

So Long, Normal

Living and Loving the Free Fall of Faith

STUDY GUIDE | FIVE SESSIONS

Laura Story
with Beth Graybill



HarperChristian
Resources

So Long, Normal Study Guide

© 2021 by Laura Story

Requests for information should be addressed to:

HarperChristian Resources, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

ISBN 978-0-310-14231-7 (softcover)

ISBN 978-0-310-14232-4 (ebook)

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked ESV are taken from the ESV Bible® (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®). Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the King James Version. Public domain.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the New American Standard Bible®. Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org).

Hello, Unknown—Laura Story, Hank Bentley, and Mia Fieldes.

Laura's Stories and Songs (ASCAP) / (admin at musicservices.org) All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Copyright © 2021 Every Square Inch (SESAC) Capitol CMG Amplifier (SESAC) (admin at CapitolCMGPublishing.com) All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Upside Down Under (BMI) / Be Essential Songs (BMI) / (admin at EssentialMusicPublishing.com). All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Any internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this study guide are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by HarperChristian Resources, nor does HarperChristian Resources vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this study guide.

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

HarperChristian Resources titles may be purchased in bulk for church, business, fundraising, or ministry use. For information, please e-mail ResourceSpecialist@ChurchSource.com.

First Printing June 2021 / Printed in the United States of America




Contents

Welcome: Ready for Adventure.....	7
Session 1: What's So Bad about Normal?.....	9
Session 2: So Long, Familiar	29
Session 3: So Long, Self.....	49
Session 4: Hello, New Life	71
Session 5: Hello, Unknown.....	93
Epilogue	117
Leader's Guide	119



Of Note

The quotations interspersed throughout this study guide and the between-sessions materials are from the book, *So Long, Normal* and the video curriculum *So Long, Normal* by Laura Story. All other resources including the small-group questions and session introductions have been written by Beth Graybill in collaboration with Laura Story.





Welcome

READY FOR ADVENTURE

Have you ever found yourself paralyzed by fear in the inevitable changes of life? Me too. In those moments, we're tempted to lean on any sense of normalcy, predictability, security, and control. But God often calls us to something better, beyond our range of fear.

While we may hear God's voice, following God's lead is another story. There are obstacles in our way: attachment to comfort, a desire for everything to remain the same, and anything else we grip tightly with two hands when our circumstances change.

Change is inevitable, but there is still a way to thrive: saying so long to normal. When we say goodbye to normal, our joy and peace are no longer tethered to the predictability of our circumstances. And it's in this place we can truly experience the abundant life God has to offer his children.

**"He has made everything beautiful
in its time. Also, he has put eternity
into man's heart, yet so that he
cannot find out what God has done
from the beginning to the end."**

Ecclesiastes 3:11 ESV

This five-session study helps us recognize our attachments to the many "normal" things in our daily lives that keep us from experiencing the kind of life God intends—the kind of life God defines in Scripture. The good news is we're not alone.

So many characters in the Bible had attachments that kept them from living the life God intended for them. They had to choose between something they could hold on to with tangible, physical assurance, *or* release those things in order to embrace the abundant life God promised.

So Long, Normal

It all came down to whether or not these characters were willing to let go of *normal* and step into the excitement of life with God. And the adventure, for them and for us, begins with the first step of trust.

This study is my invitation to you to go on this adventure together.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Laura", is placed on a light gray rectangular background that is slightly tilted.



SESSION

1

What's So Bad about Normal?

GROUP STUDY

INTRODUCTION

Leader, read this section aloud to the group:

Have you ever tried to grab your breath on a cold morning? It may seem like an odd question, but it's undoubtedly something we've all tried to do at some point in our lives. Catching our breath is like trying to maintain a sense of "normal." And at some point along the way, I realized the normal life I sought was like a vapor. Whenever it appeared within reach, I was unable to grasp it.

Normal. It's a fairly subjective word, yet we all seem to understand what it means. Normal is often defined as "conforming to a standard; usual, typical or expected." And it seems to be the gravity we seek with an innate desire to have our feet planted on something solid rather than having our lives suspended in mid-air. Normal appears to offer the steady we want, the comfort we need, and the accountability required to keep us on task.

As anyone who knows me can attest, my life has been anything but dictionary-definition normal. My idea of normal came crashing down when my husband was diagnosed with a brain tumor during the second year of

So Long, Normal

our marriage. After his diagnosis, a complicated surgery, concerning days in the ICU, and a long recovery at home, Martin still lives with short-term memory loss and a substantial vision deficit. His inability to see well or remember the smallest details make our life as a family anything but normal.

My story may look different than yours, but each of us has something in our lives that has forced us to let go of whatever normalcy we envisioned. And I've lived long enough to know no one's life has turned out exactly the way they had planned. Every one of us has endured uninvited change. Every one of us will again be forced to wave goodbye to normal.

But there is something deeply comforting about the normal ordinariness of life that draws us to this ideal. We all long for security, for stability, and firm footing. In fact, we crave it. Have you ever wondered why we crave it? I believe it's because we were designed by an orderly God to thrive in an orderly world. But then sin happened, and the steady path beneath the feet of humanity shifted and became shaky. Ever since, our normal has been distorted. Just like Adam and Eve, we have no choice but to say so long to a normal life and step out beyond the garden of our lives until Jesus returns and the garden is restored.

Believe this: whenever our life shifts and shakes, it's ultimately for our benefit that good things are shaken from our grip, even when it feels like a loss. My hope for you and me is that whenever we face the loss of normal, we encounter God. And not in a way that puts a spiritual Band-Aid on the grief we're experiencing, but in a way that helps us recognize God is working in and through our circumstances beyond our imagining.

When God is our foundation, we can learn to say so long to normal and all the good things God lovingly shakes from our lives. But first, we have to acknowledge our desire for normal and how it affects our everyday lives. Let's do the hard, courageous work together.

*God is our sure and steady hope who guides us
to embrace the beautiful story unfolding before
our very eyes as we say so long to normal.*

TALK ABOUT IT

Take 10–15 minutes to respond to the opening message from Laura. Then take turns answering the following questions in preparation for the video teaching. Use this section each week to get your hearts and minds focused and ready for Laura's teaching.

- Share about a time in your childhood, teenage years, or adult life when you felt less than normal. As you look back, what factors contributed to this feeling for you?

—or—

- What does “normal” mean to you?

Rather than defining normal, it may be easier to recognize the absence of it.

WATCH VIDEO SESSION ONE (17 MINUTES)

Use the video streaming access code on the inside of the front cover of your study guide or use the DVD to watch this session.



• **VIDEO TEACHING NOTES**

As you watch the video teaching for this session, use the following outline to record anything that stands out to you.

A departure from normal

What is normal anyway?

What would it take to feel normal?

Leaving normal for adventure with God

Saying goodbye to normal requires a heart change

Finding freedom, peace, and joy

Hebrews: the book of “better things”

Shaken (Hebrews 12:28 and Haggai 2:6–8)

God as the source of our shaking

The faulty foundation of our lives

God’s calling to us

Saying so long to normal

Having courage isn’t about the absence of fear. It’s acknowledging that fear and being willing to take that next step anyway.

• GROUP DISCUSSION

Read each question and take time for group members to give honest and thoughtful responses.

1. What comes to your mind when you hear Laura talk about this idea of being normal? What are some of the negative connotations and positive meanings of the word *normal*?

2. Where does the pressure to feel or be normal come from for you? Is it an internal idea or an external pressure? Briefly explain.

It doesn't matter if normal is something you never knew, something you've always tried to attain, or something you've grown tired of, you're invited on a thrilling journey to leave normal because what God has in store is better.

Select volunteers to read the following passages aloud to the group and discuss the questions with each:

Hebrews 12:25–29 ESV

3. What are some of the “good” or “normal” things that consume your focus and crowd out God’s invitation to you to live with a kingdom mentality? What could you do to refocus your attention and your priorities?

So Long, Normal

4. What does it mean for us to receive an unshakeable kingdom? How have you sensed God shaking up your life?

Our loving God not only allows the shaking in our lives, but he is at times the source and the cause of our shaking.

Select a group member to read this passage out loud:

Haggai 2:6–10 NIV

5. In whatever shaking you are experiencing right now, what emotions rise to the surface? Are there any positive results of this shaking?
6. Tell about some of the ways you've watched God shake things up for someone close to you. How did things turn out for that person or group of people? What did you learn by watching the situation?

God shakes the less sturdy things out of our lives out of his kindness and mercy.

Select a group member to read this passage out loud:

Ephesians 3:20–21 NIV



7. Laura shared her zipline story and the courage it took to let go and trust God. Where do you need to let go and trust God? What is one area of your life where you need to surrender your longing for normal or let go of your tight grip for control?
8. What is the “immeasurably more” you are asking God for right now? In what situation do you need God to give you faith to believe he can do something good?

*God promises to do more through us
than we could ask or imagine.*

Memory Verse

Commit to memorizing one verse or passage each week as a group, as you practice saying so long to normal. This week's verses are:

“Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”

Hebrews 12:28–29 ESV

CLOSING PRAYER

Spend time in your group praying in some of the following directions:

- Pray for your group members as they seek to understand the longing they have for normal or the sense of security they get from normal in their lives.

So Long, Normal

- Ask the Holy Spirit to show you areas in your life where you need to let go of normal and say yes to God.
- Thank God for how he shakes things up in us to loosen our grip on the things we hold tightly in order that he can do more with our lives.
- Celebrate the fact that God exceeds our expectations and our imagination for the courageous and adventurous life he calls us to live.

Record prayer requests here for easy reference to pray for one another throughout the week:





SESSION

1

What's So Bad about Normal?

BETWEEN-SESSIONS

PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY

Before your next group meeting, spend time with the following Bible study lessons. There are five lessons. Do as much as you have time for but make it a priority to engage the Scripture a few minutes each day.



• LESSON ONE: BACK TO THE GARDEN

For most of us, there is something within that likes to create patterns and stick to them, even for the most free-spirited people. But we must recognize that our desire to create normal life patterns isn't something new. It dates back to the Garden. And we don't just like to create these patterns; we actually *crave* them. We all long for the security, stability, and sure footing that our patterns (even patterns of chaos) bring to our lives.

But have you ever stopped to think about how this yearning found its way into the fabric of who we are as humans? And what is it about normal patterns that feel so safe and comforting? Orderliness is the universal

So Long, Normal

experience of all humans—it shows up in our rituals, rhythms, and routines. It shows up in our individual and collective expressions of “normal.”

Answer the following questions as you consider life’s rituals and routines:

- **Read Ecclesiastes 3** and consider what Solomon, the author, means when he writes about the “set[ting] of eternity in the heart” (verse 11 NIV). How do we experience this God-given gift and burden of experiencing eternity in our hearts?
- Why or how does it soothe us to know that there is an appointed time for every event, even death, this side of heaven?
- What rituals do you stick to in your life? Do you have a morning ritual, a work ritual, and an evening ritual? What is it and why is it so important to you?
- **Read Genesis 1** and consider what it means to be made in the image of God and to reflect the cosmic order God created. How does our desire for normalcy reflect God’s pattern of design for our world?
- **Read Genesis 2.** Pray for the courage and discipline to see your desire for normal, healthy patterns—such as the ones we see in the Creation story—as one of God’s greatest gifts to the human experience.

*"You have made us for yourself, and our hearts
are restless until we can find peace in you."*

Saint Augustine (354–430 AD)

• LESSON TWO: EAST OF EDEN

Isn't it fascinating to consider how everything in creation and our own lives was turned upside down because of Adam and Eve's sin? And yet, despite the disappointment of their fall from grace, we see the kindness and faithfulness of God. Where the serpent's question, "Indeed, has God said?" resulted in destruction, God's question, "Where are you?" resulted in restoration. As God lovingly pursued Adam and Eve, he walked them through a very deliberate process of confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation. On a whole other level, he "set eternity in their hearts" by offering them a promise of future deliverance.

This is the very same promise God offers to us today, and it's a promise to one day return things to a God-designed normal. But until then, our lives will be rocked and shaken in a world that lies "east of Eden." Until Jesus returns and the garden is restored, we will crave normal with a deep, intense heartache. And we will try to craft and create normal out of the broken pieces of our lives. It's important to acknowledge our desire for normal, and equally as important to acknowledge how this desire affects the choices we make in our everyday lives and in our world.

Adam and Eve were living life to its fullest until they ate the forbidden fruit and had to leave the garden. And I think we tend to do the same. We start to doubt God's promise. But living east of Eden reminds us of our dependence on the deliverance of Jesus. And while we wait upon his ultimate deliverance someday, he offers us little moments of deliverance in the here and now, east of Eden.

Begin with prayer. Ask God to show you how you've deflected his promises for your life, and how you've been living "east of Eden" by choice. Seeking happiness outside of his will looks like choosing to do life on your own, depending on others to fulfill your desires instead of God, or doubting

So Long, Normal

God's faithfulness to follow through on his promises to you. If you like writing out your prayers, use the space provided below:

Reflect on God's Word. Take time to read Genesis 3, and then read Psalm 139:23–24 NIV. Make this psalm your prayer for a few quiet moments.

**“Search me, God, and know my heart;
Test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting.”**

After a few moments of prayer, write down two or three specific areas of your life where you feel, or have felt in the past, like God was holding out on you. For each area, answer these questions:

- How have you taken matters into your own hands in this particular area of your life?
- What happened as a result?
- How has God shown you his faithfulness and his love despite your refusal to accept or follow his ways?
- How will you let go and trust God's plans for your life?

Think about specific instances and actions. Ponder the actions or patterns God is asking you to give up so he can fulfill his promise to you.

AREA ONE:

AREA TWO:

AREA THREE:

Identify one specific action step you will take today or this week to live a life more surrendered to his will and his ways.

MY ACTION GOAL:

God placed man in the garden of Eden to cultivate and keep it, to give him meaningful and purposeful work. Together, Adam and Eve worked in the garden, and their labor was not toilsome . . . they didn't resent its place in their lives. It was simply the natural rhythm of life that had been ordained by God the Father.

• **LESSON THREE: TRUST**

Let's be honest. All of us are prone to placing too much trust in our own abilities at times. For some of us, it's our planning and our abilities to get things done. For others, it's our ability to engage others who will plan and get things done for us. Either way, we feel pretty confident in our decision making and our skills. When we focus our attention on ourselves and what

So Long, Normal

we have control over in our lives, we lose sight of the ultimate purpose of our lives: to trust God. We kick into autopilot when our lives are filled with ease and relatively free of hardships. And we begin to live our lives seeking less and less consultation with God.

It's during these times that we find ourselves most susceptible to the consequences of placing our trust in ourselves, rather than in God. It's when we are most susceptible to the whispered question of the serpent—"Indeed, has God said?"—that leads us to doubt what we're called or not called to do. For many of us, it's when we have no hurdles or resistance and we're living on autopilot that we settle into normal. But we've forgotten a gap exists between God's version of normal and our version. Saying goodbye to our version of normal means saying goodbye to the misguided ways we trust ourselves as we transfer that trust back to God.

Answer the following questions as you consider trusting God:

- **Read Numbers 20:1–12** and consider what happened to Moses and the Israelites when they refused to trust God. We know that things ultimately worked out for their good (Joshua 1), and yet their misguided trust caused a massive delay in their redemption story. How has your own misguided trust caused a delay in your life? To where or to what was God leading you when you chose to derail the journey by trusting yourself, or others, more than trusting God? How has God redeemed you and your story despite your delay?
- **Read Psalm 62.** What reasons does the author give for trusting God? In what way have you known these reasons to be true for you in your experience of God?
- **Read Proverbs 3:5–6.** According to this passage, what does it look like to trust in God? How are you trusting God in this way? Rewrite these verses as a personal prayer:

- *I will trust in the Lord with all my heart* (list your emotions),
- *Lean not on my own understanding* (list your thoughts),
- *And in all my ways acknowledge him* (how will you do this today?),
- *And he will make my paths straight* (write your prayer, i.e., “Father
- give me the faith to trust you with my plans and with my life.”)

*Until Jesus returns and the garden is restored,
we'll continue to crave a sense of order and
normalcy that will always be beyond our reach.*

• **LESSON FOUR: UNSHAKEABLE CHANGE**

Change comes in many shapes and through many different circumstances. Every one of us has experienced something in life that has shaken us into change. We've experienced job loss, a health diagnosis, the death of a loved one, the high school graduation of a child, or a geographic change due to marriage, school, or job relocation. Change can be a wild card, introducing an element of uncertainty in our lives and most likely causing stress. We can try to avoid it, but to live is to change.

And we know change often means that upheaval follows—some kind of sturdiness and stability give way. Change shakes up our lives and reflects what we've learned long ago in the Creation story of the garden: normal is no longer normal; it's distorted. So when change shakes up the normal in our lives, how do we become the kind of people who see that the “normal” being shaken up by change is most often our distorted view of normal, anyway?

So Long, Normal

According to the Bible, our lives can get shaky and our sense of normal can disappear, but we do not have to be shaken by this change. The Bible clearly speaks about a type of shaking that our loving God allows. And this kind of shaking isn't random or unsupervised; it's actually purposeful with benefits for our lives. The shaking God allows in our lives is a means to an end. God is leveraging our circumstances to be sturdier and more stable, and to remind us we have an unshakeable faith in him.

Reflect on these reminders of God's promises to work all things out for our good:

"Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens' . . . so that what cannot be shaken may remain."

Hebrews 12:26–27 NIV

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Romans 8:28 NIV

"So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good."

1 Peter 4:19 NIV

How has God allowed change to shake things up in your life according to his purpose? In what specific ways has this contributed to an unshakeable faith in you?



*Part of our journey of saying so long to normal
is when we can learn to say so long to all of
those things God lovingly shakes from our life.*

• LESSON FIVE: A FIRM FOUNDATION

On a spiritual level, God in his mercy may allow our lives to be shaken for the sole purpose of exposing a faulty foundation. It's in God's *kindness* that he allows us to keep from building our lives on a faulty foundation that will eventually give away. It's in God's *love* that he allows us to experience trials so we learn to let go of the false building blocks of this world, and in doing so, understand the importance of clinging to only those things that cannot be shaken. God allows the changing and the shaking to occur in our lives so we can say goodbye to our distorted view of normal and find our way back to a firm foundation in him.

A peaceful (or courageous) life requires a firm foundation. When we allow God to be the source of our firm foundation, we stop looking to all of the good things we have holding up the foundation of our lives: our relationships, our accomplishments, our service, our knowledge, and we start looking to God. When we see God as our source, then everything else becomes a blessing in our lives and not a necessity to our foundation. When God is our foundation, we can let everyone and everything else off the hook.

Read these words of Jesus as he talks about himself as our foundation:

“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.”
Matthew 7:24–27 NIV

Now journal your answers to these questions:

- As we consider what makes up our foundation, take a moment to think about what things in life bring you joy and make you feel valued. Success? Your schedule? Now consider how you would handle it if those things were taken away.

MY LIFE

Success

Salary

Leisure Time

Schedule



- Who or what do you need to let off the hook? Meaning, are there important people or pieces of your foundation that may belong in your life but don't belong as part of your foundation?
- Now that you can see these things as faulty foundations, how does this change your perception of God allowing these things to give way? Can you see how God's removal of that faulty foundation was an act of kindness rather than a malicious one?

Pray for courage to embrace change and allow God to shake things from your life so you're left with him as your firm foundation. Doing this will prepare you to say goodbye to normal so you can say yes to God's adventure for your life.

*God cares too much to leave us standing
on shifting sand when he rescued us
from the dominion of darkness to stand
on the only sure foundation: himself.*

RECOMMENDED READING

As you reflect on what God is teaching you through this session, you may want to read chapters 1 and 2 of *So Long, Normal* by Laura Story. And consider reading chapter 3 as you get ready for the next session.