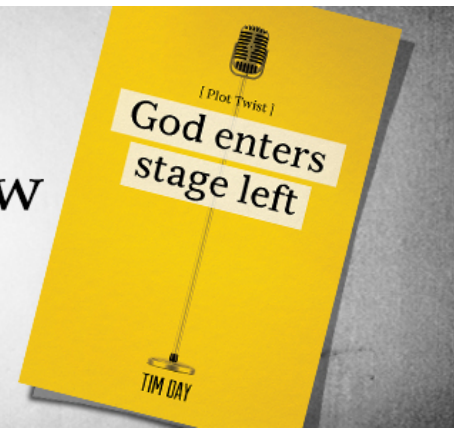


# A fresh front row view to an ancient faith.



## BOOK STUDY

These book study questions are for those interested in discussing *God Enters Stage Left* with a group of people, possibly among friends or with a book club.

### 1. MEANING

- When you think of the Bible, do you view the Bible as a myth, as a historical record, or a bit of both? Why do you hold this view?
- What is your reaction to the idea that the meaning of the Biblical narrative has, for the most part, been lost over the centuries? As you reflect on the history of the Christian Church, how might this possibility change how you view the church, past and present?
- The author lists in his response to the first question in the “Common Questions” section (p. 125-126) reasons why the overarching meaning of the story of the Bible has been lost for much of history. Which of these reasons seem most compelling to you? Does this leave you feeling more sympathetic or more frustrated with those who may not have grasped the meaning of the story?
- Respond to the following quote. Speaking of the Bible, particularly the New Testament, scholar N.T. Wright writes:  
“It must be read so that the stories, and the Story which it tells, can be heard as stories, not as rambling ways of declaring unstoried ‘ideas’. It must be read without the assumption that we already know what it is going to say, and without the arrogance that assumes that ‘we’ – whichever group that might be – already have ancestral rights over this or that passage, book, or writer. And for full appropriateness, it must be read in such a way as to set in motion the drama which it suggests.” (N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992, p. 6)  
What aspects of this quote would you agree with or disagree with and why?

What do you think he means by reading the story of Scripture so “as to set in motion the drama which it suggests”?

- In recent years, various scandals have been postulated. Here are a few. The Bible contains a secret code that predicts the future. Jesus didn't die on the cross but had a secret marriage with Mary. The real teachings of Jesus were suppressed by the church centuries later. What is your reaction to the idea that the full meaning of the Biblical story has been lost and as a result the church has been living for centuries in contradiction to its teaching? Does this encourage you or discourage you and why?

## 2. PERFECTION

- Do you hold some truths to be self-evident? In other words, do you believe there are some truths about life that everyone, everywhere and at all times simply accepts these as true? What truths do you believe fall in this category? Do you agree with the list of truths mentioned in this chapter that the author suggests are self-evident? Why or why not?
- What is your response to the idea that when God created humanity all he really ever wanted was one big happy family and he never wanted religion as the basis of his friendship with us? What are the ramifications if we accept this as the Divine starting point?
- The author makes this statement on page 20:  
“They stand before each other and their Creator completely naked and unashamed. Fully secure in love, their vulnerability frees them to be truly intimate.”  
How might perfect love free the human heart to be completely vulnerable? Why do you think most people don't want to be completely vulnerable in their relationships? What qualities would a relationship need to possess for you to feel completely free to share your vulnerabilities as being a basis for deep intimacy?
- The single boundary in the garden was the command not to eat from the tree of “I'll decide for myself what is right and wrong.” What are the reasons this single boundary must be maintained in a loving, relational community? Have you experienced a situation where everyone was “deciding for themselves what was right and wrong?” What were the consequences that you observed from that approach to relationships? How does that impact your view of this boundary that God put in place for the first man and woman?
- As you reflect on the vision of God's original intention for humanity, what kind of emotional response do you have? What parts of this vision appeal to you? What parts don't appeal as much? What questions are you left with?

### 3. BROKEN

- The decision to eat the fruit is clearly influenced by rationalizations as to why that was a good choice. Describe examples of how people today may rationalize something they know is wrong or unhealthy? What is the power behind rationalization that can lead us to set aside real conviction that something is wrong or unhealthy and choose instead to convince ourselves that it is acceptable for us? Where in your life have you been deceived into rationalizing something that if you were honest you know is wrong or unhealthy? (Okay, that is too convicting. Let's move on to the next question.)
- The author confesses, "If I am honest with myself, there is a part of me that wants to be the god of my own little world." (p. 35) In what ways do you see people wanting to be god of their own life? How might people overtly express this desire by trying to be in control of their life?
- The confession, "I was afraid because I was naked and so I hid", leads the author to suggest that our fundamental sense of vulnerability and fear leads most people to hide their true selves. Do you think this is true? In what ways do you see this? From your perspective, what does hiding your true self do to relationships? How might someone attempt to hide her or his true self? Do you think someone could actually use religion as a place to hide from God and if so, how might someone do that?
- As you consider the greatest expressions of evil and suffering in the world, past and present, what percentage would you suggest is the result of the broken order of nature (e.g. natural disasters, disease, drought) and what percentage would be the result of human decision (e.g. war, famine from hoarding food, poverty, rape and murder)? To what degree do you tend to blame God (if you believe in God) and to what degree do you tend to blame humanity for our own suffering?
- What is your reaction to the idea that God promised to send a rescuer? What questions does that raise in your mind when you read this? What does this promise from God suggest about his character and his heart position towards humanity?

### 4. STRUGGLE

- The opening scene of the Third Act begins with the theme that there are two basic ways to approach life. The author summarizes this by writing, "This way may look good in the beginning, but as we will see, eventually goes disastrously wrong. Then there is God's way, which may look ridiculous from a human point of view, but ultimately ends up being the very best way." (p. 40) From your experience, what would suggest to you that this might be true? Can you think of examples when someone has followed his or her own approach to life and things have gone wrong?
- On a larger scale, what evidence do we see of this in the areas of international conflict, global poverty, or the erosion of the environment? What examples can

you think of when governments or multi-national businesses do what seems wise in their own eyes but in time results in disastrous consequences? What may keep a large organization from approaching their decisions from a God-honoring perspective?

## 5. RELIGION

- What is your reaction to the idea that those who are truly friends of God don't need to participate in religion? Does that appeal to you or does that seem too easy? Do you think it is easier to be a friend of God or easier to follow a religion? Why do you think this?
- On page 50, the author lists the Ten Commandments and explains how these represent a way to diagnose what is wrong with the human heart. He writes, "The Ten Commandments are not an arbitrary collection of rules, but rather a way to examine our relationships. They are a gauge to measure our destructive self-centeredness. Where in your experience have you witnessed someone who carried an unhealthy inner conviction or attitude that in time, through an escalation of choices, ended up doing something very destructive? In what way would such a diagnosis tool like this be helpful for people to gain perspective on the connection between their inner heart posture and how that in time may play out in their behaviors or relationships (e.g. coveting another person's spouse sets the stage for an adulterous affair)?"

## 6. KINGDOM

- There are four different leadership styles outlined in this chapter. Which leadership style do you tend to gravitate towards? Which one tends to repel you the most? Where in your experience have you witnessed the negative impact of a leader who has an unhealthy heart disposition?
- On page 57 the author discusses the song David wrote after he committed adultery and murder. What kind of reaction do you think this popular song in Israel received from the various groups in Israel – common people, priests, governmental leaders, and those on the margins? What is your reaction to David's song in light of what he did?

## 7. CAPTIVITY

- On pages 63-64, the author lists four passages from the Old Testament that look forward to the time period when God would work to change people from the inside out through his presence in their lives. From what you know of the Old Testament concept of the religious Law, what are the implications of these verses for the religious system of the Old Testament? What about other religious systems or philosophies? If someone asked you to describe being changed by God's presence from the inside out, how would you describe it based on these verses?
- The author suggests that Israel is a case study of "what doesn't work to change the human heart." He outlines four basic ways that Israel had the perfect

external environment: give me all the rules, give me my space, give me strong leadership to follow, and hold me accountable when I mess up. To what degree to you see people try to change their lives by managing their external environment?

- From your experience, what is the success rate and sustainability of pursuing personal change based simply on focusing on your external environment and ignoring your inner beliefs or heart attitude? Why might a person prefer to focus on an external approach to change rather than an internal approach?

## 8. RESCUE

- What strikes you about this retelling of this story of the life of Jesus? Do you find Jesus' life and teaching as described in this chapter attractive, intriguing or neither? Why?
- The author outlines the difference between a rule-based approach to relationships and Jesus' call for the love ethic that requires a case-by-case approach. Which approach do you find most people use in their relationships? Do you feel both are valid or does one seem better to you? Why? Which do you prefer to have applied to your life and why?
- Jesus taught that leaders should fundamentally be servants rather than dictators or people of power and privilege. Have you ever experienced someone who was truly a servant leader and what was the impact of their approach to leadership? Reflect on the servant leadership approach within the family, business or politics. How common is this approach? What impact would there be in society if servant leadership was the norm?
- The story of the father and two sons as told by Jesus provides a clear example of radical grace rather than harsh accountability. With which son do you find it easiest to identify? In general, what is the appeal of harsh accountability as a way to manage people? How might the idea of radical grace seem offensive to some people's sense of justice? Can you think of an experience where you received or witnessed this kind of radical grace? What was the result for the people involved?
- In John 14:6 Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me." What is your reaction to the idea that Jesus was replacing all religion with himself so that all people could enter into a trust-based friendship with God through his teaching and life? Does this offend, intrigue or attract you? Why?

## 9. COMMUNITY

- Regardless of your personal belief, imagine being one of the first disciples of Jesus and believing he had risen from the dead. What would your reaction be? What emotions might you feel? What questions would you have? How would it change your sense of direction for the future?
- The author writes on page 90: "We see in the conversion of Saul what loving your enemies really looks like. Jesus, even after his resurrection, showed the early Christ-followers and all of us who read the story, that only love has the

power to make enemies into allies.“

Remember Jesus was executed because of the efforts of religious leaders. What does Paul’s story reveal about the heart of Jesus? What is the typical human reaction to those that cause us deep pain? Which do you think is a more effective way of dealing with enemies, hating and trying to kill them or practicing self-sacrificial enemy love? Why?

## 10. CHRISTENDOM

- What is your personal reaction to the history of the Christian religion? Do you tend to look for the positive examples of people following the teachings of Jesus or mainly see the terrible things that were done in Jesus’ name? What do you think would be Jesus’ perspective on the Christian religion? What do you imagine Jesus would say to Christian leaders in the past or today?
- Just based on this act of the story, what priority would you place on highlighting the need for an inside out heart change for those who claim to follow Jesus? What things should people keep in mind as they approach God to ask him to change them from the inside out? What distractions or temptations do people need to address in their lives that may cause them to miss the importance of a heart change?
- Why might some people discover this story and decide to say they follow Jesus but still not actually live out the themes of this story?

## 11. RENEWAL

- What is the first thought that comes to mind when you think of the world being completely transformed and renewed to a perfect state? What would be the very first thing you would want to do in that new world?
- Do you think the idea that God will settle all accounts would make most people feel more at peace that they don’t have take revenge or more freaked out that they might have to face God? Why do you think this? How would the world be changed if no one needed to take revenge? How would it be changed if everyone was conscious that they would one day have to stand before God?
- Read John Lennon’s lyrics to Imagine:  
Imagine there's no heaven, it's easy if you try  
No hell below us, above us only sky  
Imagine all the people living for today...  
Imagine there's no countries, it isn't hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for and no religion too  
Imagine all the people living life in peace...  
You may say I'm a dreamer but I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us and the world will be as one  
Imagine no possessions I wonder if you can  
No need for greed or hunger, a brotherhood of man  
Imagine all the people sharing all the world...  
You may say I'm a dreamer but I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us and the world will live as one

How does this song capture the longing for the renewed world as described in this final Act? How does it fall short? Why do you think this song became so popular? If someone asked you what it meant to be a friend of God without any religion, how would you describe that kind of relationship with God? What are the basic qualities of friendship and how might those qualities be expressed in a relationship with God.

## 12. WAR

- What do you think our society honors more: wisdom, power, perfection and beauty or love, compassion, and humility? What evidence do you see of this in the world around you? Why do you think we as humans find ourselves attracted to these qualities?
- How is evil characterized within society and what images are associated with evil? What do you think about the idea that evil can masquerade as an angel of light and may appear to have qualities of beauty, power or wisdom? Can you think of practical examples where evil looks beautiful, appears wise or offers power?
- The author writes on page 114, “We are the masters at hiding our deficiencies, compensating for our weaknesses, and masquerading as people who have it all together.” Do you believe this is true? Why or why not? What are some of the common ways people hide their true selves? How might people hide behind constant failure and dysfunction as another way to veil their true selves?
- If it is true, that our greatest weaknesses and failures provide the best chance for God to really shine through our lives, do you think most people would be more open to be honest with others or would most still prefer to cover up or compensate for their weaknesses? Why do you think that? What do you think of someone who is honest about their weaknesses but is putting the emphasis on partnering with God rather than pretending they don’t have weaknesses? Do you find yourself respecting that person or looking down on them?

## 13. IMPROVISE

- The author lists a series of personal questions on page 119. Which one or ones resonate the most with you? How would you answer that question for yourself in light of this book study?
- The author asks a final question in this section on page 120. In brief he asks, “Do I want to live my life without God or do I want to share life with God?” What could motivate a person to not want a close friendship with God?
- Do you know someone who you think improvises God’s story well? What characteristics do you see in that person and how has living God’s story impacted their life?
- What would you say is a brief synopsis of the story of your life? What are its themes? Where is this storyline taking you? If you began to improvise God’s story more fully, what changes might you experience in your journey?
- How would you answer someone who asked you, “Has God entered stage left in your life?”