



My Faith: Middle School Survival Series

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SECTION 1

LET'S START AT THE BEGINNING





WHO IS GOD?

You're probably holding this book in your hands because you already believe in God; most people do. But even though most people believe in God, there's a good chance they don't really know *who he is*.

All through history, people have worshiped all sorts of gods. Many times they would create gods that fit what was happening in their lives. They might have had a god of the hunt to help out when they went hunting or a god of battle to help them when they fought a war. Not a bad idea...I could have used a "god of the kiss" to help out when I kissed a girl for the first time, but that's an entirely different story.

Although a custom-made god for various situations may seem pretty cool, it's not the way it is. The Bible makes it clear that there is one true God. Yep, one God who spoke the heavens into existence, created people out of dirt, and holds the world in his hand.

In the Bible, God says he is the "First and the Last...the Beginning and the End" (Revelation 22:13). In other words, God has always been and will always be...there is no beginning or end to God because, well, because he *is* the beginning and the end! Wow, think about that for a second...but not too long, or else your brain will start to hurt.

Here are a few other cool things about God: God knows everything, is everywhere at one time, is all-powerful, and is the source of all creation. But here's the best part: God wants a relationship with

BIBLE FACT: THE LAST WORD IN THE BIBLE IS AMEN (REVELATION 22:21).

you and has a plan for your life! Imagine that...the all-knowing, all-powerful, everywhere-at-once God knows you and hopes you'll want to know him.

How do you get to know God? By reading the Bible, by getting to know Jesus (Jesus is God in human form...God in a bod!), by talking to God in prayer, and stuff like that.

It takes faith to believe in the one true God. It isn't always a popular route to take. But even though we'll never know and understand everything about him, we can know that he's ready, willing, and able to be a part of our lives!

GOD'S ORIGINAL PLAN

How many times have you heard your parents, teachers, coaches, or youth pastor ask, “What were you thinking?”

We’ve worked with middle school students for a long time, and both of us have middle school children. If we had a nickel for every time we’ve asked young teenagers that question, we’d have enough money to open our own Starbucks (which happens to be where much of this book was written).

It seems as though every time we’ve asked that question, we’ve been given the same answer: “I dunno.” Sometimes you just kinda do what you feel like, and sometimes it makes sense to those around you...and sometimes it doesn’t. It isn’t just you; we all do it. Most people don’t usually take the time to think through their actions. Instead they act first, and then, based on how things turn out, they decide if it was the right choice.

It’s easy to look at the world we live in and wonder, *God, what were you thinking?* Believe it or not, God did have an original plan in mind when he created us. Since God knows everything, it would be kinda freaky if he answered that question with, “I dunno”!

So, just what was his plan? Are you ready? Drumroll, please (insert your own drumroll sound here): The Bible says that we were made *by* God and *for* God. His original plan for all humans was for us to have a perfect, joy-filled relationship with him. That should make you feel pretty good. If you

take the time to read the first couple of chapters in Genesis, you'll see that God created Adam and Eve and placed them in the Garden of Eden. The Garden of Eden was a beautiful, lush land filled with everything they needed, including God's presence. In the garden, Adam and Eve had a very special friendship with God.

"SOMETIMES IT'S HARD FOR ME TO BELIEVE THAT GOD
ACTUALLY WANTS TO BE MY FRIEND."

—MELANIE, SEVENTH GRADE

So what was God thinking? What was his original plan? To provide a place for people to live in comfort, protection, and perfect relationship with him so he could enjoy us, his incredible creation!



THE SIN CLUB

Have you ever done, thought, or said anything wrong? Have you ever decided not to do the right thing? Welcome to the club...a very big club! It's the Sin Club. Sin includes stuff like stealing and cheating, but there's more to it than that.

One way to define sin is, "To miss the mark." In olden days when somebody shot an arrow at a target and missed the bull's-eye, the judge would yell, "Sin," which signaled to everyone that the shooter missed the mark...the perfect bull's-eye. In the Bible, God gives us a whole bunch of marks, or bull's-eyes, to aim for, and because God is perfect, his bull's-eye can be pretty tough for people to hit. God has a pretty high standard for how he hopes we will treat others, how we will make choices, and how we will handle life. When we miss the mark, we have sinned. Instead of listing a whole bunch of sins and creating some sort of checklist, let's take a look at two big categories that just about every sin falls into:

Sins of commission: This is a fancy term that simply means there are sins that are a direct result of stuff we choose to do or stuff we choose to think. Choosing to cheat or steal would be sins of commission.

Sins of omission: This is another fancy term that means there are sins that are a result of stuff we know we *should* do but choose not to do, like when your friend has hurt your feelings and you refuse to forgive her, or when your dad asks you to

take out the trash and you don't. In both cases, your choice *not* to do something was a sin.

It's important to remember that a mistake isn't a sin. When you accidentally track mud on your mom's carpet or knock over your dad's golf clubs in the garage, you haven't sinned. You've just made an honest mistake.

It's also important not to let yourself become the "sin police," pointing out all the sins your family and friends are guilty of. The religious leaders in the Bible loved to do this...they thought they were better than everybody else and loved to point out the sins people were guilty of. The funny thing is that the religious leaders were actually worse because they should have known better. Even though they looked good on the outside, they had all kinds of gross stuff going on in their hearts.

Sin always begins in the heart, so protect your heart!



RECONCILIATION: NOT SO SILLY

Reconciliation...that's a biggie! Every now and then in this book we're going to drop some big words on you—words you can use to thrill and amaze your friends.

Let's review a little bit and set the stage: Earlier we talked about God's original plan—to have a perfect, joy-filled relationship with us. Next we talked a little bit about sin...when we miss God's mark. What we didn't cover is the fact that sin is what messed up God's original plan. Remember when we said that the Sin Club is a really big club? That's because Adam and Eve were the first to sin, and everybody since then has joined their club...every single one of us has sinned.

Adam and Eve were enjoying a perfect, joy-filled relationship with God until they messed things up by disobeying him and eating from the forbidden tree. They didn't mess things up just for them, but for you, too, because that first sin paved the way for all the sin that has followed. But hey, don't go pointing your fingers at Adam and Eve (remember, don't be the sin police!)—you would have done the same thing. Sin hurt their relationships with God, and sin hurts our relationships with God, too.

But God's original plan is still the same...he wants a relationship with us, and in order for this to happen, we need *reconciliation*.

BIBLE FACT: THE LONGEST WORD IN THE BIBLE IS MAHER-SHALAL-HASH-BAZ, FOUND IN ISAIAH 8:1.

Reconciliation really just means “restoring a relationship,” or getting a relationship back to where it’s supposed to be. Sin messed up humans’ relationship with God, and he wants to restore it.

“IT SEEMS LIKE I MESS UP ALL THE TIME.
I’M GLAD JESUS DOESN’T GET TIRED OF FORGIVING ME!”

—MICAH, EIGHTH GRADE

So, why doesn’t God just forgive us and move on? He does! Through Jesus, the only person to never sin, God became a human being and allowed himself to pay for our sins so that we could have reconciliation with God...so our relationship with God could be restored to the way he originally wanted it to be.

Even though none of us will ever be perfect (although Marko’s pretty dang close), we can have a relationship with God because Jesus allowed himself to die and then came back to life!



GOD'S BIG STORY IN SEVEN MINI-CHAPTERS, PART 1 (CREATION)

It wasn't *that* long ago that you started reading chapter books, was it? And you know how different they are from the books you read as a little kid. Chapter books break the story into different parts rather than just telling a single scene. But chapter books still tell one story—just with a *ton* more detail.

So it is with God's story, told to us through the Bible. There are 66 books, but they're all part of telling one *big* story. Because many of the Bible books tell the same parts of God's Big Story, just from different "camera angles," we're going to make it a bit simpler for you. We're going to summarize God's Big Story in seven mini-chapters—from before the beginning to after the end! (And to make it easier to remember, we're going to use seven words that start with the letter C.)

Chapter 1, most of you could guess, is...*Creation*.

God chose to invent something totally outside of himself. And—this is so important—God chose to create something that would re-create itself. You can *start* to understand this by thinking of *The Sims*, or some other simulation game where you choose parts and the parts "decide" what to do next. But that's not a perfect way to think about it because those simulation games are still programmed by humans. God chose to invent a world where things (like you and me) really *do* have a choice. What a wild idea!

And then God does this totally cool thing: He invites us to play a role in this amazing creation—to be co-creators *with* him! You create stuff every day, and not just when you build something or draw something. You create something by how you live, by how you treat people, by every choice you make. Your presence on this earth changes things! We can change things for good or change things for bad—but we *do* change things, even when we’re not thinking about it.

That’s the amazing first mini-chapter of God’s Big Story: God *created* a world that keeps on re-creating, and he invites us to join in the process!



GOD'S BIG STORY IN SEVEN MINI-CHAPTERS, PART 2 (CRISIS)

In the first mini-chapter, God *created* everything out of nothing. Whoa!

But mini-chapter 2, unfortunately, is next—*Crisis*.

(When you read “crisis,” you need to make a little “beep-beep-beep” warning sound like when, in a movie, the really cute girl tells the guy who likes her, “I’m actually a zombie, and I’ve come here to eat your stomach.”) Into God’s perfect creation comes the nasty, evil villain of *crisis*. And guess who brings it? No, not that mean kid from your fourth-period math class. It’s *you* and *me*! We are the ones who bring *crisis* into God’s perfect *creation*.

Well, to be fair, let’s back up a bit (did you back up?). I mean, let’s back up a few years. Adam and Eve—heard of ‘em? First peeps—ring a bell? They were chillin’ in a totally perfect world (the Bible calls it “Eden,” or “the Garden of Eden”). But they weren’t exactly happy about the few boundaries God put in place—boundaries that were put there to protect them.

Adam and Eve crossed the boundaries, and—BAM!—hello, *crisis*.

Time-travel forward just a bit. Heard of “the Tower of Babel”? It was in this city (called Babel) where the people decided they were smart enough to build a tower all the way to heaven. BAM! More *crisis*.

Here's the key: The people of Babel didn't think they needed God anymore.

That's the way most of us (yeah, you included) still bring crisis into God's perfect creation today. We decide we don't really need God (maybe not in everything—but in this thing, or that thing), and we cross the boundaries God put in place for our own protection. BAM! More *crisis*! Let's face it: We're *crisis*-bringers.

What's one part of your life (big part or little part) where you're living as if you don't need God, and you're crossing his boundaries?

GOD'S BIG STORY IN SEVEN MINI-CHAPTERS, PART 3 (CALLING)

What a mess! Everything was perfect and peachy after mini-chapter 1, *Creation*. But then stupid mini-chapter 2 had to show up, thanks to us! We brought *crisis* into God's perfect *creation*, messing it all up. Silly people!

But don't panic! Mini-chapter 3 is a pretty amazing fixer. It starts with a dude named Abraham (let's call him Abe). I hope you've heard of Abe, because he's one of the most important people in the history of faith! Abe was a wild man, a revolutionary, and not because he had a nose-spike or a yellow Mohawk or something. Abe was a radical guy because he became convinced there was *only one God*. Now that might not sound all that radical to you—but *no one* believed that when Abe lived. Everyone (really, *everyone*—talk about peer pressure!) worshiped thousands of gods...or what they *thought* were gods.

But our Abe—he was *the man*! And he chose to believe in our God. The one true God. In response God turned the page to mini-chapter 3: *Calling*.

You can read it for yourself in Genesis 12:1-3, but God basically says, "Abe, I want you to leave everything and everyone you know, and I want you to go somewhere. I'm not going to tell you where you're going yet, but it's going to be really, really good. Oh, and Abe? The reason I'm doing this, the reason I'm blessing you like this, is because I want you to be a blessing to *everyone* else."

Here's the deal (this is super important): The *calling* chapter *starts* with Abe, but it continues on to you and me. God's call wasn't just a one-time deal. God is still *calling* us, to leave stuff behind and go where he tells us to go—knowing that it's going to be great for us. And, get this, God's *calling* is still the same: *I'm going to bless you so you can be a blessing to others.*

See? God's amazing plan for righting some of the *crisis* we bring into his perfect *creation* is to invite us (really, it's more “telling” than “inviting”) to be a blessing to the world. That's our *calling*.

GOD'S BIG STORY IN SEVEN MINI-CHAPTERS, PART 4 (CONVERSATION)

Are you keeping up with the C-words that describe the chapters of God's Big Story? So far we have: *Creation*, *crisis*, and *calling*.

And we've only gotten through the first few chapters of Genesis—the very first book in the Bible! At this rate, we could have 4,379 chapters, or something like that. That wouldn't be very easy to remember!

But there's good news: The next chapter covers (this is huge, maybe we should have another drumroll) the rest of the entire Old Testament! That's right—three chapters of the story in half of a Bible book; then one more chapter in thirty-eight and a half more Bible books.

There's a reasonable explanation for this, we promise. And to explain it, you need to know that we're calling the fourth mini-chapter, *Conversation*.

There's a ton of great stuff in the rest of the Old Testament—stories that will rock your world and truths about God and our lives that you just gotta read. But in terms of God's Big Story, from the beginning of time all the way out past us into the future, the rest of the Old Testament can be summarized as a conversation between God and his people, the Jews.

And we have a really fun way to remember the order of the biggie Old Testament stories: *Up, middle, down, mmmiddle, up, middle*. Got that?

I know it'll make you feel really stupid, but it really helps to remember this if you stand up and then say the words while moving your body up and down. Oh, and when you say “mmmiddle” and stand back up, you have to swivel your hips like a hula dancer.

Here are the story connections. It's based on a map: Abe was *up* in a country in the North (of the Middle East, that is, where all the Bible stuff took place), and God *called* Abe to leave his home and go south to the *middle*. A while later, Joseph got sold into slavery by his brothers and was taken farther south (all the way to Egypt, in northern Africa), way *down*. A few generations passed, and God sent Moses to free the Hebrew people from Egypt and go back up to the Promised Land in the *mmmiddle* (okay, so the reason you have to do the hula thing and hold out that “m” is that the Hebrew people wandered around in the desert for a long time on their way to the middle). A buncha years later, enemy armies captured most of the Hebrew people and took them *up* to their own countries. But eventually some of them got to return back to the *middle* to rebuild their homes.

Whew! That could almost make you dizzy!

A last thought on this mini-chapter of *conversation*: Like all the other chapters, this one still continues. God continues his conversation with us today—or, at least, he *wants* to.

Are you willing to have a conversation with God?



GOD'S BIG STORY IN SEVEN MINI-CHAPTERS, PART 5 (CHRIST)

BIBLE FACT: THE SHORTEST VERSE IN THE BIBLE IS FOUND IN JOHN 11:35—TWO WORDS: “JESUS WEPT.”

Oh, man, we're excited (Kurt and Marko, that is). I bet you can guess the next C-word! Remember, we just finished the entire Old Testament with the previous word: *Conversation*. So we're on to the New Testament...which means we're jumping into the books called “the Gospels” (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John)...and those books tell the amazing and life-changing (really, world- and everything-changing!) story of Jesus...so, the next C-word, the fifth mini-chapter in God's Big Story, must be...*Christ*! Yeah, we knew you knew.

By the way, *Jesus* was (and is) a first name, just like ours are (Marko and Kurt). But *Christ* means “anointed one” and is the same as the word *Messiah*. People used to refer to Jesus as “Jesus *the* Christ,” and somewhere along the line, we all just dropped the word *the*. In other words, *Christ* wasn't Jesus' last name!

Okay, this is important. Jesus didn't just start to exist at this point in God's Big Story. Jesus has been there all along. In fact, John 1:1-3 tells us that Jesus was actually the creator back in mini-chapter 1 (*Creation*).

But a wild and radical thing happens here in mini-chapter 5: Jesus (*Christ*) becomes human so he can invite us into God's Big Story. Jesus became his own invention (whoa, that will blow your mind if you think about it). And just like the other chap-

ters where you're invited to join in, this chapter is all about joining in, too.

See, Jesus said and taught lots of things. But the summary of all of what he said, the main question he came to ask (and is still asking you today) is, "Will you follow me?" And that's because following Jesus is the very, very best way to live—not just for us, but also for the whole world.

So, do you? Do you want to follow Jesus?

When Jesus died on the cross, it seemed to many that his message of hope was just a nice idea that couldn't really work.

But when he came back to life three days later, he proved that God's story of grace and forgiveness is better than any other story.

GOD'S BIG STORY IN SEVEN MINI-CHAPTERS, PART 6 (COMMUNITY)

After Jesus' death and resurrection (after the *Christ* chapter), the church got rolling. But *church* isn't the C-word we're going to use for the next chapter. We're calling it *Community*.

But let's back up to *Christ* for a second. You're probably aware of the idea that Jesus is our *master*. But there are a couple of ways of using the word *master*. The first way is like "boss" and is really the language of slavery (a slave has a master). But there's another way to use *master*: It's used for someone who is the very, very best at something. The best violin players in the world are called "master violin players." You could even say the best Xbox player is a *master*. Let's think of Jesus this way: Yes, Jesus came to earth to bring a way for us to know God. But Jesus also came to show us how to live! Jesus is the master of living the best way, and he gives us a perfect example to follow.

So almost all the stuff in the New Testament, after the four Gospels that tell the *Christ* story, is about the *Community* of the master. It starts out as a group of people totally committed to following the ways of their master (Jesus) and continues on to you and us! Remember, this is our story, too! And this part of God's Big Story, connecting with our story and your story, is all about us learning (or trying to learn!) to follow our master.

How's that going for you? Are you committed to following Jesus' perfect example of how to live? Are you committed to being part of a *community* that's trying to live like our master, Jesus *Christ*?



GOD'S BIG STORY IN SEVEN MINI-CHAPTERS, PART 7 (COMMENCEMENT)

A quick review:

Mini-chapter 1—*Creation* (God makes everything out of nothing.)

Mini-chapter 2—*Crisis* (We cross God's boundaries and mess up his perfect *creation*.)

Mini-chapter 3—*Calling* (God calls Abraham, and us, to be a blessing to the world.)

Mini-chapter 4—*Conversation* (God begins a long conversation with his people—first the Hebrew people, but continuing on with us.)

Mini-chapter 5—*Christ* (Woo-hoo! Jesus comes and lives with us, giving us both a way to connect with God and the example of a master.)

Mini-chapter 6—*Community* (We're invited to be a part of a community that follows the master, Jesus.)

And finally the last chapter of God's Big Story: *Commencement*.

What's one of the best things about middle school? Graduating from it! Same is true in high school. And that ceremony they have when you officially wrap it up and move on is called *commencement*. Most of the time we think of that ceremony as the *end* of something. But it's really more about the *beginning* of something else. Even the word itself means that: To *commence* means to begin something (not to end something).

The last chapter in God's Big Story is about an end to the way things are now—and about the beginning of the most amazing life *after* the way things are now. Think of a couple of dog owners taking their pup to the park on a leash. They get to a big open field, and one owner goes to the other side of the field without the dog. Then the owner with the dog releases the dog from the leash, and the owner on the far side of the field calls the dog. Here's the trippy part: In this illustration, we're like the dog (sorry!), and God is *both* owners! God started everything with *creation*, and he *calls* to us from the future (that will make your brain hurt if you think about it!).

You want a description of heaven? It's the place where all God's dreams and hopes for his *creation* come true. And all of us who have chosen to make our stories part of God's Big Story get to be a part of that!

There you have it. God's Big Story in seven mini-chapters: *Creation, Crisis, Calling, Conversation, Christ, Community, and Commencement*. And if you're putting your *faith* (the title of this book!) in Jesus, then this is your story, too!

I WAS A MIDDLE SCHOOL DORK!

—KURT



As a middle schooler, almost every Saturday I'd go to the swap meet with a couple of friends. The swap meet was held in the parking lot of a local drive-in theater. At the swap, people at thousands of little booths were sold everything from sunglasses to surfboards to squirt guns to salt-and-pepper shakers. But on this particular Saturday we weren't there to buy something—we were there to see something! The week before we had walked by a big booth with a banner that read, COME AND SEE THE WORLD'S BIGGEST, MOST DISGUSTING RAT! (Girls, you have to trust me on this one...there isn't a middle school boy alive who doesn't want to take a peek at the world's biggest, most disgusting rat!) We couldn't see the world's biggest, most disgusting rat when we first saw the banner the week before because it cost \$1 to see the world's biggest, most disgusting rat, and we had spent our last dollar on the world's biggest, most disgusting jawbreaker.

But this week we were back, each of us clutching a one-dollar bill and suddenly feeling a little nervous, knowing we were about to see the world's biggest, most disgusting rat! My friends chose me to go first. I gave the toothless worker my dollar and started to climb the ladder to peek into the cage. I got about halfway up and was paralyzed with fear. I suddenly realized I had lived 12 years without seeing the world's biggest, most disgusting rat, and I could probably live the rest of my life just fine without seeing it. Besides, what if the ladder wobbled and I fell in? What if I got trapped

in the cage and became dinner for the world's biggest, most disgusting rat? I couldn't do it...and none of my friends could, either. Embarrassed, I asked the toothless worker if I could have my dollar back since I only went halfway up the ladder. He gave back half my dollar.

I'm 40 years old now, and I've still never seen the world's biggest, most disgusting rat.