

Discussion Guide for Groups

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This study guide is designed for those who want to go deeper into the message of *Under Our Skin*. Invite others to join you—your family, a small group, or your church—and prepare to be challenged and inspired by each other. It is structured as a four-week study, but you may choose to adapt it for a shorter or longer time to suit your needs.

Keep in mind that race can be a sensitive, charged subject, and each group member will come to the table with different experiences, opinions, and even unconscious prejudices. Remember that your goal is to cultivate open, honest, healing conversations—and you must honor each other with mutual respect in order to create a safe place for this to happen. Consider beginning each week with a prayer such as this:



God, we ask you to guide us today as we come together to talk about our broken world.

Help us to treat each other well—with respect, dignity, and honesty.

Open our eyes so we can truly see and understand one another.

Where we agree, show us how to turn our motivation into purpose and action.

Where we disagree, remind us that we are nonetheless united in our love for you.

Thank you for every person here who cares about the racial divide and wants to be part of the solution through your work in the world.

Amen.

Week 1: Introduction, Chapters 1-2

Introduction

- Benjamin Watson unpacks the emotions he experienced upon hearing of the Ferguson grand jury decision. How aware of the events in Ferguson were you at the time? Which of his emotions do you share about the decision? Which do you not? Are there any you experienced that you would add to the list. Explain why.
- Why was it so important to Benjamin Watson to think before pushing Send on his post? Have you ever had a situation in which you hesitated to contribute your voice and opinion to the dialogue about race? What was the circumstance? What did you decide to do?
- Watson describes some of the “questionable encounters” that took place between black men and police in 2014. What does he mean by *questionable*?
- How does the author describe his hopes for this book? As you begin this group study, what are your own hopes for the experience? What are your fears? What can each person in the group do to facilitate the kind of discussions that Benjamin Watson describes?
- Many people face the question of which box to check on a form that asks about race. How do you describe your own racial identity? What aspects of your heritage are personally important to you?

Chapter 1: Angry

- What about the current state of race relations in America makes you angry?
- In this chapter, Benjamin Watson tells the story of his grandfather Pop Pop. Share a story with the group about a member of your own family who has helped to shape the course of your life.
- What do you think of Pop Pop’s statement: “You can go only so far up the totem pole”? Can you relate to his feelings?
- What aspects of your own life, neighborhood, church, or community are racially segregated? Why do you think this is? Is it something you are willing to work toward changing? What can you do?
- “Why can’t we grasp the truth that, by separating ourselves as whites and blacks, we are so much less likely to understand one another, show compassion, and prevent violence?” (page 11). Can you think of a time (in history, your own life, literature, or Scripture) when two disparate groups chose unity and peace instead of conflict? How did it happen?
- Do you agree with Benjamin Watson that personal responsibility plays a role in the negative cycle? Why or why not?
- What do you believe is the role of faith in the discussion about race?
- How does Benjamin’s role as a father shape and inform his feelings about the future of race relations in our world? How can parents contribute to a better way forward and set good examples for their children?

Week 2: Chapters 3-5

Chapter 3: Embarrassed

- Benjamin Watson considers the events of the 1965 civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery and asks: “How would I have responded if I had been alive then?” How would you respond to the same question? If you remember those days, how did you respond at the time?
- How would you define the phrase “an embarrassment of violence”? Do you believe that violence is ever an appropriate response to unrest? How do you think your opinion has been influenced by the “lenses” through which you see race?
- What does Benjamin see as the greatest struggle and difference between races? Why does he say the answer “won’t be found in legislation, government programs, or election results”?

Chapter 4: Frustrated

- In describing his own “love-hate relationship” with hip-hop, Benjamin Watson calls music “a language voicing the highest and lowest points of life.... Means by which we sometimes cry, laugh, or scream at the world.” What did he initially respond to in hip-hop, and why is his love for it waning? What do your favorite musical genres, artists, or songs say about you?
- Do you agree or disagree that there’s “a fine line between legitimate, uncensored personal expression and the celebration of a violent, sexual lifestyle that’s morally bankrupt and destructive”? How are your beliefs reflected in the media you choose to consume? Do you believe that, as a culture, we are becoming desensitized?
- What do you think of Benjamin’s description of holiness as “living with a highly moral or spiritual purpose”? How would you describe your own purpose?

Chapter 5: Fearful and Confused

- Why was Benjamin Watson apprehensive about driving his pregnant wife to the hospital? If it had been you that night, would it have occurred to you that you might have a high risk of getting pulled over? If you had an encounter with the police today, do you have reason to expect you would be treated fairly? Why or why not?
- “White people have no idea of the fear that black people feel toward the police.... We have a high expectation of being demeaned, abused, and possibly treated violently in any encounter with law enforcement” (page 91). Likewise, many police officers approach encounters on the job with an expectation of potential danger. Benjamin Watson acknowledges his belief that “the majority of police officers are on our side, making it their life’s work to protect and serve us.” How do you reconcile these two realities? Is one more or less valid than the other?

Week 3: Chapters 6-8

Chapter 6: Sad and Sympathetic

- If you have children, do they have friends and playmates from a different race or ethnic group? To what do you attribute that?
- What do the various aspects of being pro-life mean to Benjamin Watson? By his definition, would you consider yourself pro-life as well? Explain.
- How do you think social media have contributed to the national dialogue about events such as Ferguson or Charleston? Do you see social media as a positive or negative factor in this regard?
- What do you imagine forgiveness would look like for America in a racial context? Do you believe it is achievable? What would need to happen for our nation to get there?
- If you were to write your own letter to a child (your own or someone else's), as Benjamin did to his unborn daughter, what would you want to say about the world into which they are being born? How would you encourage them to live well? How would you want them to be treated, and to respond, when they are "different" or "other" in some way?

Chapter 7: Offended

- Were you surprised or shocked to see the "n-word" used in Benjamin Watson's book? Why do you think he might have made that choice? Do you ever hear it used in your everyday life? What connotations does it have for you?
- Benjamin tells of encountering a college friend who apologized for a long-ago conversation. How did each person's race play into what was said and how it was heard? Have you ever inadvertently wounded someone with your words (or been wounded by others)? Were you able to make it right?
- In this chapter, Benjamin shares his thoughts and feelings about the Confederate flag. What does the flag symbolize to you? What are your opinions about how it should be used and displayed? How would you respond to someone who held a view contrary to your own?
- Based on the TED Talk video by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Benjamin writes, "Each of us is composed of multiple overlapping stories. . . . If you see me, talk to me, or talk about me based on just one of the many stories that make up who I am, you reduce me to a single story" (page 150). What are your own stories? Have you ever felt that other people saw only a limited version of who you are, based on a single story? How did that make you feel? Why does Benjamin believe we do this to each other?

Week 4: Chapters 9-11

Chapter 9: Hopeful

- What has been your experience with integration and/or white flight? Whose experience does it most closely parallel in Benjamin's story—his grandparents, the real estate agents, the families who moved, the families who stayed?
- Do you consider it important to teach black American history in schools? How do you believe it should be approached?
- Name some of Ken Watson's qualities, shown in this chapter, that you believe helped him to succeed. How so? What can we learn from his example?
- What are some things that are "better today than they were before" that make you the most grateful?

Chapter 10: Encouraged

- Why does Benjamin Watson say that, ultimately, racial conflict "is not a SKIN problem, it's a SIN problem?" How have you and others contributed to both of these problems? How can you be part of the solution?
- What does Benjamin say is at the root of racism? How does the story he tells about the dermatologist support his point? Can you see other ways in modern society in which this is true?
- Earlier in the book, Benjamin Watson challenged us to take personal responsibility for our lives and actions. In this chapter, he explains the power of God's grace. What do you think it means to take responsibility for your choices and also surrender your life to God?

Chapter 11: Empowered

- "In the presence of a friend or relative who makes racist remarks, do we have the courage to call them on it?" (page 199). Have you ever challenged someone about racism? Would you? What might you say?
- As you reflect over the last several weeks of reading and discussing *Under Our Skin*, how have your views, opinions, beliefs, and assumptions been challenged?
 - about national news stories such as Ferguson, Charleston, and the flying of the Confederate flag?
 - about the lenses through which black people and white people view things such as law enforcement, integration, and American history?
 - about whether it is actually possible to have honest, healing conversation between people of different races?
 - about what causes the problem of the racial divide and what its ultimate solution is?
- Of the four arenas of change that Benjamin Watson describes, which could you take action on this week? What will you do?
- What significance do you see in the book's title: *Under Our Skin*?

