

Participant Study Guide

The Good & Beautiful God

By James Bryan Smith



James Bryan Smith's book *The Good and Beautiful God* is a journey into the revelation of the God that Jesus knew intimately, trusted fully and obeyed completely. May the narratives and stories of Jesus free you from false ideas of God and bring you into a closer relationship with the One who made you, loves you and wants a relationship with you.

For this study you will need:

- A copy of *The Good and Beautiful God* by James Bryan Smith
- A journal or notebook for daily homework and responding to questions

With this 10-week study, each week you will find:

- A reading assignment for that week from *The Good and Beautiful God* book
- A four-day devotional of scripture from that week's chapter. Use your journal to write out your responses using the S.O.A.P. devotional method
- A set of Reflection Questions for you to answer in your journal
- A soul-training exercise to help that week's concept sink more deeply into your heart and mind
- An optional podcast you can listen to for further insights and information
- Group discussion guide for small groups who are doing the study together

You will also notice the symbols for the Rooted Rhythms throughout this study guide. These are simple reminders of ways to continue to live out those discipleship rhythms in everyday life.

It is our hope and prayer that by learning more about the God Jesus knows, you will come to know and love him more deeply yourself, and we know that love will change your life!

Growing alongside you,
The Preston Trail Groups Team

Using the S.O.A.P devotional method

The S.O.A.P. method can be use with any Bible reading plan to help you process what you are reading. Use the S.O.A.P. method and a journal to connect with God daily.

What does S.O.A.P. mean?

S - Scripture: Write out a section of Scripture. Circle, underline and highlight what stands out to you.

O - Observation: Make simple notes of your observations. What is happening in the verses you're reading? Who is the audience? Is there a repetition of words? Where is it taking place?

A - Application: Make God's Word personal in your life. Ask, "What is God saying to me today? How can I apply what I just read to my own life? Is there an action I need to take?"

P - Prayer: One way God speaks to us is through his Word. Prayer is our opportunity to respond to God and keep a two-way conversation going. Take time to tell him what you are thinking about the Scripture you just read. You can write out your prayer, if you like. Confess your heart to him. Thank him and ask him for what you need.

For a video example of how to use S.O.A.P. visit <https://vimeo.com/411193621>

Ground Rules for Groups

If you are going through this study as a group, be sure to review these ground rules at the beginning of a new study or a new semester.

- Create a safe environment by practicing confidentiality. Attend regularly, respect each other and allow others to speak into your life.
- Be real and transparent.
- Avoid cross talk and side conversations.
- Don't try to "fix" people.
- Practice good listening skills.
- Embrace pauses and moments of silence as these can lead to deeper sharing.
- Don't release the tension when someone is sharing; allow each person to work through it as they can.
- Don't "rescue" people when they are sharing something deeply personal and/or painful. There can be a tendency to jump in to try and make them feel better about themselves or the situation.
- Use "I" statements.
- Be aware of how my words, actions and non-verbal cues are affecting the group environment.
- Apply what you are learning. How am I walking this out in my own life? How do I respond in faith and obedience?

Suggested Weekly Group Time

Week One

- Opening Prayer - Dedicate your time together to the Lord and ask the Holy Spirit to lead and direct your conversations. (5 min.)
- Make sure everyone introduces themselves. (10 min.)
- Review the S.O.A.P. method and work together through Romans 12:1-2 as an example. (20 min.)
- Review the Rooted Rhythms and how they will be used throughout this study. (5 min.)
- From the book, read “How to Get the Most out of this Book.” (15 min.)
- Discuss the reflection questions from week one. (30 min.)
- End with prayer requests and a time of prayer. (20 min.)

All other weeks

- Opening Prayer - Dedicate your time together to the Lord and ask the Holy Spirit to lead and direct your conversations. (5 min.)
- Of your five days of S.O.A.P. devotionals, share the best day and why. Read what you wrote. (30 min.)
- Select 3-5 reflection questions and discuss as a group. (45 min.)
- End with prayer requests and a time of prayer. (20 min.)

Week One

To be completed prior to the first group gathering

READ: Introduction to *The Good and Beautiful God*

COMPLETE: Read through S.O.A.P. devotional method

Complete week one reflection questions and be prepared to share at first group gathering

GROUP TIME: As a group, go through Romans 12:1-2 together using S.O.A.P. method; Discuss the week one reflection questions together

OPTIONAL: Listen to Episode 106 of the “Restoring the Soul with Michael John Cusick” podcast in which he interviews Smith about this book

Week One Reflection Questions

1. Why are you interested in a study entitled, “Falling in Love with the God Jesus Knows”?
2. What do you hope to gain/learn over the next nine weeks together?
3. What is the difference between “training” and “trying”?

Week Two

To be completed prior to the group gathering

READ: Chapter one in *The Good and Beautiful God*

COMPLETE: Daily S.O.A.P. devotionals & Reflection Questions

Soul Training: Sleep exercise from book

GROUP TIME: Discuss this week's reading and select 3-4 reflection questions to go through with your group

OPTIONAL: Listen to Episode 107 of the "Restoring the Soul with Michael John Cusick" podcast in which he interviews Smith about this book (continuation)

S.O.A.P. Devotionals

- Day 1 - Matthew 22:37-38
- Day 2 - Galatians 5:6
- Day 3 - Colossians 3:2
- Day 4 - Philippians 2:5
- Day 5 - Complete Reflection Questions



Prayer



Daily Devotion



Share Your Story

Week Two Reflection Questions

1. Describe your own experience with trying—and perhaps failing—to change.
2. Why is willpower never enough to make lasting change?
3. What comes to mind as you read about narratives that have formed your way of thinking about the world? Which narratives have most deeply affected you (family, cultural, religious or Jesus’)? Why?
4. Have you practiced spiritual exercises such as prayer, Bible reading or solitude in your life? If so, what was your intention and what was the result?
5. What is the constant aim of the Holy Spirit in our lives?
6. What will it look like for you, in this season, to “come and see”?

SOUL TRAINING: Sleep Exercise

Were you able to practice the discipline of sleep this week? If so, describe what you did and how you felt about it.

What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through this exercise?

Week Three

To be completed prior to the group gathering

READ: Chapter two in *The Good and Beautiful God*

COMPLETE: Daily S.O.A.P. devotionals & Reflection Questions

Soul Training: Silence and awareness of Creation

GROUP TIME: Discuss this week's reading and select 3-4 reflection questions to go through with your group

OPTIONAL: Pilot episode of the "Things Above" podcast about 'Mind Discipleship' (Aug. 2, 2018)

S.O.A.P. Devotionals

- Day 1 - Matthew 19:17
- Day 2 - Matthew 5:45
- Day 3 - Galatians 2:19-20
- Day 4 - Job 13:15
- Day 5 - Complete Reflection Questions



Prayer



Daily Devotion



Freedom from Strongholds



Share Your Story

Week Three Reflection Questions

1. Have you ever been through a situation that made you doubt God's goodness? If so, describe what happened and how it felt.
2. Do you believe it is vital for our belief about God to be consistent with the God that Jesus revealed? Why or why not?
3. When confronted with someone's suffering, have you ever wondered what they might have done to deserve it? Why is this response so common?
4. According to the author, why is it so significant that Jesus healed the man born blind (John 9:2-3)?
5. Does the fact that God has the final say in all of life offer you comfort? Hope? Frustration? Why?

SOUL TRAINING: Silence and Awareness of Creation

Were you able to practice any of the exercises this week? If so, describe what you did and how you felt about it. What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercises?

Was it hard for you to find five minutes for silence each day?

What stood out for you as you paid closer attention to the created world around you?

Week Four

To be completed prior to the group gathering

READ: Chapter three in *The Good and Beautiful God*

COMPLETE: Daily S.O.A.P. devotionals & Reflection Questions

Soul Training: Counting your Blessings

GROUP TIME: Discuss this week's reading and select 3-4 reflection questions to go through with your group

OPTIONAL: The "Things Above" podcast episode entitled 'Blessed' (Feb. 20, 2019)

S.O.A.P. Devotionals

- Day 1 - Luke 10:22
- Day 2 - Mark 14:36
- Day 3 - Matthew 6:9-13
- Day 4 - Matthew 26:39
- Day 5 - Complete Reflection Questions



Prayer



Daily Devotion



Freedom from Strongholds



Share Your Story

Week Four Reflection Questions

1. How would you describe your trust level when it comes to God? Have things happened to you that made you doubt that God is trustworthy?
2. Why does it matter that God is all *good* before he is all *powerful* and all *knowing*?
3. How would you respond to a person who says, “I have trouble calling God ‘Father’ because my biological father was not very good”?
4. Of the six aspects of the nature of God the Father (present, pure, powerful, provides, pardons, protects) as seen in the Lord’s Prayer, which do you most need to see and understand about God?
5. How might you begin shifting your attention away from the negative and toward the positive?

SOUL TRAINING: Count Your Blessings

Were you able to make a list of your blessings this week? If so, did you find it difficult? Why? What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercise?

What were some of the things that made your list that surprised you? Why?

Week Five

To be completed prior to the group gathering

READ: Chapter four in *The Good and Beautiful God*

COMPLETE: Daily S.O.A.P. devotionals & Reflection Questions

Soul Training: Praying Psalm 23

GROUP TIME: Discuss this week's reading and select 3-4 reflection questions to go through you're your group

OPTIONAL: 'Christ Plus Nothing Equals Everything' on the "Things Above" podcast (May 29, 2019)

S.O.A.P. Devotionals

- Day 1 - Psalm 136:26
- Day 2 - Romans 5:8
- Day 3 - Romans 5:12-15
- Day 4 - 1 John 4:10-11
- Day 5 - Complete Reflection Questions



Prayer



Daily Devotion



Freedom from Strongholds



Share Your Story

Week Five Reflection Questions

1. Why are guilt and fear ineffective lasting motivators for life change?
2. How does culture—and often, the church—support the narrative of “earning”? How have you felt this pressure?
3. What are the primary motivators in our performance-based culture?
4. Do you agree that God is generous and gives to us freely? Why or why not?
5. What are some ways you have experienced the unearned blessings of God?
6. How does it make you feel to know God delights in you? Why?
7. How do your beliefs about God explain how you live your life?

SOUL TRAINING: Praying Psalm 23

Were you able to practice the exercise this week? If so, describe what you did and how you felt about it. What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercise?

What was the most meaningful verse or phrase of Psalm 23 for you?

Week Six

To be completed prior to the group gathering

READ: Chapter five in *The Good and Beautiful God*

COMPLETE: Daily S.O.A.P. devotionals & Reflection Questions

Soul Training: *Lectio Divina*

GROUP TIME: Discuss this week's reading and select 3-4 reflection questions to go through with your group

OPTIONAL: Listen to the 'Spiritual Mirror' episode of the "Things Above" podcast (Sept 11, 2019)

S.O.A.P. Devotionals

- Day 1 - Matthew 9:9-13
- Day 2 - John 3:16-17
- Day 3 - Luke 15:11-20
- Day 4 - Luke 15:21-32
- Day 5 - Complete Reflection Questions



Prayer



Daily Devotion



Freedom from Strongholds



Share Your Story

Week Six Reflection Questions

1. What's the difference between evaluating someone's actions vs. their identity?
2. Do you sometimes feel that God's love depends on your behavior?
3. If someone were to look at the kind of people you spend time with, what would they assume about your main narratives?
4. "God loves sinners—as they are, and not as they should be." What does that sentence mean to you personally?
5. How does John 3:16-17 sum up the entire Bible?
6. Have you ever been in a position to love someone who rejected you? Or have you ever been loved by someone you have hurt? Describe.
7. How can the message of grace be twisted to make you feel guilty rather than free?

SOUL TRAINING: *Lectio Divina*

Were you able to do the *lectio divina* exercise? If so, describe how it went and how you felt about it. What, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercise?

What was your favorite line in the poem "Love (III)"? Explain why.

Week Seven

To be completed prior to the group gathering

READ: Chapter six in *The Good and Beautiful God*

COMPLETE: Daily S.O.A.P. devotionals & Reflection Questions

Soul Training: Margin

GROUP TIME: Discuss this week's reading and select 3-4 reflection questions to go through with your group

OPTIONAL: Listen to the 'Conversations with Emily P. Freeman' episode of the "Things Above" podcast (June 2019)

S.O.A.P. Devotionals

- Day 1 - Hebrews 12:29
- Day 2 - John 5:28
- Day 3 - Matthew 16:27
- Day 4 - Romans 11:22
- Day 5 - Complete Reflection Questions



Prayer



Daily Devotion



Freedom from Strongholds



Share Your Story

Week Seven Reflection Questions

1. How can God be love AND still hate sin?
2. How does a God who doesn't care about sin undermine the entire Christian story?
3. Why do we skip over Jesus' words of judgment to dwell on his words about love (or vice versa)?
4. Why is the truth that God's wrath is an action and not an attribute so important? What does the difference mean to you?
5. If God's love were to "burn" something out of your life that is holding you back, what would it be?
6. How is God's wrath *for* you?
7. How would you describe hell?

SOUL TRAINING: Margin

Were you able to practice any of the suggestions for creating margin this week? If so, describe what you did, how you felt about it, and what, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercise?

As you tried to develop margin in your life, what was most difficult? What was most rewarding?

Week Eight

To be completed prior to the group gathering

READ: Chapter seven in *The Good and Beautiful God*

COMPLETE: Daily S.O.A.P. devotionals & Reflection Questions

Soul Training: Reading the Gospel of John

GROUP TIME: Discuss this week's reading and select 3-4 reflection questions to go through with your group

OPTIONAL: Listen to the 'Your Identity Is in the Invitation' episode of the "Things Above" podcast (Aug. 7, 2019)

S.O.A.P. Devotionals

- Day 1 - Genesis 2:17
- Day 2 - John 1:10-11
- Day 3 - John 15:13
- Day 4 - 1 Corinthians 13:4-5
- Day 5 - Complete Reflection Questions



Prayer



Daily Devotion



Freedom from Strongholds



Share Your Story

Week Eight Reflection Questions

1. Describe the “divine dilemma” between God and Adam and Eve in your own words.
2. What things did the sacrifice of Jesus accomplish that we could not do for ourselves?
3. Was there anything that Athanasius explained in the dialogue that you found helpful or that gave you a new insight?
4. Do you think God can feel pain? Why or why not?
5. How can self-sacrifice be a sign of strength, not weakness?
6. Describe a time someone made a sacrifice for your well-being. Think of a time when you sacrificed for someone else. How did you feel? Could this be a sign that you are “made in God’s image”?

SOUL TRAINING: Reading the Gospel of John

Were you able to practice the exercise this week? If so, describe how you felt about it, and what, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercise?

What was your favorite passage, story or verse in the Gospel of John?

Week Nine

To be completed prior to the group gathering

READ: Chapter eight in *The Good and Beautiful God*

COMPLETE: Daily S.O.A.P. devotionals & Reflection Questions

Soul Training: Solitude

GROUP TIME: Discuss this week's reading and select 3-4 reflection questions to go through with your group

OPTIONAL: Listen to the 'Practicing Patience' episode of the "Things Above" podcast (May 8, 2019)

S.O.A.P. Devotionals

- Day 1 - 2 Corinthians 5:17-19
- Day 2 - Romans 6:6
- Day 3 - Galatians 5:17-22
- Day 4 - John 15:4-5
- Day 5 - Complete Reflection Questions



Prayer



Daily Devotion



Freedom from Strongholds



Share Your Story

Week Nine Reflection Questions

1. How does the power of the resurrection change us from one to the other; from “sinner” to “saint”?
2. What does the Apostle Paul mean when he writes that believers were “in Christ” or “in the Lord”?
3. If we are “in Christ,” why does sin still tempt us?
4. How do we abide in Christ? Have you ever done this? How might it help you in the struggle with temptation?
5. Why is our identity in Christ a better motivator for godly living than willpower or guilt?
6. What significance is a name change by God? What does it represent?

SOUL TRAINING: Solitude

Were you able to practice the exercise this week? If so, describe what you did, how you felt about it, and what, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercise?

Solitude allows us to grow in the ability to “take off our masks” and simply be who we truly are in the presence of God. Would that describe your experience with this exercise? Explain.

Week Ten

To be completed prior to the group gathering. We recommend groups partake in a meal this week to celebrate and reflect on their time in the study.

READ: Chapter nine in *The Good and Beautiful God*

COMPLETE: Daily S.O.A.P. devotionals & Reflection Questions

Soul Training: Slowing Down

GROUP TIME: Discuss this week's reading and select 3-4 reflection questions to go through with your group

OPTIONAL: Listen to the 'Moved to Pray' episode of the "Things Above" podcast (May 1, 2019)

S.O.A.P. Devotionals

- Day 1 - Luke 10:40
- Day 2 - Mark 1:35-39
- Day 3 - Matthew 6:26
- Day 4 - Philippians 1:6
- Day 5 - Complete Reflection Questions



Prayer



Daily Devotion



Freedom from Strongholds



Share Your Story



Celebration

Week Ten Reflection Questions

1. Like money, speed isn't the problem. Our *love* of speed is the problem. Would you agree or not? Explain.
2. How does Satan work within our hurriedness?
3. We cannot love, think, eat, laugh or pray in a hurry. Would you agree or not? Why?
4. Have you ever had to choose between multiple good things in order to not be overly committed? Explain.
5. Jesus lived a perfect life of balance between rest and action. Describe your "balance."
6. What would it mean for you to "ruthlessly eliminate hurry" in your life?

SOUL TRAINING: Slowing Down

Were you able to practice the exercise this week? If so, describe what you did, how you felt about it, and what, if anything, did you learn about God or yourself through the exercise?

Slowing down is countercultural. Describe the challenges you encountered. Will you keep trying to slow down in the future?