

Chapter 1: Our Stories Matter

In this chapter, we consider the pursuit of wholeness in the context of discipleship. We see how our stories connect the past and the present and understand the approach to story work the group will take together.

God's intention for us: Wholeness in Spirit, Soul, and Body

In the final words of his first letter to the Church in Thessalonica, the Apostle Paul expresses his deep desire for his friends to be made whole: “May God himself, the God who makes everything holy and whole, make you holy and whole, put you together—spirit, soul, and body.”¹

Wholeness was and is God's intention for us and includes all aspects of who we are:

- **Our spirit** is the life of the resurrected Christ in us. It is the part that most reflects what it means to be made in the image of God, or *Imago Dei* (Gen 1:27). It is our deepest and truest identity as beloved children and it is the place where God dwells in us to heal, transform, and empower us for the life we are meant to live.
- **Our soul** is what we might call our personality; what makes us uniquely who we are and finds expression in our mind, will, emotions, and behavior. Our soul has been significantly shaped by what we have experienced in life, by our story.
- **Our body** is the physical expression of all of this in the world. In our body, our spirit and soul manifest—for better or for worse. Our bodies hold the stories that have shaped our souls and they are the means by which we can live out what our spirit is calling us toward: to love and serve as the presence of Jesus in the world.²

1 Peterson, E. H. (2003). In *Bible, Message Translation*.

2 Abraham was blessed by God so that he could be a blessing to others (Gen 18:18).

In psychological terms we might call this wholeness of spirit, soul, and body **integration**. In theological terms we may call it **shalom**. It is what we are most intended for and ultimately what all of us long for in life. Pursuing this wholeness is how we seek to become more like Christ:

- We seek to embrace our identity in Christ through spiritual practices, such as scripture reading, serving others, and prayer (Spirit).
- We seek to understand how our souls have been shaped by our life's story and pursue healing for past wounds and places of brokenness in our lives (Soul).
- We seek to steward our physical bodies well by paying loving attention to them and treating them with care (Body).

All three are part of discipleship.

In this group, we will focus on the part of discipleship that is concerned with the effects of our stories on the shaping of our souls. This doesn't mean that we won't be concerned with the other parts of discipleship. On the contrary—our identity in Christ in all its complexity and the manifestation of all of who we are in our physical bodies will be 100% part of this process.

God invites us to make meaning of our stories, find redemption for them, and come to see how He has always been at work in and through them for the glory of His Kingdom. We will discover how our life experiences have both uniquely equipped us for the calling God has for us, as well as kept us from becoming who we are truly meant to be. This process is not navel-gazing or self-serving. Instead, the goal is to be able to love God, others, and ourselves with more intention, more courage, and more freedom.

PROMPTS FOR REFLECTION AND JOURNALING

- There are a variety of ways people feel about the importance, or unimportance, of spending time and energy on one's own mental, emotional, and/or physical health. What have you been taught regarding this? What's your own point of view?
- Growing up, did you ever talk about your physical body in church or with your church community? Whether you talked about it or not, what were you implicitly taught?
- How does your body respond to the previous question? If you have experienced body-shaming, abuse, and/or racism in a church context, the memories will likely be triggering. What does your body need right now? We have provided some grounding exercises for you on page 89.



THE CHALLENGES OF FACING DIFFICULT STORIES

We all have stories of beauty and goodness and we all have stories of pain and heartache. While both have much to teach us about ourselves, it is in our painful stories that we are most profoundly shaped. It is in the particularity of distinct moments of shame, betrayal, and/or powerlessness that our hearts have received lasting imprints.

This is the reason we focus on individual stories of pain that still hold an emotional charge. We believe that much of the brokenness manifesting in our lives today that seems resistant to change and transformation can be traced back to these particular moments. Engaging these stories, not from a 30,000-foot perspective but on the ground level (with particularity), opens the door to deep, heart-level healing.

As we set out to do this work together, we need to expect some resistance and defensiveness in ourselves and others, especially when it comes to facing stories that have deeply wounded us.

Dealing with difficult emotions

There is a reason we tend to compartmentalize, ignore, and/or explain away the most painful stories of our life. Engaging with these memories brings up emotions that are difficult to endure and that we work hard to avoid in our day-to-day life, such as shame, a sense of betrayal, the experience of powerlessness, emotions connected with sexual arousal, loneliness, fear of abandonment, etc. Being willing to experience these feelings is one of the most important parts of the work set before us.

Wrestling with the goodness of God

Engaging with places of suffering in our stories can feel disorienting and disruptive to some of the basic beliefs of our faith: that God loves us, is always with us, and has good intentions for us. If we have been taught a superficial understanding of Romans 8:28—“all things work together for good for those who love God”—we may have never learned that there is room for our grief, anger, and doubt. God is not afraid of our scrutiny or our wrestling but is waiting to meet us in the places of our story where we would least expect to encounter Him.

Spiritualization of suffering

For some of us who have grown up in the Christian faith, we may have encountered a distorted understanding of suffering—one in which we are to quietly and humbly accept harm that comes to us as a way of surrendering to, and suffering for, Christ. Especially for non-majority communities and people of color, this may be presented as an expectation for Christian living and may go as far as being asked to accept white supremacy or patriarchal structures by reframing them as “suffering for Christ”. This understanding and messaging is not only unbiblical, but also stands in the way of our calling to actively pursue justice, wholeness, and healing for all.

Facing the demand to forgive

Another potential obstacle on the healing journey is an internalized demand to “forgive and

forget” without ever considering the implications of the harm done. We may have been taught that digging up the past is counter to a willingness to forgive; this is not true. On the contrary, the more fully we understand what it is we are forgiving, the more our forgiveness invites true repentance and healing.

For these reasons and many others, we may have been dismissive and minimized the harm we have suffered in life. Even though as Christians we believe that the effects of sin are devastating, we may have had a hard time admitting that this is true of our own lives as well.

FIGURING OUT WHERE TO START

As you think about your own story, it might be helpful to explore places in your present life where you feel stuck. Consider where you sense a need for redemption or where you experience what feels like a resistance to change.

As you read through the examples below, take note of the statements (or portions of them) that feel like they apply to you and invite the Holy Spirit to help you discover the origins of the struggles and bring healing. Specifically, ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in selecting and writing about a specific childhood memory that may be related to this.

- I face a lot of relational tension or challenges in my life, with family and friends, in my marriage, and/or at work
- I feel that God is far away. I worry that He is angry with me and/or doesn't care about me. I find it hard to trust Him
- I struggle with emotions that seem out of proportion and/or out of control
- I have a lot of anger. Sometimes I don't recognize myself when I get angry
- I am avoidant of conflict and compromise in order to prevent people getting angry with me
- I feel distant from others and struggle with isolation and/or loneliness
- I struggle with unwanted sexual behaviors (lack of intimacy or sexual desire, infidelity, addiction to pornography, etc.)
- I experience confusion around my gender identity or sexual orientation
- I struggle with persistent worry and overthink worst-case scenarios
- I suffer from anxiety and/or panic attacks
- I try to avoid risks and don't feel like I have the courage to pursue what I desire for my life
- I struggle with lack of motivation and hopelessness. I have trouble following through with my tasks and responsibilities

- I have suicidal tendencies (these might manifest as drinking and driving, combining prescription or over-the-counter drugs and alcohol, and/or other behavior that might endanger my life)
- I feel overly responsible and that everything's my fault. I am always the problem
- I have obsessive-compulsive behaviors such as counting things, routines that can not be broken, or performing rituals
- I have trouble sleeping due to insomnia, nightmares, night terrors, or other sleeping disturbances
- I struggle with perfectionism and/or the need to always be in control
- I struggle with disordered eating
- I have a hard time accepting my physical appearance and/or I am preoccupied in thinking about diet and exercise
- I am dealing with unexplained physical health issues
- Other _____

ENGAGING THE PAST, FACING THE PRESENT, REDEEMING THE FUTURE - ONE STORY AT A TIME

"The past is the place we develop our deepest convictions about ourselves, life and God. One cannot enter another's past merely by hearing the conclusions and convictions that resulted from it, but by being invited into the story itself..."

When one is permitted into this terrain, the guest stands on holy ground"

Dan Allender³

As part of our process, we will each write a childhood narrative about something that occurred between the ages of four and eighteen. In group, we will read our stories aloud to each other and reflect on them together. (Please refer to "How to write your story" on page 77 for more instructions on your writing).

As we listen to stories, our most important goal and deep desire is to be truly present with each other in our stories. This means not being concerned with determining what's right or wrong nor focusing on agreeing with each other's biblical or theological understandings. Rather, listening generatively and attuned to the Holy Spirit.

This particular approach to story work is based on the following underlying premises:

- We think we know our own stories but too often our own defense mechanisms keep us from seeing the full picture. Of course, we each bring biases, ways of seeing the

³ Allender, D. B. (1999). In *The healing path: a study guide based on the book* (pp. 83–84). essay, WaterBrook Press.

world, that are intrinsically tied to our particular geographical and ethnic location. We need others to help us see what has been true of our lives while also remaining open to new memories and the movement of the Holy Spirit. While often surprising, it is very healing to hear someone else's compassionate response to painful aspects of our story that we would not have considered a big deal.

- We cannot leave the past behind but tend to repeat what is familiar. This is why we continue using coping strategies developed as children in our adult lives. This is how some of our most painful stories continue to be re-enacted in the present, especially in our relationships. Inevitably, some of this re-enactment will happen in the group as well. The stories we read to each other will provide some context for this and help us make connections between the present and the past.
- Most of our formative stories involve some kind of shame that is impossible to overcome alone. The closer we get to shame, the more we will feel the need to defend, hide, and push others away. While it takes immense courage and wisdom to move towards someone in shame instead of away from them, if group members choose to lean in with sensitivity and wisdom, shame can be exposed and relieved.
- Hearing the stories of others will shed light on our own stories. As we listen to others, watch their facial expressions, and witness the group's kind holding of difficult things, our own hearts will be stirred and we will better know ourselves through what moves us.

You may wonder how so much of who you are can be engaged through the lens of one single story, describing one moment or one event of your life that may have lasted only minutes and may have happened years ago. Or, you might wonder why we are asking you to write about your childhood when you have more recent stories you would rather address.

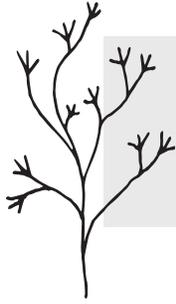
Good questions! Of course there is much more to know about you than could be told with one story. You bear countless stories, possibly more important ones than the one you choose to tell.

However, most every childhood story contains something of the main themes and patterns of our overall life. We may think of it like a DNA sample that contains information about the entire body in one tiny cell. Often, our more recent stories have their origins further back and might be interpreted more truthfully through the meaning we have made of our earliest stories.

PROMPTS FOR REFLECTION AND JOURNALING

- Here are some questions to ask as you begin reflection on your personal story:
 - Who has hurt, disappointed, abandoned, and/or betrayed you? This may include individuals or groups of people, systems, and institutions.
 - How old were you when this happened? How long did it continue to take place?
 - How did you respond, protect yourself, and/or survive?
 - Did you talk to anyone? What was their response?





- You might have a few ideas of what to write about. As you imagine what it will be like to tell this story, what fears or concerns come up for you? How does your body feel as you imagine telling this story?

GROUP EXPECTATIONS AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Confidentiality Covenant

In order to create and maintain a safe and nurturing space that allows the group to quickly develop trust and be vulnerable with each other, all participants commit to the strictest confidentiality regarding anything shared in the group.⁴ Please read through and sign your name as you enter into this confidentiality covenant with your group members:

I _____ (first and last name) promise to not share anything I hear in group, at any time, for any reason with anyone, including my significant other, friends and family, therapist, pastor, and/or group members who might have missed that session.

_____ (Signature & Date)

GROUP GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- **Always share to the level you feel comfortable**
This means... no question has to be answered and you don't have to disclose anything you don't want to. There is space to be who you want to be!
- **Make space for one another in the conversation**
This means... sharing speaking time and refraining from offering advice or inserting your own experience during another person's turn. Try to stay with their story as much as possible.
- **Honor one another through curiosity and delight**
This means... being curious and listening with open hearts and minds. No one is here coincidentally and there is always something to learn from someone else. This is how we can experience Jesus in and through one another.

Express delight with one another! As we hear one another's story, there will be opportunities to not only see the harm they have suffered but also their resiliency and the beauty of who they have become.

⁴ There are certain situations in which our group leaders may be required to report something shared in a group. We have an ethical responsibility to disclose reports of recent abuse of a child or the elderly to the authorities. Other legal responsibilities might also require that confidential information is revealed.

- **Help the group and yourself with time limits**

We have limited time and want each person to share. It may feel awkward when we have to shift from one person to the next. Expect this not to feel good and be kind to yourself in these transitions.

WEEK 1 DEVOTIONAL: HAGAR'S STORY

Read the story below slowly, paying attention to your body's response to it. What do you feel as you read? Where can you feel yourself drawing close to or pulling away from the characters in the story? Do you have a sense why? Notice your reaction; no need to explain or analyze.

It is worth noting that this is one of the many stories in scripture that we will each engage very differently, depending on our particular geographical, ethnic, and socio-economic context and location. There is no right or wrong way to engage this story, and there is space for a diversity of perspectives and interpretations. No matter where you find yourself, we're confident God will be alongside you in the conversation.

Genesis 16

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; so she said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan for ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.

When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the Lord judge between you and me."

"Your slave is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.

The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?" "I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered. Then the angel of the Lord told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her." The angel added, "I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count." The angel of the Lord also said to her: "You are now pregnant and you will give birth to a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard of your misery. He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers."

She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me." That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still

there, between Kadesh and Bered. So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.



PROMPTS FOR REFLECTION AND JOURNALING

- The Bible tells this story about this mother and father of our faith with unflinching honesty regarding their abusive treatment of Hagar. How might this provide courage and freedom for you as you get ready to tell your story?
- Consider God's questions to Hagar: "Where have you come from and where are you going?" If God would ask you these same questions today, what would your answer be?
- Hagar gives God the name "You are the one who sees me." If you were to give God a name today, based on your experiences in life, what would it be? Do you feel comfortable calling God this name?

Hagar was desperate before the angel of the Lord met her in the desert, but the encounter gave her new hope, courage, and direction to return to her place of suffering. May you be able to trust that God sees you as well and will be with you as you choose to return to some of the places of suffering in your story.

Jesus, you are the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

You hold all things together and are interceding for us this very minute, seated at the right hand of the Father. The Spirit who testifies to Your true identity—the one You've also given us—is constantly at work on our behalf, so we come to You with confidence that we are loved. We lay our burdens down at Your feet and we ask that You would safeguard our vulnerability, desires, and hopes. Help us to grow our imagination for all that is possible.

Lead, guide, and inspire us so that we may encounter You in and through our stories, in Your death and Your resurrection, in the broken and the beautiful.

We love you Jesus. Amen.

