

Family, It's Complicated: Study Leader's Guide

Welcome

Hello, I'm Rene Howitt, the co-author of this bible study. Over the summer I was personally invited to participate in this study with a small group of people from a church I'm not affiliated with. The role of a participant is completely different from that of an author. As this group dove deeper into the content it occurred to me that I should be prepared to lead this study as well. This template is designed for those considering this role but fearing this topic. As God would have it, I was invited to lead this study at my own church in the fall of the same year with a group of about 20 women. I found it very helpful to open the meetings with something that makes these biblical stories pertinent to our everyday life. I hope it will be just as useful for the leaders who also choose to use it.

Sometimes these stories don't feel real because there seems to be no emotional reaction to the consequences these people must endure. Throughout the study, it is key to remember that the writer of the book of Genesis used a writing style that is very matter-of-fact. Where are the tears, crying and begging for a second chance? It's not there. That doesn't mean it didn't happen, it is just the writing style. Using examples from our daily life makes this real and in many ways more understandable.

Before You Begin

- At the first meeting, please ask everyone to turn to page 12, read and sign and confidentiality agreement. The leader should then prepare the group that we will certainly be discussing personal stories throughout the study and that it is understood those stories should not be shared outside of the group.
- Have each member introduce themselves.
- Read the **Purpose** section on page 9 out loud.
- Once you reach the ACEs survey ask everyone to spend a moment and take the ACE survey. This is private. Then hand each participant a post-it note, instruct them to write their ACE score on the post-it, fold it in half and pass it onto the leader. Leader should make a show of mixing up the post-it notes so there is no way anyone knows whose score is whose.
- Once the answers have been shuffled, read the final page of the **Purpose** out loud.
- The leader can open the post-it notes and share the scores out loud with the group.
 - If you have a calculator on your phone you can even calculate the percentages so the group can see that Adverse Childhood Experiences is present within the group.
 - When calculating the percentage of your group make three piles of post-it notes. Those whose score is 0, those whose scores are 1-3, and finally those with a score of 4 or more. The information in this chapter refers to 64% of our families have some level of dysfunction. That percentage includes all with an ACE score of 1 or more.
 - **Remember no names should be on the post-its.**

It is highly recommended that the group be committed to doing the readings and answering questions during the week prior to the meeting. As these chapters progress there are more readings and more questions. Remember these are stories many of us have read several times. This time we are asking folks

to read the story through the lens of a child witnessing the story played out before them. As the chapters progress we recommend that participants star questions that were particularly important to them to be sure the study group does work on those questions when together.

Chapter 1

Group Reading (out loud)

- Gen 3:1-24

Leader Prompt/Discussion Kick Off

- Imagine you go home tonight and find out that your spouse has lost his/her job. Not only did they lose their job it was lost because they did something wrong, got caught and lied about it to their superior.

Discuss what that would really look and sound like. Even if we can be supportive of our spouse and our spouse did whatever they did for all the right reasons. Now imagine there are children in the home. Even if, voices aren't raised, they hear a very serious conversation going on between their parents.

- Now let's fast forward about three months. The job still hasn't been replaced. You are depleting the savings account to pay the bills.
 - Are the conversations as calm? Are we being as supportive? Is the stress starting to mount? Are we making little snide remarks to each other? Are the children witnessing this?
- Now let's fast forward six months. We have really eaten into the savings. There is no job opportunity on the horizon. The stress is almost overwhelming. We begin to understand we are going to have to change our lifestyle. We will need to cut back on extras like direct TV, eating out, taking vacations and even selling the house. That means moving. The children will go to a different school, leave their neighborhood and friends. Basically, you will be leaving your Garden of Eden.
 - What are the conversations at home like now?
- We don't often think of our life as paradise but if you had to give it up, can you imagine the embarrassment? Your family and friends will know. You may lose your circle of friends. Think about the tension this will cause on the marriage all because someone did something they shouldn't have done and lied about it. The children have witnessed all of this. The yelling, crying, doors slamming and impatience with the children. This has created, although unintended, Adverse Childhood Experiences. How many of the 10 ACEs could a situation like this lead to?
- Although, it doesn't appear that Adam and Eve had children when they were exiled from paradise how do you imagine this event changed their relationship? Surely, there was work in paradise but the results of their work would have always been successful. No more. There would

have been annoying bugs and snakes but they wouldn't have bitten them. That changed. There wouldn't have been sickness and viruses. That changed. Imagine there was much opportunity to finger point. If that continues throughout the marriage, how does this change the dynamics of the family?

- Based on how this book is written it is clear that there would have been work in the garden. There would have been effort put into gathering food. We must remember all work in the garden would have been successful. Now they are expelled and God is telling them the work will now be difficult and not always successful. That is the difference. Man doesn't control drought, flooding or even disease the animals/herds may get. Now in this new reality Adam and Eve and all of mankind will experience the pain of hard labor that is met with rejection, failure, fruitless, frustration and defeat.

Chapter 2

Leader Prompt/Discussion Kick Off

- Sibling rivalry, we have several examples of this throughout the bible. Cain and Abel are just the first. We can say that sibling rivalry comes from jealousy and selfishness; children are born with brains not fully developed and not capable of understanding anyone else has needs. Parents are put in charge of shaping the sibling relationship. Parents have to insist that children show kindness, respect and love to each other. Parents must first model this with each other. But parenting can be hard. some babies are easy and others more difficult. Some toddlers are easy and others more difficult. If the easy child also grows to share your love or passions for sports, art, music, game playing, education or any number of areas it is very easy to be treating that child differently and not even realize it. Look at some biblical siblings:

Cain= Farmer
Abel= Shepard

Ishmael= First born son of Abraham but to Hagar Sarah's slave
Isaac= First born son to Sarah but Abraham's second son and yet he will be treated as the first born

Esau= Masculine, hunter, physical strength. His father, Isaac's favorite. He is the first born.

Jacob= Second born twin. He is favored by the mom. He is more of an indoor kind of person

Leah= Oldest sister. Not as pretty. We can't tell if father, Laban favored her. But it does seem clear he knows she will need help finding a husband.

Rachel= Younger sister. Very beautiful. Jacob loves her more. He creates the sibling rivalry in this case.

Can any of us speak to this in our life as a child? By doing this exercise we make these biblical accounts more real. As we discuss this how many ACEs do we encounter in our own stories?

Chapter 3

Group Reading (out loud)

- Gen. 6: 8-9.
 - *Discussion: Noah was a righteous man doesn't mean he was sinless. However, he was faithful. What meaning does this have for our lives? We are all believers. We try to be faithful but because of sin we fall short. All of us! Yet God still uses us. Discuss this.*
- 1 Peter 4:8
 - *Discussion: Ham, Noah's son, saw the sin of drunkenness. As the story is written it seems innocent enough. He went to his brothers for help. Is it really innocent? Did he go to gossip or laugh at his father's drunkenness? It would seem so since God and his father were upset with him. His brothers reacted like our Holy Father, trying to or covered his sin. That is different from covering up or denial of sin.*
- Gen.6: 5
 - *Discussion: The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil. We are entrenched in evil yesterday, today and tomorrow. But Jesus Christ left us the Holy Spirit which is the living word of God. This is to be used to flood our life with strength and wisdom so that we can walk with God.*

Chapter Applications - Leader Prompts

This chapter is very easy to apply to today's world. Drunkenness causes the same problem now as it did in the first recorded incident. Let's have an honest discussion about this issue in our childhood family. When drinking become alcoholism, one of the 10 ACEs.

1. What other ACEs are likely to follow?
2. Bad decisions due to being under the influence can also lead to failure to protect (not on the list.) Can anyone think of a decision that could be described as failure to protect?
 - a. Drunk driving with kids in car
 - b. Allowing strangers into your home
 - c. Falling asleep when one should be caring for an infant or toddler.

We must remember that there is no indication of other substance use in the bible but we know that isn't true for today.

Chapter 4

Leader Prompt

- This chapter will really deal with the concept of blended families. This was common place in the biblical time that Genesis is written. Men were allowed to have several wives and concubines. Was this just to be sure to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth? There never appears to be any place in the Bible that God calls for men to have multiple women. In fact Adam is just given Eve. We can see in these stories where it is complicated enough when it is socially the norm for one husband and multiple wives and the children are shared.

Group Readings

- Gen. 11: 27-31
 - Read the bullet point on pg. 44. Then discuss the first two questions asked on pg. 44 and 45.
- Gen. 12:1-20 and 20: 1-6
 - Discuss the situation where a wife is passed off as the sister. This is the first of three times this will happen. Note in the discussion this happens directly after God has promised the family commitment, blessings and prosperity.
- Gen. 16: 1-15
 - Read the bullet points listed on pg. 47. Ask this question of the women:
 - How would you react and how would you feel emotionally, physically, mentally and spiritually---if another woman became pregnant by your husband?
 - Ask the men: Do you believe those feelings and possible reactions to be consistent of the women close to you?
- Gen. 17: 1-21 and 18: 9-15
 - Read the final paragraph on pg. 49 and the bullet points. Before moving to the rest of the questions you may want to refer to statistics included below.

What about our families. We now refer to this as blended families. While we don't approve of multiple spouses it has become socially acceptable to divorce, remarry, divorce, remarry.... What about the children? Here are some facts:
How Common Are Blended Families Today?

- 1 out of every 3 Americans is either a step-parent, a step-child, or has some other form of a blended family in some way, which means almost 100 million people.
- It is estimated that more than half of all Americans either have been or will be included in a blended family during their lifetime.
- 40% of married couples with children in the US are forming blended families right now.
- Step-dads are more common than step-moms.

The point is that the notion of blended families is as large today as it was in biblical times. The one huge difference being is that women also have babies with multiple partners. What impact is this having on our children? What impact did it have on those children in the biblical families?

Talk about the confusion it causes when investigating child abuse cases.

Chapter 5

Discussion Starters

- When reading this story, do you ever wonder, what was the scale of the city? How many people lived in Sodom? How big were the bands of evil doers? I live in St. Louis but we have many smaller municipalities. Is Sodom the size of one of our smaller communities or the whole of St. Louis? It is easier for us to imagine a smaller community Gen19: 4 “the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all of the people to the last man surrounded the house.”
- This is hard for us to imagine even on a small scale...every man! We do have a gang problem throughout the US. All sort of horrible behaviors happen within these gangs. We do have some communities plagued by gangs where the behavior of men seems to have no boundaries. When I think of these communities this situation is a little easier to understand. Gangs continue to grow. What will be the tipping point?

Sex Traffic in US:

- In 2013, it was estimated that 293,000 American youth (kids) were at risk of being trafficked. We know the estimates are really low as we can't know what we don't know. We can't know how many are held hostage in this if we haven't discovered them.
- This may seem outrageous that I would mention this but remember the ACEs study showed that 64% of us already grew up in some level of dysfunction and there is some level of dysfunction in 64% of our current families. Children who grow up in dysfunctional homes where parents aren't paying attention, are failing to protect and just plain neglectful, their children are much more likely to be victimized by predators. We also know that 12.5% of our children grow up in extreme dysfunction. We see the start of police just giving up in some communities and will only respond after the shooting or death has occurred. So is it really unreasonable to think that at this pace we could be the community being described in this biblical account in the future?
- ***I wanted us all to be taking this into account as we talk about these readings and answer questions.***

Chapter 6:

Leader Prompts

- There are clearly cultural differences indicated in this story. I'm speaking about the cultural difference from Laban's family and Jacob's.
 - a. The animals had to be watered at a certain time of day Gen: 29. 7-8
 - b. The giving of the oldest daughter Gen:29. 26-28

Jacob wasn't aware of these cultural differences or he wouldn't have been taken by surprise.

- There are cultural differences for us to consider too when we read these ancient stories and try to compare them to our lives today. It isn't acceptable practice for a man to have multiple wives or multiple women on the side. Yet, there are parallels we can consider.
 - a. Couples that step outside of the marriage vows
 - b. Individuals with multiple relationships (both men and women)
 - c. Babies are often the by- product of those relationships
 - d. Women will still use sex and babies to trap a man into marriage
 - e. Both men and women who still believe having another baby will save the marriage

A huge problem children's division, police, courts, educators and more run into, when drawn into a family situation for whatever reason, are blended families where all the children have different last names. At least in these biblical stories all of the children had a common father. That is no longer the case.

Even if the current parents are trying to do all the right things. Making good parenting choices, is all of that undone when the children have different rules at the other parent's home? How does the child deal with that? This is one of the reasons that **divorce** is one of the ten ACEs.

We will talk more about this in Chapter 7. The bible sort of breezes through this story with Jacob having 12 sons and 1 daughter with four different women. We aren't given any indication of how this would affect the raising of the children. Who is in charge? Do they all live under one roof? What if rules and expectations are different by whatever mom is left in charge on a given day? What about religious and moral differences? None of that is revealed in these stories.

Group Readings

- Ephesian 5: 22-33 (let's talk about vs.29)
- Leviticus 19:18
- Mark 12:31

What about those of us that don't really love ourselves? Will we be capable of loving our spouses or neighbors?

Remind the group that if we are incapable of loving ourselves to read John 15:11 "This is my commandment that you are to love each other as I have loved you."

Chapter 7:

Leader Prompt

- There seems to be a tremendous amount of jealousy within this story. **Why? We can blame this on the children but did the adults...Jacob and his four wives foster this in their parenting model?**
- It is clear that Jacob favored Joseph; probably because he was the first son and child of Rachel, the woman he truly loved. Again this biblical account gives us no indication of

the details of the day to day partiality that may have been shown to Rachel and Joseph by Jacob. **Can anyone think of examples of how that may have played out?**

- We are given two examples of a direct correlation showing how two of Leah's sons had immense issues with both Rachel and Joseph.
 - Leah's 4th son, Judah, actually sells Joseph
 - Leah's 1st son, Reuben, wasted no time after Rachel's death in sleeping with her servant Bilhah.
 - **Why her? Out of all of the women he could have slept with, he chooses her.**
 - Why is this story inserted in the bible immediately after Rachel's death? While growing up, did he see, hear and witness his own mother's pain and jealousy towards Rachel? That would have been etched on his mind.
 - This act, having sex with your aunt and step mom must have been very disrespectful to Rachel.
 - Discuss: was this story inserted here as a way to show us the depth of dysfunction within families.

One of the mistakes we make in families is denial and making excuses for a family member's action. When that happens generationally cycles continue. We know the jealousy effect was happening at the very least with Jacob and Esau. Both Isaac and Rebekah favored a different son. Even though Jacob and Esau seem to come to a sort of truce they really never acknowledge the root of their problem. We know then that Jacob then fosters the same sort of jealousy within his family. Even though it may not be on purpose if we never try to understand the root causes, cycles continue.

Joseph breaks the cycle in this family at least on this issue. Joseph finally confronts his brothers telling who he is. Making them face the truth but he is not bitter. I'm sure there was much shame and discomfort from this experience but this tough discussion allows true healing to begin.

Chapter 8:

Group Readings

- Romans 8: 1-39
- Romans 12: 1-21

Leader Prompt

- This passage is calling us to the spirit life and leading us away from the flesh. The challenge is that we still live in the flesh. So while we are here on this earth we must make every effort to transform our minds Romans 12: 2...**"That by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."** That becomes very difficult even when we are believers because our flesh experiences shape our ability to discern.
- After reading Romans 12: 14-21...share a story from your life where you had passed judgement but later understood why God is only to judge.

We took be fruitful and multiply and used it for men to have multiple women. We see where that led some of these families. The challenges of blended families existed from the beginning. The

genealogy of family is taken seriously in scripture and we still take it very seriously within our families. Biology still takes preference within the child welfare system over a permanent and nurturing home. If we trace the biology of Jesus Christ, which the Bible does through Joseph, we must remember that Joseph wasn't the biological parent of Jesus. However, God was still his father as he is ours.

- Romans is calling for us to look to the spiritual father. Hard not as practical. **How do we overcome our sinful nature when sin can be introduced through our parents when we are babies and toddlers?**

Read & Discuss

- Luke 14:26-33.
 - Vs 29 "Foundation is having children without a long term plan for raising up the child in a Godly, healthy and nurturing environment. "
 -
 - Vs 32 " We are looking for terms of peace for terms of peace within our families. We should be looking to the spiritual father."
- John 16:33 "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart, I have overcome the world."