

Session 2: God's Story and Our Story (The 'Why' of Discipleship)



Hands

ENVISIONED

"Christians grow when we have a clear vision of God, ourselves, and everyday faith that has spiritual growth as an obvious and desirable consequence".

SUBMITTED

"Christians grow as we continue to choose to lay down our will for the sake of God's."

Session Aims

- To reflect on the purpose and end goal of discipleship. What is Jesus' purpose that we should seek God and live God's way?
- To explore this through the lens of the Bible's 'big story' of salvation; God's mission and purposes in creation, incarnation and redemption.
- To reflect on how our story came to intersect with God's 'big story', as an important inspiration/source of reflection for our journey of discipleship (individually and as church).
- To allow this to renew our own joy and excitement in the Gospel, as one of the foundations for enabling others in discipleship.
- To explore the practice of spiritual journey mapping as a tool for reflecting on and retelling our discipleship stories.

Note to Enablers: Participants may want to use the **Practice/Tool: Spiritual Journey Map/Path** (below) in advance of this session, as they prepare to tell the story of their own Christian journey during this session. As well as being printed on the following pages, it can also be found in a separate handout.

Key Bible Passages

- Psalm 71
- John chapter 1
- Ephesians 1-3
- 1 John 1.1-4

Discipleship Story

This session's Discipleship Story is a little unusual, because it's about rabbits. But it's also - very appropriately - a story about stories. Most lists of Britain's favourite books over the years include an unexpected bestseller about rabbits: *Watership Down*, by Richard Adams. Without giving too many plot-spoilers, it's the story of a group of rabbits and their leader, Hazel, escaping the destruction of their warren, searching for a safe new home, and fighting to protect it against a fierce neighbouring warren. I read it again recently, and one thing I noticed was how often, throughout the action, the rabbits tell each other stories.

Their favourite stories are about the legendary Prince of Rabbits, El-Ahrrairah. El-Ahrrairah is an inspirational figure. He's a trickster; a kind of furry Robin Hood, full of daring plans to steal the King's lettuces to feed his people. But he's also a saviour; in one tale quite literally sacrificing his own body to rescue his followers (sound familiar?). Sometimes the rabbits of *Watership Down* tell stories of El-Ahrrairah to celebrate a moment of success. Sometimes they tell stories to comfort each other in times of danger. Sometimes, they tell stories to pluck up courage for a difficult task ahead. At one or two critical moments, a story inspires them with an idea for a plan which changes the whole course of events. At the very end of the book, the main character, Hazel (by now a very old and venerable rabbit), finds he cannot recall whether the stories being told are about El-Ahrrairah, or about Hazel's own adventures. The legends of El-Ahrrairah have become part of him. And Hazel, in turn, is becoming part of rabbit legend.

For us as Christians, this is why we also tell the stories of Jesus, the stories of God's big plan of salvation, and the stories of our own discipleship journeys. We tell them because we believe they're true, but in so doing, we also tell them not just as facts to agree with, but for encouragement, for comfort, for inspiration, to help us face challenges, and to give us cues for our own action as disciples today. As we retell God's story, and as we allow God to become part of our story, we in turn become part of God's story too.

In some recent research on what helps people grow as disciples, two of the key factors connect to this:

- *'Christians grow when we have a clear vision of God, ourselves, and everyday faith that has spiritual growth as an obvious and desirable consequence'.*
- *'Christians grow as we continue to choose to lay down our will for the sake of God's.'*¹

Discipleship growth is helped by having a clear vision of what God is up to in the world, and how we open ourselves up to be part of it. This is why we are spending time today sharing our own discipleship stories.

¹ *Five Practices, One Experience, and the Holy Spirit: Exploring Spiritual Growth amongst 18- to 35-year olds in the UK Church* (Eido Research/CCX,2025), 13. <https://theresource.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/ccx-report-digital-pages-1.pdf>

Main Session Content- Part 1:

Why follow Jesus? That's a question all who encounter God and the Christian story have had to ask at some point or other. It's an important question for all disciples of Jesus to revisit regularly. And when we're supporting and enabling others in their discipleship, it's really important for us to keep the big picture in view as well. Otherwise, we can get overly focused on programmes, courses or lists of things to do, and miss the big picture of what God is up to in the world.

In this session we're going to explore TWO 'whys' of discipleship:

- First of all there is **God's 'why'**.... Why does **God** call us into the life of the Kingdom? Where does Jesus's call to discipleship fit into the big picture of what God is up to with the world?
- Second, there is also **our 'why'**... Why have **we** chosen to respond to God and set out on this lifelong journey of following Jesus? What attracted us to God? What excites and fuels us for this adventure?

God's 'WHY': the 'Big Story' of the Bible

First of all, then, how does Jesus' call to discipleship fit within the big biblical story of what God is doing in creation? This is a story in five (very short) chapters...²

Chapter 1: Creation. God is love. God didn't need to create the universe out of boredom, or for an ego trip. Instead, creation is an expression of God's love. When God created, it was GOOD. Human beings are created VERY GOOD; Genesis says we are made in God's image. Our fundamental purpose here on earth is to love and enjoy God, and to look after creation - including fellow human beings - as God commanded.

Chapter 2: Fall. Despite this, humanity wasn't content with everything God had made, or with merely being 'creatures' - we wanted to become like God. We gave in to temptation, and fell. Sin and separation - from God and from each other - became part of life. We remain God's image-bearers, but this image is tarnished by sin. Our God-given desires are often distorted and become destructive. We see the effects of this all around us - in relationships between each other, between nations, with the environment... and with God.

Chapter 3: Covenant. Despite all this, God loved the world too much to leave it this way. We needed saving, and the first part of God's saving plan was to call a particular people: the people of Israel. God made 'Covenants' (promises or agreements) with his people, that they would be God's people, God would lead them in a life-giving way of holiness. There were ups and downs: times of faithfulness and rebellion, exile and return. But God never gave up on them.

Chapter 4: Jesus. Now came the critical stage of the plan, the pivotal point in history. God entered creation in Jesus the promised Messiah, coming to save us not through military or political power, but as a vulnerable human being. Jesus announced the Kingdom of God, a

² Many Christian writers from different traditions have found it helpful to tell the big story of the Bible in in five 'chapters' - including Hans Urs von Balthasar, Tom Wright and Sam Wells.

Kingdom of love and justice that turns many of the world's priorities upside down. This Kingdom was - and is - near, for those who turned from sin, trusted in God, received Jesus as Lord and sought to live lives of obedience to him. In his death and resurrection, Jesus took the sins of the world upon himself, healing the rift between humanity and God, offering grace and eternal life.

Chapter 5: Though the power of sin was broken, there is a final chapter to the story. As Jesus prepared to return to the Father, he commissioned his followers to carry forward this invitation into God's repentance and forgiveness, into this Kingdom life of love, reconciliation and new birth. We are called into a new family, a new community, the Body of Christ. Together, we are called to 'bear much fruit' (John 15.8) and to do the 'good works' which God has planned (Ephesians 2.10). But we are not left alone: God has sent his Holy Spirit to be our helper, teacher and transformer.

Together we live out that Kingdom life and mission as the Body of Christ with Jesus as our Head. We receive God's love, and let it overflow into the transformation of ourselves, society and creation. We don't always get it right, and sometimes we get it terribly wrong. But we keep on returning to God, knowing our need for his forgiveness, grace and renewal, 'running the race' as God's pilgrim people, ambassadors and servants. We join in with God's work, God's mission of love and reconciliation until God finally brings all creation together in a new heaven and a new earth.

Somewhere in the middle of chapter 5 – after the Holy Spirit's coming and the birth of the Church, and before the new heaven and new earth – is where **we** find ourselves today. If we are followers of Jesus, we are participants together in that big cosmic story, writing our individual lives and our church's story under God's guidance. We take cues for our life today from the first four chapters and from the very end of that big salvation story. So we follow Jesus's example and teaching, taking part in Jesus' commission to 'go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you' (Matt. 28.19).

Note to Enablers: It may be helpful to pause here and discuss some of the **Discipleship Questions 1** below, before moving onto the **Main Session Content - part 2**.

Discipleship Questions (1)

God's 'Big Story'

- If someone asked you: 'why follow Jesus?', how would you reply? (Think not only about what you'd want to say, but how someone else might hear it).
- How helpful is it to think of the big story of the Bible in five 'chapters'?
- What is the most striking part of the story to you?
- Is there anything important which this version has left out?
- How does this 'big story' provide a map or cues for your own discipleship? What does it suggest we should be and do as Christians today?

- The 'big story in five chapters' is one way of telling the big biblical story. What other ways can you think of? (Think as creatively as you like!)
- How far do you think the 'big story' of Christian faith is known - and owned - by your church/group?
- What might help people in your church/group to go deeper into this 'big story' together?

Main Session Content - Part 2:

Our 'WHY': When God's Story Meets Ours

In the first part of this session we've explored God's 'why'. But each of us also has our own personal 'whys' - our own unique reasons for saying 'yes' to God, for wanting to be drawn into God's overall plan for creation. At different points in our lives, our story has intersected with God's big story. God's story has become part of our story. And as we follow Jesus, our story becomes more and more part of God's story.

Not only has this changed our own lives. What gets us most excited about following Jesus can also be a powerful witness to others, perhaps helping them to get excited about Jesus too. This is why, in this session, we will spend some time sharing our discipleship stories with each other.

Both God's 'why' and our 'why' come together in the famous passage at the beginning of John's Gospel: 'in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God'. It's a hugely rich description of what God was up to when entering into the world in Jesus.

It also comes through really strongly in the opening of John's first letter. This is far from dry and theoretical, however. John's excitement is clear:

¹That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ²The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. ³We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. ⁴We write this to make our joy complete (1 John 1.1-4).

John's effectively saying: 'Wow - we actually got to *meet* the Word in the flesh, and watch him in action!'

God's 'why' and our 'why' also come together in many of the stories of Jesus calling his first disciples. In John 1, Jesus calls Philip with the words 'Follow me!' Philip immediately rushes to tell Nathanael that he has met the one Moses wrote about in the Law. At first, Nathanael is dubious: 'can anything good come from Nazareth?' But on meeting Jesus, he learns that Jesus has already seen him and sussed him out whilst Nathanael was sitting under a fig tree: 'here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit'. This leads Nathanael to declare, with amazement, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel' (John 1.43-51). God's story has broken in on Nathanael's story. He is excited about Jesus and it changes his life.

What excites us about the Gospel?

For each of us, our answer to the question 'WHY follow Jesus?' will be slightly different. For some people it will be a profound spiritual experience. For some, it's because we're convinced by the evidence for Jesus' death and resurrection. For others it's because we have found a community of love in God's church that we don't find anywhere else. For others it will be because when we cried out in pain or distress, God brought comfort, healing or freedom from fear. For others it will be a slow, developing conviction that Christianity just makes sense.

Not all of us first find our way into Christian faith for super-spiritual reasons. Perhaps you've met people who bargained with God that they'd go to church if he helped them pass that maths test, but then found faith. Or people who first came to church because they had a crush on that cute boy or girl from church youth group, and discovered Jesus into the bargain. What excites us about following Jesus will probably also change and develop over our lifetimes.

But whatever your reasons, there's so much value in reflecting with thankfulness on how our God's story has become part of ours, and vice versa. It's good to spend time rediscovering our excitement for the Gospel and how it is changing our lives.

Joy in Discipleship

This is important because joy is often so under-rated in the Christian life, and yet it's arguably a key end-goal of Christian discipleship. Jesus said to his disciples: 'I have said these things to you *so that* my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete' (John 15.11 - my italics). Joy in God is the goal; knowledge is an enabler of it. This is an important lesson for Discipleship Enablers: our groups and courses aren't primarily about making us more knowledgeable (though that can be valuable), but about finding more joy in God. A widely-used 17th Century statement of faith from the Reformed Christian tradition says: 'the chief end of man [humanity] is to worship God and enjoy him forever'.³ For many Christian writers through history, joy is also one of the clearest marks of someone living an authentic Christian life.⁴ The American poet and children's author Phyllis McGinley wrote: 'I have read that during the process of canonisation, the Catholic Church demands proof of joy in the candidate... I like the suggestion that dourness is not a sacred attribute'.⁵

That doesn't, of course, mean that Christians need to be happy all the time. Sometimes the life of discipleship is one of challenge, struggle against evil, or gritting your teeth just to keep on going. It's not about wearing a mask and pretending everything is OK. True joy isn't something we should try to force or manufacture. And we definitely don't treat ourselves or others as second-class Christians if we're not feeling joyful right now. Mental health struggles, life problems and traumatic circumstances should be taken seriously - not brushed over. Ignoring or downplaying them can do enormous damage. Working through the hard stuff takes time.

³ *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* (1646) <https://learn.ligonier.org/articles/westminster-shorter-catechism>

⁴ Mike Harrison, 'Joyful Disciples: A Study of a Missing Link in Considering Spiritual Disciplines and Corporate Missional Habits', *Ecclesial Futures* 3.1 (2022), 79-94.

⁵ Quoted in Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (IVP, 2000 edn), 114.

That said, reflecting on God's faithfulness in the past can be a source of strength for us today. A habit of praise and thankfulness won't inoculate us against life's problems, but it can help us be more attentive to God's love and presence in the middle of dark times.

- How can we remember the ways in which Jesus is genuinely 'good news' for us?
- How can we cultivate thankfulness even in the middle of challenging situations?

There's also another reason for reflecting on what brings us joy and hope as Christians. When our thankfulness and excitement overflows for others to see, that can also encourage others on their own journeys of discipleship. Christian tradition has often seen joy (alongside humility and love) as one of the most important qualities any catechist or disciple-maker should possess.⁶ Equally, if we struggle to express how the Gospel is 'good news' for us, we're unlikely to excite others as well. This is why, in this session, we're spending time sharing our own discipleship stories with each other.

Discipleship Questions (2)

Your Personal Journey

- What first attracted you to Jesus/the Christian story?
- What aspects of God and Christian faith make you excited to be a Christian today?
- Who are the Christians (past and present) who have been influential on your own life? Were joy or gratitude obvious in their lives? In what ways?
- Has your understanding of being a Christian changed over the course of your life? How?
- Where do you currently find joy in faith? What makes you come alive as a Christian?
- How could you build more opportunities to enjoy God, or be thankful, into your pattern of everyday life?

Your Church/Group

- How far is your local church or small group known for its joy? [NB: deep-down joy, not a pretend smile or manufactured happiness]
- How are joy, thankfulness and excitement at the Gospel part of your own church's or small group's life?
- Are there spaces in your life (and your church's/group's life) where you can share stories about the signs of God at work?
- How might joy and celebration become more a part of your church's/group's life together (without trying to enforce or manufacture it!)?

⁶ Alex Fogleman, *Making Disciples: Catechesis in History, Theology and Practice* (Eerdmans, 2025), 161-63.

Practice or Tool to Try:

Sharing your Discipleship Story

1. **Sharing your Story.** In this session you are invited to share your own personal story including your walk with God. Hearing stories of faith can offer powerful encouragement and learning. Becoming used to sharing your own story of faith honestly and vulnerably can also encourage others. You will have about 15-20 minutes to share your story (depending on group size). Stories can include...
 - Moments when you have surrendered to God.
 - Times when you have paid attention to God and responded.
 - How God has used important life events to grow you.

If you wish, you can use the **Spiritual Journey Map practice** (below) to help you develop your discipleship story. You don't need to share any details you don't want to share.

2. **Watch the Session 2 video:** God's Story and Ours (The 'Why' of Discipleship) and the **Session 3 video:** Who is God and how does God see us? (The 'Who' of Discipleship).

Spiritual Journey Map/Path

To help you reflect on and share your story, you are invited to create a map of your own journey of Christian discipleship so far. You can draw it on a blank sheet of paper or create a 3D model if you're feeling particularly creative! No artistic skill is required, but equally, you can make your maps as beautiful as you like. This practice offers one way of beginning to reflect on how our own personal stories fit within God's big story.

Although seeing life with God as a journey isn't the only way to describe Christian discipleship, it can be a helpful way – there are many spiritual and literal journeys in the Bible. In fact, one name for the early Christians was 'followers of the Way' (e.g., Acts 9.2, 22.4).

Reflecting on the journey of discipleship and our own Christian journeys can also be an important source of:

- **Gratitude** - for what God has done for us in our lives so far
- **Honest reflection** - on regrets, painful experience or learning from the past
- **Encouragement** in the present and **hope** for the future. God is always 'doing a new thing'

Each of these are important in growth in discipleship. It may also help with thinking about how to share your story with other group members.

Step by Step Guide:

1. Start with a short time of prayer or silence to gather your thoughts. You might like to read Psalm 71 in preparation - the writer is remembering God's faithfulness throughout their life.

2. Working on your own, create a map or timeline representing your own personal life journey and how God and being a Christian is woven into your story. Think about:

- How will you illustrate the different ups and downs of life in your map/timeline?
- What are the key turning points on the journey so far?
- What has the path been like at different times? Rough or smooth? Clear or sometimes hard to see?
- Who else have you met on the journey? Who else are you travelling with?
- Where is God on this map? Are there particular points at which you have particularly encountered God or felt God's guidance?
- Who are you following? Is anyone following you?
- What has sustained you on the journey? You could add a rucksack with these things in.

3. Once you have finished your first draft, share it with another trusted person or group. It may be that as you tell your story and others ask questions, new insights or patterns will emerge. You could add these to your map or timeline - perhaps using a different colour?

This map/timeline may provide you with some of the raw material for sharing your discipleship story with the rest of the group in the Retreat Day.

Reflecting on your life journey so far can arouse a range of emotions from happiness and thankfulness to sadness, regret or worse. If this reflective activity has stirred up strong or traumatic memories for you, talk it over with a friend, minister or spiritual director, and seek professional help if need be. Your well-being matters.

This activity is inspired by Sally Welch, *Mapping your Spiritual Journey* (Canterbury Press, 2024).

Enabling Tips

Not everyone is immediately comfortable sharing their stories with others. Experts in the fields of oral history and reminiscence for elderly people offer various tips for helping people share their stories with confidence:

- Depending on your church context, people might be very comfortable and familiar with telling their own discipleship story - or it may be completely new and scary. It can be helpful to find this out in advance.
- An atmosphere of **safety and trust** is vital. Choose a place or group situation where people feel at ease.
- Assure participants that whatever they say will be treated with **respect and discretion** - don't share people's personal stories without their permission (key exception: safeguarding concerns).
- If people might struggle to know where to start some sort of **stimulus** might help - e.g., an object, photo or music can be a helpful aid to memory (we've suggested the Spiritual

Journey Map Practice as another helpful tool). It can be easier for people to talk about something else than talk about themselves.

- Give people **time and space** to begin - don't hurry or interrupt them if they struggle to get started. Our job is to **'hear others into speech'** (Nellie Morton).
- You don't need to fill silences.
- Make sure your face and body **look attentive!** Nodding occasionally can help.
- There really is **no single 'right way'** to share your story, even though sometimes Christian testimonies can follow a certain formula.
- If someone finds sharing their story out loud really is too daunting, **there are other ways:** one adult baptism candidate re-told their spiritual journey through a powerpoint presentation of their life in Lego!
- Sometimes people can express doubts that they have anything interesting to say. But in 300+ oral history interviews I have never met anyone whose life story wasn't interesting! **Reassure them that what they are saying is valuable and interesting.**
- **Don't correct** people or press them to share more than they want to - you are not grilling them, but allowing them to speak.
- Sometimes you can **invite people to expand on aspects of their stories** - e.g., 'How did it feel when...?' 'Please could you tell me more about...', etc. This also shows you're listening.
- Be aware of the **power dynamics** in the conversation - particularly with individuals or groups whose voices often aren't heard so clearly.
- In listening to others' stories, we are there to encourage other people and look for God's actions in their lives - not to judge or criticise. It may be important to establish and agree some ground rules with your group. See **Session 7 (Creating a Discipleship Environment)** for more on this.
- **Thank** people at the end for sharing.

Further Resources

Reading on the 'Big Story' of Christian faith:

- Guy Donegan-Cross, *Discipleship: Walk this Way* (BRF, 2024), chapter 12: 'The Aim of a Disciple: Joining in with God's Work'
- John Stott, *Basic Christianity* (2008 edn)
- Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (1998)
- Rowan Williams, *Discovering Christianity: A Guide for the Curious* (2025)

Practical Guide to Spiritual Journey Mapping:

- Sally Welch, *Mapping your Spiritual Journey: A Creative Reflection Method* (Canterbury Press, 2024)

Courses:

- **The Bible Course** – 8 week small group course exploring the 'big story' of the Bible (<https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/explore-the-bible/the-bible-course>)
- **Being With - Exploring Life and Faith Together** (Sam Wells) (<https://being-with.org/>)

Videos:

- **The Bible Project** - The Story of the Bible: What it's about from Beginning to End (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7_CGP-12AE0&t=5s)
- **The Bible Project** - The Gospel (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrzq_X1NNaA)
- **The Bible Project** – The Gospel of the Kingdom (<https://bibleproject.com/videos/gospel-kingdom/>)

Resources:

- If you are exploring the 'big story' of the Bible with children and young people, there are a couple of large timelines that might help (others are also available).
 - <https://request.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Printable-Bible-Quest-Timeline-1.pdf> (printable Bible timeline for primary school ages, created by Youth for Christ's REQuest project)
 - REToday's Understanding Christianity project created this 'Big Freize' illustrating the big Christian story from creation to new creation, for use with secondary schools: <https://understandingchristianity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/The-Big-Frieze-WEB.pdf> (This is the handbook to the freize; the artwork itself costs £27.50 from the REToday website)

Going Deeper (Extension Activities)

- This session and **Session 3: Becoming 'Whole-Life' and 'Through-Life' Disciples** both touch on our own personal Christian journeys. In 2013-14 Ben Baker and Ian Jones (St Peter's Saltley Trust) created a four-session course called **Through-Life Discipleship**, week 1 of which featured a similar 'timeline' activity to the discipleship journey map offered here. You can download the whole course free here: <https://throughlifediscipleship.weebly.com/resources.html>
- You could also try creating a timeline for your own church or group, and reflect on where you have seen signs of God's activity within that history. The following resources might help you:
 - **Building on History** was a collaborative project between the Diocese of London and the Open University, with tools and guides to help churches explore their own history to inform contemporary mission and ministry. The material is available free at: <https://university.open.ac.uk/arts/research/religion-in-london/building-on-history-project>
 - **The Institute for Collective Growth and Trauma**, a US-based project that ran in the 2010s, produced a simple fact sheet for researching congregational history: <http://www.ictg.org/uploads/1/2/9/5/12954435/ictg-guidelines-for-writing-a-congregational-history-2020.pdf>
 - **Derby Diocese** has also produced a simple history audit fact sheet: <https://derby.anglican.org/en/our-mission/mission-action-plans-map/stage-2-reflect/map-stagetwo-help.html>

(However, if trying this, keep discipleship the main focus, and be aware that digging back into a congregation's history can provoke a range of reactions!)