

Together Again

Biblical Stories of Reunion & Restoration



The Return of the Prodigal (2018) Grace Carol Bomer, 48 x 48 in., mixed media on panel.
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Linked-In Learning • Fall 2021

Study Guide

NASSAU PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

How to Use this Guide

Everyone, leader and participants, should begin by reading the introduction for its important orientation to the theme for this study.

- * **Participants** can best prepare for each meeting by reading the assigned text in advance at least once. They can also read the material that will guide the discussion, although this is not necessary to enter into the discussion.
- * If you are unable to attend a small group or the adult education class, you can use this guide each week to prepare to hear the sermon in worship on Sunday or during the week on the Nassau Church website.
- * This guide can also help in your preparation for the adult education presentations. Or read the text and discuss the questions together as a family or couple.
- * If you didn't sign up for a small group because the times were not convenient, you can gather three or four friends on Zoom to talk about the *Together Again: Biblical Stories of Reunion and Restoration* using this guide.
- * **Leaders of small groups** can prepare by reading the text in advance as well as looking over the discussion plan to see how it will fit your group and the events of the day. For suggestions and reminders about leading small groups in general and this series in particular, turn to page 16 of this guide.

However and whenever you enter into this study, bring your own questions as you grapple with this material and Christian discipleship today. May your faith increase even as you find new questions in these stories from the Bible.

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INTRODUCTION

As we slowly emerge from this pandemic, the knowledge that there is no return to “normal” or a pre-pandemic past becomes clearer with each passing month. The last year and a half have changed us and our community in countless ways. Yet the days of extreme quarantine and isolation are behind us. Old rhythms and routines are returning in new ways, and we are deeply grateful that our community of faith is gathering again in-person to worship, pray, sing (some) and learn together. This reunion or return comes with joy, trepidation and expectation as we continue to learn how to be a faithful people of God in our context and community.

This fall the Linked-In Learning series, *Together Again: Biblical Stories of Reunion and Restoration*, will focus on six stories of reunion, some very familiar, some less so. We return to the complicated family dynamics found in the stories of Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers and the parable of the prodigal son. These are stories we know well and remember often as models of Christian redemption and reconciliation. But a close reading brings to light each of the very human characters in these narratives and gives us a fuller understanding and maybe even a little more empathy for each of them. We will also look at stories where reunion is stalled, avoided or only anticipated.

Small groups will focus on these texts in a way that encourages participants to reflect deeply and personally upon them and even, like Jacob, to wrestle with them. The goal is to engage the text each week in a way that shapes and nurtures individual faith and understanding in the welcoming context of a small group while also building relationships within our community.

In addition to the weekly small groups discussions, Pastors Dave and Lauren will preach on these same stories each Sunday, and an outstanding line-up of presenters will lead adult education classes on these texts. Our hope is that this overlapping study and opportunity for reflection leads to a fuller understanding of union and reunion in the Christian faith and our own lives.



WEEK ONE

October 17 - Anne Stewart

Reunion and Repair

Jacob and Esau are the long-awaited twin sons born to Isaac and Rebekah. These brothers emerge from the womb already locked in conflict (see Genesis 25:19–34; 27:1–46). As they grow, their differences deepen and result in a dramatic power grab that fractures a family. Jacob must leave home to escape the vengeful wrath of his brother Esau. As these two prepare to meet again in Genesis 32 and 33, they have not seen each other for years. Jacob has gained wisdom and humility and prepares for the reunion with caution and savvy.

Read Genesis 33.

Orienting Ourselves to the Text

- * Jacob and Esau have a long history of bad feelings. Review Genesis 25:19–34; 27:1–45. Why are the two brothers on such bad terms?
- * How did their parents enter into this conflict?
- * What might each brother expect at this reunion?
- * What might each one be thinking and feeling?

Exploring the Text

- * How does what happens when Jacob and Esau meet fulfill the expectations of each brother?
- * Where is God in this story?
- * How do the passions and the family dynamics contribute to or interrupt God's activity?
- * How had Esau and Jacob each changed since they parted at the end of chapter 27?

Preparing for the Sermon

- * On the night before this reunion, Jacob wrestles with a man that tradition often identifies as an angel (Genesis 32:22–32). How might wrestling with God help prepare Jacob for his reunion with Esau?
- * Jacob named the wrestling spot “the face of God” because he had “seen the face of God” and still lived (33:10). When do we see the face of God in our relationships with one another?

Questions for Reflection

- * When you had a crumbling relationship with a family member or friend, how was it resolved?
- * How have you experienced God in such times of reconciliation or reunion?
- * How have those experiences made you who you are today?



WEEK TWO

October 24 - Dennis Olsen

Two Reunions and a Reveal

Israel's ancestor Jacob had twelve sons who eventually became the twelve tribes of the people of Israel. Joseph and his younger brother Benjamin were Jacob's favored sons, born of Jacob's favorite wife Rachel. The other brothers all knew it and resented their younger brothers. This favoritism provokes the brothers to commit a violent act that propels Joseph on an epic quest resulting in fame, power and wealth. After years of separation, Joseph has a surprise encounter with his brothers who do not recognize him because they assume he died years ago.

Read Genesis 42, 44, and 45:1–15.

Read the following aloud in the small group: Genesis 42:1–28 and 44:18–45:15 or summarize these events.

Orienting Ourselves to the Text

- * How was Joseph separated from his family? What has happened to Joseph in Egypt?
- * How does the brothers' treatment of Joseph in the past temper how they relate to their younger brother Benjamin in these stories?
- * What are the family dynamics between Jacob and his sons, between Jacob and his youngest son Benjamin, and among the older brothers before the trip to Egypt?

Exploring the Text

- * How are the family dynamics turned upside-down in these stories?
- * Why do you think Joseph hides his identity from his brothers and accuses them of being spies when they show up seeking grain?
- * When Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, he absolves them of guilt for what they did to him and says that it was God's plan for him. When is and when isn't it appropriate to attribute something good coming out of a tragedy to God's plan? Who can make this statement with integrity?

Preparing for the Sermon

- * The sermon will focus on Genesis 44:14–45:6. What moved Joseph so profoundly that he “could no longer control himself” and he wept so loudly the Egyptians could hear?
- * How might such stories of family reconciliation help to make the strange old world of the Bible seem eerily familiar?

Questions for Reflection

- * Judah is willing to take the place of Benjamin when Joseph threatens to imprison the younger brother. Reflect on a time when you or someone you know was willing to voluntarily take on the difficulty of someone else.
- * Every family has its moments of difficulty being a family. Recall a time when your family experienced a difficult time. What helped you through this time? Looking back, where do you see God at work in this difficult time?



WEEK THREE

October 31 - James Vanderkam

Reunion with Torah

After being exiled in Babylon, the Jewish people finally return to Jerusalem to find their beloved city and temple in ruins. Nehemiah begins rebuilding the city walls while the priest Ezra seeks to rededicate the temple. Both these leaders were convinced that the national disasters of the past were caused by disobedience to the law and feared that their contemporaries were repeating the sins of their ancestors. Therefore they and other leaders instituted practices that centered on the temple and were intended to ensure conformity with the law. In that way the restored nation could avoid the punishments meted out to generations past.

Read Nehemiah 8:1–12:47

Read the following aloud in the small group: Nehemiah 8:1–2, 9–10; 9:1–3, 33–38; 10:28–29; 11:1–4a; 12:27, 30–31, 40, 43 or summarize what happens in this text.

Orienting Ourselves to the Text

- * Great respect is shown to the Law in chapter 8 when Ezra reads the scroll. What implications do you draw from this?
- * What role does the Law play in Ezra's long prayer in chapter 9?
- * What is the purpose of the "firm agreement" in chapter 10?
- * Why do you think so many lists of names are included in these chapters?

Exploring the Text

- * What is the connection between the Law and the situation in which the Israelites found themselves prior to these chapters?
- * What is the value of Nehemiah's prayer with its recital of Israel's history?
- * What is the role of God in this story?

Preparing for the Sermon

- * The sermon will focus on Nehemiah 8:1–12. This scene is sometimes described as the first example of preaching in the Bible. How does or does it not seem like an account of preaching to you?
- * The joy experienced by the people comes not just from their hearing, but also their understanding of the Torah. What might this mean for our discipleship today?

Questions for Reflection

- * When has the church had to recall its misdeeds or sins in order to set things right?
- * When has our nation or might our nation come together to confess our wrongs and make them right?
- * When have you had to acknowledge a wrong and seek forgiveness?

REFLECTIONS

PRAYERS



WEEK FOUR

November 7 - Shane Berg

Reunion and Relationship

One of the most famous reunion stories in scripture is Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. The embrace of the wayward son by his loving father, captured so poignantly in Rembrandt's famous painting, is an enduring reminder of God's compassion and love for us. This powerful image is key to our understanding of God's grace and nature. The best-known stories in the Bible, however, often repay a fresh reading. A closer look will reveal a rich complexity and nuance that deepens our appreciation of this iconic parable.

Read Luke 15:11–32.

Orienting Ourselves to the Text

- * What held your attention as you read this familiar story this time?
- * This parable is the third of three “lost and found” parables in Luke. Read Luke 15:1-10. How do these two short parables set the stage for the parable of the father and son?
- * The parables in Luke often turn the ordinary upside-down. What is turned upside-down in this parable?

Exploring the Text

- * If you were writing a paragraph about the relationship of each son to his father, how would the paragraphs differ? How would they be the same?
- * Read Luke 15:1–2. How might the two groups of listeners interpret the parable differently?
- * Who is being reunited? Who is left out? What is happening in this family?

Preparing for the Sermon

- * Family reunions are full of every kind of joy and challenge, especially if the reunion includes a family member who has “come back.” Within the church, what wisdom do we need to care for people who “come back” to the faith?
- * This parable is most commonly known as the parable of the prodigal son. It is also known as the story of two brothers, the parable of the lost son, and the parable of the loving father. As you ponder it and your reaction to it, what would you name it?

Questions for Reflection

- * Which character in this parable do you identify with? Why?
- * What did you learn about God from this parable?
- * What did you discover about forgiveness from this parable?



WEEK FIVE

November 14 - Theresa Thames

The Reunion that Wasn't

If your family is anything like my own, family reunions can be...interesting. In our text, Matthew gives us a brief introduction to family systems theory by sharing an encounter between Jesus, his birth family, and the disciples. On first reading, Jesus' response sounds harsh and gives us pause. However, Jesus' jarring words model a more expansive understanding of family and widening of the circle.

Read Matthew 12:46-50.

Orienting Ourselves to the Text

- * The last time Jesus' family appeared in Matthew is when Joseph, Mary and the young Jesus returned from their flight to Egypt to reside in Nazareth. Jesus is now an adult. What do you imagine life has been like for this family in Nazareth?
- * What might Jesus' family have heard about him since he left Nazareth?
- * Read Matthew 10:34–39. Based on this passage, what do you think Jesus' understanding of family is?

Exploring the Text

- * What is your initial reaction to the tone of Jesus' answer when he learns that his mother and brothers are outside?
- * What is Jesus communicating beyond his spoken words? To whom is he communicating this message?
- * What values lie behind Jesus' definition of family in this passage?

Preparing for the Sermon

- * This awkward and uncomfortable response from Jesus regarding his mother and brothers comes in the middle of his conversation with the scribes and Pharisees. As hard as it is to understand, what about his reference to the disciples and the importance of his relationship with them seems easy to grasp?
- * While it seems inconsistent with the commandment to “honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12), the prioritization of relationships as followers of Jesus seems quite clear. What does Jesus' response about his mother and brothers say about the stereotypical understanding that the Bible is all about “family values”?

Questions for Reflection

- * How do you think about family?
- * How wide is your family circle? When has it been wider than it is now, or is it wider now than it has been in the past?
- * Why might you want to include more people in your family circle? Why not?



WEEK SIX

November 21 - Noel Werner

The Sound of Reunion

You might be surprised how much of our congregational song is based on the visions and poetry in Revelation. Starting with the reunion of God and the great company of saints in Revelation 7:9-17, we'll explore the way in which this final book of the New Testament has inspired authors and composers for generations and created some of our most enduring songs. Together we'll experience a little of what the great reunion might sound like through the prophetic witness of word and music.

Read Revelation 7:9-17.

Orienting Ourselves to the Text

- * How is reading the Revelation to John different from reading other books of the Bible?
- * This passage is about the seventh seal. Scan chapter 6 to identify the previous six seals. To place these verses in context, what do you think the seals represent?
- * What images of the saints in heaven come to you immediately?

Exploring the Text

- * How are the saints described in this passage? How does this description counter or enrich your images?
- * What words, phrases, or images in this passage remind you of hymns or musical or literary works?
- * How is this “reunion” a thing of the past? A future event? Both?
- * As you think about our “exile” during the pandemic, how has the return to the church building been a kind of reunion?

Preparing for the Sermon

- * While this text from Revelation is mostly tied to our experience of memorial services and proclaiming resurrection hope, what theological themes might we harvest for our lives this side of heaven? Praise? The Lamb of God at the center? A number within the fold beyond what anyone can know or count?
- * What does the notion of an eternal reunion with God mean for you?

Questions for Reflection

- * What emotions does this passage draw forth from you?
- * How might this reunion event be a source of inspiration for you as we continue to struggle with Covid-19?



Notes for Small Group Leaders

Leading a small group is not quite the same as leading a Bible study. While the goal of a Bible study would be to increase biblical knowledge, the primary goal for a small group is to deepen relationships among the participants as each one grows in relationship with God and Jesus and as Christ's disciple.

At the first gathering, take time to review the group covenant on the back page of this booklet. It is important that each member of a small group is clear about the guidelines that make for a successful time together. Invite the group to add to the covenant.

A simple process for each week could be:

- * Ask the opening question (see below).
- * Prayer
- * Read or invite a group member to read the Bible passage or selections from it aloud. For the longer passages, recap the story.
- * Read and discuss the questions in "Orienting Ourselves to the Text."
- * Read and discuss the questions in "Exploring the Text."
- * Draw attention to Preparing for the Sermon. If you have time, consider discussing one or both questions. If not, encourage the group to read and think about them before Sunday.
- * Present one or more questions for reflection.
- * Invite prayer requests and close with prayer.

Opening Questions

To help the participants become better acquainted, and especially if anyone in your group doesn't know the other participants, invite everyone to answer a question at the beginning of each gathering. This time also helps the group make the transition of what has been occupying their minds to enter into the small group discussion space. Suggested questions are below, but feel free to come up with your own.

- * Week 1: How were you taught to say "I'm sorry"?
- * Week 2: Recall a time in your childhood or youth when you were jealous of something that someone else had.
- * Week 3: Have you ever been part of a group, large or small, that had to perform some service to make up for some misdeed you did? How did you feel?
- * Week 4: Recall a fight you had with a sibling or good friend. What caused it?
- * Week 5: Who do you consider to be in your family? How do you decide?
- * Week 6: Our communities are often divided in many ways. Where would you like to see reconciliation take place?

Give the group a moment to think about their response. You can model the amount of time for each person by answering the question first. You may need to remind them to keep their answers short from time to time; there is much more to discuss. Anyone may choose not to answer.

Questions for Reflection

These questions at the end of each session can be discussed in the group. However, if time is short, invite two or three responses and encourage the participants to think about them on their own during the coming week. At the opening of the next meeting, invite comments on the reflection questions.

May leading your small group be a joy and a recognition that where two or three are gathered, Christ is among them, bringing reconciliation and restoration. Thank you.

Group Covenant

- * **What happens in the group stays in the group.** To build and maintain an atmosphere of trust, confidentiality is essential.
- * **Speak and make space for others to speak.** Each voice is important. If you are usually quiet, make an effort to offer your thoughts. If you speak out easily, hold back for others to speak or invite someone who hasn't spoken to speak.
- * **Stay with the group.** Physically, be present at each gathering rather than treat attendance as just another option. Mentally, listen to others and participate.
- * **Focus on ideas, not the person.** If you disagree, disagree with the idea, but don't belittle the person.
- * **Speak from your own awareness.** When offering an opinion, claim it as your opinion rather than make generalizations.
- * **Everyone in the group is a learner.** In a small group, there are no experts. Learning is a lifelong process.