. We probably don't think of exodus as a concept weaved throughout the entire Old and New Testaments of Scripture, a recurring motif that does much to explain the saving work of Jesus.

What does Passover have to do with Eucharist? What does Sinai have to do with Pentecost? What's so important about innocent lambs and first-born sons?

Rob Bell and Don Golden, in their book *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*, retrieve these connections and their implications for our faith as we are called into the new exodus. The book is filled with strong insights concerning the connection between the exodus led by Moses and the exodus led by Jesus. *JWSC* is a book that could help us move away from a narrative of power and empire, returning to a narrative of liberation, justice, and selfless giving – Scripture's story of exodus.

INTRODUCTION:

AIR PUFFERS AND RUBBER GLOVES

INTRODUCTION QUESTIONS

[1] (Pg 13) There are some Christians who read the first eleven chapters of Genesis as solely allegorical whereas some other Christians take that section of Scripture to be completely literal (and there are nuances of both these positions along the grayscale). Regardless of how you approach the beginning of Genesis, why is there value in Bell's understanding of being "east of Eden"?

[2] (17) As you look within yourself and out at the world around you, do you sense that things are "east of Eden"?

CHAPTER ONE: CRY OF THE OPPRESSED

CHAPTER ONE QUESTIONS

[1] (Pgs 24-27) What is it that makes Egypt an anti-kingdom?

[2] (28-29) Reflect on the following excerpt: "God hasn't talked to a group of people since Eden. Things have been quiet, an eerie sort of silence... So when Moses tells the people at Sinai to 'prepare yourselves' and then leads them out of the camp 'to meet with God,' this is about way more than a group of wilderness wanderers gathering for a message from the heavens. This is about humanity estranged from its maker. This is about the primal distance that exists between the divine and the human, the deep gap in the soul of humanity... This moment at Sinai is about the reversal of the consequences of Eden. Sinai is breaking the silence. God is near. God is about to speak."

While this is first and foremost a description of our historical narrative as God's people, does your own story – unfolding today in your context – in any way resemble this story at Sinai? Has there been a chapter of your life when it seemed God is silent and distant? In that moment, were you aching to somehow experience God?

What do you imagine it would have been like to be at Sinai, preparing yourself, knowing that God is about to break the silence?

[3] (31) Bell writes, "So when God invites the people to be priests, it's an invitation to show the world who this God is and what this God is like... God needs a body. God needs flesh and blood. God needs bones and skin so that Pharaoh will know just who this God is he's dealing with and how this God acts in the world."

What does this quote say about us today, those whom Jesus made into a "holy priesthood" (1 Peter 2.5)? Do we think of our priesthood this way – showing people who God is and what He is like?

[4] (32-33) Bell rightly points out that exodus from Egypt provides the context for the Ten Commandments. “Many people are familiar with the Ten Commandments, which are often portrayed as strict rules given by a fire-breathing God to keep people in line. But when they’re seen in their original context, the commandments take on all sorts of new meanings... What God begins here at Sinai with the Ten Commandments is the long process of teaching them how to be human again.”

How does Bell’s angle on Sinai help you to read the Commandments in a new light?

[5] (35) Speaking of exodus and liberation, Bell says, “It’s as if God is saying, ‘The thing that has happened to you – go make it happen for others. The freedom from oppression that you are now experiencing – help others to experience that same freedom.’”

How does understanding liberation and salvation in this way send us in a different direction than the “sinner’s prayer” emphasis of Christianity in the modern West?

[6] (38-39) Regarding Solomon, Bell writes, “In just a few generations, the oppressed have become the oppressors... Solomon has created an empire of indifference. He has forgotten the story of his ancestors... In a few generations these wandering former slaves who were newly rescued from an oppressive empire have become empire-builders themselves.”

How might we be similar to Solomon? In what ways have we forgotten the story of our Judeo-Christian ancestors?

[7] (36-43) What are some things this book teaches you about Solomon and his impact on Israel’s history that you don’t hear taught and preached very often in churches?

[8] (44-45) In one of the climactic points of this book, Bell writes, "There's a word for this [indifference]. A word for what happens when you still have the power and the wealth and the influence, and yet in some profound way you've blown it because you've forgotten why you were given it in the first place. The word is exile. Exile is when you forget your story. Exile isn't just about location; it's about the state of your soul. Exile is when you fail to convert your blessings into blessings for others. Exile is when you find yourself a stranger to the purposes of God."

What steps of disobedience lead to exile?

What do you imagine God felt when His people settled for exile?

What role does remembering or forgetting our story play in our likelihood of slipping into exile?

[9] (46-49) The prophets of Israel come down hard on their religion's kingdom of comfort and indifference toward the oppressed? How is the nature of their prophecies wildly different from a lot of the things that pass as Christian "prophecy" today?

CHAPTER TWO: GET DOWN YOUR HARPS

CHAPTER TWO QUESTIONS

[1] (Pgs 55-57) What does it say about God, that He was willing to offer a second exodus to His people? How does the vocabulary of exodus reappear in the books Isaiah and Hosea?

[2] (59) How does the second exodus move from the particular to the universal?

[3] (63) Consider Bell's words on our tendency to forget our story: "That's always the danger, isn't it? That we'll be broken, our empires will collapse, we'll cry out for help, and when that help comes, when we get back on our feet, when there's money in the account again, and things are back to how they were, the danger is that once we get it back – whatever 'it' is – we'll forget what just happened."

How do you see that quote embodied by not only Israel, but by Christians living after Christ?

[4] (65-66) What would it have been like to be an Israelite and hear that, in the new exodus, the Egyptians and Assyrians will be invited to worship with you? What would be a good contemporary equivalent in our time and place? Who are the people you struggle to picture worshipping God? What would it take to increase your imagination for the scope and power of the new exodus?

[5] (67) Why does the book of Isaiah come back to the language of Eden? If the first exodus was liberation from Egypt, what is this new exodus liberating people from?

CHAPTER THREE: DAVID'S OTHER SON

CHAPTER THREE QUESTIONS

- [1] (Pgs 78-79) What is the significance in understanding Jesus as “Son of David” and in contrast with Solomon? What is the significance of a beggar calling to Jesus as “Son of David”? What does this title imply?
- [2] (81) What is the connection between understanding Christ as “the Way” and understanding his work in terms of exodus and liberation?
- [3] (82) Why is it important to catch the Genesis references in the opening of the books Matthew and John? Why might Christ's incarnation be connected to God's decision to transform *this world* rather than calling us into ethereal other-worldliness?

MORE TO CONSIDER: SALVATION IS FROM THE JEWS

(83) Bell writes that, “The writers [of the New Testament] want to make it very clear that this new son of David isn't just leading a new exodus for a specific group of people; he's bringing liberation for everybody everywhere for all time.”

It's true that everyone is invited into this new exodus. But that itself was not a very stunning concept; since God formed what would become “Israel” in His covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12), the implication was always that all people would be brought into the fold of Abraham's blessing.

Jesus isn't doing something different; he's doing *that* – that Abraham thing. Jesus is not God's way of saying “I've given up on this Abraham idea”; it's precisely God saying “I'm going to use my own son to carry out the Abraham idea.” The Jewishness of Jesus is no accident or small story.

The new exodus is not about the Jews failing; it's about the Jews getting it right, because Jesus is a Jew. It's a success story if there ever was one. It is for this reason the New Testament explains that the gospel goes to the Jew first and then to the Gentile. God wanted the Jews to know about the success story, and wanted each of them to participate in carrying the Good News to the whole world.

For this same reason, the book of John explains that “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4.22). It's a story of liberation that applies to every human being who chooses to live into it; for the Jews it is even more – it's a beautiful redemption story of God saying to them, “Look, we did it!”

[4] (87) Why does Jesus admonish Peter for cutting off Malchus' ear? Why doesn't Jesus resort to violence against the oppressors of his day?

[5] (90) Bell writes, "What has been needed from the [Fall] is another Adam, not an Adam who would again give in to the temptation of the serpent but one who would crush the serpent. But the serpent-crusher's victory would have to happen in a specific way. The only way it would actually change things would be if the serpent-crusher survived death – to experience the worst a human can suffer and then come out of the other side, alive."

How has Jesus (referred to as "Second Adam" in the New Testament) brought us out of Eden's exile – the "east of Eden" way of things?

[6] Why is it important that Christ-followers no longer live as if they are "east of Eden" (in the same way that a faithful Israelite could not have stayed in Egypt and been in the Promised Land simultaneously)? What is the choice we need to make about exodus and exile?

[7] (90-91) In what ways do you relate with those people who walked with Jesus for hours and didn't recognize him or understand the message he was sharing (even though it was all straight out of the Hebrew Scriptures)? In what ways do Christians today boast of having a "personal relationship" with Jesus yet abuse and misconstrue his message (and all of Scripture) to no end? What keeps us from recognizing Jesus?

CHAPTER FOUR: GENITAL-FREE AFRICANS

CHAPTER FOUR QUESTIONS

[1] (Pg 95) What are the connections between the beginning of Acts and the original Exodus story? Why is this significant?

[2] (97) What were the first-century Jews gathering to celebrate when the Holy Spirit came to them?

[3] (99) Why does Luke's reference to wine in the Acts account of Pentecost lead us to believe that Pentecost is the forming of a marriage (for some; it's a renewal of the Sinai vows for others)?

MORE TO CONSIDER: THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN JUDAISM AND JEWISH BOUNDARY MARKERS

(103) Bell writes about *particular* Jewish groups being “stuck in the old covenant” and “spreading the wrong gospel in the wrong direction.” What Bell is demeaning is not Judaism as a whole, but Jewish ethnic boundary markers such as circumcision, and not cooperation with God, as the sign of true Israel and the entrance into God's Kingdom. To learn more about this, read James Dunn's *The New Perspective on Paul* or N.T. Wright's *The Challenge of Jesus*.

[4] (106) “Paul writes to the Corinthians that if ‘the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here,’... There is a new creation, one brought into being by the death of the old and the resurrection of the new, and everybody everywhere can be a part of it.”

What sense of urgency and present reality do you hear in Paul's words that are missing from stagnant Western Christianity?

[5] (110) Carefully consider the following quote: “The central promise to the father of their faith, Abraham, was that *God would bless his people so that they would bless the world*. It’s always about wealth, health, possessions, and influence being used to bless others. But the disciples’ interest isn’t in the ends of the earth. They’re interested in *regaining the kingdom of comfort* they once had. They long for the blessing of God for themselves. Deep in their bones is the belief that they are God’s favorites. For them, blessing is about favoritism. We are chosen and elect and favorite; there we deserve certain securities and benefits” (emphasis added).

How might the average American church relate with the disciples in their misunderstanding of what being chosen is all about?

[6] (112) What are the “economic dimensions of the new exodus”? What role did in-house charity have in the lives of the first Christians?

CHAPTER FIVE: SWOLLEN-BELLIED BLACK BABIES, SOCCER MOMS ON PROZAC, AND THE MARK OF THE BEAST

CHAPTER FIVE QUESTIONS

[1] (Pg 121) How might Jesus be speaking to us today similarly to how he spoke to those on the road to Emmaus, “to save them from perpetuating the very thing he came to save them from”?

[2] (121) Why can it be difficult to relate with a biblical narrative that is told from the “underside of power” when we live in a prosperous empire? What steps can we take to rightly hear the Scripture message in our context of wealth and might?

[3] (123) Bell acknowledges that gawking at statistics about America's wealth can bring about a lot of guilt in us, but says “Guilt is not helpful. Honestly is helpful. Awareness is helpful. Knowledge is helpful. Guilt isn't.”

When you read about our abundance and squandering of resources, what is your general reaction? Is that a healthy response?

[4] (124) Why does Moses stress to the Israelites that they need to remember their exodus story? Why is it imperative that we remember the story of their exodus as well as the second exodus led by Jesus? What happens when we forget our story?

[5] (128) What does it look like to be a person who trusts in God while living among a people who trust in chariots?

[6] (131) “Followers of Christ missing the central message of the Bible? It happened then, and it happens now. And sometimes the reason is, of course, empire.”

In what ways is the contemporary American church similar to Israel in the days of Solomon's reign? In what ways have we been offered exodus but settled for exile? In what ways might this comparison become all the more real if Americans don't heed the words of the prophets?

[7] (132-134) How are images like dragons, the mark of the beast, and the anti-Christ explained by Bell? How does teaching of the book of Revelation differ from the shock horror, made-for-TV-movie style reading of Revelation that is so popular in American churches? (Why might American church leaders be predisposed to inaccurately teach this subversive apocalyptic book – looking away from its first-century context?) To quote Bell, “Were the people in John's church reading this letter for the first time, with Roman soldiers right outside their door, thinking, ‘This is going to be really helpful for people two thousand years from now who don't want to get left behind?’”

[8] (136) Speaking of the resources of many American churches, Bell says, “we should be clear about this – it *is* blessing. It is good... This church has enough resources to hire a pastor who had the resources to get training to gather these students in the student room to teach them about the way of Jesus. Many Christians around the world would simply stand in awe of that kind of blessing.”

Bell believes that resources within the local church is not necessarily a bad thing. What do you believe is an appropriate mindset for an American church to have toward resources and abundance?

CHAPTER SIX: BLOOD ON THE DOORPOSTS OF THE UNIVERSE

CHAPTER SIX QUESTIONS

[1] (Page 143) Why is it that “Every revolution needs a spark, an icon to capture people’s attention”?

What was that image for Israel?

[2] (144) What is the significance of the first-born son in Jewish culture at the time of the exodus? How does God refer to Israel, according to Moses?

[3] (145) Why is it so crucial that Israel never forget the exodus?

[4] (146) John the Baptist referred to Jesus as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” Knowing the story of Passover and exodus, and the Old Testament prophets’ stirring vision of a new exodus, what are the implications of this title?

[5] (147) What does it mean that the firstborn of heaven became the firstborn of earth? How is Jesus placed over-against Adam, the previous firstborn of earth?

- [6] (148) Why should we understand the Eucharist (a.k.a. The Lord's Supper) in connection with its original context – the Passover meal? In making this connection, what significant things can we learn about our story (as the larger people of God, and as individuals)?
- [7] (154) What does it look like for you to participate in the “new humanity”? How have you learned from people who are different from you in many regards, but with whom you are in Eucharist community?
- [8] (160-161) How can we recover a Christianity that finds its purpose in *mitzvot* and not in mere assent to doctrine? How can we make the exodus story, “the ultimate picture of salvation,” a reality outside the walls of the church?
- [9] (165-166) What does it mean that the Eucharist is not fair?

EPILOGUE: BROKEN AND POURED

EPILOGUE QUESTIONS

[1] (Page 179) There is a section in the epilogue of four “Jesus wants to save us” statements. Take a moment to read each one and reflect on what it would take to get from where we are now to where God wants us to be. Write some of your reflections in the spaces below.

“Jesus wants to save us from making the good news about another world and not this one.”

“Jesus wants to save us from preaching a gospel that is only about individuals and not about the systems that enslave them.”

“Jesus wants to save us from shrinking the gospel down to a transaction about the removal of sin and not about every single particle of creation being reconciled to its maker.”

“Jesus wants to save us from religiously sanctioned despair, the kind that doesn't believe the world can be made better, the kind that either blatantly or subtly teaches people to be quiet and behave and wait for something big to happen ‘someday.’”