

**NOTHING IS WASTED**  
*How God Redeems What Is Broken*  
Study Guide

**By Joseph Bentz**

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# INTRODUCTION



This study guide may be used in several ways:

- Some group leaders may want to use the guide for their own preparation only, while others may choose to print out copies for each group member to use.
- The guide divides the book into six weeks because that time frame works well for many groups, but some may want to slow it down and spend more time on each chapter.
- The study guide includes more questions and activities than many groups will have time to discuss, depending on the length of sessions and the level of participation in each group. Leaders may want to be selective about which questions and issues are most relevant to their groups.
- The study guide also works well for individual readers who want to deepen their study and reflection on some of the issues raised in the book.

## What is *Nothing Is Wasted* about?

Redemption is so important to God that he has scattered hints of it throughout the universe.

When you glance around the world, you may not think you see much redemption. You may notice more trouble instead. Terrorists blow up innocent children. Bombs demolish homes and send frightened citizens fleeing toward the squalor of refugee camps. Disease sweeps through poor nations and wipes out hundreds, their bodies tossed aside. Drought kills crops and puts farmers out of business. Politicians posture, blame, and take feckless stabs at solving intractable problems. Celebrities enmesh themselves in scandals, providing the public a perverse escape from all the real tragedy of the world.

Closer to home, maybe your own life isn't faring so well. You're worried about money. You fret about work. What about the crises in your family? What about all the sickness among the people you love? Where is your life headed?

Even if your life is going well now, you wonder how long that can last. All around you, everything is falling apart. People you love are getting older. *You* are getting older, much faster than you would like. The possibility of disaster lurks in every automobile trip, every medical checkup, every unknown terrorist's scheme.

One way to look at life is as a series of losses. We lose loved ones, our youth, our decaying possessions, and eventually our lives. The world is a fallen, suffering, fading place. In that kind of world, how are we supposed to see hints of redemption?

The pattern of loss is pervasive. The fallen, corrupt nature of the world is real. But there is also a countervailing force at work in the world. In the midst of all this loss beats a relentless pulse of redeeming love that thrusts itself through the chaos and pain. It does not obliterate the pain, but it also does not allow it to be wasted. Good is wrenched from it, like a gold nugget pried from deep underground.

Where are such hints planted? In beautiful elements of life, obviously, in things that make you glad you're alive even when the rest of the world stinks. Loving relationships, the joy of meaningful work, the deep pleasures of music, walks on sandy beaches, hikes through forests, good meals, enjoyable books, and countless other good facets of life certainly offset many of its harsher realities. But those redeeming elements of life are easy to see.

Does God also plant redemption in ugly, smelly, unpleasant things? Can it be found in things people see only as destructive, or mean, or sad? Can redemption spring from things that people believe have no value? Can even the worst circumstances life has to offer give rise to redemption?

*Nothing Is Wasted* may open your eyes to redemption in places where you were least likely to look for it—in dirt, in whale carcasses, in death, in suffering, in fairy tales, in frustrations, and in the story of your own life.

# SESSION 1



## Book Portion

Chapter 1: The Song of Redemption

## Key Themes

Redemption is so important to God that he has scattered it throughout the universe. This chapter introduces readers to the theme of redemption and shows some unexpected places in which it appears. It also gives an overview of where the book is headed.

## Discussion Questions

### FOCUS: The Meaning of Redemption

1. When you consider the world in which you live, are you more likely to think first of the suffering, sadness, meanness, and violence that are so pervasive, or do you put more emphasis on the joys, beauty, opportunities, and love that also exist? Is one approach more justified than the other? What dangers might there be in overemphasizing either aspect of reality?
2. What do you think of when you hear the word *redemption*? Discuss the associations you have with that word in your own life.
3. Redemption is a term that has different meanings. Ask someone to look up an official definition of the term. From what you read in this chapter, in what ways is this book using the term? What aspects of redemption is this book not about?

### FOCUS: Singing the Song of Redemption

1. This introductory chapter uses the metaphor of the repeated theme song in a movie to describe the way God repeatedly plants hints of the theme song of redemption throughout life. Play a little game of Name that Tune. Ask people who are comfortable to hum portions of famous theme songs from various films, and see how long it takes the group to identify them. For each example, discuss that song's prominence in the film. How much does the song add to the film? When you hear snippets of these songs even years later, do you still think of those movies?
2. With the movie theme songs in mind, list the ways in which those songs and the ways they are used in films are an appropriate metaphor for how God scatters redemption in the world. From evidence in this chapter and in your own experience, in what moments and details of life have you heard that song of redemption played?

### **FOCUS: The Boll Weevil**

1. Discuss the Boll Weevil Monument in Enterprise, Alabama. Do you agree with Coffee County's decision to build a monument to an insect that did so much damage?
2. If towns are going to build monuments to things like the boll weevil, which caused great heartache but ended up leading to better practices, what else might monuments be constructed for? Discuss possible unique monuments and what their plaques might say.
3. Think of the weevil-like sources of destruction in your own life. If you were asked to build a monument for any of those sources of destruction, what would you build? What changes have you had to make that turned out to be good even though the circumstances that forced you into them were very bad?

### **FOCUS: The Bible as a Sprawling, Complex Redemption Story**

1. The author describes how frustrated he was as a young Christian by how complicated the Bible seemed when he first read it all the way through. He expected a clear-cut narrative, but instead, it went off in many directions, with many stories of difficulty and failure. What possible explanation does the author offer for the multi-faceted structure of the Bible? What are your thoughts on that explanation?
2. The author also mentions authors, such as C.S. Lewis, who have helped him better understand the message of Scripture. What authors and books would you recommend that might serve a similar function?

### **FOCUS: Abraham, Sarah, Lot's Wife, and Other Complicated Dramas**

1. In biblical stories about Abraham and Sarah, or Lot's family, there are many ways in which it first appears that God's purposes will ultimately be thwarted. Review those stories and what this chapter says about them. In what surprising ways are the obstacles or complications overcome? Do you find these stories disturbing, inspiring, or both?
2. In what ways do these biblical stories parallel your own experience? Has your life followed a course that you could have predicted ten or twenty years ago? If not, what are some of the major ways in which you have been blocked or pushed in entirely different directions from what you expected? How did God redeem those shifts in course?

### **FOCUS: Why Is Redemption so Hard to See?**

1. Review the story of Jesus's healing of the man born blind. Not only is it a story of physical blindness; it is also a story of spiritual blindness on the part of the religious authorities, the townspeople, the man's family, and, to some extent, even Jesus's disciples. What do those people groups fail to see that the blind man himself understands? How often do you think we also fail to see and celebrate the clues of redemption all around us? What can we do to make ourselves more attuned to those clues?
2. If one chapter of the Bible were devoted to telling about *your* life, what story would you tell? What has happened to you that best encompasses the way God has worked in your life? How long did it take you to make sense of that story yourself?

## **Action Steps**

1. As you go through this week, make a list of every example of redemption you find in expected or unexpected places. Be ready to share from this list in the next session.
2. Identify and reread three stories from the Bible that have had the biggest impact on you or that are most memorable. What part, if any, does redemption play in those stories?

# SESSION 2



## Book Portion

Chapter 2: Redemption in Tragic Circumstances

Chapter 3: Your Suffering Is Not Only about You

## Key Themes

These chapters explore the place of redemption in our lives when the worst things happen. Chapter 2 emphasizes the ways good may spring from even the worst circumstances in our own lives. It also looks at ways that redemption and pain often coexist: One does not cancel out the other. Chapter 3 examines how our own difficulties may transform not only ourselves but also many others beyond us.

## Discussion Questions

### FOCUS: Report on Action Steps from Session 1

If members of your group conducted the Action Steps suggested in Session 1, spend some time discussing what they did. What examples of redemption did they find in unexpected places? What did they learn about redemption from the stories in Scripture?

### FOCUS: Tragedy and the Illusion of Self-Sufficiency

1. These chapters tell stories of people who were shaken to their core by catastrophes of many kinds, from the death of a beloved daughter to life-threatening illnesses. Discuss the changes of perspective that occurred in these people about life and the rules or principles that govern reality. How did these events make people see themselves differently, and how did they make them think of God differently?
2. In your experience, is suffering just as likely to lead people away from God as it is to lead them toward embracing God? What seems to make the difference?
3. Perhaps you have had disasters in your own life that rival those described in these chapters, or maybe you have not. Either way, what are some important lessons you learned from the stories of these people and their responses to suffering?

### FOCUS: Time to Grieve, Time to Wait on God

1. One idea that emerges repeatedly in these chapters is that in tragic situations, redemption itself as well as acknowledgment of it may take a long time. Discuss the various stories in these chapters in terms of the timing it took for any sense of redemption to emerge from the tragedies. What are the dangers of trying to rush redemption?

2. Just as it is a mistake to rush *ourselves* through times of grief, it is also a mistake to try to rush *others* through theirs. Can you think of situations in which someone has become impatient with how long it is taking someone else to work through a crisis?

### **FOCUS: Even Small Crises Can Rock Us**

1. Chapter 2 quotes Gerald Sittser's book, *A Grace Revealed*. Even though Sittser has endured horrible tragedy with the deaths of a mother, wife, and daughter in a car accident, many years later he writes that life's smaller disappointments and difficulties are sometimes almost as hard to endure over the long term as the initial tragedy. Have you found that to be the case in your experience? Why is it that we are sometimes able to hold up well during the big crises, yet the relatively minor ones may send us into a meltdown?

2. Sittser and others in chapter 2 claim that the smaller, seemingly un-heroic struggles and maladies that so many of us face *do* serve a redemptive purpose even though many people overlook it. Discuss the redemptive outcomes they see. What about your own life? Can you find any redemptive side effects in the midst of your own pesky, annoying problems that you may endure every day?

### **FOCUS: Saying the Wrong Things—and the Right Things**

1. In chapter 2, Jerry Deans discusses the ways that "easy answers" can frustrate and hurt those who are grieving. Even if there may be some truth in the statements themselves, people may not be ready to hear those words. Here are some examples of insensitive statements to avoid saying to those who have lost a loved one:

- *God must have needed her in heaven more than you needed her here.*
- *I understand what you are going through.*
- *This must be a part of God's plan.*
- *Everything happens for a reason.*

What does Jerry suggest would be better things to say? If you have suffered from grief, what actions or comments have helped you most? What comments or actions have hurt you?

2. Jerry Deans also says that in his grief support groups, he encourages people to try to look beyond the *content* of the insensitive comments in order to see the *intent* of the person saying them. Do you agree that it is a good idea to extend some grace to those who speak insensitively without realizing it? What can you do to avoid being one of those insensitive people? What do people need most during times of grief?

### **FOCUS: How May We Be Transformed as We Help Those Who Suffer?**

1. Chapter 3 offers an example of a church that came together beautifully to help a family in crisis. Make a list of some of the things the church did right in helping Jerry Deans and his family. What could your own church learn from that?

2. What other examples stood out to you in chapters 2 and 3 that illustrate the concept that our suffering is not only about us but can also lead to a redemptive transformation for others? Can you think of any examples of this in your own experience?

### **FOCUS: Redemption Is Powerful, but Is the Pain Worth It?**

1. Discuss this statement from Amy Hauser, who survived breast cancer: "From where I stand, I wouldn't trade my experience, starting with that phone call...revealing that I had breast cancer, for whatever would have happened if the news had been that my cancer screenings had come back clear."

Considering the redemptive outcomes of Amy's experience, do you think you could say the same thing after coming through such an ordeal? Does redemption make suffering worth it?

2. One theme in these chapters is that redemption may come, but pain continues too. Relate this concept to your own experience. Can you think of areas of your life in which pain and redemption exist side by side? Are there times when you have been grateful for a redemptive outcome in a situation but still wish the painful experience had never happened?

### **Action Steps**

1. Consider a time in your life when you went through great pain, especially if it was long enough ago that you have had time to see some of its long-term implications. Even if the pain still remains, do you find within your circumstances any recognizable examples of God's redemptive action? Can you identify any good that emerged from your circumstances? If so, list those on a sheet of paper. Does any of that surprise you? What questions about your painful time remain unanswered?

2. With that same episode in mind, make a list of what people said or did for you that was most helpful. Did anything surprise you? Did small acts of kindness mean more to you than you would have imagined? Make a list of some things people said or did that were harmful, even if it was unintentional. What can you learn from this list as you contemplate helping others who are hurting?

# SESSION 3



## Book Portion

Chapter 4: The God of the Impossible

Chapter 5: The God Who Thwarts

## Key Themes

God often works in unexpected and even bizarre ways. Chapter 4 examines cases in which the situation looks so hopeless that only God could save it. God comes to the rescue only when such a rescue looks impossible. Chapter 5 shows the role that God's thwarting sometimes plays in our lives. Instead of fulfilling our desires, God sometimes thwarts them in order to guide us toward a better path.

## Discussion Questions

### FOCUS: Report on Action Steps from Session 2

If members of your group feel comfortable sharing, ask them to tell about their reflections from last session's action steps.

### FOCUS: When a Young Mother's Death Is Not the End of the Story

1. Ask your group to respond to this statement from chapter 4: "It is often as if God wants to rescue a situation but only when it has reached the point where a favorable outcome looks impossible. He is the God of the impossible." What examples from this chapter support that statement? What examples from Scripture or from your own life illustrate this idea?
2. Although Sandi's story and Abraham's episode with Isaac end with clear and inspiring resolutions, not every situation in life ends in such a satisfying way. Sometimes it appears that God does *not* rescue the situation or bring any clear-cut redemption. What are possible explanations for that? How much of the long-term purpose and implications of circumstances may be beyond our understanding?
3. Sandi's marriage to Allen is the ultimate redemptive aspect of this story, but discuss other ways in which Sandi is rescued. Although her early life is filled with pain, what other people besides Allen emerge in this story to push Sandi in the right direction?
4. What does the prayer that Becky prayed before she died say about her character and her faith?

### FOCUS: How Often Does God Do the Impossible?

1. What Bible stories come to mind in which the outcome is anything but straightforward? When you look at the direction of your own life, has it moved forward in a straightforward manner, or have there been many detours and surprises? How comfortable are you with unexpected shifts in your life?

2. This chapter's summary of the family life of Jacob in the Bible shows a tale of great dysfunction. However, even though God does not cause or necessarily condone that dysfunction, neither does God allow it to destroy his long-term plan. When have you seen God's loving purposes prevail even in the midst of human dysfunction?

### **FOCUS: Trusting the God of the Impossible**

1. Place yourself in Abraham's situation. God orders you to sacrifice your beloved son. This is the child who has been promised to you for decades and who is the center of your hope for future generations.

- Do you think you would have the faith to carry out the order God gives to Abraham? Why or why not?
- If not, at what point in the story would you back out? As soon as the order is given? Somewhere along the journey? Right before Isaac is placed on the altar?
- Do you believe Abraham might imagine any positive outcome to this episode, or is he acting in total, blind faith?
- Can you think of situations in your own life in which you have had to act in blind faith, with little concrete assurance of the outcome?

### **FOCUS: Thwarted for Our Own Good**

1. Much of chapter 5 is about ways God thwarts us from one path in order to guide us to a different and better one. The chapter also speculates on what might happen if we were never thwarted. What if you got everything you wanted? Imagine that scenario and discuss where it might lead.

2. Discuss the following quote from the book. How would you answer the questions it raises?

"Think of your own past. Can you recall a relationship that, at the time, you would have given almost anything to have but now realize would have been destructive in the long run? Maybe you can think of a relationship that you *did* have that lasted for a while but left you devastated when it ended. Can you now see ways in which you are better off that it ended? Can you think of some other passion of your younger years—for some experience, or achievement, or possession—that at the time felt as if it would be the fulfillment of all your desires but that now you see would not have satisfied you for all that long? Can you think of one of these passions that *was* fulfilled but that still eventually left you wanting more?"

### **FOCUS: Wake-Up Calls**

Amie Longmire was hit by a car while crossing the street. The apostle Paul was knocked down and temporarily blinded. For both of them, these incidents, while painful in themselves, were the best things that ever happened to them. They served as wake-up calls that pushed them in new and better directions.

1. What incidents have served as wake-up calls in your own life?
2. Did you realize immediately that the incident was a wake-up call, or did it take awhile to see the benefit of what happened to you?

## **Action Steps**

1. Interview three people and ask them how different their lives are now from what they expected when they were younger. What sense do they make of those differences? Are they glad their paths were diverted? Are there ways in which they are disappointed? Do they sense God's guidance?
2. Rewrite the story of Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac as if Abraham did not fully trust God. What might the short-term and long-term consequences of such a lack of faith have been for Abraham and others?

# SESSION 4



## Book Portion

Chapter 6: Why We Like Stories about Trouble

Chapter 7: How Storytellers Create Beauty from Pain

## Key Themes

Session 4 probes the ways redemption emerges in the stories that entertain us and in the lives of the storytellers who create them. Chapter 6 considers why trouble is so pervasive in the stories we love. It looks at how the Christian pattern of redemption is often present even in stories that are not explicitly Christian. Chapter 7 looks at how difficult circumstances in the lives of writers helped fuel their desire to become storytellers.

## Discussion Questions

### FOCUS: Report on Action Steps from Session 3

If members of your group conducted the Action Steps suggested in Session 3, give them a chance to share their thoughts and findings with the group.

### FOCUS: Our Obsession with Trouble

1. Focusing on the past 24 hours of your life, list all the examples of stories you have either told or consumed—on TV, the internet, newspapers, conversations, books, and in other venues. Why this urge for story? What needs do you think it meets?
2. Looking at your list, how many of those stories included some kind of trouble? What are some examples of that trouble? What if you tried to write a novel or TV drama that did not contain trouble? How successful do you think it would be?
3. What does this chapter say about why people are so drawn to trouble in stories? Do you agree? Why or why not?

### FOCUS: Why *Cinderella* Works

1. Review and discuss the list of absurdities the author identifies in the *Cinderella* story. Had any of those occurred to you or bothered you before? How have different versions of the story you have read or seen handled those issues? Do you still love the story in spite of these implausible elements?
2. What reasons does this chapter give for why readers are willing to accept the absurdities in *Cinderella*, even though they are often more picky about even the smallest inconsistencies in other stories? What deep need does this story hit? Do you agree with the comparisons the author makes between the *Cinderella* story and the Christian story of redemption? Why or why not?

## FOCUS: Christ Figures in Literary Classics and Popcorn Movies

1. Brainstorm with your group to come up with a list of movies and novels that have affected you most powerfully. How do those stories fit into the pattern of redemption that is described in chapter 6? How many of these stories contain what you would consider a Christ figure? Are the stories themselves Christian stories? If not, why do you think the Christian elements can be found in them?

2. This chapter discusses popular apocalyptic movies in which the world or nation is at risk of annihilation and relies on a brave hero to save it. How long a list of such movies can your group come up with? Why are such movies so popular? What, if anything, do these films show about the spiritual needs and longings of this generation?

3. It's easy to find Christ figures in films and novels, but is that any indication that the Christian story is true or special? Review this quote from the book:

"Some might claim that the Christian story is merely one of countless stories that happen to follow the same redemptive pattern and that there is nothing special about the story of the life of Christ. We have Greek and Roman mythology, *Star Wars* mythology, Superman mythology, Christian mythology. If all these stories follow such similar patterns, why should any of them be thought of as more important than the others?"

What is the author's answer to this question? Do you agree? Why or why not?

## FOCUS: How Storytellers Redeem Their Pain

1. For all three writers whose lives are discussed in chapter 7, make a list of the difficulties or failures they faced. Next to that list, show the ways in which those circumstances ultimately made them better writers than they otherwise would have been.

2. Chapter 7 focuses specifically on how pain in the lives of writers has been redeemed, but even if you are not a writer, what similarities do you see in how painful elements of your own life have been transformed into some kind of positive outcome?

3. This chapter points out that the difficulties these writers faced did not *inevitably* lead them to become successful writers. These men instead could have approached their trying circumstances in ways that would have led them to even *more* pain and failure. Look at these three lives and discuss the part that the writers themselves played in bringing redemption from their tough circumstances.

## Action Steps

1. As you watch movies, read novels, or read news articles this week, make a list of all the stories you come across that follow the redemptive patterns discussed in these chapters. Do you find any Christ figures in the stories you are enjoying? How many times has the world been threatened in fiction or reality in the stories you consume this week? How many times has the need for a savior been shown?

2. Try to write a short story that contains no trouble. Let others read it. How much do they enjoy it?

# SESSION 5



## Book Portion

Chapter 8: Some Unexpected Benefits of Death

Chapter 9: Melting Down to Your Essential Goo

## Key Themes

Chapters 8 and 9 consider different ways of thinking about our identity in Christ and the transformations that will have to take place in order to achieve it. Chapter 8 examines Jesus's metaphor of the seed that must be buried and die in order to grow up into a plant that produces good fruit. Like the seed planted in the dirt, Jonah in the Old Testament is placed into the belly of the whale in order to undergo his own spiritual transformation. In Chapter 9, the metaphor shifts to the caterpillar that must be melted down to its essential goo in order to be able to establish its new identity as a butterfly. Redemption and renewal often require changes that feel painful and bewildering while they are happening but that are worth it in the end.

## Discussion Questions

### FOCUS: Report on Action Steps from Session 4

If members of your group conducted the Action Steps suggested in Session 4, give them a chance to share those findings.

### FOCUS: The Death and Life of Seeds

Chapter 8 begins with Jesus's statement in John 12:24: "Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." Using that verse and chapter 8 as a guide, analyze the symbolic spiritual significance of the various aspects of the life and transformation of a seed by discussing these questions:

1. As Jesus describes the seed, the first thing that should happen to it is that it should be buried (or, "fall to the ground and die.") What if that part never happened? What if the seed were preserved instead?
2. The seed is torn apart underground, and a new *plant* grows from it (not a gigantic *seed*, not a bigger version of *itself*, but a whole new being.) What does that indicate spiritually about what should emerge from a seed's destruction underground?
3. The plant grows and produces fruit and also new seeds. What does that mean spiritually?

### **FOCUS: Resistance**

1. Think of examples in your own life of seeds that God has buried in order to transform them into productive plants. How much resistance did you feel as the death of your seed happened? How did you come to terms with it?

2. Analyze and discuss the following two quotations from chapter 8, which deal with our reluctance to allow our seeds to go through the often painful process of transformation:

“In ‘Jack and the Beanstalk,’ Jack’s mother angrily flings away the beans. My temptation is usually not to fling the seeds away; for me, the temptation is to hold on to them and think, *Someday I’m going to plant this, when the time is right.* I want to hold back, not commit myself, preserve my options.”

“The Christian life is a series of transformative deaths and resurrections...

As life-giving as this process sounds, it is always accompanied by a dangerous negative force that has the potential to undermine it—resistance.

...Seed burying, rather than seed preservation, is so counterintuitive, and often so painful, that resistance is built into it. It helps to anticipate that resistance so that, with God’s help, we can overcome it when it happens.”

### **FOCUS: Jonah as a Resistant Seed**

1. Review the story of Jonah. Connecting this story to the first part of chapter 8, in what ways can Jonah be considered a resistant seed?

2. Put yourself in Jonah’s situation. At each step, in what ways might you respond to circumstances differently than he does? What does he do wrong? What does he do that you admire?

### **FOCUS: Coming to Terms with Our Spiritual Goo**

1. Review what chapter 9 says about the goo stage of the caterpillar/butterfly’s life. Were you surprised that the caterpillar gets so completely melted down inside the chrysalis? What metaphorical spiritual application does the chapter make about this? How is it similar to what happens with the seed in chapter 8?

2. Consider the following quote from chapter 9 about the caterpillar being in the way in the chrysalis stage. What spiritual analogy can be drawn from this? What two identities might a new Christian try to hold onto?

“The truth is that once that caterpillar is in the chrysalis, it is in the way. If its present form survived, it would serve no purpose. In order for that butterfly to be created, the caterpillar has to quit taking up all the space. There is not room for both of them, and since they are really the same creature, there can only be one or the other. This being survives either as a caterpillar or a butterfly. It can’t be both. If it *tried* to be both, or if somehow the process were interrupted in the middle without a full transformation, the result would be a disaster.”

## **FOCUS: Shipwreck**

Review highlights of Christin Taylor's shipwreck story presented in chapter 9 then discuss these questions:

1. Christin's shipwreck actually came in the form of a job offer. She accepted the job then cried for three hours. Why was this job offer, which normally would be considered a *good* thing, such a disappointment for her? In the long run, how did it help lead her to her true identity? Has a crushed dream ever become the first step in the journey to your own new identity?
2. What elements of Christin's journey toward her true identity were completely unpredictable? How much trust in God did it require from her? How much of your own life journey has been different from anything you could have anticipated? How does that impact your faith?

## **Action Steps**

1. Using Christin Taylor's story as a model, map out your own journey toward the identity you now inhabit. You could do this as a list or in narrative form. Which of those elements do you view differently now than at the time it was happening? What do you know now that you wish you had known then? How does this affect your trust in God?
2. With that journey of your past in mind, create a few possible scenarios of where you would like the rest of your journey to go.

# SESSION 6



## Book Portion

Chapter 10: Dirt, Manure, and Other Yucky Things

Chapter 11: Doing Laundry for 10,000 Years?

## Key Themes

Does redemption reach even to the parts of life often considered the ugliest and most stinky? Chapter 10 probes the redemptive purposes in aspects of life that may be hard to love but that we should all be grateful for, such as dirt, manure, and dung beetles. Chapter 11 considers the lifelong search for *completeness*. Would a life that is simply longer—say, a thousand years longer—help us achieve that completeness, or can the ultimate fulfillment of our desires be found only in eternity with God?

## Discussion Questions

### FOCUS: Report on Action Steps from Session 5

If members of your group took part in the Action Steps suggested in Session 5, give them a chance to share their story with the group.

### FOCUS: Is Dirt a Messy Nuisance or Life-Giving Treasure?

1. Discuss the reputation of dirt. When most people first think of it, are the connotations usually good or bad? How much of this depends on the person's lifestyle or upbringing? Do farmers and gardeners have a different first impression of dirt than other people?

2. Chapter 10 begins with negative phrases about dirt. Can you think of others to add to those examples? Why is something as valuable as dirt treated with such metaphorical disrespect?

3. Discuss the following quote from Chapter 10:

"The dirt under my feet is not what I thought it was. While it was doing its work to keep me alive, I was walking around on it with no appreciation or awareness at all. Many people miss the beauty of spiritual redemption in the same way. They're simply annoyed by any talk of it, or they think it doesn't apply to them, or they think of it in such a flawed or simplistic way that they reject it entirely."

In what ways have you found this to be true in your experience? What are some ways you can think of that people either overlook or reject the redemption that is all around them? Why would they do that?

### **FOCUS: Why We Should Be Grateful for Manure**

1. Many people consider manure an entirely unpleasant thing, but the information in chapter 10 makes a case for its tremendous usefulness. What does that indicate about God's use of all the elements of his creation for achieving his redemptive purposes?
2. The chapter mentions that ancient Egyptians worshiped a beetle they called a scarab. Why did they hold this beetle in such high regard? Even though we as Christians don't worship a beetle, what does this chapter show that we can learn about beetles as symbols of redemption?

### **FOCUS: Kill a Patient to Save Him?**

1. Chapter 10 describes an experimental medical procedure for patients with severe gunshot or stab wounds in which the patient's blood would be removed and freezing saltwater pumped into its place in order to buy time to allow the doctors to work on the patient's injuries before blood is put back into the body. At first the author thinks this sounds crazy.

*"My first thought was to reject that blood-draining surgery idea. But then I thought, Everything I have been writing over the last several chapters is actually just as unexpected and counterintuitive as killing a patient in order to save him. Burying a seed to let it die so a plant can grow? Letting the caterpillar be dissolved in a blob of goo so a butterfly can take shape? Hearing a woman say that being hit by a car was the best thing that has ever happened to her?*

*...If I were in charge of the universe, I would set it up so you simply saved someone in order to save them. I would leave out the killing part. But I am not in charge. And the universe is strange."*

Review that section of the chapter and discuss that quote with your group.

2. One question this chapter contemplates is, *Why does the redemptive process have to include so much pain?* The chapter shows how even Jesus, when faced with the torment of his crucifixion, agonizes about it at Gethsemane. Review that portion of the chapter. What does Jesus do in order to courageously face the agony he is about to endure? What can we learn from him?

### **FOCUS: Searching for Completeness**

1. Discuss the section of chapter 11 in which the author describes the elusive sense of completeness that he longs for but never quite achieves. Can you relate to that same longing? Do you have a different term for it? How and when are you most likely to get close to it?

2. As a teenager, the author had a flawed sense of how older adults viewed their lives. Review the section of chapter 11 in which he shows those misconceptions. Then discuss your thoughts about this quote:

*"I now realize that most [people] want more time, even when their lives are difficult. Even after all those decades, they still have not achieved the completeness they sought.*

*What if they, and all the rest of us, did have more time? What if, instead of a life span of eighty years or so, we had a thousand years to work with, or several times that? Would the fulfillment that so eludes us in this short life finally come?"*

## **FOCUS: Is a Thousand-year Life Span a Good or Bad Idea?**

1. Divide your group in half and ask them to sit on opposite sides of the room. Ask one side to prepare arguments in favor of a one-thousand-year human life and the other side to prepare arguments against it. Then discuss and debate the issue as a group. At the end of this discussion, allow people to break free from their assigned positions and share what they really think.

2. The author points out that a life that is merely *longer* could get pretty tedious. "How many thousands of times do you really want to trim those hedges or unclog those drains or wash those loads of laundry or clean the carpet or change the oil in the car, or the next car, or the dozens of cars after that?"

The chapter then poses these questions: "But is this extension of human life really all that different from what Christians say they long for, eternity in heaven? Won't that get tedious too, since it will last not only for a thousand years but tens of thousands of years and beyond?"

How does the chapter answer that question? Do you agree? Why or why not?

## **Action Steps**

1. One of the issues raised in chapter 10 is how grateful we should be for certain details of life that are often considered ugly or bothersome, such as dirt and manure. As you consider your own daily existence, what aspects of your life have you taken for granted or griped about even though good things actually spring from them?

2. As you look back on the book study you have just experienced, make a list of the ideas about redemption that have been changed or deepened or challenged during these weeks. What aspects of these themes do you still want to pursue further?