
Study Guide for *A Geography of God: Exploring the Christian Journey*

by Michael L. Lindvall

Study Guide by Stephens Lytch

Introduction

This study guide for *A Geography of God: Exploring the Christian Journey* by Michael L. Lindvall is designed for four sessions of approximately forty-five minutes each. It can be used by Sunday school classes, new member classes, or small groups that want to explore the journey of faith. Many of the exercises involve discussion in groups of four to six people. If the number of participants is larger than six, the class will need to break into smaller groups for those activities.

The leader should feel free to modify these outlines according to the needs of the group. It is likely that some of the suggestions will not resonate with your group, while others will stimulate extensive discussion. Be aware of the specific needs of your group, and tailor your time accordingly.

Each participant should have access to a copy of *A Geography of God* and read part I before the first session.

Leaving for Home

Purpose: To reflect with fellow travelers on how we got started on our spiritual journeys.

Materials:

Name tags (if necessary)

Newsprint

Markers

Open with Scripture

Welcome participants to this study of *A Geography of God: Exploring the Christian Journey*. Explain that over the course of four sessions we will explore our own spiritual journeys. Point out that the Bible tells of many people whom God led on journeys. One such person was Abraham.

Invite the participants to relax and open their hearts and minds to hear how Abraham began his journey. Ask them to notice any word or phrase that stands out for them.

Read aloud Genesis 12:1–11.

Ask participants to share anything that stood out as they heard the story. Spend a few minutes sharing responses.

Introduce the Study

The title of part I, “Leaving for Home,” implies a journey to a place where you belong. This study is about the spiritual journey that takes us to that place of centeredness and wholeness where each of us is accepted as the person we are made to be. Yet this is not some place where we arrive and settle in, at least not in this life. The journey itself is our destination, at least for now. In these four sessions we’ll explore the geography of that journey. We’ll do that with fellow travelers who will help us notice things along the way. It is quite possible that our fellow participants will help us see things about our journey that we have overlooked along the way.

Invite the group to adopt some “Rules for the Road” as they share with one another:

1. We will respect the confidentiality of what others share with us.
2. We will allow enough time in our small-group discussions to give each person an opportunity to share.
3. We will respect each person’s desire to share at whatever level he or she is comfortable.

Map the Journey

Read the closing paragraph of chapter 2 (p. 9):

When people of faith are at their most candid, they acknowledge the very thing that many of us are often too proud to admit. Some longing once led them to look deeper and ask the underneath questions about life. They may speak about the questions that set them on the road. They may speak of their journey itself and a trust they have formed in the One who pulled them beyond the constricting boundaries of self and set them on a road to more.

Give each participant a piece of newsprint and some markers. Ask each person to depict his or her spiritual journey. Invite them to use whatever format is most comfortable. Some possibilities are a map, an outline, pictures, or symbols. (You’ll need to make sure each person has space at a table or on the floor where there is room to spread out and write or draw.)

After about ten minutes, get everyone’s attention and point out that when we reflect back over our spiritual journey we often discover that God has been reaching out to us. Read from the bottom of p. 11:

The thirst we seek to quench is a gift from the very God who quenches the thirst. Struck still and incredulous before the grace and terror of creation, we can know that it is none other than the Creator who has planted the capacity to wonder in our souls. When we are made to go tête-à-tête with our vulnerability, it is God who whispers in the darkness. When we use our intellects to think our way into the possibility of faith, it is God who gave us a mind to reason in the first place. God is willing to use all things at hand to find us.

Ask the participants to look back over the description of their spiritual journey and identify places along that journey where God

has reached out to them. Then ask them to form groups of four to six and share their descriptions with one another.

Belief and Trust

In chapter 5 Lindvall points out that there are two sides of faith: belief and trust. Belief is what we know and understand about God. Trust is the commitment to follow God even without completely understanding. Belief often follows trust. “In the last analysis, the decision to take to the road is always made without all the facts” (p. 15). Usually, you can’t understand the deepest spiritual things until you’ve committed yourself to them. “The road itself is the teacher” (p. 17). Nevertheless, belief is important. It keeps us grounded and focused, and sometimes we’re carried along on the spiritual journey of faith by the beliefs of others. (You might want to remind participants of the story of the Orthodox priest and the frustrated student on p. 18.)

Ask participants: As you look back over the map of your spiritual journey, are there places where your trust in God has preceded your beliefs? Are there places where the faith of others has sustained you along the journey when your beliefs were shaky? Invite them to share their observations with their small groups.

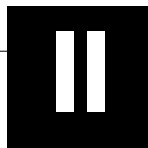
Closing

Close with the following prayer. Say that there will be an opportunity for participants to mention in prayer anything they heard or learned during the session for which they are thankful.

Lord, you are the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Moses and Miriam, of Mary and Jesus, and of all who are on a journey of faith. We thank you that you reach out to us and call us to follow the way that leads to life. Thank you for those in this room who journey with us. Especially we thank you for (here participants may give thanks for particular things they heard or learned during the session). Go with us as we leave this place and guide our paths until we meet again. **Amen.**

Ask participants to read part II (chapters 6–8) for next time. Ask them to bring their spiritual maps next time.

The Way



Purpose: To explore the road we travel on our journey of faith—God who is known to us as the Trinity.

First Things First

The first thing God does when God summons us to the journey of faith is to radically reorient us. Ask participants to sit comfortably and listen as you read aloud Matthew 16:24–25. Then invite them to look at the maps of their spiritual journey they prepared during the last session. Ask them to identify silently places along the way where God reoriented their lives by replacing self with God at the center of their concerns. After a few minutes ask: Are there places in your life now that you need to relinquish and let God take over? After a brief time for silent reflection, offer this prayer:

Almighty God, we lift before you those places in our lives where we need you to reorient us. Turn us around so we are on the right path. Be at the center of our time together now so our trust and our understanding will grow stronger for the journey ahead. **Amen.**

God above Us, God among Us

Ask the participants to imagine a line running along one side of the room. (Make sure there is unencumbered space along that imaginary line for people to stand.) One end of the room represents God's transcendence. The other end represents God's closeness to us. Ask the participants to stand at a point along that line that best represents the aspect of God that is most appealing or comforting or descriptive of their relationship with God at this moment. Once all have selected their places, invite them to cluster in groups of three and share in a sentence or two why they went to that spot.

Bridging the Chasm

In chapter 7 Lindvall discusses how the cross of Christ bridges the chasm between our imperfection and God's perfection. He describes three clusters of atonement theories that try to explain how Jesus' death has such power: the cross as forgiveness (p. 36), the cross as inspiration (p. 37), and the cross as revelation (p. 38). Ask participants to get into groups of four to six and share which of those atonement theories is most helpful at this stage in their spiritual journey. (Each group may need a few minutes to review the theories as described in the book.) Once all have had time to share, ask if there are any insights the small groups would like to share with the whole group.

“Breathe on Me, Breath of God”

The Holy Spirit is “present tense divinity.” Read aloud this passage from p. 44:

God may and often does choose to work through the Spirit subtly, hidden in routine, veiled in the mundane, camouflaged as coincidence. We recognize the work of the Spirit, not necessarily because some wonder has bedazzled us but because something has come to pass that cannot be credited to human effort alone. Something has moved us; we did not perhaps see it pass, but we know it's there. There is no other explanation.

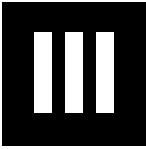
Close this session by inviting participants to become aware of the Holy Spirit's presence. Lead them through the following exercise:

- Sit in a comfortable position: feet flat on the floor, back comfortably straight, hands resting on legs with palms facing up in a receptive manner.
- Close your eyes. Take a deep breath, inhaling slowly and then exhaling slowly. Do this several times. As you inhale, imagine yourself being filled with the breath/spirit of God. As you exhale, imagine yourself letting go of all the things that burden you, trouble you, or keep you from God.
- Listen carefully to the sounds around you. Become aware.
- Invite the Holy Spirit to fill you. As distracting thoughts flit across your mind, commend them to God until later.

- You or someone else sing softly—as a prayer—the first verse of the hymn “Breathe on Me, Breath of God.”
- Invite all to join in singing prayerfully the first verse of the hymn. Repeat twice.
- After a period of silence, invite the participants to return their attention to the group, and offer this prayer:

Living God, open our souls to the wind of your Spirit. By your grace, shape us and mold us so we are willing to go where you guide us. We pray in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Ask all to read chapters 9–13 for next time.



Life on the Road

Purpose: God is not so much the one who shows us the way; “rather, this God is for us the Way.” In these final two sessions, “we will trace the shape of life along this road” (p. 51). In this session we will explore three practices—worship, devotional Bible reading, and prayer—that keep us focused on God.

Materials: Bibles or printed copies of Luke 5:1–11 for each participant.

Devotional Bible Reading

Ask participants to break into groups of four to six. Remind them of the three things Lindvall says we automatically bring with us when we read the Bible: identity, recognition, and imagination (pp. 72–73). Explain that they are going to read a Bible story in a way that will make them more aware of how they hear a reading. Invite them, through this heightened awareness, to be more attentive to God speaking to them through Scripture.

As one person in each group reads Luke 5:1–11 slowly, each person listens carefully for the character in the story with whom he or she identifies. After the reading is finished, ask them to share in one sentence which character they identified with and why.

Ask everyone to notice how they respond to the story as a different person in each group reads the passage slowly a second time. After the reading, ask small-group members to share in one sentence how they responded.

Have a third person in each group slowly read the passage again to the group. Ask participants to share in their small groups one new insight they received.

Conclude this exercise by reading for the entire group this selection from *A Geography of God*:

As we look at life through the lens of Scripture, it all makes sense like nothing ever made sense before. Through our own experience, the Bible, this witness of the ages, this narrative of God, this story

of death and life, comes to make sense like nothing else because it fills the God-shaped hole in the human heart as though it had been custom-created to fit that space. (p. 77)

Worship: Practice at Getting outside Ourselves

“Worship is no less than weekly practice at not being God” (p. 63). You might say that worship works when we are able “to give ourselves again to God, to lose ourselves in the Absolute, to turn away from self and re-center on God” (p. 65).

Ask participants to describe in their small groups what makes worship “work” for them. Encourage them to give an example of a time when worship “worked.”

Ask if there is anything the small groups would like to share with everyone about their discussion of worship.

Growing in the Practice of Prayer

It is likely that among your group there is a wide variety of experience with prayer. There are probably some veteran “prayer warriors” and some novices. Lead the large group in a discussion about their experiences of prayer. Invite them to share the challenges they face in trying to keep a disciplined practice of prayer. Ask them to share some things that help them in prayer, for example, books, devotional guides, Web sites, or practices.

Praying Together

On p. 83 Lindvall suggests five aspects of prayer. Lead the group in a guided prayer using this list.

Invite everyone to sit comfortably straight, both feet on the floor, hands resting relaxed on legs with palms turned upward in a receptive manner. Ask them to close their eyes and breathe deeply. Explain that you will say a few words introducing each section of the prayer and then allow a few moments for each person to offer his or her

own prayers of adoration, thanksgiving, confession, supplication, or intercession, either in silence or aloud. Then lead the group in the following prayer or a similar one:

Almighty and glorious God, you set the stars in their courses. You rule over the sun and the moon and the planets. Your majesty is beyond our comprehension. Hear our prayers of adoration

Gracious God, “source of blessing, the giver of all good things, the creator and sustainer of life,” bless us with grateful hearts. We give you thanks for

Merciful God, we confess that we have turned from you. We have tried to make ourselves the center of our lives. As a result, we have damaged our relationships with others, with you, and with ourselves. Hear us as we confess our sin and our need for you

Loving God, you know our needs even before we know them ourselves. We come to you trusting that you care for us and our families and our communities. Hear our prayers of supplication

God of power and might, you protect the poor and the powerless. Hear us as we pray for peace in the world, for justice among nations, and for the needs of all people

Conclude by saying together the Lord’s Prayer.

Remind all to read the rest of *A Geography of God* for the next session. Ask them to bring the spiritual journey maps they made during the first session.

Life on the Road, Part 2

Purpose: To consider how we can live an expansive life with our traveling companions along the road of faith and give ourselves completely to the journey.

Materials: Index cards and pens or pencils.

Supporting One Another along the Way

- Invite everyone to sit or stand in a circle. Ask everyone to look at each person in the group and silently name the gifts each one brings to the group. Ask them to pray for individuals as they come to mind while you slowly read aloud 1 Corinthians 12:4–13.
- Break into groups of four to six. Read aloud this passage from *A Geography of God*:

Our personhood is invariably shaped *in relationship* to other persons. These relationships are not something added on to a fundamentally private self, but relationship is the very thing that has made us into “selves.” (p. 87)

- Ask each person to look over the map of her or his spiritual journey and identify those places where another person played a key role in that journey. Who was that person? How did he or she have an impact? Invite participants to share with the others in their small groups.

Getting It Right

Lindvall describes sin as “the simple word used to describe the reality that things are not as they ought to be, that we too often live estranged from each other and from God” (p. 94). He identifies three ways God raises us into a new moral life: obedience, imitation, and inspiration. Ask participants to review briefly in small groups those three ways (pp. 97–100). Invite them to share with others in

their small groups which of those three ways of following God best describes their ethics at this point in their spiritual journey. Do they find it most helpful to know God's laws and follow them, to follow the example of Jesus (WWJD), or to rely on the Spirit's guidance in each situation? Are there times when one way of following God is more appropriate than the others?

When Things Go Wrong

In October 2006, a man murdered five children in an Amish schoolhouse in Pennsylvania and then killed himself. In a move that made national headlines, the Amish community asked people to forgive the murderer and took up a collection to assist his widow and children. Discuss in small groups your reaction to the Amish community's forgiveness. Why was it a major news story? What can we learn from their response to that heinous crime?

The Way Forward

Read aloud the conclusion of chapter 20:

Perhaps the sharpest edge of the Christian gospel is this radical demand for all. Only in this great yielding of all can all that I give come back transformed. So I let go of my anxious grip. I yield to the God in whom and through whom and with whom the journey moves across the page. And then this day-after-day movement is transformed into the pilgrimage of high joy and deep purpose that it was intended to be from the very beginning. (p. 133)

Ask participants to share in small groups some of the challenges they face in living the kind of "all or nothing" lifestyle Lindvall describes.

Concluding the Study

- Ask the whole group to share any insights they have had over the course of this study that have enriched their spiritual journey.
- Pass out index cards, one per person. Ask each person to write on the card something he or she wants to give over to God or some

new commitment for the next stage of the spiritual journey. Explain that the closing prayer will be a prayer dedicating those commitments to God. After all have had time to write a commitment on the card, close with this or a similar prayer:

Loving God we dedicate these things to you. You have been faithful to us along the way, and we know that you will be faithful to us still. Give us the faith and the understanding to follow you wherever your road leads us. We pray in the name of the one who is the way, the truth, and the life, Jesus our Lord.

Amen.