

The World's Most Dangerous Bible Study STUDY GUIDE

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This form of Bible study can be quite effective for making connections between faith and everyday life. You should not expect that participants will remember exactly the Bible passage they studied the next time they hear the song. What they will likely remember when they hear the song in the future is that faith engaged meaningfully, and fruitfully, with their music – and their lives.

Your experience will be greatly enhanced if you follow the following simple guidelines for group study:

(a) Begin with prayer, asking God to speak to the hearts and minds of each participant in a special way. Don't use a pre-printed prayer, even if you are not used to leading spoken prayer. Speak from the heart. Youth appreciate this more than you may realize.

(b) Remember that the purpose of the "World's Most Dangerous Bible Study" is neither to show the youth how terrible their music is in comparison with our wonderful Bible, nor to show that "it all says the same thing anyway (So what's the difference?)." Rather, it is to create an honest conversation between the scriptures and the music – between faith and everyday life.

(c) Be quicker to appreciate than denigrate. Music is important to youth, and many songs speak with astonishing clarity on central life issues. Youth will not normally take criticism of their music seriously unless you first demonstrate an honest appreciation of it. If you can find nothing to appreciate, don't lead the Bible study.

(d) Despite (c) above, youth can be as prejudiced about certain forms of popular music as adults (frequently more so). Not every youth will like every song you offer. Be a diplomat. Don't let the critics dominate the conversation. Remind them that the principle subject is not the form of music, but what is being said in it. Offer to play other forms of music in future sessions.

(e) Have fun! You don't have to be a biblical scholar to lead this study, nor do you have to have "all the answers." You'll likely be surprised at how insightful participants can be. You will learn as much as you teach.

THE SONG: “Arms Wide Open,” from the CD Human Clay, by Creed © 1999 Wind-up Entertainment. Written by Mark Tremonti and Scott Stapp.

This song offers us highly personal reflections from a father-to-be, anticipating the birth of his first child. The song, lyrics, music video, and group bio are available at Creed’s website at www.creed.com.

Format Notes:

(a) Play the song for the group. Don’t just rely on printed lyrics. Having lyrics available is important, however. They should be printed out in advance.

(b) After the song is finished, lead participants in a discussion using the questions below as a guide. Feel free to add or modify them. Write responses on a Dry-Erase board or paper. Leave enough room to do the same for the scripture without erasing the song notes.

Questions to consider:

(1) What feelings does the singer express about the child about to arrive?

Encourage participants to locate specific places in the song that express his feelings.

(1) What do you think standing with “arms wide open” means to the singer? to you?

Again, encourage participants to locate specific places in the song that express the author’s point-of-view. During the course of the discussion, you may want to invite participants to raise their arms for a moment, opening them wide. Note that when you are in this stance, your posture suggests you are simultaneously welcoming all that life has to throw at you – both positive and negative – and giving thanks.

(2) The singer hopes his child will understand that he can “take this life, and hold it by the hand, and he can greet the world with arms wide open.” Is this a trait that comes naturally to the singer? What prevents us from welcoming all that life has to throw at us with “arms wide open”?

The singer voices his hope that his child is “not like me,” in that he will learn to stand toward life with “arms wide open.” You may want to address the personal hesitations among the participants to standing with “arms wide open.” What areas of their lives do find it hard to welcome or give thanks for?

(3) Given that standing with “arms wide open” doesn’t come naturally to any of us, how would you begin to teach this quality to a child?

A related question could be, "Is this a quality worth teaching a child?"

THE SCRIPTURE: Romans 8:28, 35-39

Although the apostle Paul is known as Christianity's greatest evangelist, he was originally a persecutor of Christians until being converted (See Luke's account of Paul's conversion in Acts 9). His subsequent ministry would make even a person with a "No Fear" bumper sticker, T-shirt, and *tattoo* tremble. In a letter he wrote to the church in Corinth (2 Corinthians 11), Paul lets on that he has endured numerous imprisonments, floggings, beatings with rods, shipwrecks, periods of homelessness, and a stoning – all while spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ. Considering all he had been through, it numbs the mind to think that Paul could write the following lines – especially the first one:

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose ... Can anything separate us from the love of God in Christ? Can trouble, suffering, and hard times, or hunger and nakedness, or danger and death? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in everything we have won more than a victory because of Christ who loves us. I am convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love – not life or death, not angels or spirits, not the present or the future, and not powers above or powers below. Nothing in all creation can separate us from God's love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord.
(NRSV)

Format Notes:

- (a) Avoid the temptation to discuss the scripture and song together. Each should be first considered independently, on its own merits, before looking for connections.
- (b) As with the song, outline the discussion points on a Dry-Erase board or paper. Do not erase the song notes. You will refer to song and scripture notes later.
- (c) Print out the verses in advance, or make sure everyone has a Bible. Have a youth read the passage, then use the questions below as a guide. Once again, feel free to add or modify.

Questions to Consider:

- 1) Paul claims it is possible for *all* things to work together for good. Do you agree?

Some participants may rush to agree with Paul, assuming that one is “supposed to agree since his words are in the Bible. Agreement is fine, but be cautious about agreement reached without serious consideration of circumstances that may appear to contradict Paul’s claim. Each person will have brought with them a history that includes painful experiences that are not “good” in and of themselves. If the group is comfortable with one another, you can encourage them to share some of these.

2) Paul does not say “all things work for good ...,” but, “all things work *together* for good ...” What do you suppose he means by this?

The words "work together" are are a translation of a single word in Greek, derived from "sunergos" (sun- "together" + ergon "work"). The English word "synergy" comes from this root. When something works synergistically, it means the product of the whole is greater than the sum of each individual part. Atom bombs work on the principle of synergy. The energy created by all the atoms releasing their energy together is far greater than the sum total of each atom separately releasing its energy. Curiously, great art works this way too.

Applied to the passage, this suggests that one cannot simply isolate one or two experiences and rubber stamp them “GOOD.” Only when those individual experiences are placed in the context of all the other experiences of one's life and handed over to God, is God able to make them work synergistically to create something good. Explosively good.

3) Paul claims that all things work together for good “for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” What do you think this caveat could mean?

Some may take this caveat to draw overly easy distinctions between God’s care for believers versus non-believers. Yet, Paul’s conviction that absolutely nothing can separate us from God’s love later in the passage indicates this is not the direction of Paul’s words. One way of understanding his caveat is that God does not override our freewill. God will not tie all our experiences together and make them work in concert with one another without our permission. Those “who love God” are those who willingly surrender all of life – the good with the bad – to God’s care and nurture. It is then that God is able to weave them, one by one, into a larger tapestry – giving them a positive purpose.

4) What experiences do you think could have given Paul such confidence that all things work together for good, and that nothing can separate us from God’s love?

You may wish to bring in other passages to facilitate discussion here, such as Acts 9 and 2 Corinthians 11.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Format Notes:

(a) As much as possible, allow the similarities and differences to be mentioned by participants, not the leader. If you notice a connection that has been overlooked, ask a leading question or two to flesh it out rather than simply stating it yourself.

(b) This is the time to develop the connections between what participants have noticed in the song/scripture, and their everyday lives. How will life be different tomorrow in light of your findings, or will it?

(c) Your notes on the Dry Erase board or paper will likely be handy for this discussion. Draw lines between connected thoughts and ideas.

Questions to Consider:

- 1) What connections do you find between the song and the scripture?
- 2) The song and scripture both suggest that the conviction to stand toward life with “arms wide open” arises from an experience of awe and wonder – of getting a glimpse at a larger meaning and purpose to everyday life. Have you ever had an experience that has given you a similar perspective?
- 3) Does the song/scripture have any bearing on issues you are presently facing?

NEXT STEPS

If this form of Bible Study proves helpful to you and your group, a logical next step is to ask participants what music they are currently listening to. Ask them to loan you CDs you may not have or wish to purchase. If lyrics are not contained in the CD insert, they can almost always be found on the Internet – either at the group’s official site or at a site maintained by fans. Often, the lyrics can be found on a web browser by simply typing the name of a song in quotes and the word “lyrics.”

My criterion for choosing music is simple: If a song expresses something meaningful about life, and the participants are listening to it, I’ll use it. My understanding is that, if it expresses something meaningful about life, the scriptures must have a way of engaging with it fruitfully. Otherwise, scripture would not be scripture. The connections may not always be overt or direct, but they are there. If you do not feel comfortable enough with your Bible knowledge to find related scriptures, put your Pastor on the hot seat. It is her or his responsibility as a Pastor to be familiar enough with the scriptures to notice

connections between faith and everyday life. Provided she or he understands the song, and does not seek to overlay an external agenda on it, finding connections with the scriptures should not be too much trouble.

At some point, you may wish to invite all ages to participate in a “World’s Most Dangerous Bible Study.” It can be a powerful experience to have youth and their parents discussing faith and life issues, feeling like they share some degree of common ground, and that the parents aren’t necessarily the teachers. Be sensitive to what desires the youth may have to engage in this Bible study without a bunch of parents around, however. You may wish to offer a series of these to youth only, then offer the same series to parents, inviting the youth to return for it. Likely, they will.