



GARDENS

GROWING AN EVERGREEN FAITH
IN A TRUSTWORTHY GOD

KAT ARMSTRONG

STORYLINE

I'm convinced that the Bible is somehow powerfully simple and beautifully complex. Like a diamond viewed from different angles, Scripture continually confronts my heart in fresh ways. This Bible-study series offers insightful perspectives and gives its participants a refreshing opportunity to admire the character of God and be transformed by the truth of his Word. Our souls need to meander through the minutiae and metanarrative of the Bible, and the **Storyline Bible Studies** help us do both.

KYLE IDLEMAN, senior pastor of Southeast Christian Church and bestselling author of *Not a Fan* and *One at a Time*

If you are longing for a breath of fresh air in your spiritual life, this study is for you. Kat Armstrong brings to life both familiar and less familiar Bible stories in such an engaging way that you can't help but see how the God of the past is also working and moving in your present. Through the captivating truths revealed in this series, you will discover more about God's faithfulness, be equipped to move past fear and disappointment, and be empowered to be who you were created to be. If your faith has felt mundane or routine, these words will be a refreshing balm to your soul and a guide to go deeper in your relationship with God.

HOSANNA WONG, international speaker and bestselling author of *How (Not) to Save the World: The Truth about Revealing God's Love to the People Right Next to You*

We are watching a new wave of Bible studies that care about the Bible's big story, from Genesis to Revelation; that plunge Bible readers into the depths of human despair and show them the glories of the Kingdom God plans for creation; and that invite readers to participate in that story in all its dimensions—in the mountains and the valleys. Anyone who ponders these Bible studies will come to terms not only with the storyline of the Bible but also with where each of us fits in God's grand narrative. I heartily commend Kat's **Storyline Bible Studies**.

REV. CANON DR. SCOT McKNIGHT, New Testament scholar, author, professor, and host of the *Kingdom Roots* podcast

Kat Armstrong is an able trail guide with contagious enthusiasm! In this series, she'll take you hiking through Scripture to experience mountains and valleys, sticks and stones, sinners and saints. If you are relatively new to the Bible or are struggling to see how it all fits together, your trek with Kat will be well worth it. You might even decide that hiking through the Bible is your new hobby.

CARMEN JOY IMES, associate professor of Old Testament at Biola University and author of *Bearing God's Name: Why Sinai Still Matters*

Kat Armstrong takes you into the heart of Scripture so that Scripture can grow in your heart. The **Storyline Bible Studies** have everything: the overarching story of God's redemption, the individual biblical story's historical context, and the text's interpretation that connects with today's realities. Armstrong asks insightful questions that make the Bible come alive and draws authentically on her own faith journey so that readers might deepen their relationship with Jesus. Beautifully written and accessible, the **Storyline Bible Studies** are a wonderful resource for individual or group study.

LYNN H. COHICK, PhD, distinguished professor of New Testament and director of Houston Theological Seminary at Houston Christian University

Christians affirm that the Bible is God's Word and provides God's life-giving instruction and encouragement. But what good is such an authoritative and valuable text if God's people don't engage it to find the help the Scriptures provide? Here's where Kat Armstrong's studies shine. In each volume, she presents Bible study as a journey through Scripture that can be transformational. In the process, she enables readers to see the overarching storyline of the Bible and to find their place in that story. In addition, Armstrong reinforces the essential steps that make Bible study life-giving for people seeking to grow in their faith. Whether for individuals, for small groups, or as part of a church curriculum, these studies are ideally suited to draw students into a fresh and invigorating engagement with God's Word.

WILLIAM W. KLEIN, PhD, professor emeritus of New Testament interpretation and author of *Handbook for Personal Bible Study: Enriching Your Experience with God's Word*

Kat has done two things that I love. She's taken something that is familiar and presented it in a fresh way that is understandable by all, balancing the profound with accessibility. And her trustworthy and constant approach to Bible study equips the participant to emerge from this study with the ability to keep studying and growing more.

MARTY SOLOMON, creator and executive producer of *The BEMA Podcast*

You are in for an adventure. In this series, Kat pulls back the curtain to reveal how intentionally God has woven together seemingly disconnected moments in the collective Bible story. Her delivery is both brilliant and approachable. She will invite you to be a curious sleuth as you navigate familiar passages of Scripture, discovering things you'd never seen before. I promise you will never read the living Word the same again.

JENN JETT BARRETT, founder and visionary of The Well Summit

Kat has done it again! The same wisdom, depth, humility, and authenticity that we have come to expect from her previous work is on full display here in her new **Storyline Bible Study** series. Kat is the perfect guide through these important themes and through the story of Scripture: gentle and generous on the one hand, capable and clear on the other. She is a gifted communicator and teacher of God's Word. The format of these studies is helpful too—perfect pacing, just the right amount of new information at each turn, with plenty of space for writing and prayerful reflection as you go and some great resources for further study. I love learning from Kat, and I'm sure you will too. Grab a few friends from your church or neighborhood and dig into these incredible resources together to find your imagination awakened and your faith strengthened.

DAN LOWERY, president of Pillar Seminary

Kat Armstrong possesses something I deeply admire: a sincere and abiding respect for the Bible. Her tenaciousness to know more about her beloved Christ, her commitment to truth telling, and her desire to dig until she mines the deepest gold for her Bible-study readers makes her one of my favorite Bible teachers. I find few that match her scriptural attentiveness and even fewer that embody her humble spirit. This project is stunning, like the rest of her work.

LISA WHITTLE, bestselling author of *Jesus over Everything: Uncomplicating the Daily Struggle to Put Jesus First*, Bible teacher, and podcast host



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NavPress 

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A Message from Kat

I HAVE NO BUSINESS writing about gardens. I can't keep any plants alive, and honestly, I don't care to try. I'm fine living in a concrete jungle and buying my produce from the grocery store. The only thing that could interest me in a gardening hobby would be a guaranteed best friendship with Joanna Gaines—who, according to her shows and magazines, really loves spending time in her garden, watching things grow.

Gardens in the Bible, however, occupy a lot of my brain space. After all, God bookends his Word with stories about celestial gardens. The Bible begins with a story about God planting a garden in Eden and ends with a story about God replanting Christians in a Garden City called the new Jerusalem.

I find myself desperately fixated on that final Garden City, where the apostle John says death and tears are gone (Revelation 21:4) and only life and light remain. I need the new Jerusalem to be real. I've had enough of death and pain and weariness. I cling to the promise of always-and-forever abundant, endless life.

As I began my research on gardens in the Bible, I wanted more out of my relationship with Christ. I've experienced the "abundant life" at times. But somewhere along the way, I grew distracted, stressed, and tired.

Do you find yourself longing for a spiritual life that is abundant—where you are not just scraping by but enduring and flourishing?

In all the past seasons of life when I experienced immense growth in my faith, I was absorbing every last nutrient from the soil of Scripture. I was soaking in the sunlight of Bible verses illuminated and drinking in God's Living Water, his Spirit. I want that again. I want my faith to spring up—to be vibrant, not static. To have deep, sturdy roots, not feel flimsy or droopy.

Here's what I know for sure: Every garden in Scripture is a landmark for my faith—and for yours. The *Gardens* Bible study is an invitation to explore God's literary genius and masterful storytelling, to approach the themes and threads of his Word with curiosity and hope. As we follow the garden theme from Genesis to Revelation, I can promise you this: We'll find Christ's presence in all the gardens we're exploring, inviting us into an evergreen faith.

Love,



**The LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your needs in parched places,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.**

ISAIAH 58:11

The Storyline of Scripture

YOUR DECISION TO STUDY THE BIBLE for the next few weeks is no accident—God has brought you here, to this moment. And I don't want to take it for granted. Here, at the beginning, I want to invite you into the most important step you can take, the one that brings the whole of the Bible alive in extraordinary ways: a relationship with Jesus.

The Bible is a collection of divinely inspired manuscripts written over fifteen hundred years by at least forty different authors. Together, the manuscripts make up tens of thousands of verses, sixty-six books, and two testaments. Point being: It's a lot of content.

But the Bible is really just one big story: God's story of redemption. From Genesis to Revelation the Bible includes narratives, songs, poems, wisdom literature, letters, and even apocalyptic prophecies. Yet everything we read in God's Word helps us understand God's love and his plan to be in a relationship with us.

If you hear nothing else, hear this: God loves you.

It's easy to get lost in the vast amount of information in the Bible, so we're going to explore the storyline of Scripture in four parts. And as you locate your experience in the story of the Bible, I hope the story of redemption becomes your own.

PART 1: GOD MADE SOMETHING GOOD.

The big story—God's story of redemption—started in a garden. When God launched his project for humanity, he purposed all of us—his image bearers—to flourish and co-create with him. In the beginning there was peace, beauty, order, and abundant life. The soil was good. Life was good. We rarely hear this part of our story, but it doesn't make it less true. God created something good—and that includes you.

PART 2: WE MESSED IT UP.

If you've ever thought, *This isn't how it's supposed to be*, you're right. It's not. We messed up God's good world. Do you ever feel like you've won gold medals in messing things up? Me too. All humanity shares in that brokenness. We are imperfect. The people we love are imperfect. Our systems are jacked, and our world is broken. And that's on us. We made the mess, and we literally can't help ourselves. We need to be rescued from our circumstances, the systems in which we live, and ourselves.

PART 3: JESUS MAKES IT RIGHT.

The good news is that God can clean up all our messes, and he does so through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. No one denies that Jesus lived and died. That's just history. It's the empty tomb and the hundreds of eyewitnesses who saw Jesus after his death that make us scratch our heads. Because science can only prove something that is repeatable, we are dependent upon the eyewitness testimonies of Jesus' resurrection for this once-in-history moment. If Jesus rose from the dead—and I believe he did—Jesus is exactly who he said he was, and he accomplished exactly what had been predicted for thousands of years. He restored

us. Jesus made *it*, all of it, right. He can forgive your sins and connect you to the holy God through his life, death, and resurrection.

PART 4: ONE DAY, GOD WILL MAKE ALL THINGS NEW.

The best news is that this is not as good as it gets. A day is coming when Christ will return. He's coming back to re-create our world: a place with no tears, no pain, no suffering, no brokenness, no helplessness—just love. God will make all things new. In the meantime, God invites you to step into his storyline, to join him in his work of restoring all things. Rescued restorers live with purpose and on mission: not a life devoid of hardship, but one filled with enduring hope.

RESPONDING TO GOD'S STORYLINE

If the storyline of Scripture feels like a lightbulb turning on in your soul, that, my friend, is the one true, living God, who eternally exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is inviting you into a relationship with him to have your sins forgiven and secure a place in his presence forever. When you locate your story within God's story of redemption, you begin a lifelong relationship with God that brings meaning, hope, and restoration to your life.

Take a moment now to begin a relationship with Christ:

God, I believe the story of the Bible, that Jesus is Lord and you raised him from the dead to forgive my sins and make our relationship possible. Your storyline is now my story. I want to learn how to love you and share your love with others. Amen.

If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

ROMANS 10:9

How to Use This Bible Study

THE **STORYLINE BIBLE STUDIES** are versatile and can be used for

- ✧ individual study (self-paced),
- ✧ small groups (five- or ten-lesson curriculum), or
- ✧ church ministry (semester-long curriculum).

INDIVIDUAL STUDY

Each lesson in the *Gardens* Bible study is divided into four fifteen- to twenty-minute parts (sixty to eighty minutes of individual study time per lesson). You can work through the material one part at a time over a few different days or all in one sitting. Either way, this study will be like anything good in your life: What you put in, you get out. Each of the four parts of each lesson will help you practice Bible-study methods.

SMALL GROUPS

Working through the *Gardens* Bible study with a group could be a catalyst for life change. Although the Holy Spirit can teach you truth when you read the Bible on your own, I want to encourage you to gather a small group together to work through this study for these reasons:

- ❖ God himself is in communion as one essence and three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- ❖ Interconnected, interdependent relationships are hallmarks of the Christian faith life.
- ❖ When we collaborate with each other in Bible study, we have access to the viewpoints of our brothers and sisters in Christ, which enrich our understanding of the truth.

For this Bible study, every small-group member will need a copy of the *Gardens* study guide. In addition, I've created a free downloadable small-group guide that includes

- ❖ discussion questions for each lesson,
- ❖ Scripture readings, and
- ❖ prayer prompts.

Whether you've been a discussion leader for decades or just volunteered to lead a group for the first time, you'll find the resources you need to create a loving atmosphere for men and women to grow in Christlikeness. You can download the small-group guide using this QR code.



CHURCH MINISTRY

Church and ministry leaders: Your work is sacred. I know that planning and leading through a semester of ministry can be both challenging and rewarding. That's why every **Storyline Bible Study** is written so that you can build modular semesters of ministry. The *Gardens* Bible study is designed to complement the

Deserts Bible study. Together, *Gardens* and *Deserts* can support a whole semester of ministry seamlessly, inviting the people you lead into God’s Word and making your life simpler.

To further equip church and ministry leaders, I’ve created *The Leader’s Guide*, a free digital resource. You can download *The Leader’s Guide* using this QR code.



The Leader’s Guide offers these resources:

- ❖ a sample ministry calendar for a ten-plus-lesson semester of ministry,
- ❖ small-group discussion questions for each lesson,
- ❖ Scripture readings for each lesson,
- ❖ prayer prompts for each lesson,
- ❖ five teaching topics for messages that could be taught in large-group settings, and
- ❖ resources for deeper study.

SPECIAL FEATURES

However you decide to utilize the *Gardens* Bible study, whether for individual, self-paced devotional time; as a small-group curriculum; or for semester-long church ministry, you’ll notice several stand-out features unique to the **Storyline Bible Studies**:

- ❖ gospel presentation at the beginning of each Bible study;
- ❖ full Scripture passages included in the study so that you can mark up the text and keep your notes in one place;
- ❖ insights from diverse scholars, authors, and Bible teachers;
- ❖ an emphasis on close readings of large portions of Scripture;
- ❖ following one theme instead of focusing on one verse or passage;
- ❖ Christological narrative theology without a lot of church-y words; and
- ❖ retrospective or imaginative readings of the Bible to help Christians follow the storyline of Scripture.

You may have studied the Bible by book, topic, or passage before; all those approaches are enriching ways to read the Word of God. The **Storyline Bible Studies** follow a literary thread to deepen your appreciation for God's master plan of redemption and develop your skill in connecting the Old Testament to the New.



INTRODUCTION

THE GARDENS STORYLINE

GOD'S GOT A GREEN THUMB. He is the ultimate Gardener, specializing in planting seeds of faith and providing nutrient-rich soil for our faith to grow. And only our expert Gardener can somehow, miraculously, bring dead, fruitless plants back to life, where they not only grow but bear *much* fruit. If there's anyone we need guiding us toward the abundant life, it's him. He knows how to cultivate.

The Bible is a literary masterpiece for infinite reasons, and one way God's artistic brilliance unfolds is through his storied settings—the geographical locations of the stories he has preserved for us in Scripture. As you may have seen through other **Storyline Bible Studies**, places didn't just matter in the ancient world—they had meaning. Locations are not solely pins on a map; they are loaded with historical significance and serve as connection points unifying God's story of redemption from the Old Testament to the New.

The God who planted a garden in Eden, placing Adam and Eve in it to cultivate all God's creation, is the same God who suffered the agony of abandonment and self-sacrifice in the Garden of Gethsemane, who revealed himself to the first gospel preacher at the Gardens of the Crucifixion and Resurrection, and who is the King of the new Garden City in Revelation.

As we zero in on the different gardens in Scripture, you and I are going to discover this all-important truth: God is sacrificially committed to our flourishing. He doesn't expect us to just spontaneously start growing in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. He's the Vine. He's producing the fruit of his Holy Spirit in our lives. Our responsibility is to remain connected to him and to trust that his boundaries are what cultivate goodness and abundance in our lives.

The *Gardens* Bible study will guide you through five Bible stories set in gardens. The presence of these places in the Scriptures is a key element in each story, revealing something about God—and about us. As we begin in the paradise of Eden and move through other gardens in Scripture, we will be on a journey to find the paradise that's been lost. The good news is that the good Gardener can be trusted to plant *and* replant us in the story of redemption.

In the *Gardens* Bible study, we're going to explore

- ❖ *Genesis 1–3*: the Garden of Eden, where the first humans made a choice between trusting God and trusting themselves;
- ❖ *Esther 1, 7*: the Garden of Ahasuerus, where human dysfunction creates an antigarden motif;
- ❖ *Matthew 26*: the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus wrestled with the sacrifice before him;
- ❖ *John 19–20*: the Gardens of the Crucifixion and Resurrection, where the resurrected Jesus revealed himself to Mary Magdalene; and
- ❖ *Revelation 21–22*: the Garden City, where God will replant Christians in the new Jerusalem.

We're going to do this by looking at each garden story through four different lenses:

- ❖ **PART 1: CONTEXT.** Do you ever feel dropped into a Bible story disoriented? Part 1 will introduce you to the garden you're going to study and help you study its story in its scriptural context. Getting your bearings before you read will enable you to answer the question *What am I about to read?*
- ❖ **PART 2: SEEING.** Do you ever read on autopilot? I do too. Sometimes I finish reading without a clue as to what just happened. A better way to read the Bible is to practice thoughtful, close reading of Scripture to absorb the message God is offering to us. That's why part 2 includes close Scripture reading and observation questions to empower you to answer the question *What is the story saying?*
- ❖ **PART 3: UNDERSTANDING.** If you've ever scratched your head after reading your Bible, part 3 will give you the tools to understand the author's intended meaning both for the original audience and for you. Plus you'll practice connecting the Old and New Testaments to get a fuller picture of God's unchanging grace. Part 3 will enable you to answer the question *What does it mean?*
- ❖ **PART 4: RESPONDING.** The purpose of Bible study is to help you become more Christlike; that's why part 4 will include journaling space for your reflection on and responses to the content and a blank checklist for actionable next steps. You'll be able to process what you're learning so that you can live out the concepts and pursue Christlikeness. Part 4 will enable you to answer the questions *What truths is this passage teaching?* and *How do I apply this to my life?*

One of my prayers for you, as a curious Bible reader, is that our journey through this study will help you cultivate a biblical imagination so that you're

able to make connections throughout the whole storyline of the Bible. In each lesson, I'll do my best to include a few verses from different places in the Bible that are connected to our garden stories. In the course of this study, we'll see the way God shows up in gardens throughout his Word—and get a glimpse of how he might show up in our lives today.

God's Word is so wonderful, I hardly know how to contain my excitement. Feel free to geek out with me; let your geek flag fly high, my friends. When we can see how interrelated all the parts of Scripture are to each other, we'll find our affection for God stirred as we see his artistic brilliance unfold.

LESSON ONE

TRUSTING GOD'S BOUNDARIES



**THE GARDEN OF EDEN:
A FOOL'S PARADISE**

SCRIPTURE: GENESIS 1-3



PART 1

CONTEXT

Before you begin your study, we will start with the context of the story we are about to read together: the setting, both cultural and historical; the people involved; and where our passage fits in the larger setting of Scripture. All these things help us make sense of what we're reading. Understanding the context of a Bible story is fundamental to reading Scripture well. Getting your bearings before you read will enable you to answer the question *What am I about to read?*

GARDENERS TAKE GREAT PRIDE in their produce. My uncle Rod loves to brag that his Austin-grown lettuce is better than any other greens around. My friend Chris enjoys measuring the various sizes of his watermelons. And I can personally attest that my friend Jamie's chocolate-mint herb is delicious. Intentional gardeners celebrate and share the fruits of their labor.

That's what God did with his garden project in Eden too. He intentionally planted a garden and then celebrated what he'd cultivated. At the end of each day of Creation, God surveyed his work and declared it good. The waters under the sky were good. The dry land was good. All the vegetation, the plants and the grass and the fruit trees, were good too. The lights in the sky were good. All the living creatures swimming in the waters, flying in the sky, or moving on land—they were good, good, good.

You know what God called *very* good? Adam and Eve. They were more than just good—because they were made in God’s image. Together they were meant to reflect God’s glory, to be his vice-regents on earth, and to care for and cultivate everything God had created. They were supposed to be good gardeners like the good Gardener.

The problem is, instead of living up to their cultural mandate, Adam and Eve decided to pursue wisdom apart from God. And the garden project they were supposed to cultivate failed epically. Everyone and everything suffered because Adam and Eve refused to listen to God’s wisdom. Instead, they chose to take matters into their own hands.

We see Adam and Eve’s story repeated again and again throughout human history. The Garden of Eden is more than a historical location; it shows us the patterns of our lives and the state of the human soul.

But this garden was also where God planted the first seeds of our redemption, amid trees and flowers—a place called Eden, the name of which is sometimes translated from Hebrew as *joy*, *finery*, or *delight*.¹ Our journey begins in God’s delight, his paradise, our paradise—and one day, God’s saving grace will lead us somewhere even better than Eden.

Without some context, we may be tempted to read Genesis as a stand-alone book of the Bible. But Genesis is not a stand-alone book; it is one part of a five-part literary unit called the Pentateuch. Or put another way: The Pentateuch is a single body of literature with five unique but cohesive parts. The writer of the Pentateuch, Moses, wanted us to—and assumed we would—read all five parts as a unit. Additionally, Moses would have assumed that his audience understood why he was writing Genesis, why the garden in Eden mattered, and to whom it would matter.

Moses was likely writing what became the book of Genesis during the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt and leading up to the conquest of the Promised Land—which meant he was writing to people who had experienced God’s liberating power from evil forces, the refining wanderings and miraculous provision

in the wilderness, and the giving of the law. God's people were standing at the precipice of finally entering his Promised Land.

God's people were people of promise, but the promise hadn't come to pass yet. So they were having an identity crisis. Would they be garden dwellers again, or would they live forever exiled in the wilderness? Would they finally reach the Promised Land, or would they die in the desert? In a very real sense, this generation—who lived in the wilderness because their parents had repeated Adam and Eve's rejection of God's wisdom—must have been questioning God's trustworthiness. And wondering if God was holding out on them.

Moses needed his people to remember the past so they could face their future. God's people needed to be reminded why they'd been created: that their purpose was to bless all nations. They needed to be reminded of their identity: that they were loved and chosen by God to bring his love to all the world. And they needed to understand their relationship with God: that they were covenant members of God's community, beloved and fought for by a faithful God powerful enough to overthrow Pharaoh.

You and I are invited into the same lesson, the same clarification of our identity. Are we going to live this life as garden dwellers, with all the resources God intends for our flourishing? Will we trust God enough to appreciate, honor, and respect the boundaries he sets for us? Or will we continue, through our own sinful actions, to reject God's wisdom and get expelled from paradise? Will we be paradise-lost people or people-who-walk-with-God-in-his-garden people?

The story set in the Garden of Eden shows us that God can be trusted. And it will help us trust God more. Trust the good Gardener's cultivation skills. And enjoy the way God celebrates the work of his hands. The way God celebrates us, the apple of his eye.

Genesis introduces us
to an awesome God
who holds a good
world in loving hands.²

Rodney S. Sadler Jr., "Genesis," in
The Africana Bible

1. PERSONAL CONTEXT: What is going on in your life right now that might impact how you understand the Garden of Eden story? What do you hope to learn from this lesson?

2. SPIRITUAL CONTEXT: If you've never studied the Garden of Eden before, what piques your curiosity? If you've studied this place before, what impressions and insights do you recall?

3. BIBLICAL CONTEXT: What questions come to mind as you read about the context of Genesis, the Garden of Eden, and the Israelites' history? What questions do you wish you could have answered before studying this part of Scripture?