

Leader's Guide
for
WHO AM I?

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WHO AM I?
by
Katherine Paterson

ELIZABETH STICKNEY

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Preface

Who Am I? is the sort of book that many of us wish we had had in our hands twenty or more years ago when we were beginning to ask life's hard questions for ourselves. Why am I here? Where is God in the midst of tragedy? Why is life sometimes so difficult? Does God care about me?

Paterson's study serves as a good introduction to some of the issues presented in less accessible form in the catechisms and creeds. It is a tremendous resource for ministers, church-school teachers, leaders of midweek programs, parents — in short, for anyone who interacts with and is concerned about young people. The book has five chapters, and each chapter contains a wealth of discussion material that could be spread out over two meetings, so the book might serve as a semester-long guide for a church-school program or young people's group. Or it could be the focus of a weekend retreat, a lock-in, or a camping experience. Perhaps the place where the book fits most naturally is in the confirmation or catechism class of the church, or the doctrine class in a Christian school, where students seek to define their role in the church and the world.

Who Am I? will resonate with a spectrum of age groups. Readers of any age who are familiar with books like *Bridge to Terabithia*, *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, and *Jacob Have I Loved* will recognize the spiritual questions Paterson has posed in these novels. Middle-school students will be drawn to the stories Paterson relates from her own experience as well as those of her friends and family, and will begin to see how God works lovingly in all of our lives. High-school students will find in *Who Am I?* the assurance that their questions are valid and shared by a great number of other people. And adults will find comfort in

Paterson's picture of a God who is preeminently interested in reconciliation rather than judgment.

This leader's guide has been developed in such a way that it should be a helpful resource to leaders of both middle-school and high-school groups.

Many of the ideas for classroom discussion were generated by Betty Hansen, to whom I extend my thanks. Thanks also go to Duane Kelderman, whose teaching about the Christian's identity as a child of God has guided much of my thinking. And to my husband, Gary, whose knowledge of Paterson's fiction and careful reading of early drafts have greatly contributed to this guide, my gratitude and love.

Planning Ahead

This leader's guide is not a series of lesson plans to be followed systematically but a compendium of ideas meant to assist you in formulating your own plans. You may want to use all the suggestions in a given chapter; you may want to use just two or three and adapt them to your group. Just as individuals have their own unique identities, so too do groups. What works for one class may be an abysmal failure for another. You are the best judge of which questions and activities will be most appropriate for your particular situation.

How much time you have with your students will also be a factor in your choices. I have included two possible Bible-passage studies in every chapter, one from the Old Testament and one from the New Testament. If you have a five-week time allotment, you will probably choose either the story of Ruth or the New Testament study. (Your choice will depend on what else you are studying this year, personal preference, and the needs of your students.) A ten-week class would give you the opportunity of alternating the studies between the Old and New Testaments.

Some of your students may wish to begin faith journals in which they explore for themselves the issues raised in class and in *Who Am I?* Whether or not you read their personal writing will depend on their willingness to share it. Faith journals provide a safe place for students to explore their responses to issues raised in class. The journals make it possible for them to look back on their circumstances and feelings from the perspective of time, and in so doing to see that God has been a presence in their lives. If you decide not to assign journals (and do not insist that everyone keep them), some of the questions I've developed for use in the journals might be appropriate for class discussion.

I have structured each session to follow essentially the same pattern

(though you may want to alter it for your group): introduction, discussion of material from *Who Am I?*, Bible study, activity/craft, and closing. A good way to summarize each lesson at the end of the session is to ask the question “Who am I?” and formulate an answer based on that week’s discussion. (It helps to look at the closing paragraphs of each chapter of *Who Am I?*) You might display the answers on a bulletin board or poster to serve as a review and reminder throughout the course of your study.

It is the dream of every church-school teacher, camp counselor, and youth-group leader to have someone available who can play a guitar and lead singing. While this is often nothing more than a fantasy (and time doesn’t permit much singing), it seems appropriate that as your students begin to learn about the expansiveness of God’s love, they respond with songs of praise. Perhaps you could arrange for a time of singing for one or two of the sessions. This, too, will depend on the preferences and abilities of your group.

Some of the activities suggested in this guide will require advance planning:

- Chapter One: You should have read one or two novels by Katherine Paterson that are familiar to your students. Perhaps *Bridge to Terabithia* and *The Great Gilly Hopkins* would be appropriate. You might also read her *Tale of the Mandarin Ducks*.
- Chapter Two: You will need to have photographs of each member of the class as well as one or two group photos. You will need to take them the first week and have them printed.
- Chapter Five: You might need to do some hunting for the video of *Jacob Have I Loved*. It may be available through your local library; better children’s bookstores also have it.

The ideal setting for this study is a room with comfortable chairs that can be moved around easily for group work. Try to develop good relationships with the members of your class, to show genuine interest in their concerns. When the course of study is over, what they will remember most is that you cared about their questions.

CHAPTER ONE

Where in the World Is God?

A. Background for Discussion

Children aren't the only ones with questions.

Tonight's news included articles about a raging forest fire threatening hundreds of homes in California, two young men being tried for the murder of their parents, two eleven-year-olds being tried for the unthinkable beating and murder of a toddler, a \$275 million ten-year contract for a baseball player, and the news that 46 percent of American children live below the poverty line. The news you read today is probably not much different.

Where are you, God? How could you let these things happen? How long, O Lord, how long?

I like the subtitle an editor attached to the 1962 edition of C. S. Lewis's *The Problem of Pain*: "How Human Suffering Raises Almost Intolerable Intellectual Problems." How can one, indeed, reconcile faith in a loving, omnipotent God with so much evidence of human agony? Lewis answers, in part, by saying that we need to redefine "love"; it is not simply good-will, or a grandfather figure hoping at the end of the day to be able to say, "A good time was had by all." God, Lewis argues, created us not to be the center of the universe, but to be the object of God's love. We were not created for our own sake; accordingly, we need to change our perspective when we begin to talk about things like suffering and pain in relation to God's love. We need to think from the perspective of the will of God.

But how does a person learn of this love and this sometimes terrible will? Frederick Buechner, in *The Alphabet of Grace* and *The Sacred Journey*, suggests that, in part, we must learn to listen to our lives, to their mundane rhythms and their epic events alike, to hear the promptings of God:

What quickens my pulse now is the stretch ahead rather than the one behind, and it is mainly for some clue to where I am going that I search through where I have been, for some hint as to who I am becoming or failing to become that I delve into what used to be. I listen back to a time when nothing was much farther from my thoughts than God for an echo of the gutturals and sibilants and vowellessness by which I believe that even then God was addressing me out of my life as he addresses us all. And it is because I believe that, that I think of my life and of the lives of everyone who has ever lived, or will ever live, as not just journeys through time but as sacred journeys. (*The Sacred Journey*, p. 6)

Paterson would agree. In telling the story of Alison and Pamela in “Where in the World Is God?” she demonstrates how God can use tragedy to promote a kingdom of love and kindness. Pamela’s death prompted an outpouring of support from the church community for Pamela’s family and for Alison. This same theme is sounded at greater length in *Bridge to Terabithia*. It is very difficult to make sense out of the death of a friend, but God does not leave us comfortless through the experience.

Yet Paterson does not stop here. There is a point at which our experiences fail us. General revelation (particularly in this fallen world) can take us only so far. We must turn to Scripture (special revelation) to discover evidence of God’s love. We can find out who God is by reading about Jesus — God incarnate in the flesh. Paterson points us to the many examples of Jesus’ care for the sick and grieving, for they reveal to us the merciful, compassionate face of God.

In *The Hiding Place*, Corrie Ten Boom recounts the experiences of her family in the Netherlands during the Second World War, when they hid Jewish families from Nazi aggressors. After she and her other family members were arrested, they were plunged into the abyss of the concentration camp. When Corrie was being tormented by her captors, her sister Betsy urged her, “Look to Jesus, Corrie. Look only to Jesus.” It was this looking to Jesus that enabled Corrie to survive and, after the war, even to forgive those who had done terrible things to her.

May we, as we face natural disasters, violence, inequities, discrimination, and all manner of evil in our society, also look to Jesus.

B. Getting Started

1. Ask your students if they have read any books by Katherine Paterson, and what they liked about them. Tell them some things that you find interesting about Paterson's life, and introduce *Who Am I?*
2. What has the love of God meant in the story of your own life? One way of beginning to answer that question is to look through photograph albums and glean some pictures from different stages of your life. Take several pictures (and don't choose only the flattering ones!) to class and share some of your stories with your students. Spend a few minutes talking about how it is easier for us to see the hand of God in retrospect than when we are actually going through the events of our lives, and show how this is the case by citing concrete examples from your own life. (Not only will this help your students get to know you, but it will establish a certain atmosphere in class. Remember that your students will not share if you are not willing to share.)

Another approach to this same theme is to gather pictures of church members who are strong witnesses to God's presence and love in their lives. Perhaps someone has suffered physical disability or illness with grace; perhaps a parent of a child with Down syndrome has demonstrated great faith; perhaps a family has taken in foster children in response to the love of God; perhaps a family has had to deal with death. Ask your students if they can think of other people whose lives exemplify the power and presence of God's love.

3. Beginning to recognize the working of God's love in human events will be the focus of your discussions over the next several weeks. Yet, given the presence of pain and evil in our society, that is not always an easy task. The following activity will raise some hard questions about God's presence in the world.

Distribute a stack of newspapers among your students and have them (in groups of two or three) find headlines to fit under the following headings:

How Could God Let These Things Happen?

In the World

In My Community

When most groups have six or seven headlines in each category, come back together as a larger group and discuss them. Ask

your students if they have ever been in situations that have prompted them to ask how God could let certain things happen in their lives.

4. You'll need to take photos of your students this week so that you can have them printed in time for next week's lesson. Take a few group photos as well as individual photos.

C. Discussion Questions for the Chapter

1. What does Paterson say is the only way to know what God is like (p. 5)? Do you agree? Might there be other ways to understand what God is like?
2. What are some characteristics of Jesus that you can think of that tell you about God?
3. Does Paterson believe that God is not powerful enough to prevent bad things from happening to people? What do you think?
4. Why does she suggest that God doesn't intervene more often in the laws of nature — for example, suspending the laws of gravity so that Pamela would not fall to her death from the tree?
5. Do you think that God sometimes gets blamed for things that occur because of a person's wrong choices? Think of some news stories you've read that made you wonder, "How could God let these things happen?" How many of these occurrences were the result of a person's or group's deliberate choice?
6. What does Paterson say is God's answer to sin and suffering in the world (p. 13)?
7. Jesus died almost two thousand years ago. Why do you think there is still evil present in the world?

D. Biblical Illustrations

1. *Ruth 1:1-22*

A good way to read Ruth's story for this lesson and the following ones is to assign parts as in a reader's theater. You may want to prepare scripts in advance and highlight each reader's lines. Other class members may follow along in their Bibles or simply listen to the story.

In the discussion that follows, use the same question posed earlier in this lesson: "How could God let these things happen . . . to Naomi and Ruth?" Remind your students that in the culture of the Old Testament, widowhood was even more devastating than it is today, because it meant the loss of livelihood. Naomi's loss of both her husband and her sons was an even greater hardship. She had good reason to tell others to call her Mara (bitter) rather than Naomi (pleasant). She was returning to Bethlehem, she thought, with nothing, and nothing but poverty and loneliness awaited her there.

Where was God in the tragedy of her life? In her bitterness she claimed that the Lord was the instigator of her affliction (v. 21). Yet there are clues in this chapter that things were going to turn out for her good — that God was watching over her. Ruth pledged her love and loyalty to Naomi on the road back to Bethlehem, and at the close of this chapter we read that they reached Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest — perhaps a foreshadowing of the abundance that would later befall them.

And what about Ruth? Certainly her life had not been easy. She had married into a family of foreigners who practiced a religion that was strange to her. Her husband had died, and there was no family member left in Moab to take his place (as was the custom then). She had been married for ten years, but there is no mention of a child born of that union. Yet she was attracted to her husband's family and customs, and she grew to have a genuine love for her mother-in-law. And when she made her simple pledge to Naomi, she declared her allegiance to or faith in Naomi's God. Each step they took together along the road from Moab to Bethlehem was a step of faith.

Ask your students how we might understand the difficulties in the lives of Naomi and Ruth. When we try to view these events from the perspective of God's will, can we see why God might have allowed these things to happen?

2. *John 11:1-7, 17-44*

Divide your class into three groups (or more, if you have a very large class). Assign one character in the story to each discussion group. Ask each group to read over the passage, then to think about the story from the perspective of the assigned character. How did their character feel when Jesus didn't come to Bethany after word had been sent to him about Lazarus's illness? What reasons might their character have imagined for Jesus' delay? Might Mary and Martha have stopped believing in Jesus' power and love once Lazarus died?

When you regroup, you might choose one person from each group to represent the character they studied and have them role-play with each other as they react to the miracle of Lazarus's resurrection. As a class, discuss the differences in the two women's responses. Martha was able to articulate her faith when she met Jesus outside the town, but Mary only said, perhaps bitterly, that her brother would not have died if the Lord had been there. Talk about the different responses Jesus gave to the two women. It's also interesting to note that when he came to the gravesite, even though he knew that Lazarus would rise from the dead, Jesus wept. Surely he suffers with us when we mourn the loss of relatives and close friends.

And what about Lazarus? In the scriptural account, nothing is said of his faith in Jesus' ability to heal him (it was his sisters who asked Jesus to come), yet he is called "he whom [Jesus] love[s]" (v. 3). How must he have felt as he sensed his strength slip away, then his very life ebb? How must he have felt about dying, and then being raised again to life? (Perhaps your students will ask if it was such a good thing to be summoned from death. Paul, writing after Jesus' own death and resurrection, said that he would prefer to die and be with Christ [Phil. 1:23]. But since Lazarus died before Jesus' crucifixion, his position was much different. And it is easy for us to become so caught up in the tragedies and injustices of the world that we forget what a great blessing our life is. Clearly both Jesus and Lazarus saw death as an evil and life as a blessing.)

It might be appropriate to end the discussion by noting that all of us must participate in an experience similar to that of Lazarus: trusting in Christ means that we must go through a death and a resurrection. Read verse 25, commenting on Jesus' invitation to begin a new life of belief (a new story) with him.

E. Activities to Extend the Lesson

1. Take the headlines collected earlier (you may need more) and have your students arrange them on a sheet of poster board. Using construction paper, foil, or shimmering fabric, cut out a bright sun, star, or other symbol representing the good news of Christ's love and place it in the middle of the grouping of these clippings. You may want to use John 1:5 as a title: "The light shines in the darkness."
2. Make a banner representing the same theme, suggesting God's presence in our lives.
3. Make cards or write letters to send to someone in your church or community who is experiencing hardship. Perhaps you would also like to arrange a visit at this time. More service activities are listed in Chapters Three and Four.

F. Ideas for Faith Journals

1. Would you classify your life as bitter (Mara) or pleasant (Naomi) or a combination of both? List some of the reasons for your choice.
2. What difference has the love of God made in the story of your life?
3. When Martha confronted Jesus after her brother's death, she affirmed her faith in Christ, but Mary was simply overcome by grief. What would your reaction be in a similar circumstance?
4. Describe a situation of tragedy or grieving you or someone close to you has experienced, then comment on how God may have been at work in that situation.
5. On pages 10 and 11 in *Who Am I?* Katherine Paterson talks about the difference between puppet-like creatures, who are "absolutely under the puppeteer's control," and creatures of choice, who are "meant to be partners with the Creator." List some of the joys and blessings we have because God has given us the ability to make choices. What are some ways in which you can demonstrate your partnership with God in this time and place?

CHAPTER TWO

What about Me?

A. Background for Discussion

Young adults living in the 1960s were part of the “Me Generation.” They popularized phrases such as “Do your own thing” and chased a myriad of dreams in search of their singular identities. Yet it could be argued that at no other time in history have people been so dissatisfied with their situation in life as in the last half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first: our preoccupation with self — and its accompanying pitfalls of materialism and pride — have left us feeling empty and adrift. As Paterson demonstrates in this second chapter, apart from an understanding of our place in the household of God, we are indeed living lives that are devoid of meaning.

The Heidelberg Catechism expresses this need for God:

QUESTION: What is your only comfort in life and in death?

ANSWER: That I am not my own, but belong — body and soul, in life and in death — to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

We are not merely individual organisms who happen to live at this particular point in time, but people who were uniquely created by God and lovingly, caringly placed in a particular time and location.

Any search for meaning that does not account for God’s presence and power in our lives will necessarily result in existential despair. Any attempt to define ourselves only in relation to our environment (secularism) will lead us to devalue our identities. Our starting point in understanding who we are must be at the place where we acknowledge that God has a claim on our lives. The basic question we confront is therefore not “who” we are but “whose” we are.

B. Getting Started

1. Read the story of the Ugly Duckling, or have a student retell it. What were the false assumptions of the swan? Have your students ever known someone who was an Ugly Duckling? Have they ever felt like one themselves?

What are some false assumptions about our own identities that we may have derived from our experiences in our schools and communities? What false messages about ourselves do we hear from the media? Make a list of some of your students' ideas. Then ask them what they have learned about themselves as children of God from the Bible, church-school classes, and their families. Draw up a second list, parallel to the first. What conclusions can your students draw by comparing the two lists?

2. Read Psalm 139:13-16.

What does it mean to us that we were lovingly created by God? Are our bodies any less mysterious or wondrous now that scientists have been able to unravel some of our genetic code? Borrow a model of DNA (or slides) from a biology teacher to use as an object lesson as you talk with your students about the fearful and wonderful way in which we were “woven together” to be a unique creation of God. (You might want to do some outside reading on your own to prepare, or invite a doctor or biologist who goes to your church to talk with your group about the wonders of the human body.)

3. Bring to class the pictures of your group that you took last week. As you look at the group pictures, talk about the many things your students have in common (age, school, interests, likes and dislikes). Then display the individual pictures and point out how many more things about your group are dissimilar — how each student is unique. Why did God make us this way? Wouldn't things be easier if we were all alike? Peter Spier's book entitled *People*, although aimed at a younger audience, is a wonderful celebration of the great variety of humanity God has created. Your students might enjoy looking at it.

C. Discussion Questions for the Chapter

1. Paterson says that we must have some knowledge of God to answer the question “Who am I?” (p. 18). What do you know about the nature of God? What is God like? What does God do? What things does God enjoy? How does knowing certain things about God tell us about our identities? What are the ways in which we can learn more about God (p. 23)?
2. Do you agree with Paterson that “we are creatures who can direct and determine to some extent what we will do and what we will become” (p. 19)? Do you feel like a decision-maker or like someone who is pushed and pulled by your government, culture, church, school, parents, and peers? What are some important decisions that you have made this week? What might limit our ability to direct and determine what we will become? Are there times when those limits are positive?
3. As individuals we are unique creations of God, yet we have been placed in community with other people. What are the benefits of living in social units like families and neighborhoods? What makes someone comfortable in the communities in which he or she has been placed? What makes someone feel like a loner? What are some of the responsibilities of group living?
4. What does Paterson say is necessary to be a complete or real person (pp. 21-23)? What are some alternate ideas you hear from the media, other religions, or friends?
5. What is the “sad” part of the answer to the question “Who am I?” (p. 23)? How do you see this “sad” part in your own life, and how do you deal with it?
6. What is God’s solution to the problem of our sinfulness?

D. Biblical Illustrations

1. Ruth 2:1-16

When Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem, their most pressing concern was to obtain food to ward off starvation, and Ruth, as the younger and stronger of the two, took on that responsibility. In following the harvesters and gleaners, she was within the bounds of the Mosaic law, for Jews were commanded to leave a portion of their harvest for the poor to gather.

Yet even though the presence of poor strangers would be expected at harvest-time, Ruth drew the attention of Boaz, the owner of the field — perhaps because of her foreign dress, or because of her grace and beauty. And when he learned the details of her situation, Boaz responded with kindness, going well beyond what the Mosaic law required.

Divide your class into two groups. The first will look at the passage and identify the choices that first Ruth and then Boaz made. How did they make their decisions? Were they good choices? What was the result? The second group will read the story in order to identify Ruth as a “swan” or as an “ugly duckling.” What evidence do we have that she trusted God and recognized that she had a place in the household of God? How did God respond to Ruth’s faithfulness?

After the groups have presented their ideas, ask them how Boaz might answer the question “What is necessary to be a complete and real person?” Is it enough to obey the law? In his kindness, how does Boaz reveal something of who he is? Is this the same way we learn about God? Is God revealed through actions as well?

Ask your students if they can predict the ending of Ruth’s story based on what they have read so far. If this were a fairy tale, how would it end? Can we expect happily-ever-after endings in our lives? After all, if God loves us and calls us children, shouldn’t our lives always be happy? Or does being a beloved child of God carry different promises?

2. John 4:4-30, 39-42

When the woman from Samaria went to the well on the day she met Jesus, she bore on her shoulders the weight of bad choices made over the course of many years. She had been involved in what we assume were five bad marriages, and was presently living with a man to whom she was not married. She was part of an outcast segment of Jewish society

— a Samaritan — and in addition was a person with no legal status in that culture — a woman. Her self-image was undoubtedly low.

Yet Jesus offers her his time, his love, and ultimately his salvation. In their discussion he reveals himself to be the promised Messiah of Israel, and she is the first person to whom he makes this declaration. He promises her living water. Yet the reason that she comes to believe in him is that he tells her everything that she ever did (v. 39). She is drawn to him because he knows her so intimately, and he helps her to know herself.

We are not given the end of the Samaritan woman's story, yet it must be similar to that of the woman who was about to be stoned because of her sin (John 8:3-11). Jesus interrupted her execution by saying, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." When none in the crowd could identify themselves as sinless, Jesus said to the woman, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again." He was helping her to know herself, as well as to know something about God's nature. The Samaritan woman's newfound belief was in a Savior who did not judge, but would bear the penalty of her bad choices (her sin). He knew her shortcomings, yet offered her acceptance and the promise of a new identity (a new creation) founded on him. Her response was one of gratitude and action: she brought others to the Savior.

Read the passage with your students, then identify why the Samaritan woman was alienated from her community, what Jesus asked of her, what he offered her, and how her life was changed because of her encounter with Christ.

Close with a discussion of her freedom from the burden of sin and the joy of her new life in Christ. How might she have answered the question "Who am I?" both before and after her encounter with Jesus? Here are some ideas for beginning this discussion:

- a. Read aloud the passage in John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* where Christian is freed from his burden at the Cross. You might want to use the retelling by Gary D. Schmidt (Eerdmans, 1994).
- b. Bring a pair of weights (one- or two-pound weights would work well) and have your students take turns holding them at arm's length at shoulder height for a couple of minutes. Have them describe what it feels like to put down a physical burden, then apply that to what it feels like to be released from a spiritual burden.
- c. Ask students to tell of a time when they carried around a burden

of guilt or pain and were finally able to release it. What allowed the release? How did they feel afterward?

E. Activities to Extend the Lesson

1. Make picture frames for the photographs you took by painting the backs of some pieces from an old jigsaw puzzle and gluing these on simple frames made from poster board or plywood. Attach magnetic strips to the backs. (You can talk about the events of our lives being similar to these puzzle pieces — as we are experiencing these events, we don't yet know how they will fit into the larger picture.)
2. Make swans using origami or another technique.
3. Make friendship bracelets or do a similar simple weaving project that will remind your students of the intricate way in which our bodies were formed.

F. Ideas for Faith Journals

1. Write a free-verse poem based on Psalm 139:13-16.
2. Larry Norman, a Christian rock artist, wrote, "This world is not my home / I'm just passing through." Do you feel at home in your world? Why or why not? What do you think are good ways for Christians to relate to the world?
3. Rewrite the story of the Ugly Duckling from the perspective of one of the ducklings rather than the swan. Do you know someone who doesn't fit in who could use a friend? What steps can you take this week to make him or her feel more at home?
4. When Jesus met the Samaritan woman, he told her things about her life that she thought she could hide, things of which she was ashamed. How do you think she felt when he began to tell her these things? How do you think she felt when she left him, forgiven and

free again? Write a prayer, a poem, or a song of praise that reflects the way she might have felt, a response that you can also offer as you experience God's forgiveness in your life.

5. One of Katherine Paterson's main ideas in this chapter is that we are given the opportunity to make choices in our lives and ultimately to change our world because of the choices we make. What are some of the important decisions you will make in the next month? In the next year? Paterson writes, "Many young people make bad choices because they don't know who they are. They don't know that they are God's beloved children, so they do not value themselves as they should" (p. 23). How will the realization that you are God's beloved child influence you in making the decisions you have listed?
6. Read Katherine Paterson's *Come Sing, Jimmy Jo*. What choices does James make that will influence the rest of his life? How do these choices affect the family around him?

CHAPTER THREE

Where Do I Belong?

A. Background for Discussion

In a precedent-setting legal case in Florida in 1992, an eight-year-old boy won a divorce from his biological parents. A year later, a Michigan judge ruled that a twelve-year-old girl need have no further contact with her birth parents but was free to remain with her foster family. The “rights of the child” are gaining more and more media attention as well as legal weight. It is becoming easier for children asking the question “Where do I belong?” to forge their own answers.

The term “dysfunctional family” is on everyone’s lips these days. It is an easy label to use when one wants to escape from an unhappy marriage. Adults recalling their childhoods use them as an excuse for all manner of addictive and violent behavior, and society accepts their reasoning as valid. Psychologists, politicians, and sociologists wring their hands in despair over the decline of moral values in our world, and in their zeal point their fingers at disappearing “family values.”

But there are no perfect families, and at some point in every person’s life, as Paterson points out, he or she must take responsibility for his or her own actions rather than blaming circumstances of birth or adoption. This is not an easy concept to communicate to a group of young people. It is natural for them to look around and find parents who have more money than their own, are more attractive, have a bigger house, and take the kids to Disney World every year. Sometimes they see parents who are more loving, brothers and sisters who seem more “bearable.” Almost every one of us has fantasized to some extent about what life would be like if only we had a different mother and father or set of siblings. The result of this kind of thinking is the complaint, “It’s not fair.”

And we as teachers and parents can affirm the truth of that statement. Paterson comments, “There seems to be no fairness when it comes to family. But this is part of the price of being human. We are not puppets who are affected only by the movements of the puppeteer. God has made us people in families whose lives affect one another’s for good and for ill” (p. 48). We live in a fallen world among fallen people, and families consequently are fallen too.

Certainly we need to be compassionate and understanding with our students when they ask some difficult questions about the lot they have been given. But our message need not be one of hopelessness or simply encouragement to endure their present circumstances until they turn eighteen. Just as God works miraculously in the lives of individuals, so too can God make a new creation out of families that aren’t “functioning.”

In *As for Me and My House*, Walter Wangerin describes some of the qualities of a Christian marriage. He gives special treatment to the importance of forgiveness in that relationship. His comments are appropriate also for parent-child and sibling-sibling relationships:

This is our human predicament: we are able to sin infinitely against one another, but we are able to forgive only finitely. Left to ourselves alone, forgiveness will run out long before the sinning does.

In fact, we cannot sacrifice enough to heal the one who hurts us. We are not able to forgive equal to our spouse’s sinning — not when such giving must come solely from ourselves. But if forgiveness is a tool, it is also a power tool whose power comes from a source other than ourselves. We may use it; we may carefully and self-consciously apply it to our spouses; but Jesus Christ empowers it. He is the true source of its transfiguring love. And the love of the Son of God is infinite. (p. 82)

God has placed us in families so that we can experience and practice that love. And even though we will never do so perfectly, God calls us to keep trying.

B. Getting Started

1. Using the four family situations Paterson describes at the beginning of this chapter, discuss some of the tensions involved in family

living. Divide your class into four groups and assign each group one of the stories. Ask them to identify the following:

- Major characters
- Problem
- Cause of the problem
- Potential solutions.

Then have each group choose two members who will role-play for the rest of the class a discussion between two of the characters they have identified. Their presentation need not be long, but it should describe the situation and a possible resolution. At the end of each presentation, discuss the story being dramatized with the entire group.

2. Years ago it was easy to define the word *family*: we had only to turn on the TV and see parents functioning as a unit, dispensing wisdom and love to their well-adjusted children, and solving whatever minor crisis the writers came up with that particular week. But today the definition is much less clear: certainly families we observe on TV no longer bear much resemblance to our traditional understanding of the concept. After having your students identify several “TV families,” have them volunteer their ideas about what a family actually is. Write these down together.

Is there a common element among the definitions provided by your students? Does a family necessarily share an ideology? Can you all agree on a definition? Or is it more appropriate for your particular class to understand the many and varied ways in which it is possible to complete the sentence “A family is . . .”?

3. Read Genesis 2:20b-24. Ask your students why they think God instituted the family, and what purposes God means the family to serve.

C. Discussion Questions for the Chapter

1. Can you think of anyone (either someone you know or a character from a book or television) who doesn’t belong to a family or some other significant person or group? How has that lack affected his or her life?

2. What can we learn about God from our families? (pp. 32-33).
3. Paterson quotes Psalm 27:10 to demonstrate that God's love for us never fails, despite the way our parents may raise us (p. 34). If you have a parent who deals with you abusively rather than lovingly, how does this verse comfort you?
4. What are some practical ways in which you can show respect for the other members of your family?
5. What are the two places Paterson suggests that a person living in a tough family situation might look for help? (pp. 40-41). If you know someone in this kind of situation, can you think of specific ways to help him or her?
6. How does Paterson define *forbearance*? (pp. 41-44). Can you think of a time when you or someone close to you practiced the art of forbearance?
7. Paterson closes the chapter with the story of Fred, who, she writes, had "everything against him." What did Fred need to learn about himself? Are there ways you can apply to yourself the lesson Fred learns?

D. Biblical Illustrations

1. Ruth 2:17-3:18

Ruth's story took place in a culture vastly different from our own, and without an understanding of the customs of her day the meaning of this passage is elusive. As a foreigner among the Jews, Ruth had no rights in the twentieth-century sense. As a daughter-in-law, she was expected to submit to the authority of Naomi. In an age when prosperity was tied to the ownership of land, and males were typically the property owners, she could have little expectation of bettering her financial situation.

Yet there was a set of religious and cultural laws that acted as a safety net for her. Boaz expected the needy to follow his harvesters up and down his rows of wheat and barley, gleaning what they could find, and his workers were instructed to leave deliberately some of the grain

for the gleaners. There was also a system by which families took care of women who were widowed: the brother of the deceased would marry the widow and father children in his brother's name. In the absence of a brother-in-law, the next of kin would assume that responsibility. So when Naomi told Ruth to lie down at Boaz's feet one night, she was not encouraging her to commit a brazen act, but prompting her to choose Boaz as the one who would fulfill the obligations of Ruth's husband.

For your class's purposes, the main point of the story is that Ruth's family provided for her needs according to the law — and will — of God. Through the family and religious structures that God had established in Israel, God was taking care of Ruth. As you study this passage with your group, make a list of these customs and laws. Then list the structures that act as a "safety net" for people in our society and church family. In what ways does God care for us today?

2. Luke 15:11-32

Paterson uses this parable as an illustration of the love of God. Like the father in Jesus' story, God greets the repentant one with loving arms. It is one of the most interesting parables of Jesus, perhaps because the characters seem more fully developed than in other stories. It is a wonderful picture of a Christian family (showing that we must learn to be generous and forgiving of one another), but also a picture of the family of God. In your discussion of the parable, talk about the feelings and motivations of each of the three main characters. Was the younger son wrong to ask for his share of the estate? Did the father ever stop loving the younger son? Was the elder son justified in feeling angry that his father had never held a party for him?

You may want to talk about the stresses that the two sons put on the bounds of the family. The younger son abandons his responsibilities; the older son feels self-righteous about the ways he has carried out his responsibilities. Each one, however, seems not to understand what a family is all about. What counsel would your students give each son if both came to ask for advice?

This is a good story to present as a play to another class or to record on video. You don't need to make it an elaborate production, or even insist that the students playing the characters memorize lines. If they understand the point of the story, they will be able to improvise their conversation.

E. Activities to Extend the Lesson

1. If your church has a pictorial directory of its members, bring it to class and let your students look through it. (If you can get several copies to pass around, so much the better.) Talk about the way your church acts like a large family for those who need to belong and for those who are shut-ins. Invite an elder or a deacon to talk to your class about programs of caring offered by your church or denomination.
2. In this and the following chapter of *Who Am I?* the reader is challenged to recognize the responsibilities entailed by his or her position in the family of God. With your students, plan to engage in a benevolent activity for an individual or a family. You might choose to assemble a Thanksgiving or Christmas basket, do some yard work, or prepare a meal.

F. Ideas for Faith Journals

1. In what ways have the people close to you demonstrated the love of God? What has your family taught you about God?
2. Paterson writes not only about the benefits of living in a family, but also of the responsibilities that we have to other family members. Are there any changes you should be making in the way you relate to your parents and siblings?
3. Do you feel more like the Prodigal Son or the Older Son of Jesus' parable? Rewrite the story from the perspective of the character you chose.
4. Do you believe that "God can use even bad situations to strengthen us and help us to grow"? (p. 51). As you think back over the last six months or so, can you remember a time of hardship that resulted in your emotional or spiritual growth?
5. Have you taken your place in the family of God by professing your faith in Jesus Christ? If so, reflect on the day you made that commitment. If not, what questions do you have about God and the

church that need to be answered before you make that commitment?
Where can you go for answers?

CHAPTER FOUR

Who Is My Neighbor?

A. Background for Discussion

In the preceding chapter Paterson discussed the blessings of belonging somewhere: we were created to communicate with other people, to be nurtured by them, to grow in community with them. This chapter provides the counterpoint to that theme: we are responsible for others in our communities, and we are called by God to reach out to our neighbors in love. Paterson summons her readers to an active faith. “As we begin to open our lives to the great love God wants to give us, we will find that we can also begin to reach out to others” (p. 60).

People today are driven to achieve perfection in career, home, and family. We have borrowed the “winning isn’t everything — it’s the only thing” motto from sports and applied it to corporate mergers and Wall Street maneuverings. Homeowners strive to buy the best house in the best possible neighborhood. Parents enroll their children in the “best” preschools and kindergartens before they are born so that they will be on the inside track for an Ivy League college. Christians are not strangers to this type of mind-set, and certainly we have good cause to strive for excellence. Paul set himself as an example of one who presses toward victory, and Jesus calls us to be perfect as he is perfect.

Yet the danger of any program of self-improvement or personal achievement is that we become nearsighted. While he attempts to get every nuance of his theology to align with orthodoxy, a Christian landlord may ignore the needs of tenants who are struggling to pay their heating and food bills. While working to get their home to conform to their ideals of *House Beautiful*, a family may ignore the simplest acts of hospitality. In pursuing an advanced degree, a mother may remember the details of home management but forget to listen when her children

talk to her. Christ calls us to become involved in our neighbors' lives — to love them — and in so doing, to demonstrate our love for God. Loving our neighbor is one way in which we work out our salvation.

My four-year-old son is full of questions, and one of his favorites is “Who do you love best in the whole wide world?” Because he has a terrific Sunday school teacher, he knows that the proper answer is “God.” Yet whenever he poses the question to me, my inner response is something like, “The way I love God is completely different from the way I love my family.” I know that God should be first, but it’s so much easier to love someone I can see. Like the little boy Paterson described in her chapter about belonging, I want “someone with skin on” to whom I can show love. And somehow in God’s magnificent, gracious scheme of things, the acts of love I offer to my family, neighbors, community, and the world become gifts of love to God.

B. Getting Started

1. Review the story of Ginny from this chapter. Ask your students if they have ever been involved in similar circumstances, and what they can remember about the event. Have they ever been on the receiving end of a “Samaritan’s” aid? Can they identify that event as an example of God’s love reaching out to them?
2. Together, make a list of circumstances and mind-sets that may prevent people from acting “neighborly.” Discuss what prevented the priest and the Levite in the parable from helping the injured man. Ask your students what they think prevents the typical North American teenager from helping others.

C. Discussion Questions for the Chapter

1. Can you think of some modern-day equivalents to the Samaritan? What sorts of people does our society look down upon? Do you think your church is free of discrimination?
2. Paterson summarizes the story of the Good Samaritan by saying that “life with God . . . cannot be separated from life with other

people” (p. 51). Can you think of people, families, or communities who have tried to make that separation? What was the result?

3. What does Paterson mean when she writes that the gospel is “not a set of impossible rules but possibility” (p. 55)? Is this a new way for you to think about Jesus’ challenge to us? How can you apply this idea to the Ten Commandments?
4. In the section entitled “A Definition of Love” (pp. 54-59), Paterson relates two stories of people dealing with others. What do these stories say about love? How would you define “love”?
5. At the close of this chapter, Paterson tells another parable of Jesus in which a king separates the “sheep” from the “goats.” According to this story, why are our efforts to help other people “doubly important”?
6. Who is our neighbor? Does God call us to be neighborly to strangers? To people who are not neighborly to us?
7. What connections do you see between the fact that God created us to live in family communities and the fact that God calls us to love our neighbors?

D. Biblical Illustrations

1. Ruth 4:1-10

This section of Ruth’s story is the product of Naomi’s scheme, which was described in the previous section. Boaz has agreed to fulfill the role of “kinsman redeemer” for Ruth, provided that the nearest relative does not want that role for himself. Although that relative (who is unnamed) is willing to buy Naomi’s plot of land, when he learns that he must raise Ruth’s children in Elimelech’s name, he fears that his own estate will be endangered (he would have to use his money to care for Ruth and her property), and he surrenders his rights.

Certainly Boaz had to deal with the same problem. Perhaps he was more financially secure than the other relative and didn’t feel that he was taking on such a risk. But I don’t think one is reading too much

into the passage by saying that Boaz treated Ruth as someone who, in Paterson's terms, was "real." He noticed her kindness and her hard work, was concerned for her plight, and was generous to her. He took a risk to be her neighbor — and more.

After reading the passage with your group, review the story thus far by making a chart or time line of Ruth's life. You will want to include the major events in her life (marriage, death of her husband, commitment to Naomi, move to Bethlehem, and so on). Then talk about the ways God had been at work in the events of her life. Highlight those events on your time line with a particular color or symbol. Recall how Ruth had in turn let herself be used as an agent of God's love to other people, and use a different color or symbol to mark these events. In examining Ruth's life in this way, your students will begin to see that her story was a pattern of giving and receiving — of God blessing her through her family and community, and then using her to serve others.

2. *John 13:21-35*

This passage occurs just after Jesus' last supper with his disciples. He had begun the meal with a visual lesson of service to his followers: he had washed their feet. Then he turned his attention to his coming death. He knew that Judas was going to betray him, and that the betrayal would lead to his crucifixion. But first he had much to tell the disciples about heaven, about their role in the world, and about their relationship to God. He began his final instructions to them with a new commandment — that his followers love one another in the same way he loved them.

The word *commandment* or *law* would have much significance for Jesus' Jewish audience. They would think of the Mosaic law, which had preeminent authority both in their nation and in their individual lives. Jesus' new commandment was not meant to abolish the law but was rather a rephrasing of it. Like the Golden Rule he had articulated earlier in his ministry (Matt. 7:12), this new commandment was a summary or distillation of the law.

Jesus had spent three years showing compassion and providing healing to the poor, the hungry, and the disabled. He had just shown his disciples what he meant by humility by washing their feet in the ritual ceremony. But now Jesus was going to demonstrate in an unforgettable way what he meant by that love. He had set in motion the events that would lead to his death — his supreme moment of self-sacrifice.

This is the way you are to treat others, Jesus told his audience —

in the same loving way that I have always cared for you. And, he added, your love for each other will be the mark by which others will know that you belong to me.

As you discuss this teaching with your class, have them identify three things: what the commandment is, how Jesus had demonstrated his love, and what would be the result of the disciples' love for each other. Ask them if this command excuses us from loving non-Christians or takes away our responsibility to them.

It is much easier to think of negative behaviors in our society (e.g., shooting another teenager for a pair of sneakers, killing a rival cheerleader, mass shootings at schools), but can your students think of any modern examples of sacrificial love? Have they observed it in movies or read about it in books? Are there individuals in your church fellowship who are notable for their loving spirit? Paterson's *The Crane Wife* is a moving story of a wife who gives of herself so that her husband can prosper; it is short enough to read aloud to your class and will begin a good discussion.

E. Activities to Extend the Lesson

1. Continue the activity you began planning in Lesson Three, in which your class demonstrates God's love to an individual, family, or group.
2. Make a list of other ways your class can act as Good Samaritans. Use the examples on pages 64 and 65 of *Who Am I?* as a springboard for ideas. Key these ideas to specific members of your church and the surrounding community.
3. Give a dramatic presentation of the parable of the Good Samaritan.
4. Make a poster showing the various ways your church and denomination act as agents of God's love, and display it in your church's lobby or hallway.
5. Have your students chart time lines of their own lives in the same way that you did one together of the life of Ruth. They should include at least ten major events. Have them indicate those events which they think show God at work in their lives.

6. Read Katherine Paterson's *Tale of the Mandarin Ducks* and talk about how the notion of burdens shared fits in with this chapter.

F. Ideas for Faith Journals

1. Who are your neighbors? What can you do to help them in the next week?
2. Has there been a time in your life that you have failed to love your neighbor? What were the obstacles you faced? What do you wish that you had done differently?
3. Have you ever felt "out of it" or been treated as if you were "inferior, invisible, or disposable"? Describe what that situation felt like.
4. Has your image of God been one of judgment or of grace? Have these studies changed the way you think about God? What have you learned?

CHAPTER FIVE

What Is My Purpose?

A. Background for Discussion

One of the best modern-day expressions of the first question and answer of the Westminster Shorter Catechism comes from the movie *Chariots of Fire*. Bible scholar and teacher Eric Liddell is torn between his work and his hobby — running. His sister is an old-fashioned Calvinist who cannot understand the time he spends away from the Bible and the church mission. Eric takes her for a walk one day among the rocky Scottish hills to explain his position to her. He says, “I know God made me for a purpose.” Then he tells her about his plans to return to China as a missionary, but he adds, “God also made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure.” Liddell was blessed at a young age with what many spend a lifetime seeking: the knowledge that he was one of God’s beloved creations, and also the joy that accompanies a life lived in obedience to that Creator.

Each of us must fashion our own answer to the question “Who am I?” or “What is the meaning of my life?” We come upon the answer by means of small steps, partial revelations, and sometimes painful lessons. And sometimes when we believe we are almost there, something happens to make us despair of ever having an answer. It is a task that each of us must take on for ourselves: no one can be certain of another’s purpose in life, although he or she can give advice and guidance. This, perhaps, is the part you can play in some of your students’ lives.

But what do you have to go on? What do you tell the child who comes to you from an abusive home? What do you tell the fifth-grade girl who is lonely, excluded from the social life of her peers, always on the fringes? What do you tell the sixth-grade boy who stutters? What do

you say if your budding athlete is not an Eric Liddell, but a Harold Abrahams, who torments himself by demanding perfection, but who takes little pleasure even from his successes? What do you tell yourself during those middle-of-the-night sleepless hours when you feel like your life has been a failure?

Certainly *Who Am I?* provides some of the answers your students need to hear; it is a book that merits several readings. But as Paterson states in the closing chapter, we cannot yet know all the answers. We must wait for the glorious meeting with our Lord to see the complete picture. Until then we must function by faith and trust, responding to Jesus' invitation to "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden" (Matt. 11:28). Our only hope of coming to an understanding of our purpose in life is in Christ.

B. Getting Started

1. Read Psalm 8 with your group. Ask them how David answered the question "Who am I?" Note that our blessings (glory and honor) are balanced with responsibilities — here, to the environment. Also, David frames his meditation with expressions of praise for God's majesty and glory; again, we see that we cannot answer the question of our identity without reference to the One who created us.
2. Make a list together of synonyms for the word *purpose*. (Have a thesaurus with you in case you get stuck.) Then identify some of the purposes that motivate us as individuals and as a society. Is there any overlap between these and the kinds of purpose that Paterson discusses in her chapter? What are the differences?
3. One of this chapter's most difficult concepts to grasp is that God's judgment is meant for restoration and reconciliation rather than punishment. To clarify this idea, Paterson uses the example of the child who has disobeyed, and the parents who use their authority to set matters straight. Do you have similar examples from your own life to share with your class? Or is there a law-enforcement official or social worker in your church who could come and speak to your students for a few minutes about some of their success stories with individuals?

C. Discussion Questions for the Chapter

1. The Westminster Shorter Catechism says that our “chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” What do you think that means? Do the Christians you know “enjoy” walking with God? Do you?
2. Paterson points out that our purpose in life is not separate from our relationships with other people (p. 68). Are you developing a sense of your purpose in life? How is that connected to your relationships with other people?
3. God has given us gifts that help us accomplish our purpose in life. How do you define these “gifts”? Are there ways you can broaden your definition?
4. What is Paterson’s definition of sin (p. 73)? How would you define it?
5. What are the two deaths that a Christian has to face (p. 73)? How do you feel about facing them?
6. What do you think of Paterson’s understanding of God’s judgment (pp. 77-78)? Do you have a different understanding? Why do you think God must judge us? Why can’t he overlook our sin?
7. Why must our answer to the question “Who am I?” remain incomplete for now? Can you be content waiting for the end of the story?

Note: The end of the chapter is a powerful expression of a Christian’s expectation of eternity, and there is a point at which it cannot be analyzed, but only felt on a personal level. It would be appropriate to end this part of the discussion by reading Paterson’s excerpts from *The Last Battle*, followed by her own concluding paragraphs.

D. Biblical Illustrations

1. Ruth 4:11-22

This portion of the chapter begins with the blessing given to Ruth and Boaz by the townspeople and the elders assembled at the gate of Bethlehem. The benediction is realized in the genealogy of Boaz's family listed at the end of the chapter. When Ruth and Boaz died, their story was incomplete: they knew only a part of their purpose in life. They did not live to see the fulfillment of the people's blessing, or know that from their family would come the blood of kings. But readers of the biblical account discover that their family would be the one from which came David, the most famous king of Israel. And from David's line, we can add, was born Jesus the Messiah (Matt. 1:5-16).

Although they could not yet see the complete unfolding of God's plan for their lives, they could discern God's blessing and favor. Naomi, too, who had once called her life "bitter," now cradled her grandson in her arms and lovingly cared for him. Boaz was her kinsman-redeemer as well as Ruth's; the women of Bethlehem recognized the son Boaz had with Ruth as someone who would renew Naomi's life and sustain her in her old age.

Ruth doesn't change much over the course of the biblical narrative: she remains obedient, faithful, optimistic, and loving. We never read that she had a crisis of faith or resented her lot in life; we remember her for her resolve to stay with Naomi despite the strenuous circumstances of her life. Her answer to the question "What is the meaning of my life?" would be similar to the prophet Micah's prescription for a godly life: "He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic. 6:8). And being obedient to God in her daily walk had taken Ruth from sorrow into joy.

Ask your students to think about how the three major characters in the story would answer the question "What is the purpose of my life?" How have their answers to that question changed over the course of the story of Ruth? What further purpose for their lives can we discern from our vantage point?

You might want to conclude with further discussion about the ending of the story. Does it seem too much like a fairy tale to your students? Is Boaz too much like a prince on a white charger who rescues the fair maiden and takes care of all her problems forever after? Does the ending seem at all "real"? The essay entitled "Hope and Happy

Endings” in *The Spying Heart* has much to say on this question as it relates to children’s literature; you may want to read it in preparation for your discussion. In addition, if you have some good readers in your group, you may ask them to read *The Great Gilly Hopkins* for this class and ask them to talk about the way Paterson ends Gilly’s story. Does this seem more realistic than the ending of Ruth’s story?

2. *John 15:1-17*

This is a portion of Jesus’ parting instructions to his disciples that he began with the commandment studied in the previous chapter. He uses the picture of a grapevine to illustrate his relationship to his followers: they are integrally connected to him in the same way that branches are attached to the primary grapevine. When detached from the sustenance they receive from the vine, the branches are worthless and produce no fruit.

This is, in the end, the purpose of us “branches” — to bear fruit. Jesus says that this will show the world that we are his disciples, and he also says that it will be to God’s glory. Then he continues by restating his commandment to us to love each other. He has given us these instructions, he says, in order “that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (v. 11). “Glory” and “joy” sound rather familiar to readers of the Westminster Shorter Catechism. It appears that God’s purpose for us (our “chief end”) has something to do with loving each other, bearing fruit, and following Christ.

Sometimes the illustrations Jesus used get a little foggy for a twenty-first-century audience that is more familiar with virtual reality than with vineyards. If it’s planting season, you might go to a nursery and buy a grapevine to bring to class. Let your students examine it closely so they can understand the kind of relationship with his followers that Jesus was trying to achieve and express. Talk about the importance of pruning the vine: by cutting back some of the growth, the gardener can cause the branches to produce more abundantly.

Read this passage together, then divide your class into three groups. Ask the first to list the things we learn about God in this passage. The second will list the things we learn about Christ, and the third, the things we learn about believers. There will probably be a lot of overlapping in these lists, which is another illustration of the way in which we are dependent upon God.

Speculate with your class about what the “fruit” mentioned here refers to. Does it have any relation to the fruit of the Spirit Paul talks

about in Galatians? How do we make sure that we remain in Christ as a branch remains in the vine? What does that mean? What is the equivalent of “pruning” in the spiritual life? How would your students summarize what this passage says about God’s purpose for Christians?

E. Activities to Extend the Lesson

1. Watch the movie version of *Jacob Have I Loved* with your class. What was Sara Louise’s main struggle? What did the Captain mean when he said, “You were never meant to be a woman on this island”? The novel extends the ending to Louise’s new beginning as a nurse in the Appalachians. Read the section where she comes to her new home and meets her future husband (pp. 204-9). What does your class think of Joseph’s assertion that “God in Heaven’s been raising you for this valley from the day you were born”? Do they think God really takes a personal interest in us and has such a plan for each of our lives?
2. Obtain some grapevines to make wreaths: you will need a small wreath form for each class member, ample vines, trimmings, and florist’s wire to secure them around the forms. (If the cost of a wreath per member is prohibitive, you might work together on one or two wreaths to deliver to shut-ins.) If you don’t study the passage from John 15, you will want to tell your students about it, emphasizing the way it illustrates our need for Christ as we discover and live out God’s purpose for us.

F. Ideas for Faith Journals

1. Is there someone you know who has identified your gifts and calling in the same way that the Captain and Joseph did for Sara Louise in *Jacob Have I Loved*? What have you learned from that person? Or, what would you like to hear someone tell you about your purpose in life?
2. Have you experienced the death of a relative or close friend? Did reading the comments about death in this chapter make you think about that particular death in a new way?

3. What do you imagine heaven will be like? What do you think our resurrected bodies will be like?
4. Do you “enjoy” God? What can you do to increase your enjoyment of God?
5. If a group of strangers could observe your life for a week, what would they infer to be your purpose in life? What decisions and actions have you taken in the last week that will work to accomplish both your own personal goals and God’s purpose for you?
6. Can you comment on a new insight or idea you have learned from studying *Who Am I?* Has reading the book changed the way you think about yourself? About God?

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About Katherine Paterson

If Katherine Paterson were to ask herself the question “Who am I?” she would have several answers. She was the daughter of missionaries to China and spent her earliest years living as a foreigner in that culture. Political upheavals there forced her family to flee twice: the first time to Virginia, the second time to North Carolina. Paterson’s experiences in China and the British accent she acquired there stamped her at once as a “foreigner” on the schoolground. Yet she is truly a Southerner, and that heritage gave her a love for story and the ability to tell a story well.

Paterson is also a student: following high school graduation, she attended college and then earned two master’s degrees. Her interests were English literature, education, and religious education. Her training led her to teaching posts in nearby Virginia and far-off Japan.

After her return from Japan she met and married Reverend John Paterson, and thus became a minister’s wife and, subsequently, a mother. The Patersons are the parents of four children — John, David, Lin, and Mary — and also served for a time as foster parents, as Paterson recounts in *Who Am I?*

In the midst of their busy household Paterson somehow found the time to pursue her interests in writing. *Bridge to Terabithia* and *Jacob Have I Loved* won Newbery Medals, one of America’s highest honors in children’s literature, and Paterson has also garnered several other awards.

Paterson’s novels are not always easy reads. She portrays characters who deal with intense inner turmoil and hardships that come from family situations or peer groups. She does not give easy answers or paste on happily-ever-after endings. Yet she always offers her characters — and thus, her readers — an element of hope.