

Margaret Feinberg

Critically acclaimed author of *Fight Back with Joy*

# Pursuing God

ENCOUNTERING HIS LOVE AND  
BEAUTY IN THE BIBLE

# Pursuing God

STUDY GUIDE

ALSO BY MARGARET FEINBERG

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# Pursuing God

ENCOUNTERING HIS LOVE AND  
BEAUTY IN THE BIBLE

STUDY GUIDE  
TWELVE SESSIONS

Margaret Feinberg

ZONDERVAN

*Pursuing God Study Guide*

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# A Message for Leaders

The twelve sessions of *Pursuing God* are designed to be accessible for people to grow in their knowledge of God and Scripture. Whether participants are still trying to figure out who God is or made the decision to follow Jesus decades ago, you'll find material that reaches them wherever they are in their spiritual journey.

Here are a few guidelines to help you and your group get the most out of this study.

## TAILOR THE STUDY TO YOUR GROUP

Groups are as diverse as the people in them. Some groups will want to watch one video session each week and complete the study in twelve weeks. Others may want to focus only on the six Genesis sessions and save the six Gospel of John sessions for another time (or vice versa). Some groups will want to watch the video and then discuss as a large group; others will prefer to watch the video together and then break into smaller groups to discuss. Tailor the study to what best suits your group.

## SELECT AN EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVITY OR ICEBREAKER QUESTION IN ADVANCE

Each group session offers two options for getting started: an Experiential Activity or a selection of Icebreaker Questions. If your gathering is an hour or less, you may want to skip the activity or icebreaker question and dive right into the video so you have plenty of

time for discussion. If your gathering is longer than an hour, select either the activity or one of the questions for your group.

Before the first meeting, read through all the experiential activities in the study. Select the ones you'd like to do and make a list of items you need to purchase, gather, or research.

Consider inviting a handful of participants to organize the experiential activity each week. This will encourage involvement and develop leadership skills of the participants.

## SELECT DISCUSSION QUESTIONS IN ADVANCE

Each session includes a variety of discussion questions. Some questions focus on encouraging people to open up about their lives and others focus more on wrestling with Scripture and the material presented on the video.

More questions are provided than time will allow for most groups—don't feel like you have to ask every question. Before you gather, highlight the questions you want to focus on during the session. Select the questions best suited to the interests and objectives of your group. You may even want to develop a few questions of your own.

As you lead the discussion, remember that silence can be a friend. You may ask a question and be greeted with silence. Allow the silence to rest for a moment and see who speaks up. If you have a participant who is particularly quiet and you're asking an open-ended question that anyone could answer, consider calling on that person by name. Gently ask, "What do you think, Josh?" Try to avoid questions that lead to "yes" and "no" answers, and stay focused on learning more about God and deepening relationships.

Throughout the study, you'll discover quotes, scholarly observations, and various insights. Invite discussion on this content and see what develops.

## ENCOURAGE PARTICIPANTS TO ENGAGE IN AFTERHOURS PERSONAL STUDIES (IF THEY CAN)

Each session includes five Afterhours personal studies. The goal of Afterhours is to challenge participants to keep diving deeper into the books of Genesis and John. Encourage participants to engage in the personal studies, but remember that not everyone will be able to do so.

Remind participants that even if they aren't able to do Afterhours, they're still welcome to be part of the study. If they can only do one personal study each week, encourage them to complete Day Five, which specifically prepares participants for the next group session.

## STAY CONNECTED

Encourage participants to connect with Margaret on her website at [www.margaretfeinberg.com](http://www.margaretfeinberg.com), via Twitter @mafeinberg, or “like” her on Facebook. If you get a chance, take a photo of your group and submit it to be posted on the home page of her website. Email your photo to [info@margaretfeinberg.com](mailto:info@margaretfeinberg.com) and include the name of your church or group.





# PURSUIING GOD'S LOVE

**S**tories matter. Your story matters. My story matters. But the greatest story we will ever encounter is the story of God's love for us.

Stories were passed down orally long before they were written down. Genesis was written so the Israelites would know God and his presence and involvement in people's lives since the beginning of the world. Through the Genesis story, the Israelites are reminded how they became God's people and discover God's tremendous love for them.

Why pursue God's love?

From the foundation of the world, God created us for love. Pursuing God's love isn't just about receiving God's love but recognizing that we were made for the purpose of loving God and loving others. We are meant to experience God's love and become expressions of God's love in our world.

According to tradition, Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible (also called the Torah), including Genesis, though some scholars believe that Genesis is a collection of writings from different authors.

The first book of the Bible probably isn't the oldest written book in the Bible. Many scholars believe the book of Job predates Genesis. Yet the title of this book is derived from the very first word of Scripture, *beresheet*, which means "beginning." Does the word refer to the beginning of time, space, creation, or our planet? While the answer is debated, we know that Genesis is primarily the story of God and an expression of the divine desire for a relationship with humankind. Genesis is a story we need to hear because it teaches us about the depth and breadth of God's love for us.

My hope and prayer is that through these first six sessions you'll be reminded of the depths of God's love and faithful commitment to you.

## SESSION ONE

# Encountering God

## Genesis 1–3

*God loves us as we are, as he finds us, which is messy, muddy, and singing out of tune. Even when we've tried to be good, we have often only made matters worse, adding pride to our other failures. And the never-ending wonder at the heart of genuine Christian living is that God has come to meet us right there, in our confusion of pride and fear, of mess and muddle and downright rebellion and sin.<sup>1</sup>*

—N. T. WRIGHT

Scripture is God's story. God is the central character, and God is the author of it all. Yet, as a loving God, we're invited into the divine story God has been writing since the beginning of time.

The opening chapters of Genesis are chock-full of stories that showcase the attributes of God. God is all-powerful, all-knowing, abounding in imagination, creativity, mystery, and wisdom. God is the source of life, strength, and goodness. God is immortal and transcendent. God has a plan and purpose. The first stories in Genesis remind us that even when we question, disobey, or doubt divine love, God continues pursuing us.

## GETTING STARTED: Select One (10–15 minutes)

### Experiential Activity: Imagining the Flavors of Eden

*What you'll need:*

- A variety of fresh fruits and vegetables
  - Serving plates, forks, napkins
1. Visit a local supermarket that specializes in fresh produce. Buy a variety of fruits and vegetables. Be adventurous! Purchase some exotic fruits that you've never tried before.
  2. Wash and prepare the fruits and vegetables prior to your gathering, or you may wish to leave everything whole and make cutting and peeling part of the group experience.
  3. Discuss the following questions as you enjoy tasting your healthy snacks:
    - Which fruit is the most pleasing visually? Why?
    - Why do you think God created so many different types and flavors of fruits?
    - What emotions do you imagine God felt as creation unfolded?
    - After the man and woman were expelled from the garden, what are some of the things you think they missed most?

### Icebreaker Question

*If you're not doing the experiential activity, choose **one** of the following questions to begin your discussion.*

- Imagine that you had the opportunity to stand alongside God on one of the days of creation. Which day of creation would you most like to experience and why?
- What kinds of activities help you appreciate the wonder of God's creation?
- What do you love about God the most?

## VIDEO ONE: Encountering God (16 minutes)

*As you watch the video, use the following outline to take notes on anything that stands out to you.*

When I face times like those in life, the only thing I know to do is not give up.

In some ways, Genesis is the greatest love story ever told because it reminds us that God's love for humankind cannot be thwarted.

I apologized profusely, but hung up the phone with that sense of, "What have I done?"

As a holy and divine artist, God paints our world beautiful with the most loving attention to detail.

Whenever we focus on God's prohibitions rather than provisions, we can't help but doubt the goodness and generosity of God. We can't help but question God's love.

While the story in the garden is often referred to as "the fall of humankind," I can't help but think we need to rename it "God's rising."

## GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (30–45 minutes)

1. What caught your attention or stood out most to you on the video?

### Going Nowhere

2. The spiritual life is marked by seasons of growing and making great progress as well as those seasons when it doesn't feel like any progress is being made. Use the sentence starters to briefly describe both experiences.

I know I'm growing spiritually when . . .

I know I'm stalled spiritually when . . .

3. How do you typically respond when you mess up?

Are you able to accept forgiveness (from God and others) and move on, or are you more likely to beat yourself up with regret and second-guessing?

What helps you to move beyond your mistakes?

**NOTABLE**

Many scholars believe that Genesis was written for a people living in exile and meant to refute the false theological claims of the Babylonians. That it was written for a people who were discouraged and felt defeated. The first chapter of Genesis is a powerful declaration that God is the Lord of all.

## The Story of God

4. When you read the Bible, do you tend to view what you're reading as a historical document, a scientific document, a theological document, a literary document, or some other way? Explain.
  
5. How does the way you tend to view the Bible affect the way you learn about God and grow spiritually?
  
6. Read Genesis 3:1–7. It's easy to recognize that Adam and the woman fell for the serpent's lie that God isn't good or doesn't really love them, but what relationships or situations tend to challenge *your* belief in God's goodness or love for you?
  
7. Deep down inside, do you really believe God loves you? Explain.



**NOTABLE**

Eve isn't named until Genesis 3:20, after encountering God.

## God Rising

8. Overall, would you say you tend to focus more on God's prohibitions or God's provisions in your life? Mark your response on the continuum below. Briefly share the reason for your response.

I am always aware  
of God's prohibitions.

I am always aware  
of God's provisions.

9. Do you tend to focus more on your failings or on the redemptive healing and restoration God offers you? Mark your response on the continuum below. Briefly share the reason for your response.

I always focus more  
on my failings.

I always focus more on  
the redemptive healing and  
restoration God offers me.

Why is it important to focus on God's rising more than our failings?

When have you most recently experienced God rising in your own life?

**QUOTABLE**

“The Bible is the story of the creation of the universe—brilliant, glistening, new, and green—and of our own creation in the image of God. It is the story of our falling away from God and of God’s repeated attempts to bring us back.”<sup>2</sup>

—H. Stephen Shoemaker

10. How are you actively and intentionally pursuing God’s love in your life and your relationships right now?

At times, we need to shift our focus from our mistakes to God’s rising—the ability of God to heal, redeem, and make a way for us. When we do, we find God’s love pouring more readily to us and through us.

## CLOSE IN PRAYER

Ask God to:

- Give you the spiritual eyes to see the wonders of creation.
- Provide a new appreciation for God’s rising in your life.
- Open up new opportunities to both receive and extend God’s love.

## JUMPSTART

To prepare for the next group session, read Genesis 4 and tackle the Afterhours personal studies.

**BONUS ACTIVITY**

Take a quick photo! Before you close, take a picture of your group and email it to [info@margaretfeinberg.com](mailto:info@margaretfeinberg.com). Your group could be featured on the home page of [www.margaretfeinberg.com](http://www.margaretfeinberg.com).

## SESSION ONE

# Afterhours Personal Studies

*Dive deeper into the book of Genesis by engaging in these five personal studies. If you only have time for one, choose Day Five, which will prepare you specifically for the next session.*

### DAY ONE: The Breathtaking Account of Creation

#### GENESIS 1:1–2:3

The opening chapter of Genesis provides a breathtaking account of the story of creation. This is the story of God bringing order to our world. The creation story is a powerful reminder that everything God creates has a purpose.

Each day of the creation story follows a pattern, which often includes *announcing, commanding, separating, reporting, naming, evaluating, and timing*. However, some days of creation provide exceptions to the pattern. For example, day two in the creation story is the only day in which God doesn't say, "It is good" (Genesis 1:6–8). Scholars differ on the explanation. Some suggest that day two isn't declared good because there is a separation between the heavens, or firmament, and the water below. They argue that any separation from heaven isn't good. Whatever the reason, it's worth paying attention to the exceptions found in the pattern used to describe creation.

1. Read Genesis 1. On day three, God says "It is good" twice. What do you think was good about creating the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16–17)?

2. On which day of creation does God declare what he creates “very good” (Genesis 1:31)?

Why do you think this day receives a special declaration?



**NOTABLE**

On the first day, evening came before morning. Some believe this detail is reflective of the Jewish day, which begins at sundown rather than sunrise.

3. Which day of creation is mentioned three times, indicating its significance (Genesis 2:2–3)?

What is the first thing God creates that he sets apart as holy (Genesis 2:3)?

In what ways have you experienced the Sabbath as a holy day in your own life?

4. What is the only day of creation that does not include, “There was evening, there was morning” (Genesis 2:2–3)?

Why do you think this phrase is omitted?



#### QUOTABLE

The Bible tells us how to go to Heaven, not how the heavens go.”<sup>3</sup>

—Galileo Galilei

5. What obstacles in your life prevent you from entering God’s rest?

In ancient culture, the sun, moon, and stars were often worshiped as gods. It is important to make a distinction between the objects that produce light and God as the source of light. Note the sequence of creation: God creates light itself on day one, but it isn’t until day four that he hangs the sun, moon, and stars in the sky.

The creation story is laced with details that highlight the wonders of God. It teaches us that God exists within himself, triumphs over chaos, and is intimately involved with creation. While other gods threaten death and loss, our God is full of blessing. God’s creation literally teams with life.

6. In which areas of your life do you need to experience God triumphing over chaos?

How do you hope to experience God's blessing in these areas?

Spend some time thanking God for any fresh insights or discoveries you made as you dove into the first chapter of Genesis. Ask God to give you the desire and time to dive deeper into the Scriptures over the upcoming week. Ask the Holy Spirit to illuminate Genesis as you read and study.

## DAY TWO: Second Account of Creation

### GENESIS 1-2

If the first chapter of Genesis provides a bird's eye view of the story of creation, then the second chapter provides a street-level view as it continues the story of creation, adding rich details to the creation of the garden and humankind.

An interesting shift in perspective takes place from Genesis 1 to Genesis 2. The first chapter of Genesis tells the creation story from God's perspective; the second chapter of Genesis tells the story from a human perspective. While Genesis 1:1 notes that in the beginning God created "the heavens and the earth," Genesis 2 reverses the order: "the earth and the heavens" (2:4).

1. Read Genesis 1-2. As you read, make a list of four to six differences you notice in the way the two chapters tell the creation story.
2. How does the Genesis 2 account of creation expand your understanding of God and the purpose of humankind? (*Hint:* See Genesis 2:15-17.)



**NOTABLE**

Men and women have the same number of ribs anatomically. But since Adam and Eve were the first people, it's always fair to wonder, did they have bellybuttons?

3. How should knowing that you're made in "the image of God" (see Genesis 1:26–27; 2:22–25) affect the way you interact and view the following:

Yourself

Others

God

4. Some scholars note a correlation between the words and phrases used in the story of creation and the words and phrases used in the Exodus story of the tabernacle. The tabernacle was a portable sanctuary, God's temporary dwelling place among his people before they were able to build a permanent temple. Scholars suggest that the temple is a smaller portrait of what God created in the beginning of Genesis. Look up the passages in the chart on the following page. What common words and phrases do they share?

PASSAGES	SHARED WORDS AND PHRASES
Genesis 1:31 and Exodus 39:43	
Genesis 2:1 and Exodus 39:32	
Genesis 2:2 and Exodus 40:33	
Genesis 2:3 and Exodus 39:43	

When God instructs the Israelites to build the tabernacle, God is renewing the vision of the garden of Eden, the vision of God dwelling with humanity.

5. When are you most aware of God’s desire to be with you? How do you respond when you sense the Spirit’s tugging in your life?

God places Adam in the garden of Eden, which can be translated “pleasure” or “delight,” and instructs him to enjoy the lush fruits and vegetables of the land, except for one: the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Though the tree of life is mentioned first in the text, all the attention falls on the second tree—suggesting that mankind’s desire for power is stronger than his hunger for life.

6. When do you feel most tempted by the desire for power?

Spend some time thanking God for the wonders and beauty of creation. Praise God for the care and love with which humankind was made. Ask God to increase your own desire for an intimate relationship with him as well as the abundant life he wants to give you.

## DAY THREE: Facing Temptation

## GENESIS 3:1–7

The third chapter of Genesis paints a beautiful portrait of God's love for us by demonstrating divine grace and provision for our lives. We meet God's adversary who takes the form of a serpent. The Genesis text never says that Satan is the actual snake in the garden, but in the Old Testament and the New, snakes are sometimes used to describe evil people or nations. However, in the last book of the Bible, Satan is described as a snake (Revelation 12:9, 13–15). Satan could have chosen to take the form of any animal, but chooses a wise, crafty reptile.

1. Read Genesis 3:1–3 and compare it to Genesis 2:16–17. How does the serpent distort God's instructions?

**NOTABLE**

The Hebrew word for “knowing” is *yodea*, which can also be translated as a respectful reference to a divine being. The temptation of the serpent in Genesis 3:5 can be interpreted as a promise to become “divine beings, knowers of good and evil.”

2. Read Genesis 3:4–5. The serpent is a smooth talker. In just a few sentences, he convinces the woman to doubt God's goodness and embrace disobedience. What do you think was most appealing to the woman about the serpent's argument in this passage?

Which aspect of the temptation would be the hardest for you to resist?

The serpent approaches the woman with a mixture of truth and falsehood. The woman turns to the tree, rather than God, to make her final decision. She finds the fruit is aesthetically pleasing and tasty. She shares the news with her husband. The Scripture doesn't detail their conversation, and so we are left to wonder: Did Adam protest? Did the woman disclose which fruit the tree was plucked from? Were the serpent's arguments enough to convince Adam? Did the woman add any arguments to persuade Adam to eat the fruit?

3. Read Genesis 3:6–7. In the space below, imagine and record the dialogue between the woman and Adam in which she convinces him to eat the fruit. For example:

THE WOMAN: "Honey, you'll never guess what I discovered in the garden today!  
The fruit on this one tree is sweeter and more delicious than anything we've  
eaten so far."

ADAM: "You know that I love fruit—which tree did you get it from?"

THE WOMAN:

ADAM:

THE WOMAN:

ADAM:

THE WOMAN:

ADAM:

Which argument do you imagine was most effective in convincing Adam to eat the fruit?

**NOTABLE**

Some scholars believe the tree of life extended life rather than granted immortality. Being removed from the garden prevented access to the tree. This interpretation explains why God never forbid Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit of the tree of life.

Though we don't know the details of the conversation between Adam and the woman, both ate the fruit. The consequences of their actions were just as God had warned—death entered the world. Their eyes were opened as they were given the knowledge of good and evil. In an instant, they experience something they've never encountered before: shame. What is shame? The painful feeling of embarrassment, humiliation, or distress resulting from the awareness of wrong, foolish, or ill-considered behavior.

4. What types of situations or encounters have caused you to feel shame?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. The Bible is rich with promises about how God wants to remove our shame. Read Psalm 119:39; Romans 8:1–2; Romans 10:11; and John 8:1–11. How do these promises encourage you?

Spend some time asking God to reveal any interactions or incidents from the past for which you still feel shame. Ask God to remove any shame and saturate you with forgiveness, grace, and hope.

DAY FOUR: The Story of God

GENESIS 3:8-24

A crafty serpent convinces the woman of the ultimate lie, namely, that God is not good. She and Adam eat the fruit. Sin enters our world. Stripped of their innocence, the couple attempts to cover themselves. They reach for the bright green fig leaves—which are known to grow up to a foot in length—to create a covering. The couple is alienated from each other and God as they hide among the vegetation.

While the story of the garden is often called “the fall,” a better name might be “God’s rising.” Remember that this is God’s story: “In the beginning . . . God.” While Genesis 3 highlights our sinful nature and a tragic decision on the part of humankind, the hero of the story is still God. A glimpse of God’s plan for redemption emerges in the promise that one of the woman’s offspring will crush the head of the serpent.

1. Despite their sin, God does not abandon Adam, the woman, or the garden. Read Genesis 3:8–13. What four questions does God ask?

GOD’S FOUR QUESTIONS	
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	

If God already knows the answer to these questions, why do you think God chose to ask them anyway?

What does the interaction among God, Adam, and the woman reveal about God’s love and his desire for a relationship with us?



—John H. Walton

2. Read Genesis 3:14–19. What does God curse in this passage? (*Hint:* See vv. 14, 17.)



—Unknown

After God judges the serpent, the woman, and Adam, a subtle but significant shift takes place in the text. For the first time, the woman is given a personal name! She is called Eve, the mother of all the living. The name Eve is derived from the Hebrew word *chavah*, meaning “to breathe.” This is the first sign of hope after the fall. God’s redemptive work has begun. Eve will bear children. Many generations later one of her offspring will defeat evil forever.

A second sign of hope appears in God's provision for Adam and Eve. God takes on the role of fashion designer and creates clothing for them from animal skins. The scene foreshadows the central biblical truth that sin requires a sacrifice, which appears later in Scripture.

4. The third sign of hope is found in God's removal of Adam and Eve from the garden. Read Genesis 3:22–24. Why was driving the couple from the garden a sign of God's love and protection?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
5. What are some unexpected ways in which you've experienced God's love and protection?

How do you tend to respond to difficult situations in life before you recognize God's love and protection in those things?

6. How might the difficult things in your life right now actually be a sign of God's love and protection?

Adam and Eve are removed from the garden forever. The great loss is not the garden but God. Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, we never read about people wanting to return to the comforts of Eden; instead they long for God's presence. As Genesis continues to unfold, we keep seeing God rising—divine love and redemption appearing in the most unexpected circumstances and situations.

Spend some time reflecting on any areas of your life where you need to experience God rising. Ask God to increase your awareness of divine love.

## DAY FIVE: Cain's Legacy

## GENESIS 4

The story of Cain and Abel is a story of heartbreak—two brothers whose differences cause one to murder the other. In the wake of the fratricide, the story makes it clear that the descendants of Cain will continue to compound their sins until hope appears and God's people begin to love and obey him.

1. Read Genesis 4:1–16. Reflecting on Genesis 4:1–5, why do you think Cain's gift wasn't highly regarded by God?
2. Though Scripture does not specifically tell us, what do you imagine happened between Cain and Abel in the field on the day Cain murdered his brother?

Not only does the story of Cain teach us about the importance of love, forgiveness, and obedience, it also gives us an insight into temptations we face. God tells Cain, "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it" (Genesis 4:7).

3. Read the passages listed in the chart on the next page. In the second column, note the wisdom each passage offers about handling anger. Then rate how difficult it is for you to apply this particular truth when you are angry. Use a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the most difficult.

SCRIPTURE	WISDOM ABOUT HOW TO HANDLE ANGER	LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY (1 TO 10)
Proverbs 15:1	<i>Ex.: Responding with gentleness can defuse anger.</i>	<i>Ex.: 7</i>
Proverbs 20:2		
Proverbs 21:14		
Proverbs 22:24		
Proverbs 29:11		
Ecclesiastes 7:9		
Matthew 5:21–24		
Ephesians 4:26–27		
James 1:20		

4. Reflecting on the Scriptures from the chart in question 3, list four to six ways Cain could have handled the situation differently.

Place a checkmark next to the passage that is most compelling for you. How might it help you to develop a healthier response to anger?

Whenever you encounter genealogies in Scripture, it's important to remember that they don't always include every single person who is born. They're more like a highlight reel. Biblical genealogies also serve more than one purpose. For example, they may trace lineage back to a common ancestor, establish continuity between biblical stories, demonstrate the legitimacy of a person for a particular office, or reveal God's redemptive work and favor in a person's life.

5. Read Genesis 4:17–26. What is the significance of the birth of Enosh?

What does it look like in your own life to call on the name of the Lord?

Spend some time in prayer asking God to reveal any areas of anger or unforgiveness in your life. Acknowledge what you've done or left undone. Ask God to forgive and heal you.