

The World's Most Dangerous Bible Study – STUDY GUIDE

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Introduction

This form of Bible study can be quite effective for making connections between faith and everyday life. Months from now, participants may not remember exactly which Bible passage they studied when they hear the featured song on the radio or CD, but they will likely remember that faith engaged meaningfully, and fruitfully, with the music – and their lives.

What youth will hopefully recognize through your discussion of this particular song and scripture is that having faith does not necessarily keep us from experiencing pain and suffering. Rather, faith gives us vision to trust that pain and suffering do not have the final word in our story. Our story is part of a much larger story whose outcome is in God's hands. By being attentive to that story, we gain not only hope, but the ability to transform pain and suffering itself by making God's outcome more and more a part of our present reality.

Format Notes

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) Review the “World’s Most Dangerous Bible Study” track on the “Cloud of Witnesses” audio CD before class, but do not play it for the youth – or at least not at first. Their conclusions about the song/scripture should come more from their hearts than from the CD.

(f) Have fun! You don’t have to be a biblical scholar or music expert 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 likely learn as much as you teach.

THE SONG: “Wonderful” from the CD, “Songs from An American Movie: Learning How to Smile” by the Everclear (© 2000 Capitol)

Lyrics for this song may be found in the CD jacket, or on any number of fan sites on the web, or at sites that specialize in lyrics collections, like www.lyricspost.com (a free commercial site).

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. For fun, I like to insert a picture of the group or CD, which I have downloaded from the internet.

(b) After the song is finished, lead participants in a discussion using the questions below as a guide. Given the chance that some or many of the youth in your group may have a very personal connection to what is being described in the song, you will likely want to stay a bit limber, allowing the discussion to develop organically, without losing sight of the fact that the major purpose of this particular section is to hear what the song itself is saying. If the discussion roams too far off track, you can always bring it around again by asking about what is specifically being said in the song. Write any major points 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 are the youth’s major problems, as expressed in the song?

(2) Why do you suppose the youth asks, “Please don’t tell me everything is wonderful now?” How might those he loves be increasing his anxieties rather than comforting him through their assurances?

(3) In what ways does the youth comfort himself in the song? How effective are they?

(4) How does the song speak to your personal experience? If you have found comfort or hope in a similar situation, where did you find it?

(5) What advice would you give the youth in the song? his parents?

THE SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 65:17-25

Format Notes:

(a) Avoid the temptation to discuss the scripture and song together at this point. 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) Make sure everyone has a Bible. I also like to print the words out in advance on other side of the lyrics sheet so everyone can keep the scripture and song together for future reference. Again, for fun, I like to insert a picture I have downloaded over the Internet – something that helps people experience the scripture as more than just text. There is a great art database at www.textweek.com that is keyed to scripture passages, persons, and events, which I regularly draw upon as a resource. Have one or more youth read the passage, then use the questions below as a guide. Once again, feel free to add or modify.

Questions to Consider:

(1) The passage was most likely written after 539 BCE, when the Hebrew people returned to Israel after over forty years of exile in Babylon, only to find that things weren't so wonderful. Jerusalem, along with its great palaces and Temple, was little more than a pile of ruins and the land was impoverished. How might the words of the prophet have comforted the people or given them hope?

(2) Were the prophet's words realistic in your opinion?

Here you may want to bring the contemporary situation in Israel into the discussion, noting that Jerusalem is far from peaceful. The promise that "they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain" is hardly fulfilled.

(3) If the prophet's words have not yet come to pass – 2,500 years later – what are we to make of them? Are they untrue? Was the prophet misguided or

deceitful? Did God lie? If the people to whom the prophet was speaking could have looked into a crystal ball and seen that the promises have not yet come to pass, would they have any reason to be comforted?

Some participants may feel tempted to reduce the tension involved with unfulfilled prophecy by relating the passage to something they believe about Christ's "Second Coming." If this happens, you may want to gently encourage them to think through how this would have been of any concrete encouragement to the original recipients of the promise.

(4) Given that the promises have not yet been fulfilled, would it have been better for the prophet to remain silent? Why or why not?

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 similarities and differences do you find between the song and the scripture? Does our understanding of these help in interpreting the song or scripture?

2) Take a look at Revelation 21:1-5, which appears to have been written under the influence of Isaiah 65. Do passages like these amount to empty assurances that things are (or soon will be) wonderful when they really aren't – like in the song? Or, are there other ways of understanding the promises that we may have overlooked?

3) [This following question is based on the example given in the audio journal:] Suppose you had an Uncle Pierre from France – an uncle you knew nothing about until a lawyer shows up on your front door informing you that you have just inherited a vast fortune from his estate, including a number of French chateaux (mansions/palaces) and the equivalent of hundreds of millions of dollars.

Suppose further that, being a proud Frenchman, Uncle Pierre placed a stipulation on your claiming your inheritance: you can only have it if you become a French citizen and move to France. Due to bureaucratic red tape, however, it will be five years before you can do this. How might your life change over the coming years, before leaving for France?

*You may wish to refer to the audio journal CD for this question, noting its connection to the “prophetic past tense” and what some theologians call the “already, not yet.” Applied to our inheritance from Uncle Pierre, what has **already** been accomplished but **not yet** been entirely fulfilled will likely affect more and more of our present reality as the years pass. Before the five years is up, we will likely have learned the language, acquired a taste for the food, integrated various aspects of the culture into our everyday lives, and so on. In other words, we will likely have become more and more French before ever setting foot in France. [I once had some fun with this by bringing in French food, showing slides of French art, etc., to help people envision all this more concretely.]*

*Applied to God’s promises, what God claims is **already** accomplished can affect our present reality in a similar way. Suppose we knew – really knew in the depths of our hearts – that God’s intention for us is that we become citizens of God’s Realm. And suppose we knew for a fact that we’d be experiencing God’s realm in its fullness five years from now. How would that knowledge affect the next five years?*

Exploring this aspect, you may want to refer to Jesus’ words, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” as an example. If these words accurately describe something of God’s Realm in its fullness, and you know you’re going to be living there in five years, how might this affect the way you act in the present? Do you suppose that, for instance, a year from now, you would at least be more loving toward a couple of people you would not ordinarily have acted loving toward before? After another year or two, would not that circle have expanded? And after four years or so, is it not logical to assume that your love for your enemies might be somewhat on par with such modern examples as Martin Luther King or Mahatma Gandhi? Trusting in God’s future promise would very much affect your present reality.

*Through examples like these, you can help the youth discover how attentiveness to what God has **already** accomplished but **not yet** fulfilled may affect our everyday lives in real, concrete ways – bringing the already more and more into the realm of the not yet, even while acknowledging that life isn’t always “wonderful now,” even for people of faith.*

4) How might God's story – as reflected by the promises made in this and similar passages – affect the story of the youth in the song? How might it affect *our* story?

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, at a site maintained by fans, or on lyrics database sites (see above). 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, their parents, and other members of the congregation discussing faith and life issues, feeling like they share some degree of common ground (If anything, the youth become the "experts" on the music). 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. Our youth have also enjoyed opportunities to share the "World's Most Dangerous Bible Study" with the congregation in Sunday morning worship, commenting on the relationships they have found between the music and their faith. Even some of our (initially) most skeptical adults have, after seeing/hearing the lyrics and hearing the youth's commentary, gone out and bought the music for themselves or their children/grandchildren.