



**Small Group Discussion Guides**  
Based on the 1977 Television Mini-Series

# Roots

(An Adaptation of Alex Haley's Book of the Same Title)

From the NACCC Racial Justice Task Team  
Sub-Group Educational Offerings  
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## Introduction

### **A 40+ year old TV mini-series? Why?**

For many, *Roots* was a truly transformative viewing experience, and a cultural watershed event. Today, we might say the series caused a “paradigm shift” for many. And, though many watched the mini-series in 1977, many were either too young or not yet born. For them, this is brand new. Even decades later, it remains one of the most powerful media creations addressing the history of racial injustice in America.

### **Discuss *Roots* in my local church? Why?**

When we're at our best as Christians, the gospel message permeates every aspect of our lives and our very beings. Our theological beliefs and spiritual understandings can and should inform our perspectives on the news of the day in general, and on the issues surrounding racial justice in particular. Our faith should not be compartmentalized. It therefore seems fitting that local communities of faith engage in this discussion, taking care to be respectful of differing viewpoints, of course. In a sense, a local Congregational church can be the ideal context for this discussion, as it champions faith-based discourse, the freedom of each person's individual conscience, and respect for a diversity of authentically-held opinions.

### **Now? Today? Why?**

Obviously, our national discussion on racial injustice didn't start in 2020. But, in late-May of 2020, the killing of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers brought the discussion to the forefront of the news. Soon after, the nation learned more about the shootings of Breona Taylor in Louisville, Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta, and Jacob Blake in Kenosha. Protests erupted in many cities, and critical questions were posed, and continue to be posed, regarding proper police conduct. All this has understandably fostered a national dialogue—not just on policing, but on a broad range of policy issues related to racial justice.

### **How could this be used in my church?**

The mini-series is organized into six episodes, each running approximately 90 minutes. You might schedule an eight-session discussion series.

Session I: Introduction  
Session II: *Roots*, episode 1  
Session III: *Roots*, episode 2  
Session VI: *Roots*, episode 3

Session V: *Roots*, episode 4  
Session VI: *Roots*, episode 5  
Session VII: *Roots*, episode 6  
Session VIII: Conclusion

### **When would the group meet?**

Discussions could take place weekly for eight weeks, or bi-weekly for four months, or monthly for eight months, depending on the preferences of the participants. The sessions could be on an agreed upon weeknight, or on Saturday mornings, or on Sundays right after worship, or on Sunday evenings.

### **How long would each session last?**

Your group could meet for two or two and a half hours each time if your plan is for the group to view each 90-minute Roots episode together (kind of like a “movie night”) and then discuss it. Or, you could leave it to group participants to watch each episode on their own at home, in advance, and only meet for an hour or so each time to discuss.

### **How can we even get Roots on video?**

The complete 1977 mini-series can be purchased as a DVD boxed set or as digital video files. Sellers include Amazon, Amazon Prime Video, Best Buy, Hulu, Netflix, Walmart, and others. Prices vary, but the complete mini-series can typically be purchased for under \$40.

### **A few assumptions**

It is assumed that most local churches have access to a large TV screen or projector, capable of playing either DVDs or digital video files. It is further assumed that most local churches have experience bringing together small groups for Bible study or other discussions. Therefore, it is assumed that most local churches have the wherewithal to offer a discussion on the Roots series. It’s also assumed and stipulated that each group facilitator is entirely free to add, omit, or rephrase any of the questions on any of the guide sheets. Each sheet is simply that—a guide, a resource. It should empower the facilitator and the group, and not be seen as constraining in any way. Finally, please note that using Zoom or some other video conferencing platform is recommended during the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than holding in person discussion group meetings.

### **OK, so how do I get started?**

You may want to run this by the relevant board or committee at your church. This could be the Board of Christian Education, the Fellowship Committee, the Discipleship Team, or even your Church Council. Assuming you have the “green light” to proceed, you’ll want to...

- obtain the DVDs or video files of the complete mini-series,
- determine who will serve as the group’s discussion facilitator(s),
- schedule the sessions on your church calendar, and
- thoroughly publicize them!

# Facilitator's Guide for the Introductory Session

## Recommendations for the Opening Moments

- Welcome all the attendees to the group's very first session.
- Invite all participants to introduce themselves.

## Explanation of the Group's "Ground Rules"

You might want to briefly clarify for everyone the basic understandings about this group, including...

- Who?** Who is eligible to participate in this group?  
Is church membership required?  
Is there a minimum age? (Would youth be welcome?)
- What?** Simply note that the Roots videos will be a starting point or springboard, but that discussions of specific issues currently in the news may arise and are most definitely welcome. Emphasize the importance of respecting differing opinions.
- When?** Will we meet weekly? Bi-weekly? Monthly? On what days? At what time?
- Where?** Will we meet at church? In someone's home? On Zoom?
- How?** Will we watch the videos together at each session?  
Or, is each participant responsible for watching the videos ahead of time?  
How exactly will participants access the videos (DVDs or digital files)?
- Why?** You might hand this question back to the participants: "Why do you think a discussion of this mini-series will be relevant for us today? (Otherwise, you might refer back to the front/cover page of this guide for thoughts on "why?")"

## A few discussion questions

1. What was something you were taught as a child about one or more races other than your own?
2. Who taught you this? How and why did it even come up in your childhood conversation?
3. Did you have any childhood friends who were of a different race than you?
4. How did that friendship develop, and what did it mean to you?
5. How would you describe the state of racial togetherness in your neighborhood today?
6. What about in your workplace?
7. How about your social circles?
8. How would you describe the current state of racial togetherness in our country?
9. What do you think Jesus would say to us about all this today?

## Closing Moments

- Thank all attendees for participating.
- Suggest that they contemplate Galatians 3:28 (NRSV) between now and the group's next meeting:  
"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free,  
there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."
- Close the meeting in prayer.

# Facilitator's Guide for the Discussion of Episode 1

## Recommendations for the Opening Moments

- Welcome back those who participated in the Introductory Session.
- Welcome any who were not at the Introductory Session and ask them to introduce themselves.
- Reiterate the importance of respecting differing opinions as our discussion moves forward.
- Invite participants to share their thoughts on the current relevance of Galatians 3:28.

## Discussion Questions

1. Did you have a chance to think about Galatians 3:28 since our last meeting? How, if at all, do you think these words are relevant to our discussion of racial justice in the United States today?
2. Is Mr. Slater truly evil, motivated entirely by racial hatred? Or, does he delude himself, rationalizing the capture and sale of slaves in order to subdue his conscience and benefit financially?
3. Mr. Slater is very frank about his feelings towards black people. What is Mr. Slater's concept of them?
4. Captain Davies seems profoundly uncomfortable with the whole enterprise. Is he more a perpetrator or a victim of circumstance? To what degree did he have the freedom of choice, once the slave capturing endeavor had begun?
5. Kunta struggles with becoming a man. Later he is confronted with the values learned from his village and his reality of becoming a slave. How does he deal with these realities?
6. How did you feel when Kunta returns to his village as a man and tells his mother in an energetic voice: "A woman should not tell a man what to do."? How do we relate those times to what happens in our reality now?
7. In this episode we have the opportunity to see the conditions in which the slaves were transported. How would anyone from our time react to such conditions?
8. What does Captain Davies' strong testimony say about his morals? What was his reaction upon learning that slave women were given to sailors, and that Mr. Slater takes a "belly warmer"? Did Captain Davies' sense of morality and faith in fact prevail?

## Recommendations for the Closing Moments

- Invite everyone to consider which character from episode 1 they could relate to most, and why?
- Thank everyone for their participation.
- Remind them about plans (date, time, place, etc.) for the next group meeting.
- Close in prayer.

# Facilitator's Guide for the Discussion of Episode 2

## Recommendations for the Opening Moments

- Welcome back those who participated in either or both of the first two sessions.
- Welcome any first-time participants and ask them to introduce themselves.
- Reiterate the importance of respecting differing opinions as our discussion moves forward.
- Invite participants to share which character from the previous episode they could relate to most.

## Discussion Questions

1. The "wrestler" is an interesting figure. What ultimate end would he have brought about through his leadership if the insurrection on board the ship had succeeded? Would he have thrown all the white guys overboard? Or, would he have held them captive below deck? Which outcome would have been morally justifiable? Or would either/both of them have been justifiable?
2. John Carrington is in charge of arranging the auction in Virginia. In his conversation with Captain Davies, he essentially does intellectual contortions to try to convince Davies (and maybe himself) that the slave trade was a win-win...that the Africans were "better off here anyway" and that the whole thing was an economic jackpot for everyone. So, was he a racist, or just a capitalist? Or both? How exactly would we name his sin?
3. Captain Davies asks Mr. Carrington if he doesn't feel "entrapped like the slaves down below." What is Captain Davies trying to convey?
4. Why is Mr. Ames unhappy about Fiddler breaking in the new slave? Does he propose a different approach? What do you think might have worked with a slave like Kunta? Why?
5. Aurelia, a slave, is taken to Mr. Ames for his entertainment. How does this act affect Kunta?
6. There is a profound message in a conversation between Fiddler and Kunta. This conversation takes place right after Kunta broke one of his chains. "Chains ain't good for n\*\*\*\*s Fiddler." Is that his way of explaining why he took them off, or is there more meaning in this conversation?
7. Dr. William Reynolds engages in a conversation with his brother John and sister in-law about slaves. She makes very good points just using her logic and keeping her place as a submissive woman. How does she, as a Christian woman, see the slaves in comparison to her husband or to Dr. Reynolds (who also has a different point of view)? And how would you describe Dr. Reynolds' view of the African slaves and his behavior toward them?
8. Fiddler asks to speak to Mr. Reynolds in regards to the punishment that Kunta is receiving in that moment. Mr. Reynolds is studying his Bible at the time. Fiddler decides to appeal to his business mind instead of his humanity. What does this situation say about hypocrisy?
9. In your view, what was the real significance of Mr. Ames' determination to hear Kunta say that his name was "Toby," and of Kunta's stubborn resistance to this?

## Recommendations for the Closing Moments

- Invite everyone to consider which character from episode 2 they could relate to most, and why?
- Thank everyone for their participation.
- Remind them about plans (date, time, place, etc.) for the next group meeting.
- Close in prayer.

# Facilitator's Guide for the Discussion of Episode 3

## Recommendations for the Opening Moments

- Welcome back those who participated in either or both of the first three sessions.
- Welcome any first-time participants and ask them to introduce themselves.
- Reiterate the importance of respecting differing opinions as our discussion moves forward.
- Invite participants to share which character from the previous episode they could relate to most.

## Discussion Questions

1. Kunta again tries to escape, and is re-captured. As punishment, about half of one of his feet is lopped off with an axe. As he recovers from this injury, he descends into deep despair, considering whether death would be preferable to continued existence as a one-footed slave. While most of us are probably reluctant to consider suicide to ever be the right choice for anyone, was it at least an understandable temptation for Kunta? What thoughts and options do you think would have been swimming around in your head, given the same circumstances?
2. John Reynolds sells Kunta and Fiddler to his brother, Dr. William Reynolds, as part of settling a debt between them. Deep down in your gut, how does it make you feel to think about how people were considered property, and even used as currency, back then?
3. Belle is Dr. Reynolds' cook, and ends up tending to Kunta as he recovers from his foot injury. How would you describe Belle's "bedside manner"? How would you describe the role do you think she played in Kunta's recovery—and in the longer-term trajectory of his life?
4. Kunta falls in love with Belle, and seems to make his peace with his circumstances. He's a slave of a somewhat kinder, gentler slave owner (Dr. Reynolds). In time, he marries Belle. How would you describe their wedding day—the ceremony itself, the reactions of the other slaves, and the post-ceremony conversations?
5. Belle and Kunta have a daughter, and Kunta is intent on naming her "Kizzy," which means "stay put" in the Mandinka language. Belle doesn't seem initially convinced that giving her this name is a good idea, but Kunta insists. What's the significance of this naming decision for Kunta? What's the significance for Belle?
6. Theologically and otherwise, what do you think of Kunta lifting up his newborn child to the starry heavens—just as his father had lifted him up when he was an infant—and saying "Behold, the only thing greater than yourself"?
7. On a scale of zero to ten, just how tempted do you think Kunta was to again attempt escape when the drummer sounded the drum that night?
8. How do you think Fiddler's death impacted Kunta? What do you think were the main lessons Kunta learned from Fiddler over their years of friendship?

## Recommendations for the Closing Moments

- Invite everyone to consider which character from episode 3 they could relate to most, and why?
- Thank everyone for their participation.
- Remind them about plans (date, time, place, etc.) for the next group meeting.
- Close in prayer.

# Facilitator's Guide for the Discussion of Episode 4

## Recommendations for the Opening Moments

- Welcome back those who participated in any of the discussion sessions thus far.
- Welcome any first-time participants and ask them to introduce themselves.
- Reiterate the importance of respecting differing opinions as our discussion moves forward.
- Invite participants to share which character from the previous episode they could relate to most.

## Discussion Questions

1. Missy Anne secretly teaches Kizzy to read and write, despite the prohibition against slaves learning these skills. Kizzy goes on to forge a traveling pass for Noah, with whom she is in love, and he uses the pass to attempt escape. He's caught, and Dr. Reynolds learns that Kizzy was the forger. In exasperation, Dr. Reynolds sells Noah and Kizzy—but to separate buyers. How do you think this turn of events affected Missy Anne? How would you assess the moral fiber of her character overall? How does Missy Anne's reaction to Kizzy's sale affect her father, Dr. Reynolds?
2. Kizzy is sold to Tom Moore. He rapes Kizzy, and she becomes pregnant. She gives birth to George. How do you imagine her love for her son was shaped by the violent nature of his conception?
3. Sam Bennett takes Kizzy for a ride to Dr. Reynolds' plantation. Kizzy is hoping to see her parents, Kunta and Belle. But, upon arrival, she learns that Belle was sold and that Kunta died two years earlier. She visits her father's burial spot on the plantation, and sees the wooden grave marker. She takes a stone, scratches through "Toby" on the marker, and scratch-writes "Kunta Kinte" below it. We know from episode 1 that Kunta's real name meant a lot to him. But why do you think it was so important, and so emotional, for Kizzy?
4. In time, Kizzy's son George begins working on training Tom Moore's roosters for cockfighting. Today, most of us see cockfighting as an unambiguous example of cruelty to animals. Do you think anyone back then harbored any shred of ethical misgivings about cockfighting?
5. George becomes known as "Chicken George" because of his affinity for training cocks for fighting. He ends up taking over the role of chief trainer, which seems to bring him a sense of self-esteem. Do you think he was genuinely content with his station in life at this point? Or, did the passionate yearning for freedom so strongly held by his mother and grandfather still burn in him?
6. When Kizzy tells George not to trust anyone, and he says that the master is like a father to him, what is her reaction? Why does George trust Tom Moore?
7. After a conversation with Marcellus, a free black man who was also a cock trainer, George starts contemplating the possibility of one day buying his own freedom. He shares that aspiration with his mother. How do you think she feels about George's goal? (Remember, she knows who George's father is. At this point, George does not.)

## Recommendations for the Closing Moments

- Invite everyone to consider which character from episode 4 they could relate to most, and why?
- Thank everyone for their participation.
- Remind them about plans (date, time, place, etc.) for the next group meeting.
- Close in prayer.

# Facilitator's Guide for the Discussion of Episode 5

## Recommendations for the Opening Moments

- Welcome back those who participated in any of the discussion sessions thus far.
- Welcome any first-time participants and ask them to introduce themselves.
- Reiterate the importance of respecting differing opinions as our discussion moves forward.
- Invite participants to share which character from the previous episode they could relate to most.

## Discussion Questions

1. Tom Moore wasn't without any human regard for what he knew to be his own biological son (Chicken George). But he didn't hesitate to ruthlessly blackmail and exploit him. Was Tom Moore, like many other white characters in *Roots*, driven primarily by economic self-interest, deeply felt racial hatred, or the desire for power over others?
2. And what about Chicken George? He told his mom (Kizzy) that he was going to kill Tom Moore. In fact, it seemed that nothing would dissuade him from that—until his mom told him that his intended victim was in fact his own father. Only then did Chicken George reconsider his homicidal intent. How would you describe Chicken George's sense of ethics in that moment? Once Chicken George knew that Tom Moore was his father, what hope did that knowledge give him?
3. How did the Nat Turner Rebellion change Tom Moore's overall outlook? How did it change the climate of the connections between the various characters in the story? What role did Tom Moore's wife play in all this?
4. How would you describe the conversation with Missy Anne and Kizzy by the well? At that point, do you think Missy Anne was plagued by senility, or was she willfully lying in denying that she ever knew anyone named "Kizzy"?
5. How does Kizzy respond to Missy Anne's denial of their childhood friendship. What action does Kizzy choose to make in that moment? Would you say she was justified in that action?
6. Why was George away in England for fourteen years instead of three? How did the long separation affect George and his family?
7. What observations did you make about the conversation between George and Matilda in bed after George returned a free man? Matilda said that she was married to a free man and would not live with a slave ever again. Why was that an important statement for her to make?
8. When Tom discovers Jemmy Brent attempting to assault Tom's wife, Tom and Jemmy physically struggle. After Tom had disarmed and subdued Jemmy, Tom drowns him in a tub of water. In your view, was that homicide justifiable?

## Recommendations for the Closing Moments

- Invite everyone to consider which character from episode 5 they could relate to most, and why?
- Thank everyone for their participation.
- Remind them about plans (date, time, place, etc.) for the next group meeting.
- Close in prayer.



# Facilitator's Guide for the Discussion of Episode 6

## Recommendations for the Opening Moments

- Welcome back those who participated in any of the discussion sessions thus far.
- Welcome any first-time participants and ask them to introduce themselves.
- Reiterate the importance of respecting differing opinions as our discussion moves forward.
- Invite participants to share which character from the previous episode they could relate to most.

## Discussion Questions

1. After the Civil War had ended, what caused the former slave owners to become the Night Riders and turn to violence? What role did the Senator Arthur Justin play in the actions the men took?
2. As the slaves held something of a strategy session in the barn, Tom's brother, Lewis, expresses distrust of "Old George." Should Lewis have ostracized Old George the way he did?
3. What plan does Tom devise in response to the terrorizing attacks of the Night Riders?
4. When Tom's plan yielded evidence, he took a major risk in going to the sheriff, in effect betting on the sheriff's integrity. How did the sheriff respond to this evidence initially, and what action did he then take? And what reaction did all this trigger on the part of the Night Riders?
5. By this point, Old George had been entrusted with the role of overseer on Sam Harvey's plantation. As the Night Riders ruthlessly whip Tom, Old George intervenes. What does he do? Shortly thereafter, what's the nature of the conversation between Irene (Tom's wife) and Martha (Old George's wife)?
6. How would you describe the character strengths and flaws of Sam Harvey? He appears to be sympathetic to the slaves, but is naively double-crossed by Senator Justin. Sam and his wife are forced to leave the plantation, but before they go, one of the slaves says to him, "You was better than some." How do you think that made Sam feel?
7. Consider the relationship of the newly freed slaves with Old George and Martha, the changes made and endured. Do you think that kind of back-and-forth relationship could exist today?
8. Inspired and led by the returning Chicken George, the group of slaves, along with Old George and Martha, devise an elaborate escape plan. At one point, Evan Brandt is tied up and at the mercy of Tom. How would you describe the decision by Tom not to whip Brandt when he had the chance? Would his decision have been different if his family, including children, were not present?

## Recommendations for the Closing Moments

- Invite everyone to consider which character from episode 6 they could relate to most, and why?
- Thank everyone for their participation.
- Remind them about plans (date, time, place, etc.) for the next group meeting.
- Close in prayer.

# Facilitator's Guide for the Concluding Session

## Recommendations for the Opening Moments

- Welcome back those who participated in any of the discussion sessions thus far.
- Welcome any first-time participants and ask them to introduce themselves.
- Reiterate the importance of respecting differing opinions as our discussion wraps up today.
- Invite participants to share which character from the previous episode they could relate to most.

## Discussion Questions

1. Consider the different masters and how they treated their slaves, in word and deed. Were any of the masters any higher or lower character than the others? Why?
2. When Missy Anne is speaking with Kizzy, she describes men as being above women and whites as being above blacks in intelligence and value as the natural order, the way God intended. Why did she think this and why was she content or happy with it? Also consider Missy Anne's use of the word "friend." How did her meaning of that word differ from Kizzy's?
3. When you think of the Night Riders, are their motivations and actions relevant to some issues of race relations in today's culture?
4. Early in the series there is a conversation about slavery and skin color. Those who had white skin could not be recognized as slaves, whereas those with dark skin could. How important was this distinction to the massive kidnappings of blacks from Africa? What was the primary motivation for having slaves?
5. Think of all of the names used for slaves in the mini-series: black, nigger, darkie, buck and wench. What do they mean and what are they used to justify?
6. Why did Dr. Reynolds sell Kizzy to Tom Moore when he knew what kind of a man he was?
7. Consider the sympathetic white folks: Captain Davies, Dr. Reynolds, Sir Eric Russell, Squire James, George and Martha, Sam Harvey. Compare and contrast them in feelings and actions. Why did they not take more action on behalf of the slaves?
8. How were the words "civilized" and "barbarian" used in Roots? How is our understanding of faith and culture different today?
9. What did you learn from the series? What spoke most powerfully to you? Were there any awakenings? How will you personally change—if at all—in the ways you think, speak, and act because you watched and discussed Roots?
10. What, if anything, do you think your local church could or should consider doing now in response to the national conversation around racial justice?

## Recommendations for the Closing Moments

- Thank everyone for their participation—at this meeting, and throughout the discussion series.
- Briefly recap the recurring themes that have been most often expressed during the discussions.
- Lift up the open question of "next steps." (See question #10 above.)
- Close in prayer.