



Study Guide

Original Blessing: Study Guide

This is a six-week study guide, complete with suggested readings, discussion questions, pull quotes, and brief summary points, to be used in conjunction with the book, *Original Blessing: Putting Sin in its Rightful Place*. This study guide is intended for use in classrooms, church small groups, book clubs, and Sunday school classes. Each week includes reading assignments to be completed before the session. It's important to read ahead so you can be ready for discussions and questions.

Think of this guide as a six-week course, covering the most relevant themes of the book. Each section also includes questions for discussion, key takeaways, and a few key quotes that can foster deeper conversation. Of course, if you want to extend the study beyond six weeks, there are plenty of resources to allow for a fuller conversation on the chapters as needed.

Week One: Awakening to Blessing

Read: *Introduction, Blessing is Like Bulletproof Glass, Blessing is God's Prerogative*

Scripture for reflection: Isaiah 43:1, Genesis 1

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion:

- If you had to describe your faith in a few sentences, what would your elevator pitch be?
- Did you grow up in a tradition that described the gospel as a problem of separation from God and Jesus as a solution? How do you resonate with that description? Can you see reasons why a story of separation might be problematic, and even wrong?
- Much of our religious language describes God as being high above us, which can give us a false sense that God is not also near to us. What shifts when we imagine ourselves *in* God?
- Notice the range of ways you use the word “good” in your own life. We remember in Mark 10:18 when Jesus said, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.” What does it mean in scripture for someone or something to be good?
- Shroyer describes goodness as both an origin and a goal, a theme that will continue throughout the book. Discuss the distinctions between these two, and how they relate to original blessing.

- What does it mean that blessing is part of the natural order of things, rather than something magical or supernatural?
- We are used to hearing God's sovereignty described in terms of God's power. What does it mean to see original blessing as a declaration of God's sovereignty in faithful relationship instead?
- How is original blessing different than an everyone-gets-a-trophy idea?
- Shroyer talks about three basic reactions to blessing- relief, anger, and fear. Which of these resonates with you and why? Is there another reaction you had?

Key Takeaways:

1. While the story of original sin is founded on separation from God, original blessing is founded on connection with God (and, by extension, with others and all of creation).
2. Original blessing is the idea that God has chosen to be in a relationship with us, and God has chosen to stay faithful to that relationship no matter what.
3. Though we can choose how or whether to respond to God, God has chosen to echo blessing over us. Original blessing is the gift we are naturally given as humans made in God's image.
4. The word *barak* in Hebrew makes what Shroyer calls a circle of blessing, with God blessing us, us blessing each other, and us blessing God. This is how original blessing works, too. We ground ourselves in God's blessing, and we are able to love God and others.

Key Quotes:

“Sin is not at the heart of our nature; blessing is.” (xi)

“Our human nature is designed to belong, and, specifically, to belong to God.” (4)

“We are in a relationship with God, and God started it. And God is sticking with it.” (6)

“Rather than seeing our lives as naturally and deeply connected with God, original sin has convinced us that human nature stands not only at a distance from God but also in some inborn, natural way as contrary to God.” (8)

“Our relationship with God is not *in* the glass. It *IS* the glass.” (9)

“Original blessing isn't just a state of being, but also a process of becoming. We could say blessing *is*, and blessing *unfolds*.” (11-12)

“The cost of blessing is to see the world the way God sees the world.” (23)

Week Two: Discussing Original Sin

Read: *Original Sin is Unnecessary and Unhelpful, A Tale of Two Boxes and a Golden Thread*

Scripture for reflection: Deuteronomy 30, John 10:7-18

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion:

- What is your response to the realization that Jesus, the disciples, and Paul did not have a concept of the doctrine of original sin in mind?
- If Adam and Eve didn't have a sin nature and they still sinned, why can't we say the same about us? Is there anything we gain by a belief in original sin?
- Shroyer lists 4 problems with the doctrine of original sin: waging unnecessary war with God, the danger of a sin nature, protecting personhood, and a theological extreme makeover. Discuss each of these. Which resonated with you most? Where would you disagree? What would you add?
- Shroyer describes the pivotal shift between the "boxes" of death and sin in the East and West churches. What's at stake in shifting the boxes? Which would you use?
- Have there been times in your life when you have lost the golden thread of blessing? Did you find your way back, and if so, how?

Key Takeaways:

1. It's difficult for us to imagine that original sin hasn't always been universally accepted. But the early church, the Eastern church, and our Jewish and Muslim siblings tell a different story.
2. Some people hold onto the idea of original sin because they think the only other option is to believe people are perfect (or people can possibly be perfect). But that's not true, and those aren't the only two options.
3. When we decide to focus on sin instead of death as the biggest reality, it shifts the way we see a whole lot of other things.
4. Original blessing is like a golden thread we can find anytime we get lost and want to come back home.

Key Quotes:

"Original sin is the red sock in our theological laundry. It has the potential to discolor everything, and it often does." (26)

“All have sinned and fall short of God’s glory. We can leave it at that.” (28)

“One of the most disturbing things about original sin is that it ensnares us in an endless cycle of battle. It is a tour of shame (not duty) that runs on constant redeployment.” (35)

“Seeing people as inherently flawed is a terribly convenient way to devalue each other, even if that isn’t what the doctrine intended.” (39)

“God doesn’t need to humiliate us before giving us grace just to ensure the grace is effective and appreciated. If God set up the world to work that way, we would all be suffering from grace-induced PTSD.” (44)

“God calls us to life, not acquittal.” (50)

Week Three: Revisiting the Garden

Read: *Section II: Revisiting the Garden*

Scripture for reflection: Genesis 2 and 3, Isaiah 61

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion:

- Did you have any assumptions about Genesis 3 that you realized were not actually in the text? Which surprised you most? How did the story change for you?
- The creation story describes God as creating the world with loving intention. How is this world of harmony and potential different than views we have of a utopian, perfect paradise?
- How does your reading of Genesis 3 shift when you read it from God’s perspective and focus on God’s actions and reactions? What do you notice?
- Contrary to common assumption, God curses the snake and the ground, not humanity, after they eat the fruit. What do you make of the curses?
- If the verb God used to send out Adam and Eve was an act of peace even after conflict, how do we see our journey east of Eden differently?
- Few people have a love for snakes, but snakes were a popular symbol in the ancient world. What are your reactions to the many symbols and meanings she mentions? Does that alter the way you see the serpent in the garden? How or why not?
- Shroyer offers three alternative readings to the popular Western understanding of Genesis 3. Discuss each reading. Did you find them helpful? Why or why not?

- God does describe natural consequences to Adam and Eve’s understanding of the knowledge of good and evil. Do you agree that life comes at a cost? How do you describe or experience that in your own life?

Key Takeaways:

1. Our reading of scripture changes when we come to read it *literarily* and not literally.
2. Many of us have a lot of assumptions about Genesis 3 that aren’t actually present in the story.
3. God is far more gracious in response to the man and the woman eating fruit in the garden than we’ve come to assume.
4. The Jewish word *dayenu* is a word of praise and thankfulness that God gives us far more than we deserve. We could use this word to describe God’s actions in the garden and beyond.
5. Genesis 3 may be better described as a coming of age story and the beginning of a bittersweet path to wisdom in the world beyond the Garden, one that each of us must take.

Key Quotes:

“A more appropriate view of creation would be not perfection but potential.” (67)

“The rest of scripture simply doesn’t seem to have the same level of obsession with Genesis 3 that Western Christianity possesses.” (72)

“If we see Genesis 3 as a story warning us to stay faithful to God, we also see it as a sign of God’s faithfulness to us.” (96)

“If the garden is the idealistic version of anything, it’s the ideal childhood home.” (99)

“God is decidedly not a helicopter parent. God places the tree and the snake in the garden because they are necessary.” (104)

“We were never meant to live only in the garden. God creates the fertile land as the intended territory of human experience.” (105-6)

Week Four: Rethinking Sin

Read: *Section III, Rethinking Sin*

Scripture for reflection: Genesis 4, Deuteronomy 30, Matthew 5:43-45

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion:

- After Cain kills Abel, God marks his forehead with protection. Discuss how this radical grace differs from the scarlet letters we often give each other.
- The blessing of God is not special, but universal. How is being grounded in original blessing different from being special in the way society understands? What pitfalls await us if we try to ground ourselves in specialness or favor?
- *Sin crouches, but we rest.* Reflect on the idea of resting in blessing even as sin crouches at the door. Have there been times when you have been able to do that? How could resting in blessing have helped in times you failed?
- Scripture uses many different words to describe sin. As you review the words described in this chapter, discuss how this connects or disconnects with your own understanding of sin and human nature.
- There are times when our choices become habits, and our habits become systems of injustice or oppression. How does the story of *adikia* help us understand what is at stake in a communal, systemic understanding of sin?
- What are your thoughts on the researchers' conclusions from Rat Park? How are our views on the effectiveness of punishment questioned by the themes of connection and the basic need for love in this chapter?
- Christianity has a long and complicated history in approaching sexuality, much of which is reflected in Western society. Where have you encountered views of sexuality influenced by the doctrine of original sin? How does original blessing differ in its approach to human sexuality?
- Many adults joke that children and teenagers are living proof of the inherent nature of original sin. How does a view of human nature as a developing moral capacity return us to a sense of original blessing instead?
- When you reflect on your own understanding of baptism, what does it mean for you? If you have experienced baptism, either personally or in connection to someone else, how would you describe it as an act of blessing?

Key Takeaways:

1. The Jewish concepts of *yetzer hatov*/conscience and *yetzer hara*/drive are introduced as a way for us to navigate our capacity for both good and evil. When we see our inclinations not as inherently good or bad but as directed in the right or wrong direction, we can approach them in a more healthy way. We can consider what it would look like to integrate these inclinations instead of rejecting or enshrining them.
2. Original blessing is a growth mindset, not a fixed mindset.

3. Scripture has many words for sin, and sin is described as an action, a choice, a path, or a habit.
4. As Westerners, we spend much of our focus and energy on our individual identity. Original blessing reminds us that we live in an interconnected web of relationships. It calls us to reclaim a more faithful approach to sin by realizing it is far more than just personal. It's something that affects us as communities, nations, and global citizens.

Key Quotes:

“We live in a society that busily cuts out red letters for everyone, but we are loved by a God who would never make us wear them.” (115)

“Just as sin is waiting for you, crouching at the door, the word is also waiting for you.” (122)

“Desire is not evil; what matters is the source of the desire and the direction and intensity with which we seek it.” (126)

“We carry with us both the instinct to survive and the instinct to be virtuous.” (128)

“Connectional sin reminds us that our choices ripple out far beyond our own lives.” (142)

“People are most motivated by a desire to be loved and cherished.” (150)

“While original sin asks sex to carry the weight of the world, original blessing can approach sex with far more perspective and sanity.” (156)

Week Five: Rediscovering Jesus

Read: *Section IV, Rediscovering Jesus*

Scripture for reflection: Psalm 38, Romans 5:5

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion:

- Whether part of your particular denomination or not, much of Western Christianity describes Jesus only in relation to him fixing our sin problem. So it's a good question to ask ourselves: why do you need Jesus?
- It's hard to imagine a world where Jesus isn't primarily seen on the cross, but the earliest years of our faith were filled with pictures of lush gardens, trees of life and Jesus as the good shepherd. How would your own understanding of Jesus differ if these were the only images you had known growing up?

- Do you find it helpful to return to the language of sin as sickness, salvation as healing, and Jesus as the Great Physician? Why or why not?
- Discuss your own views of atonement. How does your understanding of sin inform how you view the cross? How does that connect or disconnect with original blessing?
- Blessing is not if-then but as-is. How does this fly in the face of what we want and expect out of life? How does the cross reject our understanding of the reward of being faithful?
- Meister Eckhart once prayed, “God, rid me of God.” Where in your own life does God need to rid you of your own understanding of God?
- In Jesus, we recognize that death- even death of God by our hands- does not separate us from God’s blessing. Reflect on the power of Easter as God’s definitive act of sticking with it.
- Paul tells us in Romans 5:5 that our hope in God does not disappoint us. Discuss how hope in God is different than hope in outcome, or circumstance, or even our own abilities.
- Shroyer ends the chapter with her reflection on why we need Jesus. What’s yours?

Key Takeaways:

1. When we view Jesus only as the solution for our sin problem, we greatly diminish his life and the life he offers us.
2. Language that describes sin as an illness and forgiveness/salvation as healing was used often in the early church. Early Christian art also depicted themes of abundant life and health.
3. The cross is an apocalyptic event, because it overturned our expectations for God and for the rewards of faithful discipleship.
4. The cross can be seen as a blessing, because it reminds us that the love of God endures even after we have rejected, abandoned and killed the Son of God.

Key Quotes:

“Healing for Jesus is always salvation. It is always an act of bringing whole life.” (171)

“(Jesus) doesn’t speak of the cross as something to be settled between him and God, but something to be endured between him and humanity.” (172)

“God is not trying to figure out how to pay for our sin. *We* are trying to figure that out.” (173)

“The cross is the symbol of a cosmic ‘should not.’ It is the ferocious antidote of ‘if, then’ faith.” (178)

“In Jesus, God dies to our rejection of blessing.” (184)

“And that is why he came. Not to fix our sin problem but our blessing problem, which is that we are in the terrifying and tragic habit of forgetting we have one.” (191)

Week Six: Living Into Blessing

Read: *Section V, Living Into Blessing*

Scripture for reflection: Philippians 2:12-13, Romans 6:11-14, Matthew 10:16

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion:

- Does describing our spiritual disciplines as “practice” take the pressure off, in your opinion? Why or why not?
- Consider writing out your own personal *habitus* on a piece of paper- your own depiction of the main practices, actions, groups and identities that form you from day to day. What patterns do you see? How does this connect with your intentions and goals?
- If practice makes pathways, what pathways are you digging right now? What pathways is your church or faith community forging?
- Discuss the paradox of Philippians 2:12-13. Where are you working out your own salvation, and where is God at work in you? Where might you need to push more, or rest more? (If you practice Lent disciplines, this is a good springboard idea. Consider adding in two Lenten practices, one of “working it out”, and one of “letting God work in you.”)
- God tells Abram and Sarah that they are blessed in order to be a blessing to others. Paul says we are to present ourselves as instruments of righteousness. How do we respond to this calling to be people of blessing in the world? What instruments has God given us to do so?
- Prayer is a central practice of blessing. How do you live into prayer with God? What prayer practices have been most helpful for you? Are there ways you can expand your own practice of prayer to create pathways to rest in blessing?
- Reflect on the idea of original blessing as our center of balance- not only individually, but as all of creation. Have you ever been caught in a moment when you’ve felt that center of gravity deeply? What was it like?
- Discuss what it means to be both wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Where do you need to find more wisdom? More innocence?

- God’s love is always present to you and always available to you. Where in your own life do you need to be reminded of that? Is there someone else you know who needs to hear this reminder of love?
- It’s easy to fall into the trap of wanting to be “good at” original blessing, or to get frustrated when we lose that sense of our center balance of blessing. What token, mantra, scripture verse or other reminder might help you remember that your blessing cannot be lost? Consider writing this down or making something to bring with you as you finish this study, so that you will have a tangible reminder as you go forward.

Key Takeaways:

1. Goodness is both an origin and a goal. The way we work toward goodness is through spiritual practices. When we call it practice, we remind ourselves it’s not the ivy leagues. It’s important, but we don’t have to be perfect. We are formed by the practice itself.
2. Habitus is a word that describes the practices and actions of us and the people/culture around us. Habitus is the interconnected web that shapes us and the decisions we make. The more we’re conscious of it, the more we can make conscious decisions about our responses to it.
3. As God told Abraham and Sarah, we have been given blessing in order to bless others. So a healthy sense of blessing will always be good news for those around us.
4. Prayer connects us to our golden thread of blessing. It’s the way we learn to rest in God and to gain clarity in how to live and move toward God.
5. We live in the tension of being wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Key Quotes:

“We want to make beautiful things, not least of them being our own lives.” (196)

“We create habits, and habits create us.” (197)

“We live in the dynamic fusion of divine and human agency.” (199)

“Blessing is not a trophy on a shelf but a light to guide us in all we do. We are blessed to be a blessing.” (201)

“Every object in the universe has a center of gravity. Ours is original blessing.” (205)

“Be wise as serpents by being aware of our human potential to do wrong. Be innocent as doves by encouraging our human potential to do good.” (207)

“God is fantastic at blessing, so take a deep breath. You’re off the hook.” (210)
