



INSPIRED

SLAYING
GIANTS, WALKING
ON WATER,
AND LOVING THE
BIBLE AGAIN

READING GUIDE

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FROM THE AUTHOR

Perhaps more than any other book I’ve written, *Inspired* is intended to be read, wrestled with, discussed, debated, and creatively engaged with in the context of community. And that’s precisely because the Bible invites us to do the same. Contrary to what you may have heard in church or Sunday school along the way, the Bible does not always provide clear, straightforward answers to difficult questions, but rather relies on story and song, letters and laws, poetry and proverb to spark among God’s people the questions, ideas, and actions that bring them closer to truth and to one another. With this posture, “the sacred text becomes a crucial point of contact, a great dining room table, erected by God and set by God’s people, where those who hunger for nourishment and companionship can gather together and be filled” (p. 24). My hope is that *Inspired* helps you set that kind of table—in your church, in your small group, or in your time of personal study.

This guide (written entirely by me, the author) provides questions for reflection and discussion, ideas for creative engagement, and additional resources for making the most of your experience with *Inspired*. Much of the focus is on getting creative with the biblical text, so get ready to break out those coloring pencils, instruments, and journals as you approach the Bible’s stories in some new ways. My aim is for readers to encounter the Bible with their questions, doubts, and imaginations fully engaged.

As always, thank you for reading. It means so much that you would spend this time in the company of my words. May they inspire you to see the Bible—and the world it illuminates—in ways that *inspire*.

METHODS OF READING AND ENGAGEMENT

The following guide recommends several methods for reading and engaging the biblical texts discussed in the book. Volumes have been written about each of these methods, and readers are encouraged to learn more about each one but, for reference, these are the methods most used and recommended in *Inspired* and in this guide:

Midrash is a Jewish method of interpretation and commentary that plumbs the depths of Scripture by clarifying or expounding on a point of law, “filling in the gaps” of the biblical narrative with new stories and anecdotes, and exploring intriguing questions left open-ended by the text. Historically, rabbis wrote *midrash* to help resolve contradictions in the text and fill in missing pieces of its stories, but the form has evolved through the years to include imaginative tales and commentaries based on the Bible’s places, characters, stories, and laws. *Midrash* is a way of reading between the lines of Scripture and imagining the possibilities. While *midrashic* commentary is best left to rabbis and scholars, everyday readers can engage in the spirit of *midrash* by “playing” with the biblical text, indulging their questions and imaginations when they encounter a passage or a story that intrigues them. The method is discussed in more depth, with examples, on pages 21–24 of *Inspired*.

Lectio Divina (Latin for *divine reading*) is a spiritual discipline that has been practiced for more than a thousand years. It was originally formulated by Benedictine monks who found that while reading Scripture, certain words, phrases, or verses seemed to leap from the page with fresh significance. *Lectio Divina* is a method for savoring those insights, first mediating upon them and then acting on them. The practice traditionally follows four steps: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation).

For personal practice, begin by selecting a passage of Scripture and reading through it very slowly. Notice things. Look for repetition, themes, metaphors, and images. Stay alert for a single word, phrase, or image that catches your eye or connects with you emotionally. Then read the passage for a second time, noting again what words, phrases, and images really jump out at you.

Now mediate on those words, phrases, or images. Write them down. Doodle around them. Let them unfold with new meaning. Ask yourself why they stood out to you and what you might learn from them.

Next, pray. Incorporate the words, phrases, and images into a prayer, asking God to continue to reveal their significance.

Finally, ask yourself—*What does this mean for me? How will this encounter with Scripture change how I go about the rest of my day and the rest of my life? How will it change interactions with my neighbors and with my community?*

Lectio Divina can also be practiced in a group setting by listening to the passage together as it is read several times, making individual notes about significant words, phrases, and images after each reading, and then sharing those insights with the group to enjoy and learn from a diversity of responses.

For a more in-depth guide to Lectio Divina, see *Conversing with God in Scripture: A Contemporary Approach to Lectio Divina* by Stephen Binz.

The Ignatian Method of engaging Scripture was developed by Saint Ignatius, a sixteenth century Spanish priest and the founder of the Jesuits. Ignatius created a daily devotional called *Spiritual Exercises* to help regular people grow closer to God. The devotional included meditations on the life of Jesus—his birth, ministry, healings, teachings, death, and resurrection. Ignatius encouraged Christians to not simply read or hear these gospel stories, but to immerse themselves in the stories, to use their imaginations to put themselves into the scene. So, when engaging the story of the feeding of the five thousand, for example, the reader is encouraged to imagine what the scene might smell like and sound like. *What does a breeze blowing off the Sea of Galilee feel like? Who is in the crowd? What are they saying to one another? What is the weather like? Can you feel your belly grumbling? What emotions are you experiencing?*

To practice the Ignatian method, choose a story from the New Testament and read it slowly. Then place yourself inside the story using your imagination. Pretend you are one of the characters who can interact with others in the scene. (You may want to give your character a backstory and thoughts and feelings of his or her own.) Observe what's happening around you and pay attention to the sensory experience. What does the scene feel like, sound like, smell like, taste like? Notice what's going on inside of you too. Do you feel happy, peaceful, confused, sad, or surprised? Finally, consider retelling the story from your character's perspective or in some new, creative way.



INTRODUCTION



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How have your thoughts and feelings about the Bible changed over the years? What were some crucial turning points in your experience with the Bible?

2. Did you have any trepidation about reading a book about the Bible? Why might that be?

3. Do you have a biblical name? If so, what do you know about the biblical character who shares your name?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What was your favorite Bible story as a child? Do you now read that story differently as an adult?

2. Is there a Bible story that has always struck you as strange or troubling, one that perhaps stirs up questions and doubts?

3. Consider the following words:

- Inspired*
- Inerrant*
- Infallible*
- Trustworthy*
- Authoritative*
- Sacred*
- Oppressive*
- Outdated*

Which ones strike you as appropriate ways to describe the Bible? Which ones strike you as unhelpful? Why?

4. The author describes the various roles the Bible played in her life—storybook, handbook, answer book, etc. Do you relate to some of those? Which ones?

IDEAS FOR CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT

1. Write your own “Bible story,” describing your personal experience with the Bible, beginning with “Once upon a time....”



“THE TEMPLE” AND ORIGIN STORIES



*“Origin stories tell us who we are, where we come from,
and what the world is like.”*

BIBLICAL TEXTS

Genesis 1; Genesis 32:22–32

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- I. What are some of the family stories, religious stories, and cultural stories that have shaped who you are and how you understand the world? In what ways have those stories been harmful or helpful to you?

2. What might it mean for you to wrestle with the Bible until God gives you a blessing?
What sort of blessing are you seeking?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What struck you about the differences between the two creation stories featured in “The Temple” (the Babylonian story as recounted by little Haggai and the biblical story as recounted by his father)?

2. How have you traditionally understood the nature of the Bible’s creation stories? As scientific, historical accounts? As myths? How does considering context of the Babylonian Exile change or inform your interpretation?

3. What are some of the most important origin stories in your family, your community, and your culture? (See pages 15–17 for examples of origin stories.) How have those stories shaped the world around you in both positive and negative ways?

4. What are some ways in which you’ve observed the Bible treated as a conversation-ender? What are some ways in which you’ve observed the Bible treated as a conversation-starter?

IDEAS FOR CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT

1. For artists: using comic panels, illustrate the Babylonian creation story of Tiamat and Marduk on one page and the biblical creation story of Elohim and the seven-day creation on another.
2. Read Genesis 32:22–32. In the spirit of midrash, imagine the conversation between Jacob’s two wives, Rachel and Leah, as they wait—camping by the river with their children, maids, and livestock—for Jacob to return from his night wrestling with the stranger. Consider writing a dialog between the two. (Read Genesis 32:1–21 for more context.)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. Background for “The Temple” was drawn from John Walton’s book, *The Lost World of Genesis One* and from an article by Ilan Ben Zion in *Times of Israel* entitled “‘By the Rivers of Babylon’ Exhibit Breathes Life into Judean Exile,” which can be accessed here: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/by-the-rivers-of-babylon-exhibit-breathes-life-into-judean-exile/>.
2. To learn more about midrash and Jewish interpretations of Scripture, check out “What is Midrash?” from My Jewish Learning: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/mid-rash-101/>. See also *Reading the Book* by Rabbi Burton L. Visotzky and *Womanist Midrash* by Wilda Gafney. For some examples of midrash around Rachel and Leah, check out this article by Tamar Kadari in Jewish Women’s Archive: <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/leah-mid-rash-and-aggadah>.



“THE WELL” AND DELIVERANCE STORIES



“Don’t you dare forget.”

BIBLICAL TEXTS

Genesis 16; Psalm 63:1–8; Matthew 22:37–40

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- I. Have there been times in your life when God has “made a way where there seems to be no way”? What did you learn from those experiences?

2. Do you find yourself in some sort of wilderness now? What brought you here?

3. Thinking over the wilderness experiences in your life, have there been places or moments when God has provided, or been powerfully present, that you might mark with a naming, like Hagar and Jacob did? What name would you give your “well” in the wilderness?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

I. What are some ways in which the Bible has been used to harm and oppress people throughout history and in the present? What are some ways in which the Bible has been used for liberation? Do these examples shake your faith in the Bible, strengthen it, or do a little of both?

2. Share about a time in your life, or the life of a loved one, when God has “made a way where there seems to be no way.” Give testimony!

3. What comes to mind when you hear reference to “the Law” in Scripture? Is your impression positive or negative? Has that changed?

4. On page 56 the author writes, “For those who count the Bible as sacred, interpretation is not a matter of *whether* to pick and choose, but *how* to pick and choose. We’re all selective.” Agree? Disagree?

IDEAS FOR CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT

1. Pages 42–43 feature what author Lauren Winner describes as “dislocated exegesis,” a method of engaging Scripture in unexpected places. Try this with Psalm 63:1–8, a wilderness poem. Print up the passage and read it on your favorite hiking trail, in the waiting room during a doctor’s appointment you’ve been dreading, or in a place that brings back difficult memories. Or simply meditate on the passage at home, using the method of *Lectio Divina*.
2. Consider introducing a brief “testimony time” in your Sunday school class, small group, or worship service. (Read pages 47–48 for context.)
3. Make “story stones” for telling, and remembering, your own deliverance story. Set aside one stone for the naming of your wilderness. (See <https://happyhooligans.ca/story-stones/> and <https://artfulparent.com/2014/05/story-stones-ideas-storytelling-rocks.html>.)
4. Write a song or a poem inspired by Psalm 63 that interweaves that text with images from your own wilderness experiences.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. To learn more about womanist interpretations of Hagar, see Delores Williams’ landmark book, *Sisters in the Wilderness* and the forthcoming *Reimagining Hagar* by Nyasha Junior.
2. For more on how the Bible was used to justify American slavery, see Mark Noll’s *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* and for more on African Americans and the Bible, see *The Talking Book* by Allen Dwight Callahan
3. For a beautiful collection of wilderness prayers, be sure to find and cherish Jan Richardson’s book *In the Sanctuary of Women*, especially the “Way in the Wilderness” chapter.



“THE WALLS” AND WAR STORIES



“I don’t want to become a person who is unbothered by these texts, and if Jesus is who he says he is, then I don’t think he wants me to be either.”

BIBLICAL TEXTS

Joshua 6; Judges 11; Philippians 2:6–11

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. If you could make one story or verse from the Bible disappear, which one would it be?

2. On page 66, the author writes, “I tried reading Scripture with my conscience and curiosity suspended, and I felt, quite literally, disintegrated. I felt fractured and fake.” Can you relate? Have you ever “faked” your way through faith?

3. What are some hard questions you have about the Bible that perhaps you’ve been afraid to confront? What does it look like for you to “face these questions head-on, mind and heart fully engaged, willing to risk the loss of faith if that’s where the search leads”? And what might it mean to continue in your faith, even if your questions and doubts are not fully resolved?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Joshua 11:19–20 reports that “except for the Hivites living in Gideon, not one city made a treaty of peace with the Israelites, who took them all in battle. For it was the Lord himself who hardened their hearts to wage war against Israel, so that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy, as the Lord had commanded Moses.” What is your initial reaction to that statement? Revulsion? Confusion? Indifference?

2. What are some other Bible stories you find especially troubling?

3. What sort of justifications and explanations have you encountered over the years regarding Israel's conquest of Canaan? Have you found explanations satisfying? Why or why not?

4. Have you ever doubted your faith? Or doubted the Bible? How have friends, family, and religious leaders responded to those doubts?

5. What are some of your favorite (or least favorite) war stories—movies, books, plays, etc.? Do you see similarities between how we tell war stories in our culture and how the ancients told war stories in theirs?

6. At the conclusion of the chapter, the author acknowledges that she has yet to find satisfying answers to all her questions about the Bible’s violent and troubling texts, but that she finds perspective in 1) paying attention to the stories and experiences of biblical women, 2) keeping humble about her own culture’s violent tendencies, 3) seeing in Jesus a God who “would rather die by violence than commit it.” Which, if any, of these perspectives do you find most helpful or challenging?

IDEAS FOR CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT

1. On pages 75–76 and in *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, the author describes engaging in a candle-lighting ceremony honoring the women who were victims of the Bible’s “texts of terror,” connecting their stories to the stories of present-day women facing violence and abuse. Consider holding a similar ceremony yourself, in the company of friends and fellow readers, or integrating a memorial into your worship service. For more ideas on this, see <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/dark-stories> and <https://itistrish.com/2016/11/30/we-remember-a-ceremony-to-lament-and-honor-women/>.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. Phyllis Trible’s short, landmark book, *Texts of Terror* is a must-read for engaging the Bible’s violent and patriarchal texts.
2. For more on the conquest of Canaan, see Peter Enns’ *The Bible Tells Me So*.



“THE DEBATE” AND WISDOM STORIES



“You reap what you sow—except when you don’t.”

BIBLICAL TEXTS

The Book of Job (especially chapters 1–4, 38, 39, 42);
Ecclesiastes 3:1–8; Proverbs 3; Psalm 139

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- I. What comes into your mind when you hear the word *wisdom*? Consider journaling your free-association thoughts around that concept.

2. On page 99 the author writes, "In many ways, the Bible of my youth was set up to fail." Can you relate? Has the Bible, or your expectations around the Bible, ever disappointed you?

3. Have you ever been angry with God? Were you able to find songs or poems of lament that helped you express that anger? Did you feel guilty for having those feelings?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do you make of the claim that the Bible includes tensions and even contradictions? Have you ever noticed these tensions and contradictions before? How did you resolve them?

2. How have you observed, in your own life, wisdom as circumstantial? What are some examples of advice being helpful and true in one scenario, but false in another (like “you reap what you sow” or, “don’t go to bed angry”)?

3. What’s your reaction to the term *biblical*? Do you find it helpful? Reductive? Irritating?

4. On page 101 the author writes, “The owner’s manual Bible, with its single prescriptions for all people in all circumstances, just didn’t fit the complexities of actual life.” Can you relate? How?

5. Were you aware of the Bible’s “angry psalms”? How often do you sing songs of lament and frustration in your personal or corporate worship? Why might there be a need for more of that?

IDEAS FOR CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT

1. Watch the movie *A Serious Man* by the Coen brothers—a dark comedy that draws inspiration from the story of Job. Or read Archibald MacLeish’s Pulitzer-prize-winning play, *JB*, also based on the biblical tale. Discuss with your group.
2. Write a monologue from the perspective of Eliphaz, Bildad, or Zophar, *after* Job’s friends have been rebuked by God.
3. Read Proverbs 3. Circle in your Bible (or on a printout) every occurrence of the words *way* or *path*. Pray that God will teach you to seek wisdom in this manner—as a way of life, an ongoing journey to maturity.
4. Watch the Oscar-winning movie *Philomena*, referenced in pages 105–106. Notice the ways in which it avoids flat, one-dimensional characters and plotlines and instead embraces complexity, nuance, and truth.
5. If you are going through a difficult time, write a song or a poem of lament/anger to God. Don’t hold back! Also, consider working with your group to explore ways of incorporating lament into public worship more often.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. For a highly readable and instructive introduction to wisdom literature, see Ellen Davis’ excellent book, *Getting Involved with God*.
2. For more on embracing lament, see Soong-Chan Rah’s *Prophetic Lament*, and for more on the Bible’s “cursing psalms,” see Kathleen Norris’ chapter on the subject in *The Cloister Walk*.
3. The author’s favorite book of religious poetry, outside of the Psalms, for both exultation and lament, is *Rilke’s Book of Hours: Love Poems to God* (translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy.) Read it for some beautiful examples of sincere wrestling with God.



“THE BEAST” AND RESISTANCE STORIES



“What I love about the Bible is the story isn’t over. There are still prophets in our midst. There are still dragons and beasts. It might not look like it, but the Resistance is winning. The light is breaking through.”

BIBLICAL TEXTS

Isaiah 13:19–22 and 25:6–12; Amos 5:21–25; Daniel 7:1–4;
the book of Esther; Revelation 13:1–10 and 20:7–10.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Pastor Rob Bell observes, “This is what we read, again and again in the pages of the Bible—fearless, pointed, courageous, subversive, poetic, sometimes sarcastic, other times angry, heart-felt, razor-sharp critique of the people, nations, systems, and empires endlessly accumulating more at the expense of everybody they’re stepping on along the way” (*What Is the Bible?* page 215). Is this a biblical theme you have noticed or discussed before? Is it one you’ve heard much about in church or from faith leaders? Why or why not? Why might it be considered controversial for Christians in America to highlight biblical themes about resisting the injustices of great empires?

2. Do you ever feel hopeless or cynical about the injustices you observe in the world around you? Does anything from this chapter encourage you?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What comes into your mind when you hear the word *apocalyptic*? Has that changed since reading this chapter? What about *prophet* and *prophecy*?

2. What do you think of the author’s statement, “America’s no ancient Babylon or Rome, but it’s no kingdom of God either”? What’s your reaction to the examples the author cites of past and present injustices like indigenous genocide, slavery, the prison-industrial complex, and gun violence? Are these issues worthy of prophetic challenge? What might that challenge look like?

3. Who are some people you consider to be modern-day prophets—men and women willing to challenge the powerful and speak up for the marginalized?

4. What do you think of the author’s decision to include Esther as a resistance story? Have you ever thought about that story in this way?

5. What's your experience with the book of Revelation? In the past, have you found it scary? Bizarre? Inspiring? Confusing? How has your interpretation of that text changed and evolved?

IDEAS FOR CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT

1. For artists: Make a sketch of the Great Beast from Revelation 13, using the biblical text for details and inspiration.
2. Search You Tube for videos of Purim plays, and enjoy cheering and booing (and possibly drinking?) along with the audience. (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zUfFNp8ZhA> for just one example.) If you are bold, consider acting out a scene from the story of Esther with your group.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. Walter Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination* is a must-read on what the Bible says about prophetic response to Empire.
2. To learn more about Bree Newsome's prophetic stand in South Carolina, see Goldie Taylor's article for *Blue Nation Review* entitled, "Bree Newsome Speaks for the First Time After Courageous Act of Civil Disobedience" (<http://archives.bluenationreview.com/exclusive-bree-newsome-speaks-for-the-first-time-after-courageous-act-of-civil-disobedience/>). You can find Bree online at <http://www.breenewsome.com/> and @BreeNewsome.



“THE WATER” AND GOSPEL STORIES



“Every Christian gets a testimony, every Christian gets a ‘gospel according to...’”

BIBLICAL TEXTS

John 4:1–42; John 9; Acts 8:26–40

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

3. When did you first encounter Jesus? Even if it was in childhood, try to recount as many details as possible. What did Jesus look like, sound like, smell like, taste like? What about the message or the presence of Jesus first struck you as “good news”?

4. Why are you a Christian? (Yes, that’s a BIG QUESTION! Spend lots of time with it, and let it take you to unexpected places. Try to answer honestly and specifically. This is a good one to bring to your journal.)

5. What does it mean—to you personally, to the church, and to the world—that “Jesus didn’t just come to die; he came to live”?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

I. What are some of your favorite stories from the gospels? Is there one encounter someone had with Jesus that always moves you? Why do you think that story strikes you the way that it does?

2. If someone were to ask you, “*What is the gospel?*,” how would you respond?

3. What do you think of the author’s point that “it strikes me as fruitless to try and turn the gospel into a statement when God so clearly gave us a story—or, more precisely, a person.” Agree or disagree? What might be gained by rendering the gospel into a single declaration and what might be lost?

4. Read the story of the woman at the well (John 4:1–42), the story of the blind beggar (John 9), and the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26–40). Now imagine how each of these people would explain the “good news” to family and friends. What would be similar? What would be different?

5. On page 155 the author writes, “Every Christian gets a testimony, every Christian gets a ‘gospel according to...’ whether you’re Desmond Tutu or Tim Tebow.” In that spirit, and in the spirit of the Why Christian? conference (described on pages 162–164), share your personal testimony. When did you first encounter Jesus and when did you realize his message and presence was good news? Does it continue to be good news in your life? How so?

IDEAS FOR CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT

1. Read John 4:1–42, the story of the woman at the well. Using the Ignatian method, imagine the story from the perspective of one of Jesus’ disciples. Consider writing an imaginary journal entry written by that disciple about the incident.
2. One of Jesus’ favorite methods for describing the Kingdom is through simile, riddle, and metaphor. (The Kingdom is like a treasure buried in a field, like yeast mixed into flour, like wheat growing in weeds, like a net catching an abundance of fish, etc.) Artists: illustrate the most compelling of these images with a sketch or two. Writers: add your own images to the mix, drawing from your own experience and modern culture, beginning each one with, “the Kingdom is like...”
3. In whatever form you like (essay, vignette, song, poem, comic strip, memoir, blog post), share your own “gospel according to...” Answer the question, “Why Christian?”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. For more on the parables of Jesus, see Amy-Jill Levine's *Short Stories by Jesus* and Robert Farrar Capon's *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*.
2. For more on the gospel, see Scot McKnight's *The King Jesus Gospel* and N. T. Wright's *Surprised by Hope*.
3. Some of the author's favorite modern-day testimonies come from Sara Miles (*Take This Bread*), Nadia Bolz-Weber (*Pastrix*), and Bryan Stevenson (*Just Mercy*). These stories will remind you of why you are a Christian.



“THE SEA” AND FISH STORIES



*“Is it any wonder that the first symbol of the Christian faith wasn’t the cross,
but rather the ichthys—the sign of a fish?”*

BIBLICAL TEXTS

Matthew 14:22–33; Mark 1:40–45 and 5:21–43

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

I. Do you have trouble believing some of the Bible’s miracle stories? Which ones?

2. How have you made sense of the Bible’s miracles stories in the past? What guidance have you received from faith leaders, family, and friends? Has it been helpful or not-so-helpful?

3. On page 188 the author writes, “It’s been said that if you want to walk on water, you have to get out of the boat. Sometimes getting out of the boat looks like showing up for another recovery meeting. Sometimes it looks like filling out hospital paperwork for an elderly neighbor. Sometimes it looks like making a casserole for the family down with the flu or offering free babysitting for the friend with a job interview. Sometimes it looks like jumping when it matters.” What does “getting out of the boat” look like for you? What does it mean to “jump when it matters”?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

I. Which of the Bible’s miracle stories strike you as especially strange, delightful, or unbelievable?

2. On page 179 the author says of the Bible’s miracle stories and their interpretation, “I found myself dissatisfied with both sweeping literalism on the one hand and disembodied abstractions on the other.” Can you relate? How have the Bible’s miracle stories been explained to you through the years? Which explanations did you find most compelling? Most unbelievable?

3. What do you think of the author’s advice that, when it comes to belief, sometimes you have to “fake it till you make it,” that you have to “move your feet and your heart will catch up”? Have you found this true in your own life? What does it look like to “jump when it matters”?

IDEAS FOR CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT

1. Have a little fun and write a third choose-your-own-adventure option to add to “The Sea.”
2. Read the series of healing stories in Mark 1:40–45 and Mark 5:21–43, and using the Ignatian method, imagine the events from one of the character’s perspectives—the man with leprosy, Jairus, the bleeding woman, someone in the crowd, one of the disciples, the mother or sister of the little girl who was raised, etc.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. For more on the miracles of the New Testament, see Jeffrey John’s *The Meaning in the Miracles*. For a personal and compelling look at what miracles and healing looks like in the context of a modern faith community, see Sara Miles’ memoir, *Jesus Freak: Feeding, Healing and Raising the Dead*.



“THE LETTER” AND CHURCH STORIES



“No one lives in general—not even Christ or his church.”

BIBLICAL TEXTS

Colossians 3 and 4; 1 Corinthians 13

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- I. Have quotes from the Bible’s epistles ever been used to justify cruelty or injustice against you or someone you love? How did that affect your view of the Bible? How did it affect your view of the apostle Paul?

2. On page 208 the author writes, “To make peace with the Bible, I had to make peace with Paul.” Can you relate? What is your experience with the writings of Paul?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What’s your reaction when you hear that the Bible says, “slaves obey your masters” and “wives submit to your husbands”? Did you know the context of these instructions before reading this chapter? Did adding context change your reception of them?

2. How has the apostle Paul been regarded in your faith community? Is he lauded to the point that he is held in as high esteem as Christ himself, or is he grumbled about and largely ignored? Do you see his words as illuminating, brilliant, problematic, sexist, outdated, timeless—or perhaps all of the above?

3. How is the experience of engaging the epistles a bit like the experience of engaging wisdom literature?

4. How would you answer the question, “Why letters?” regarding the inclusion of the epistles in Scripture?

IDEAS FOR CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT

1. Go through your email and pick out a few sentences that, without context, make little sense to outsiders. Read them in the group without context and enjoy the reactions. Then add the context for the fuller story. This illustrates how lifting single verses from the epistles, without considering the broader context of the entire letter and the circumstances in which it was delivered, can be misleading.
2. Write a letter to your current church or to a church from your past. (You don’t have to deliver it!)
3. Read I Corinthians 13 using the method of Lectio Divina. It’s a familiar passage so focus on the images, phrases, and words that strike you in a fresh way. Consider how this passage puts the epistles, and all of Scripture, into perspective. Remember that the apostle Paul wrote these words.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. For an in-depth look at what the Bible says about gender and sexuality, see James Brownson’s book *Bible, Gender, Sexuality*, and Matthew Vines’ book, *God and the Gay Christian*.



AND THEN...



"We live inside an unfinished story..."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Which Bible story changed the most for you after reading this book? What parts of the Bible are you inspired to explore in more depth?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. On page 218 the author says, "If the biggest story we can imagine is about God's loving and redemptive work in the world, then our lives will be shaped by that epic." What does it mean for our lives to be shaped by the story of Scripture? (See the quote from N. T. Wright on pages 217–218 for inspiration.)

2. What are some of the other stories (told by our culture, by our country, and even by our religious communities) that compete for our allegiance and imaginations?

3. What are some of the most important stories—from Scripture, from your community, from your life—that you want to pass on to your children, or to the next generation?

