

LIVING THE QUESTIONS IN John

A NavStudy Featuring

The
MESSAGE



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ABOUT THE LIVING THE QUESTIONS SERIES

I want to beg you, as much as I can . . . to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. . . . Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

RAINER MARIA RILKE, *LETTERS TO A YOUNG POET*

Christians usually think about Jesus as the One with all the answers; the God-man with the evidence the verdict demands; a divine answer-man, sent down to earth to give us just what we need. And yes, he did give us just what we needed. Yet a careful reading of the Gospels shows that Jesus asked just as many questions as he gave outright answers. You would not have found a “The Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it” bumper sticker on Jesus’ backpack. It was more like, “This is God’s Word. Stop and think about it, and let’s talk about it.”

However, the perception of Jesus as the divine answer-man appeals to a great many people. Life has questions, so you go to the Scriptures, look on the right page, find the answers, and everything’s good. But while that works great for algebra class, it just doesn’t seem to work well for this thing called *life*. Could the “divine answer-man” approach be too simplistic? Too one-dimensional for such a deep character as Jesus Christ? For one, it seems to leave you and me, the children of

God, out of the picture. We're not collaborators with God; we're just laborers.

Jesus went about doing good. Apparently part of this "good" was asking great questions—questions that would cause people to stop and pause and ponder the things they were living for and what might be worth dying for; questions not bound by a calendar but applicable to the ages; questions as poignant today as they were then.

The book you hold in your hand takes the approach of looking at the questions found in the Gospels—the questions Jesus asked. The questions are specific to the text of Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. I'm talking about questions such as, "All this time and money wasted on fashion—do you think it makes that much difference?" or "Who needs a doctor: the healthy or the sick?" Our temptation might be to respond quickly because we think we know the answers. But what if these questions must be lived? Lived out in dimensions such as friendship, family, and church? Lived out in locales such as homes, classrooms, and forests primeval? Lived by the flesh and blood whose main focus is the future, and lived by those who think mainly of the past? And what if living out these questions might lead us one day, gradually, without noticing it, into The Answer—the One who described himself as the way, truth, and life?

Live the questions now.

HOW TO USE THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. This NavStudy is meant to be completed on your own *and* in a small group. You'll want to line up your study group ahead of time. A group of four to six is optimal—any bigger and one or more members will likely be shut out of discussions. Your small group can also be two. Each person will need his or her own copy of this book.

2. Lessons open with a Scripture passage intended to help you to prepare your heart and mind for the content that follows. Don't skip over this preparation time. Use it to reflect, slow down from a busy life, and transition into your study time.

3. *Read* the Scripture passages and other readings in each lesson. Let it all soak in. Re-read if necessary. There's no blue ribbon for finishing quickly. Make notes in the white space on the page. If you like journaling, think of this as a space to journal. If you don't like journaling, just think of it as space to "think out loud on paper."

4. *Think* about what you read. Respond to the questions we've provided. Always ask, "What does this mean?" and "Why does this matter?" about the readings. Compare different Bible translations for Scripture readings. Respond to the questions we've provided, and then discuss the questions when you're in your small group. Allow the experience of others to broaden your wisdom. You'll be stretched—called upon to evaluate what you've discovered and asked to make practical sense of it. In community, that stretching can often be painful and sometimes even embarrassing. But your willingness to be transparent—your openness to the possibility of personal growth—will reap great rewards.

5. *Pray* as you go through the entire session: before you read a word, in the middle of your thinking process, when you get stuck on a

concept or passage, and as you approach the time when you'll explore these passages and thoughts together in a small group. Pause when you need to ask God for inspiration or when you need to cry out in frustration. Compose a prayer prompted by what you've uncovered in the readings and your responses to the "Think" questions.

6. *Live*. (That's "live" as in "rhymes with give" as in "Give me something I can really use in my life.") This is a place to choose one thing you can do to live out the question posed in the lesson. Don't try to craft a plan that is lofty or unreachable. Choose something small, something doable. Then, in your small group, talk about this "one thing." Commit to following through on your idea, wrestle with what that means in practical terms, and call upon your group members to hold you accountable.

7. *Follow up*. Don't let the life application drift away without action. Be accountable to small-group members and refer to previous "Live" as in "rhymes with give" sections often. Take time at the beginning of each new study to review. See how you're doing.

SMALL-GROUP STUDY TIPS

After going through each week's study on your own, it's time to sit down with others and go deeper. Here are a few thoughts on how to make the most of your small-group discussion time.

Set ground rules. You don't need many. Here are two:

First, you'll want group members to make a commitment to the entire ten-week study. Significant personal growth happens when group members spend enough time together to really get to know each other. Hit-and-miss attendance can hinder this growth.

Second, agree together that everyone's story is important. Time is a valuable commodity, so if you have an hour to spend together, do your best to give each person ample time to express concerns, pass along insights, and generally feel like a participating member of the group. Small-group discussions are not monologues. However, a one-person-dominated discussion isn't always a bad thing. Not only is your role in a small group to explore and expand your own understanding, it's also to support one another. If someone truly needs more of the floor, give it to him or her. There will be times when the needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many. Use good judgment and allow extra space when needed. *Your* time might be next week.

Meet regularly. Choose a time and place, and stick to it. Consistency removes stress that could otherwise frustrate discussion and subsequent personal growth.

Follow the book outline. Each week, open your small-group time with prayer, and read aloud the reflective Scripture passage that opens

the lesson. Then go through the study together, reading each section aloud and discussing it with your group members. Tell others what you wrote. Write down new insights gleaned from other group members. Wrestle the questions together. When you get to the “Pray” section, ask for volunteers willing to read aloud their written prayers. Finally, spend a few minutes talking together about each person’s “one thing” and how to achieve that goal.

Talk openly. If you enter this study with shields up, you’re probably not alone. And you’re not a “bad person” for your hesitation to unpack your life in front of friends or strangers. Maybe you’re skeptical about the value of revealing to others the deepest parts of who you are. Maybe you’re simply too afraid of what might fall out of the suitcase. You don’t have to go to a place where you’re uncomfortable. If you want to sit and listen, offer a few thoughts, or even express a surface level of your own pain, go ahead. But don’t neglect what brings you to this place—that longing for meaning. You can’t ignore it away. Dip your feet in the water of brutally honest discussion, and you may choose to dive in. There is healing here.

Stay on task. Refrain from sharing material that falls into the “too much information” category. Don’t spill unnecessary stuff. If structure isn’t your group’s strength, try a few minutes of general comments about the study, and then take each question one at a time and give everyone in the group a chance to respond.

LESSON 1

“If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don’t believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can’t see, the things of God?” (John 3:12)

Before You Begin

Take some time to reflect and prepare your heart and mind for this study. Read the following Scripture passage. Soak up God’s Word. There’s no hurry. Then, when you’re ready, turn the page and begin.

PSALM 40:9-10

I’ve preached you to the whole congregation,
I’ve kept back nothing, God—you know that.
I didn’t keep the news of your ways
a secret, didn’t keep it to myself.
I told it all, how dependable you are, how thorough.
I didn’t hold back pieces of love and truth
For myself alone. I told it all,
let the congregation know the whole story.

READ

John 3:1-16

There was a man of the Pharisee sect, Nicodemus, a prominent leader among the Jews. Late one night he visited Jesus and said, “Rabbi, we all know you’re a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren’t in on it.”

Jesus said, “You’re absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it’s not possible to see what I’m pointing to—to God’s kingdom.”

“How can anyone,” said Nicodemus, “be born who has already been born and grown up? You can’t re-enter your mother’s womb and be born again. What are you saying with this ‘born-from-above’ talk?”

Jesus said, “You’re not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the ‘wind hovering over the water’ creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. When you look at a baby, it’s just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can’t see and touch—the Spirit—and becomes a living spirit.

“So don’t be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be ‘born from above’—out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it’s headed next. That’s the way it is with everyone ‘born from above’ by the wind of God, the Spirit of God.”

Nicodemus asked, “What do you mean by this? How does this happen?”

Jesus said, “You’re a respected teacher of Israel and you don’t know these basics? Listen carefully. I’m speaking sober truth to you. I speak only of what I know by experience; I give witness only to what I have seen with my own eyes. There is nothing secondhand here, no hearsay. Yet instead of facing the evidence

and accepting it, you procrastinate with questions. **If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don't believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can't see, the things of God?**

“No one has ever gone up into the presence of God except the One who came down from that Presence, the Son of Man. In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life.

“This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.”

THINK

“If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don't believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can't see, the things of God?”

- What is your immediate response to this question?
- Why do you think you responded in this way?
- Do either of the statements “born again” or “born from above” evoke any feelings in you? If so, think about where you first heard the phrase and who used it. What was your initial reaction? How does that compare to your reaction today?
- How do you feel when you read these words: “Unless a person is born from above, it's not possible to see . . . God's kingdom”?
- Make a list of what you believe to be the Christian basics.
- What is your response to Jesus' use of the word “basics” to describe things like being “born from above,” “invisible moving the visible,” “hear it rustling through the trees,” “something you can't see and touch”? How do you think Nicodemus felt?

READ

From *Walking on Water*, by Madeleine L'Engle¹

The well-intentioned mothers who don't want their children polluted by fairy tales would not only deny them their childhood, with its high creativity, but they would have them conform to the secular world, with its dirty devices. The world of fairy tale, fantasy, myth, is inimical to the secular world, and in total opposition to it, for it is interested not in limited laboratory proofs, but in truth.

From *Orthodoxy*, by G. K. Chesterton²

My first and last philosophy, that which I believe in with unbroken certainty, I learnt in the nursery. I generally learnt it from a nurse; that is, from the solemn and star-appointed priestess at once of democracy and tradition. The things I believed most then, the things I believe most now, are the things called fairy tales. They seem to me to be the entirely reasonable things: compared with them other things are fantastic. Compared with them religion and rationalism are both abnormal, though religion is abnormally right and rationalism abnormally wrong. Fairyland is nothing but the sunny country of common sense. . . . I am concerned with a certain way of looking at life, which was created in me by the fairy tales, but has since been meekly ratified by the mere facts.

It might be stated this way. There are certain sequences or developments (cases of one thing following another), which are, in the true sense of the word, reasonable. They are, in the true sense of the word, necessary. Such are the mathematical and merely logical sequences. We in fairyland (who are the most reasonable of all creatures) admit that reason and that necessity. For instance, if the Ugly Sisters are older than Cinderella, it is (in an iron and awful sense) necessary that Cinderella is younger than the Ugly Sisters. There is no getting out of it. . . . If Jack is the son of a miller, a miller is the father of Jack. Cold reason decrees it

from her awful throne: and we in fairyland submit. If the three brothers all ride horses, there are six animals and eighteen legs involved: that is true rationalism, and fairyland is full of it. But as I put my head over the hedge of the elves and began to take notice of the natural world, I observed extraordinary things. I observed that learned men in spectacles were talking of the actual things that happened—dawn and death and so on—as if they were rational and inevitable. They talked as if the fact that trees bear fruit were just as necessary as the fact that two and one trees make three. But it is not. There is an enormous difference by the test of fairyland: which is the test of the imagination. You cannot imagine two and one not making three. But you can easily imagine trees not growing fruit; you can imagine them growing golden candlesticks or tigers hanging on by the tail.

THINK

“If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don’t believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can’t see, the things of God?”

- What is your initial reaction to these excerpts? Why do you think these excerpts were the ones chosen to be represented in an exploration of things that are “plain as the hand before your face” and “things you can’t see”?
- Were fairy tales and myths a part of your childhood? If so, what were your favorites and why?
- What do these excerpts suggest about the role of “belief” in fairy tales and myths? Can you apply that understanding of belief to faith? Why or why not?
- How does your belief relate to “things you can’t see, the things of God”?

READ

From *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris³

I find it sad to consider that belief has become a scary word, because at its Greek root, “to believe” simply means “to give one’s heart to.” Thus, if we can determine what it is we give our heart to, then we will know what it is to believe.

But the word “belief” has been impoverished; it has come to mean a head-over-heart intellectual assent. When people ask, “What do you believe?” they are usually asking, “What do you think?” I have come to see that my education, even my religious education, left me with a faulty and inadequate sense of religious belief as a kind of suspension of the intellect. Religion, as I came to understand it, was a primitive relic that could not stand up to the advances made in our understanding of human psychological development or the inquiry of higher mathematics and the modern sciences.

Yet I knew religious people who were psychologists, mathematicians, and scientists. So I had to assume that religious belief was simply beyond my grasp. Other people had it, I did not. And for a long time, even though I was attracted to church, I was convinced that I did not belong there, because my beliefs were not thoroughly solid, set in stone.

When I first stumbled upon the Benedictine Abbey where I am now an oblate, I was surprised to find the monks so unconcerned with my weighty doubts and intellectual frustrations over Christianity. What interested them more was my desire to come to their worship, the liturgy of the hours. I was a bit disappointed—I had thought that my doubts were spectacular obstacles to my faith and was confused but intrigued when an old monk blithely stated that doubt is merely the seed of faith, a sign that faith is alive and ready to grow. I am grateful now for his wisdom and grateful to the community for teaching me about the power of liturgy. They seemed to believe that if I just kept coming back to worship, kept coming home, things would eventually fall into place.

THINK

“If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don’t believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can’t see, the things of God?”

- What do you feel after reading Norris’s words?
- “Doubt is merely the seed of faith.” If you spoke that sentence in your next church group meeting, what kind of a response do you think you would get?
- How can “things that are plain as the hand before your face” lead you to belief in “things you can’t see”? Is this what Norris is suggesting?
- What are some of the things you experience that can help things “fall into place” regarding your faith?

READ

From *The Orphean Passages*, by Walter Wangerin Jr.⁴

There came the Sunday which was not unlike a thousand other Sundays, a thousand earlier worships, stretching backward as far as the boy could remember, but to which the boy now paid attention as he never had before.

They went to church. Orpheus was quiet, as though a voice said, "Listen! You will hear something today." And, "Watch! You will see something today." In fact, there was no voice; but there was in him a keen awareness and anticipation.

The words of worship droned. The talking was opaque to him, sounds of various pitches and intensities, signifying little; he could not enter the talking.

He liked the singing because he'd always liked to sing. That was satisfying.

But then an awesome drama began to be enacted. People got up and began to move about the room with such solemnity that Orpheus sensed a meaning here, and he felt a twitch of fear. Moreover, everyone except himself seemed to know both the moves and their significance: he was somewhat alien. Now, this dreadfulness of the moment, and his shrinking in humility before it, were feelings familiar to him; this was experience on a higher plane; the Unknown Other was more nearly active than usual and in control. Orpheus, sensing this, got up on his knees in the pew and shot his eyes about the room, trying to see as much of this drama as he could, but afraid. Something was going to happen.

Suddenly it became very personal. His own mother got up and left his side. With her head bowed and her hands folded, she joined a line of people that stretched to the front of this vast room. Step by step, in a slow dance, she went forward. One by one she climbed steps into a raised and Sacred Place; men, dressed in long robes, bowed to her; she bowed back, and kneeled down before them: she had been admitted into a Presence. Orpheus, his heart ramming, craned his neck to see.

What were they going to do to his mother?

Now one of these robed men approached his mother, putting his face very close to hers, and his hand to her mouth, a gesture so intimate between the two that Orpheus felt ashamed to see it. And the man mumbled to her, and she nodded; and when he left her, she was chewing. He had given her something to swallow. Why would he feed her? Why would she allow him to treat her like a baby? He hurt for his mother, so weak, so weak upon her knees. No, this was different from the mother he knew.

And then another man came to her and put an enormous cup to her lips, and she drank from it, and she did not argue. Then she bowed her head so deep that it disappeared below her shoulders, and Orpheus had the sudden grisly impression that the head of his mother was gone. . . .

She rose; she turned; she traveled the long aisle back to him. She smiled at him. . . . She sat beside him and bowed her head and began to pray.

And then he smelled the smell.

His mother moved in a cloud. There flowed from her nose a scent both sweet and penetrating, new and altogether mystic. When he breathed it in, it seemed to suffuse his whole being. It was wonderful. It made his mother wonderful. He gazed at her while she prayed.

He touched her shoulder.

“Mama,” he whispered. “What did you eat?”

“A piece of bread,” she said, and he smelled the smell more strongly still.

He made strange eyes at her. Not bread. Bread didn’t fill the drama. Really? Was it only bread?

She looked a moment on him, then spoke seriously. “I ate the body of Jesus,” she said.

Orpheus knew the truth by experience, that when the Other was in control, then no reality could be taken for granted; all realities could melt into other realities; neither names nor habits could keep things as they were. Therefore, that a piece of bread

should be a bit of someone's body didn't seem impossible to him. He accepted that.

His mother said, "And I drank his blood."

Solemnly, solemnly Orpheus nodded back to her. Blood. Blood was a strange and terrible thing to drink. It poured from wounds and pain. . . . It was life. Blood fit the undefined enormity of the drama. The Other was near indeed. The Other was very close to Orpheus now, because it had also seized on his own mother, shattering her common reality, making her to do and then to speak impossible things: "I drank his blood" —and then to smile upon him, Orpheus, her son.

Orpheus whispered, "Is that what I smell?" If he could smell it, then he had been admitted into mystery.

She said, "Yes."

He said, "Whose blood Mama?"

And she said, "The blood of Jesus."

Jesus.

THINK

"If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don't believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can't see, the things of God?"

- In what way is this story a picture of something as "plain as the hand before your face"? In what way is it a picture of "things you can't see"?
- Is there any similarity in *this* story of entering "mystery" and your own story? Describe those similarities, and then list the differences.
- What does Orpheus's story teach you about how God can work to help people discover the things of God? What does your own faith conversion story tell you?

READ

From *Traveling Mercies*, by Anne Lamott⁵

I went back to St. Andrew about once a month. No one tried to con me into sitting down or staying. I always left before the sermon. I loved singing, even about Jesus, but I just didn't want to be preached at about him. To me, Jesus made about as much sense as Scientology or dowsing. But the church smelled wonderful, like the air had nourishment in it, or like it was composed of these people's exhalations, of warmth and faith and peace. There were always children running around or being embraced, and a gorgeous stick-thin deaf black girl signing to her mother, hearing the songs and the Scripture through her mother's flashing fingers. The radical old women of the congregation were famous in those parts for having convinced the very conservative national Presbytery to donate ten thousand dollars to the Angela Davis Defense fund during her trial up at the Civic Center. And every other week they brought huge tubs of great food for the homeless families living at the shelter near the canal to the north. I loved this. But it was the singing that pulled me in and split me wide open.

That April of 1984, in the midst of this experience, Pammy took a fourth urine sample to the lab, and it finally came back positive. I had published three books by then, but none of them had sold particularly well, and I did not have the money or wherewithal to have a baby. The father was someone I had just met, who was married, and no one I wanted a real life or baby with. So Pammy one evening took me in for the abortion, and I was sadder than I'd been since my father died, and when she brought me home that night, I went upstairs to my loft . . . and . . . drank until nearly dawn. . . . On the seventh night, though, very drunk and just about to take a sleeping pill, I discovered that I was bleeding heavily. It did not stop over the next hour. . . . I got in bed, shaky and sad and too wild to have another drink or take a sleeping pill. I had a cigarette and turned off the

light. After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it was my father, whose presence I had felt over the years when I was frightened and alone. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there—of course, there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.

And I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, "I would rather die."

I felt him sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love, and I squinched my eyes shut, but that didn't help because that's not what I was seeing him with.

Finally I fell asleep, and in the morning, he was gone.

This experience spooked me badly, but I thought it was just an apparition, born of fear and self-loathing and booze and loss of blood. But then everywhere I went, I had the feeling that a little cat was following me, wanting me to reach down and pick it up, wanting me to open the door and let it in. But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time, give it a little milk, and then it stays forever. So I tried to keep one step ahead of it, slamming my houseboat door when I entered or left.

And one week later, when I went back to church, I was so hung-over that I couldn't stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extra-terrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling—and it washed over me.

I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said, ". . . All right. You can come in."

So this was my beautiful moment of conversion.

THINK

"If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don't believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can't see, the things of God?"

- What is your initial reaction to Anne's story? Why do you think you reacted that way?
- What are examples of "things you can't see, the things of God" in Anne's story? Why do you think she fought against these?
- Where do you find these things in your own life? Have you also fought against them, not wanting to "let the cat in"? Explain.

PRAY

Look back at the “Think” sections. Ruminates on your responses. Let them distill into a prayer, and then write that prayer below.

Author of my story . . .

The issue of prayer is not prayer; the issue of prayer is God.

ABRAHAM HESCHEL

LIVING THE QUESTIONS SERIES

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LIVE

"If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don't believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can't see, the things of God?"

The challenge now is to take this question further along—to live out this question. Think of one thing, *just one*, that you can personally do to wrestle with the question, inhabit the character of it, and live it in everyday life. In the following space, jot down your thoughts on this "one thing." Read the Scripture and quotes that follow for additional inspiration. During the coming week, pray about this "one thing," talk with a close friend about it, and learn to live the question.

One thing...

Religion is the fashionable substitute for belief.

Oscar Wilde

As you read over what I have written to you, you'll be able to see for yourselves into the mystery of Christ. None of our ancestors understood this. Only in our time has it been made clear by God's Spirit through his holy apostles and prophets of this new order. The mystery is that people who have never heard of God and those who have heard of him all their lives (what I've been calling outsiders and insiders) stand on the same ground before God. They get the same offer, same help, same promises in Christ Jesus. The Message is accessible and welcoming to everyone, across the board.

Ephesians 3:4-6

Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

RAINER MARIA RILKE, *LETTERS TO A YOUNG POET*

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