



STONES

MAKING GOD'S FAITHFULNESS
THE BEDROCK OF YOUR FAITH

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, professor of New Testament at Northern Seminary

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, provost and dean of academic affairs at Northern Seminary

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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A Message from Kat

RUSSIA INVADED UKRAINE as I started to write this Bible study.

Throughout the invasion, I vacillated between feeling helpless and distraught. Helpless because life felt so fragile and subject to evil's whims. And distraught because the images of Ukrainian children, stumbling across the border to Poland, broke my heart. The sounds of toddlers crying for their daddies and whimpering after a long, harrowing journey was too much for me to bear.

The day before the invasion I was looking up every use of the words *stone* and *rock* in the Bible, and the next day the whole world seemed unprotected, vulnerable, and defenseless. It felt as if the ground beneath my feet were sinking sand, catastrophically damaged, irreparable.

What I needed most during that season of life was to remember that God is faithful. His character is solid as a rock, and I can build my life on the sure foundation of Jesus—who never cracks under pressure. I needed the God described by the psalmists: a stronghold, a refuge, the rock of my salvation, and the rock of my protection.

After some digging in the Scriptures, I was reminded that the Rock of Ages, the one true, living God, is still on his throne (which, according to Revelation, sits in the midst of innumerable precious stones). And Jesus, the Cornerstone of my faith, the surest evidence of God's faithfulness, is still in the business of building his invincible Kingdom—a Kingdom never threatened by evil or evildoers.

If you are struggling to find sure footing in your faith or are longing for security, protection, or refuge, this Bible study will guide you to a hiding place in God. You'll find the safety you long for in your mightiest fortress, Jesus.

Together, we are going to study the bedrock—the foundational principles—of Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Jesus, and the church. What you are going to find in this storyline is that rocks and stones are not random details captured by the Bible's authors. Stone imagery in the Scriptures can build our faith in the same way stones have been used to build altars and memorials of worship.

And the storyline of rocks and stones will lead you to Jesus, the One for whom the stone was rolled away, whose resurrection solidifies our faith.

Love,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Kat'.

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 *Stones* 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 *Stones* 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 *Stones* 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 *Stones* Bible study is designed to complement the *Sticks*

Bible study. Together, *Sticks* and *Stones* 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 *Stones* 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 STONES STORYLINE

STONES ARE SOME OF the most indestructible things in nature. Even when they are destroyed—beaten by weather, ground down, battered, worn by time—they re-form and make something new. They are still stone. They endure.

Perhaps that's why in Scripture, stones are such a profound sign of God's faithfulness. Again and again, when stones show up in the Bible, we see God proving himself to be faithful, loyal in his love, powerful, sacrificial, and purposeful.

And here's the thing: God's faithfulness was not—and is not—dependent on the people he was in relationship with. Many of those we'll read about in this study struggled with feeling unworthy of God's grace. Doubted whether God was as forgiving as he says. Yearned to experience progress in their faith walks. Took steps of obedience when the odds were against them. And needed salvation from their sins. I find parts of my own story in theirs because I, too, am searching for worthiness, forgiveness, progress, rescue, and purpose.

Ultimately, what I learned from the stones of Scripture is that stones are a tangible reminder of God's faithfulness, pointing us again and again to the Rock, to the One for whom the stone was rolled away, to the Living Stone who makes us living stones. God's faithfulness, in the face of our unworthiness, culminates in extravagant grace and the commission to take the beauty of the Kingdom to those around us.

In *Stones*, we're going to explore

- *Genesis 28, 35*: the bedrock of Jacob. Rocks and stones emerge in Jacob's story as the sign of his connection to God and remembrance of God's call on his life.
- *Exodus 34*: the bedrock of Moses. Rocks and stones play a key role in Moses' story as the sign of God's enduring covenant with a stubborn and disobedient people.
- *Joshua 4*: the bedrock of Joshua. Rocks and stones show up in Joshua's story when he has the Israelites bring stones of remembrance together to bear witness to God's faithfulness.
- *Matthew 27–28*: the bedrock of Jesus. The impact of stones in the story of God changes forever when the power of God rolls away the tombstone for the resurrected Christ.
- *1 Peter 2*: the bedrock of the church. Rocks and stones convey our purpose as living stones, commissioned to live out God's purpose in the world.

My favorite part of this storyline is the stone being rolled away from Jesus' tomb when he is raised to life after death. Through it all, again and again, we are reminded: No matter where we are or what we're going through, God's faithfulness endures.

We're going to trace the stones storyline through four different lenses:

- **PART 1: CONTEXT.** Do you ever feel dropped into a Bible story disoriented? Part 1 will introduce you to the stories you're going to study and help you study those stories in their 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 rock and stone motif. At a time when we are so practiced in pulling things out of the Scriptures or apart in our faith, the **Storyline Bible Studies** will help you put things back together.

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

YOUR WORTHINESS COMES FROM GOD'S FAITHFULNESS



**BEDROCK OF JACOB:
WHERE JACOB'S FAITH BECOMES HIS OWN**

SCRIPTURE: GENESIS 28, 35



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?*

“I’VE MADE A MESS OF MY LIFE, and I’m trying to get my cr** together—but I need to fly under the radar today.”

She was a thirtysomething professional wearing a pencil skirt and working the room for new contacts. Between bursts of confidence and introductory smiles, she leaned over and began to whisper her story. She didn’t want to take a picture with me at the networking luncheon, she said—not because of the messy divorce she’d just been through, but because she was skittish at the thought of her dad and stepmom, both devout Christians, finding out she’d attended a Christian luncheon.

This young woman was a delight to talk to. She was interesting, ambitious, and open about her faith journey. She had believed in Jesus at one time in her youth, and she really hoped she still had faith, but she was just starting to figure that out on her own. Her dad and stepmom hovered over her at every social event

in hopes she would become a churchgoer again. And she felt the pressure to please them. What she really needed was space to explore her faith independently.

At a time when Christians are all abuzz about the next generation leaving the faith in record numbers, this young woman was trying to find her way back without drawing a lot of attention. Like a startled deer, she was wary, concerned that her parents would pounce at any slight movement toward faith in Jesus.

She and I met several times after that luncheon, and each time we were together, she unpacked parts of her story. She was inching back toward Christ and working through what she called “the shame of a failed marriage.”

But what she wanted to talk about most was God’s faithfulness in spite of our unworthiness. She was shocked to find out that I shared those feelings of unworthiness. I continue, to this day, to feel uneasy about God’s undeserved grace. There’s a tension between knowing how undeserving I am to be loved by God and accepting that he freely offers his love to me anyway.

This woman and I had little else in common. But the bond we shared is something I’m betting you and I share too: the uneasy appreciation of God’s grace.

Fully aware of her faults, her mistakes, and her doubts, the young woman from the luncheon wrestled through them all to embrace God’s faithfulness. I’m trying to do the same thing in my own faith journey. It meant a lot to me then that she confided in me. And now, as I reflect on her story, I’m also encouraged that some of our deepest struggles were shared by the

brothers and sisters in the faith who came before us.

Much like the young woman at the luncheon, a man in the Bible named Jacob was discovering his faith apart from his very religious parents, Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob came from the most famous faith family in Christian history. God had

Jacob’s life so far had been sheltered. He had been the son who preferred his mother’s company and followed her advice. He had shown himself to be an untrustworthy schemer. Now, however, he is thrust out on a new journey, where he will have to learn to survive on his own, without the help of his parents.¹

Jesudason Baskar Jeyaraj, “Genesis,”
in *South Asia Bible Commentary*

promised Jacob's grandfather, Abraham, that the blessings intended for everyone in the world would come through Abraham's family. *No pressure.*

And God-fearing parents were not the only thing Jacob shared with my friend from the luncheon. Both of them also had hover mothers who meddled.

To understand Jacob's faith life, you need a little insight into his backstory. But how does one summarize the beginnings of the world as we know it? How could I possibly synthesize the hinge moments in our faith history from Adam and Eve through the line of Abraham to get us all the way to Jacob? The best that we can do for now is acknowledge that Jacob's story in isolation is riveting. But in context, Jacob is a link from God's promise to his grandfather, Abraham, all the way to Jesus.

Jacob is best known for his sneaky ambition, trickster deception, and emotional outbursts.² And for some, Jacob's most memorable moment in Scripture is when he schemes to inherit his brother's blessing. The plan Jacob and his mother hatch together works, leaving him with the "blessing" of material and social capital—but bankrupt emotionally and relationally. Jacob runs away from his vengeful brother and ends up distanced from the only life he's ever known. But there, far from the security and familiarity of his familial ties, Jacob has an encounter with God that shapes the rest of his life.

As I researched the bedrock of Jacob's faith, I was surprised by the stone imagery in his story:

- Jacob uses a stone as a pillow at Bethel while he has a dream about God's presence (Genesis 28:11-17).
- Jacob uses the stone to create a memorial at Bethel to commemorate his vision from God (Genesis 28:18-22).
- Jacob rolls a stone away from a well after meeting his future wife, Rachel (Genesis 29:10).
- Jacob builds a stone memorial when entering into an agreement with his father-in-law, Laban (Genesis 31:45-54).
- Jacob creates a pillar of stone at Bethel to renew his covenant with God (Genesis 35:9-14).

Every biblical scholar I referenced talks about the overwhelming role stones play in Jacob's life. Robert Alter, professor in the graduate school and emeritus professor of Hebrew and comparative literature at the University of California at Berkeley, has this to say about Jacob's bedrock of faith:

Jacob is a man who sleeps on stones, speaks in stones, wrestles with stones, contending with the hard unyielding nature of things.³

What you are about to read is one of the episodes in Jacob's life where God's unmerited favor and love are most obvious. As uncomfortable as it makes us all feel, God will reassure Jacob—and, by way of the Scriptures, all of us—that one's worthiness comes from God's faithfulness and nothing else.

1. PERSONAL CONTEXT: What is going on in your life right now that might impact how you understand this Bible story?

What a reassurance Jacob's encounter with God offers us today. Despite our limitations and our failings, both as individuals and as his church, God is able to achieve his purposes through us (see 1 Cor 1:26-29).⁴

Jesudason Baskar Jeyaraj, "Genesis," in *South Asia Bible Commentary*

2. SPIRITUAL CONTEXT: If you've never studied this Bible story before, what piques your curiosity? If you've studied these passages before, what impressions and insights do you recall? What problems or concerns might you have with the story?