

STUDY GUIDE
GROUPS / INDIVIDUALS

SIX SESSIONS

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO BECOME
THE PERSON YOU WERE MEANT TO BE

UNFINISHED

FILLING THE HOLE IN OUR GOSPEL



RICHARD STEARNS

PRESIDENT, WORLD VISION U.S. and Author of the National Bestseller

THE HOLE IN OUR GOSPEL

UNFINISHED

STUDY GUIDE

BELIEVING
IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

UNFINISHED

STUDY GUIDE
SIX SESSIONS

RICHARD STEARNS

with DIXON KINSER



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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INTRODUCTION

“Jesus did not call us to build an institution; he called us to lead a revolution.”

(*Unfinished*, p. 175)

WELCOME TO *UNFINISHED*! Over the next six weeks you will be invited to discover your life’s purpose by joining God in nothing less than changing the world. Does that sound audacious? It should. The plan is God’s. But what’s more daring is God’s desire to use people like you and me to get the job done.

It is for this reason that this study and the book on which it is based are called *Unfinished*. The name carries two meanings. First, “unfinished” echoes back to the ascension, when Jesus left the task of building God’s kingdom to his disciples. He had begun the work, but at the time of his ascension, that task remained incomplete. So Jesus instructed his followers to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). The very DNA of the church includes a charge to finish the job Jesus has given us.

This leads to the second meaning of the word “unfinished,” which is more personal. Each of us has a specific, God-given role to play in fulfilling Jesus’ instructions. We were all made for a reason. However, until we embrace the role the Creator has given us to play in his great story of redemption, we too will remain “unfinished.” This study explores how both of these “unfinished” items can find their completion at the same time when we accept Jesus’ invitation to become his disciples.

That being said, accepting Jesus' invitation to discipleship is not something we can do alone. We will necessarily need a community. Therefore, your *Unfinished* experience will be anchored in weekly small group interaction. A small group is an excellent place to process the content of this study, ask questions, and learn from others as you listen to what God is doing in their lives. If you are new to small groups, know that they can be a deeply rewarding time of intimacy and friendship. However, they can also be a disaster. Keeping the following ground rules in mind will make this group experience a fruitful one for everyone involved.

First, work to make the group a safe place. That means being honest about your thoughts and feelings as well as listening carefully to everyone else's. Second, resist the temptation to "fix" a problem someone might be having or to correct someone else's theology. That's not what this time is for. Third, and finally, keep everything your group shares confidential. All this will foster a rewarding sense of community in your *Unfinished* study group and give God's Spirit a powerful forum to heal, challenge, and send you all out to finish the job.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

BECAUSE THIS STUDY is based on the book *Unfinished* by Rich Stearns, participants are invited to do some pre-reading prior to each group gathering. Directions for this reading can be found in the highlighted “Pre-Session Personal Study” section at the beginning of each session. Each pre-session activity will direct you to the chapters of the book that correspond with that week’s video study. The reading is meant to complement your engagement with the video; the quotes and questions are designed to help you process what you are learning. For this reason, each participant is strongly encouraged to get a copy of the book *Unfinished* and read ahead to get the most out of his or her study experience.

During your group time, you will watch a video clip where Rich Stearns (author of the book and president of World Vision U.S.) takes you into the core content of *Unfinished*. The video will be followed each week by a time of small group discussion. There are a number of questions available for this time, but do not feel like you have to get through all of them. Your leader will focus on the ones that resonate with your group and guide you from there.

The last two elements of each session are practical experiments designed to challenge you and your study group to actually act on what you have been learning. The group portion (called “Doing the Word”) is to be completed during your meeting time, while the individual portion (called “Living the Word” and highlighted the same as the pre-session material) is to be completed on your own. Use your study guide to record what you are learning during the “Living the Word” activities, because starting in session two, time is provided to

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

check in about the previous week's activity. During this check-in time, you will be asked to share your experiences as well as listen to those of your fellow group members. However, don't worry if you could not do the experiment one week or are just joining the study. Hearing what others have learned will be nourishment enough on its own.

Now you are ready to enter the world of *Unfinished*. This is a study that has the potential to change your life—if you let it. Be honest about where you are struggling and resist the temptation to shut down if the content hits close to home. Examining our lives and admitting where they are out of sync or inconsistent takes courage, but it is not an invitation to shame. Instead, it is actually a way to open our hearts to God's love. Knowing this love is what Jesus' commission is all about, because knowing this love changes everything. And if we seek it, Jesus promises, that is exactly what we will find.

If you are a group leader, there are additional resources for you in the back of this guide.

SPECIAL NOTE

OVER THE NEXT six weeks you will be immersed in the hope and challenge of Rich Stearns's *Unfinished*. The meaning and significance of your journey can be even greater if you take time to complete the "Pre-Session Personal Study" that is highlighted at the beginning of every session. This activity will introduce you to the content of the *Unfinished* book and prepare you to more fully participate in the *Unfinished* small group experience.

SESSION 1

THE MEANING OF LIFE AND OTHER IMPORTANT THINGS

“The meaning, purpose, and significance of our lives are found only by aligning our lives with God’s purposes, in lives committed to following Jesus Christ.”

(Unfinished, p. xviii)

PRE-SESSION PERSONAL STUDY

Based on the introduction and chapters 1–2 of the Unfinished book

INTRODUCTION

Read the introduction to *Unfinished* (pp. xvii–xxiii); then meditate on the following quotes and answer the related questions. (This same basic format will repeat in each pre-session of the guide. Use the space provided or a separate notebook to record your responses.)

“So why is it that so many Christians seem to lack that sense of fullness of life? They go to church, read their Bibles, and say their prayers but still feel that something is missing.” (p. xviii)

Do you ever feel something is missing from your life? If so, when do you feel that way? Why do you feel that way?

How would you answer the question posed in the quote if someone asked you?

“Our Christian faith is not just a way to find forgiveness for sin in order to enter eternal life, yet it is that. It is not just a system of right beliefs about ultimate truth and the order of things, though it is that. Nor is it just a way to find God’s comfort in times of trouble or a helpful code of conduct for how to live a good and productive life, though it is those things too. Fundamentally, the Christian faith is a call to leave everything else behind, follow our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and join in the great mission of Christ in our world. It is a call to forsake all else and follow him. Only then will we become completed people—people living according to God’s deepest purpose for our lives.” (p. xviii)

How do you experience this quote from *Unfinished*? Does it inspire you? Make you angry?

What would it mean for you to leave everything behind?

What are you most afraid to leave behind?

THE MEANING OF LIFE AND OTHER IMPORTANT THINGS

“Listen carefully to these next few statements: You don’t have to go to the Congo or to Uzbekistan to change the world. You don’t have to be brilliant to change the world—or wealthy or influential or a spiritual giant. But you do have to say yes to the invitation.” *(p. xxii)*

Can you change the world for God’s kingdom right where you are?

What does it mean to say yes to the invitation? What will saying yes require of you?

Does a quote like this sound like good news? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 1: THE MEANING OF LIFE AND OTHER IMPORTANT THINGS

Read *Unfinished* chapter 1 (pp. 1–16).

Pick one quote or concept that really connected with you from today's reading and write it down to share, as appropriate, with the group during session one.

“I want to suggest to you that our lives are part of a much bigger story—one that began in eternity and one that will continue indefinitely into the future. And unless we understand how our story fits into this bigger story, we will live our lives with little sense of real purpose or significance, drifting through life like a ship without a rudder.” (pp. 6–7)

Do you know someone with a real sense of purpose? What is he or she like?

Do you feel like your life has purpose? Why or why not? Does your answer have anything to do with your Christianity? Why or why not?

THE MEANING OF LIFE AND OTHER IMPORTANT THINGS

What does it mean to you that God has a purpose for your life?

CHAPTER 2: GOD'S BIG STORY

Read *Unfinished* chapter 2 (pp. 17–30).

At the end of the chapter Rich retells the entire biblical narrative. Have you ever heard the story told the way he does? How did you experience his version? What are the implications for our lives when the story is told this way?

“I came to believe that the most plausible explanation for the universe was that God was real and he had created all that we see; that there was a painter behind this incredible painting, an author behind this astonishing story. I also came to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed God incarnate—that God had taken human form in order to inaugurate a new and deeper kind of relationship with us.” (pp. 19–20)

In this section of the book, Rich shares his experience of coming to faith in Jesus. What was your experience of coming to faith? How was it similar or different from Rich's?

“The truth is that the only things we can really know about God are the things he has chosen to reveal to us in one way or another. We can discern things about God from observing what he created. When we see the world around us, we see vastness, complexity, power, order, beauty, creativity, precision, and majesty. And all of these words say something about the Creator.” *(p. 23)*

What are three adjectives you would use to describe God? Why did you pick the words you did?

What does the creation itself tell us about the great Creator?

GROUP STUDY

INTRODUCTION

One of the subplots in the 2003 movie *Finding Nemo* is about of a group of fish who long to live in the ocean but are trapped in a dentist's aquarium. They can see the harbor from their prison in the dentist's office, but no matter how many escape plans they devise, they can never quite get there. Finally they succeed. As the last of the group plops into the sea, the newly freed fish silently take stock of their situation: they're floating in individual plastic bags in the midst of a vast harbor, with no tools or opposable thumbs with which to get out of the bags. After a moment, one of them humorously asks the obvious question, "Now what?"

"Now what?" indeed.

"Now what?" is a question many Christians find themselves asking after they make an initial commitment to Jesus. They truly love God and have a sincere belief in Jesus, but they sense something missing. They wonder what they are supposed to do next. Is there more to this life of faith than simply going to church, praying, reading the Bible, and waiting to die? The answer to this question is a resounding yes!

Over the last century, American Christianity has become hyper-focused on believing the right things. We have produced thousands of theology books, used countless bytes on the Internet defending our religious particulars, and even left old churches to start new ones based on differences in doctrine. But what if belief is only half the story? Yes, it is important to trust God and believe in Jesus, but that is only the first step. What comes next is just as important but also much harder: actually doing what Jesus commands. Over and over again, Jesus insists that his followers and friends are the ones who both "hear" and "do" the things he teaches (Luke 6:49; John 15:14). Which brings us back to that very important question from *Finding Nemo*: "Now what?"

Chances are you are engaged in this study because you are interested in Jesus. You believe in him and trust him as Lord and Savior,

but you want to know more about how to live out your faith. You know that Jesus has things to say about the way we prioritize our time and what we do with our money. You know that God expects his worshipers to have a particular relationship with the poor and people in need. You know that God's agenda is for the renewal of all things, but you wonder how your life fits into that big plan. If this is the case, then you have come to the right place.

These kinds of questions are questions about story. They ask what kind of story God has been and is still telling in this world. They ask who the main characters of that story are and, more personally, how each of our individual stories fits into God's big one. They ask what is the ultimate purpose and meaning of life. And that is why it is such good news that we wonder about these things, because such wonderings come from a place of hope. Hope that things can be different. Hope that God has not abandoned this world but is indeed rescuing it. And hope that the significance, satisfaction, and peace we long for are not actually found in the pursuit of money, sex, or power but in something far more exciting. However, pursuing the answers takes courage and intentionality. Jesus is inviting you to join him on this journey of discipleship. Do you want to accept that invitation?

CHECKING IN

After welcome time, briefly share highlights of your pre-session reading. Then answer this question:

If God could do one thing in your life during this study, what would you want it to be?

HEARING THE WORD

Read Matthew 7:24–27 out loud twice in the group. If possible, use two different readers. Then answer the questions that follow.

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

What word or phrase stuck out to you most when the Scripture was read?

Why do you think Jesus uses the metaphor of a house in his teaching?

WATCH THE VIDEO

Watch the session one video clip, using the space below to take notes. When the video ends, take a moment to jot down one or two things that you learned, disagreed with, or were surprised by.

VIDEO DISCUSSION

First Impressions

1. Before everyone shares in the large group, turn to one or two people next to you and finish this sentence, “After watching the video clip, one question I now have is . . .”

Community Reflection

2. As a group, summarize why Rich says the book is called *Unfinished*. Why is this concept a challenge to the church today?

THE MEANING OF LIFE AND OTHER IMPORTANT THINGS

3. How do you define the “meaning of life”? Does your life and lifestyle match up with your definition? Why or why not?

4. Rich says that “truth matters” and that “truth has consequences.” What do you think this means? Do you think there is any such thing as truth? Why or why not? Where does your definition of “truth” come from?

5. In the video, Rich suggests that there are three ways to answer the question, “What is the meaning of life?” The first option is that there is no meaning to life and everything is purposeless and random. The second option is that life only has the meaning we want it to have. Here we make up our own code of ethics and hold that what’s true for me may not be true for you. The third option is that we decide to become part of God’s story and find our purpose in his will for our lives.

Do you like these categories? Do they work, in your opinion? Did any of them particularly resonate with you? Did any of them not? Why did you answer the way you did?

Which of the three options best describe how you are finding your meaning in life right now?

6. God has invited us to join him in changing the world. Does this sound like good news to you? Why or why not? Are there any places in your life you think you might already be joining God? Are there any places where you know you are not joining God? Explain.

THE MEANING OF LIFE AND OTHER IMPORTANT THINGS

EXPLORING THE WORD

Reread Matthew 7:24–27 as a group.

Does the text sound different to you now? Why or why not?

Jesus says that the wise person hears his words and puts them into practice. Are there any of Jesus' words that are harder to practice than others?

What is at least one implication of Jesus' words on your life this week?

DOING THE WORD

Jesus' teaching about houses built on either rocks or sand is the conclusion of a much larger sermon. Earlier in that same sermon Jesus instructed those who call him Lord to do the following:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” *(Matthew 5:43–45)*

As part of a group exercise in “doing” Jesus’ words, each of you call to mind someone you experience as an enemy or persecutor. Then go around the room and take turns offering a one-word prayer of blessing for that person. The word can be general (like “peace”) or something more specific. Afterward, answer these questions:

Was this a hard or easy exercise?

If you prayed for your enemies every day, how do you think it would change you?

Is there a way to pray for your enemies that would “miss Jesus’ point”? If so, what would it be?

CLOSING PRAYER

Close the session with this popular version of the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:9–13):

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.

PERSONAL ACTIVITY

LIVING THE WORD

Between now and the next session, you are invited to individually *live* one of the words of Jesus.

Jesus says that the whole of the Bible's teaching before him could be summed up in our call to love God with everything we've got and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:37–40). Embody this call by performing one anonymous act of kindness or generosity this week: anything from buying a stranger lunch to emptying the dishwasher without being asked. Whatever you do, do it with intention and love and not for any credit.

Write about your experience below so that you can briefly share about it during the check-in portion of session two.

What did you choose to do?

What was your experience like?