

# GOOD GOD

FAITH FOR  
THE REST OF US

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Reader's/Study Guide and Lesson Plan

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### Reader's/Study Guide and Lesson Plan

The following is both a “classic” reader's/study guide for the ubiquitous book groups proliferating in the Era of Oprah, and a more structured lesson plan to be used in educational settings.

### Study Guide

#### Chapter 1: Talkin' Bout My Degeneration

Have you encountered individuals who, like Lady Starbucks, seem to integrate well the daily world and matters of the spirit? What most impressed you about them?

1. Why do so many of us persist in being “Peter Pans of faith?” Does this make us feel more or less secure?
2. Is the power and influence of the Religious Right waning from its previous heights? Why or why not?
3. Is there a remedy for the fear that fires fundamentalism?
4. How can Barry Goldwater's warning reach today's Conservative movement?
5. Do you know any “card-carrying, vow-taking, secret-handshake offering secularists?” Do you discuss matters of faith?
6. Why are supporters of church/state separation often lumped together with secularists? What is the distinction?
7. Do the celebrated, more militant neo-Atheists (Dawkins, Hitchens and Harris) resonate with many? Why or why not?
8. Why is Russell's message both more grounded and subtler?
9. What's the difference between being a “good person” and a person of faith? Can they be mutually exclusive? Are they inextricably bound?
10. What compels “seekers” to search for spiritual meaning? Why do they assume it is not to be found in the faith of their youth?
11. Are we hard-wired for faith? Is a capacity for faith more nurture or nature?
12. Why does the media only showcase the religious margins and extremes? How can it be encouraged to cover the more moderate and common expressions of faith?
13. Why are Americans so anomalous in their identity as 1st world consumers but 3rd world believers?

#### Chapter 2: Spirit at the Center

1. Have you experienced a moment of transcendence? What made it so?
2. How can we mitigate the jadedness and cynicism that seems to be the inevitable byproduct of growing up?
3. Where might people find spiritual engagement beyond fad, fashion and commerce? What must more authentic expressions of faith do to break through in the marketplace of ideas?
4. What does it mean to have Spirit at the Center of our Being? How does faith-mindedness define who

we are and who we want to be?

5. What does the concept of a “Creator” add to our sense of self and place in the world? Why is this sense of “God” (or equivalent cosmic power), even amongst the agnostic and apathetic, so universal and timeless?
6. How can we heighten an awareness of our spiritual selves in a frenetic, distracting world? How can we provide a refuge like the Sabbath in our lives?
7. Is the concept of relationship necessary for faith and spirituality? Relationship to what? To whom?
8. Building upon relationship, what does the notion of “covenant” add?
9. How can we filter the timeless message of scripture from the times that produced it?
10. How can we separate our egos and agendas from the broader message of scripture?
11. Does the concept of accountability impact faith? Why or why not?
12. What does it mean to have Spirit at the Center of our Ideology? How does this impact our ways and efforts in the world?
13. How do we measure and achieve Lincoln’s challenge to “be on God’s side?”
14. Is humility bred, not born? If bred, how is it taught and inculcated?

### **Chapter 3: Just Do It**

1. How can we better translate awareness and conviction into righteous action?
2. Is empathy hard-wired or taught; is it nature or nurture?
3. What does it mean to be created “in the image of God?”
4. What does it mean to “love your neighbor as yourself?”
5. Why is compassion universal to most religious systems?
6. What does it mean to be holy? Holy like “God?”
7. What is the more important impetus to give to those in need, a sense of obligation or good will? Does it matter?
8. How do we reconcile the dual commands in Genesis to “subdue” and to “till and tend” the earth?
9. What are ways we can practice tzimtzum in our daily lives?
10. Is diversity a progressive social goal or a natural state of being?
11. What can inspire/compel us to employ crisis towards a constructive “breaking down” rather than a destructive concession to fear?

### **Chapter 4: And in the End...**

1. Are there encouraging signs that the moderate middle is both asserting itself and rejecting the extremes of religious fundamentalism and contempt for faith?
2. How can we reach out more effectively to elements amongst fundamentalists and atheists that are more open to engagement?
3. How can the silent majority of moderates gain a louder voice and inspire more regular coverage in the media and the culture?
4. Is the love you take really equal to the love you make?

## Lesson Plan

Can be used with mature middle schoolers through adults and inter-generationally.

### Goals:

1. To explore and understand the concept of Spirit at the Center of Being.
2. To consider ways to implement this understanding in our lives.

### Objectives:

Learners will be able to:

1. Describe Spirit at the Center of Being
2. Brainstorm and list ways in which this awareness can inform/inspire their pursuits in the world.

### Materials

1. Paper and pens for notes
2. Post-it posters and markers

### Procedure

#### Part I

1. Intro: The lead facilitator will share a memorable moment of transcendence, an “aha” or “whoa” moment (birth of a child, key life-cycle ceremony with family, sunset at the Grand Canyon, etc.) with the larger group, and ask for a few responses:
  - a. Have you had a moment like this? What was it?
  - b. What made this moment special and different from others?
  - c. Was there a source of this feeling? Could it be focused on a defined object?
  - d. Were you a different “self” at this moment? How? Why don’t you feel this way all the time?
2. The lead facilitator will offer that, while transcendent moments are unique and rare by definition, faiths and philosophies have sought for centuries to recreate them in less dramatic times in our lives. This quest for meaning or spirituality seeks to bridge our spiritual selves with our selves in the “real” world. We’re going to explore these moments and ways in which we can bring these feelings and this special self into our daily lives.
3. The larger group will be broken down into groups of 5-8, with an inter-generational mix if appropriate. Ideally, each group will have a prepared facilitator to spark discussion, and a post-it poster to record responses.
4. Learners responses to the following are posted:
  - a. Have you had an “aha” or “whoa” moment? What was it?
  - b. What made the moment so special?
  - c. Did you feel a sense of connection or oneness? Why?
5. Learners will read the following, discuss questions and post responses:

When the heroes of our sacred myths sought a direct experience with God, is it any wonder they left the city and headed for the desert, the mountaintop, or the base of a rural tree? Through moral genius and mystical insight, they brought their experiences back to an often stubborn and obtuse world, creating an accessible pathway to the infinite and a simple, disciplined method of realizing the power

of that encounter in the world. The greatness of the founders of faith emerged from what they created out of that experience. Yet we all can share in it. Awareness of the sacred is a sixth sense, and like touch, taste, and sight, it can be dulled by disuse.

If our ancestors needed to leave the village to find clarity to sense the sacred, how far must we go? Escaping the city or taking other kinds of leave from our hectic lives provides space to appreciate and revel in other parts of the self we give short shrift in our daily grind. The concept of the Sabbath emerged to provide a weekly refuge of the spirit for people who could ill afford or had little opportunity to get away physically. As imagined by the modern sage, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, it is a refuge in time, not in space. It provides respite from the toils and troubles of the week to embrace the best, most essential parts of the self. The Sabbath enables us to tend to the most neglected, most integral of our relationships, to heighten awareness of the eternal, ever-present Divine abiding within us, coursing through us, surging around us, and reaching beyond us. To better appreciate the Creator of Spirit, we must craft our own versions of this Sabbath refuge in our lives.

We are often passive participants in transcendent moments, going along for the ride. How can we actively create these moments more often? How can we heighten awareness of the sacred? How does the Jewish notion of the Sabbath inform this challenge?

6. Learners will read the following, discuss questions and post responses:

..."God" is only a name, a tool of thought and expression we use to convey a concept, to point to an ideal. Many are put off by an unwillingness or inability to accept the traditional idea of God that has inspired and driven, perplexed, and persuaded so many. Yet while rejecting the concept of a defined "God," the uncertain often acknowledge a force in the universe beyond chance--a craftsmanship that implies a Creator, an ordered structure that assumes an Architect, and a great purpose that reveals a Grand Intelligence. Though they may depersonalize this idea, rendering it a power or force rather than a defined, singular entity, it remains distinct and apart from the created.

Why is the notion of a "Creator" nearly universal in all faith traditions and even rationalistic philosophies? What would our sense of reality and the world be without it? Why are so many uncomfortable identifying "God?" What do they substitute for "God?" Is this essentially the same thing as God?

6. Learners will read the following, discuss questions and post responses:

Quid pro quo, the fundamental idea of "something for something," is as key an ingredient in the neuro-chemical stew simmering in our skulls as is receptivity to the mystical. From the prehistoric bartering of Neanderthals on the savanna to the torrential maelstrom of the Chicago Options Exchange, life is a series of deals, commitments, and cost/benefit analyses. It is not surprising that this essential part of the human condition would make its way into an understanding of faith from its tribal origins to the highest reaches of formal theology.

This forms the second component of Spirit at the Center of Being: Promises and Expectations. In

highfalutin' theological language, this idea is called covenant. The infinite, transcendent "Other" shares our understanding of exchange and obligation. Whether this is objectively "true" of God or merely our limited take on what we imagine of God, the result is the same. Contact and communion, discussion and dialogue are only the first step. Something more must grow from simple exposure to what is bigger and beyond. Throughout our lives, we are changed by our experiences, transformed by our relationships. How much more so are we changed by our experience of God! Whether we ignore the bond and its impact or embrace it, we become different in the presence of the infinite. And like the storied founders of faith, we, too, can bring something of this moment back to our world to better our lives and the concentric circles encompassing the lives of others.

Why is the notion of relationship so important to these transcendent moments? Why is it important to move beyond the self to consider "Another" or others?

7. Learners will read the following, discuss questions and post responses:

...The silent majority of spiritual-seekers-without-affiliation often relies on [a] secular, philosophical argument. It contends that the pursuit of an ethical life and a moral society is a boon in and of itself. Unsure of the existence of God, these seekers are fairly certain of what constitutes good in the world. While this may work well on one level to compel behavior and encourage order, it lacks a critical component. It depends entirely on contemporary standards of good and is rooted too narrowly in a personal sense of what is right. These standards can vary across generations and around the globe. And this sense is often driven by convenience, responding more to the needs of the moment than the welfare of the world.

Contemporary mores and personal criteria can inspire and contribute to the greater good, but they are insufficient. What is lacking is accountability. Not a tyrannical submission to authority for its own sake, as millennia of clerics demanded in appropriating temporal power to protect corrupt religious systems. Not a concession to discipline as needed character trait, the hobbyhorse of social conservatives who envision God as a belt-wielding, stern father figure. There is something qualitatively different, deeper, and richer when we act in the world in response to expectation than when we do not. Maybe it's rooted in our infantile need to please our parents. Or maybe that universal need of all children exists to prepare us for a greater challenge: to meet the expectations of a greater power toward the achieving of a greater goal, a greater good.

Is accountability an important factor in seeking to be a good person? Why or why not? Could we extend the power of a personal spiritual moment without a sense of relationship? Of accountability?

## **Part II**

The groups will consider one of the following scenarios and prepare a creative presentation for the group as a whole.

1. Rupert Murdoch calls and offers you a book contract because he is looking to publish the views of "ordinary blokes." He wants a cross between Deepak Chopra's Seven Spiritual Laws of Success and Richard Simmons Sweatin' Out the Oldies—a daily guide of "spiritual calisthenics" that "stretch the soul."

What are some ways the spiritually out of shape can condition awareness of the sacred? Rupert is waiting!

2. An alien lands in your backyard, and before you call David Duchovny or check for any resemblance to Keanu Reeves, you decide to sharpen your inter-lifeform conversational skills. The alien asks you how your civilization understands the beginnings of your world. Klaatu only has a few minutes before beaming over to a big speech at the Carl Sagan Center for Extra-terrestrial Dialogue, so you've got to be brief. Your account must be broad enough to represent the entire world throughout history.
3. Barack Obama has taken the change mantra farther than anyone imagined. He's seeking citizen advisers to offer suggestions of ways in which our entire economic system can be updated. Quid pro quo, "something for something" is so 2007. He wants to create a economy without exchange, incentive or agreement. Can you do this? Is it possible? Explain your answer so that Sascha and Malia can understand.
4. Dr. Phil has written a new book, Parenting Without Strings. In it, he claims that we instill in our children a kind of "social slavery," fostering the nagging notions of responsibility and accountability. We can only reach our full potential as human beings if we liberate ourselves from concern for the views, expectations and demands of others. Oprah asks you to read and review the book before she recommends it and launches it to the top of the New York Times list. You don't have time to read much more than you just have, so tell Oprah whether this is healthy for children or whether she's going to be sued by MAP (Mothers Against Phil).

*For more examinations of these themes please see our blog: [www.goodgodforus.com](http://www.goodgodforus.com)*