

Everything Happens for a Reason (and other lies I've loved)

By Kate Bowler

Small Group Discussion Guide

June 3 – July 29, 2018

Yates Baptist Church

Included in this Guide

- An eight-session curriculum for discussing the book and exploring points of Biblical and personal connection to the story
- General introductory prompts for discussion
- Biblical discussion questions to explore points of contact between God's Word and our complicated lives. These Biblical passages will be the same as the readings for Sunday sermons during our summer of study
- A concluding prayer (in the form of a Psalm) that can be shared together to conclude group times
- A prayer exercise for group members to take home and practice until the next meeting

Suggested Tips and Norms for Small Group Experiences

You may wish to affirm these with your small group at the outset. As needed, you may wish to reaffirm them.

- **Create Safe Space:** Strive to create and maintain an environment where everyone can be real, open, and honest with their struggles and victories.
- **Maintain Confidence:** Allow what is said in the group to remain in the group. Avoid revisiting personal comments, stories and situations with fellow group members at other times and locations unless invited to do so.
- **Listen:** Value one another during the discussions by really listening to what is being shared. Try to avoid thinking about how you are going to respond, or what you are going to say next.
- **Pauses:** Allow a pause in conversation after someone shares. Give the person sharing the chance to finish and the group the opportunity to consider what was just shared before responding.
- **Silence:** Do not fear the occasional silences that visit a group. It is important to allow silence in the group as it provides an opportunity for someone to share and for members in the group to process the topic or question being considered.
- **No “Cross Talk”:** Be considerate of others as they are sharing. Avoid side conversations.
- **No Fixing, Saving, Advising or Setting Anyone Straight:** We are not here to fix each other. Jesus does that part. Give encouragement. Continue to reaffirm the Gospel and point to Jesus. Don’t try to solve or fix each other.
- **No Rescuing:** When people are sharing something deeply personal, there can be a tendency to try to make them feel better about themselves or the situation by providing immediate platitudes or condolences. This will often cause them to stop sharing. Resist the temptation to rescue if someone shares a thought or story that prompts your “fix-it instinct.”
- **Sharing:** Be sensitive about the amount of time you take to share.
- **Remain Self-Aware:** Be self-aware of how you are personally effecting the environment through your words, actions and non-verbal communication.
- **Use “I” Statements:** It’s easy to talk about the issues of others, but for our purposes, we want you to put yourself on the table. Try to use “I” statements rather than “them,” “the church,” “us,” “we,” etc.
- **Conflict:** If conflict happens to arise, commit to resolve conflict Biblically. If issues between group members arise, make sure to honoring God and each other in the way conflicts are addressed.

Everything Happens for a Reason, Session 1 (Chapter 1)

“Is God good? Is God fair?”

A hulking Norwegian asked me this once in the line at my college cafeteria.

‘I think so,’ I said. ‘But it’s seven a.m. and I’m starving.’ But now I wonder. Does God even care?”

(Everything Happens for a Reason, pp. 7-8)

Listening to One Another

- The title of the book, *Everything Happens for a Reason (and other lies I’ve loved)*, plays on a common phrase of comfort offered to those in need. Name some popular phrases you have heard or used to respond to a friend going through a hard time.
- Share any insights, questions, or observations from the week’s reading.

Listening to the Bible

Read Psalm 11:3

³ *When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?*

- Our study begins with an open-ended Scriptural question instead of a prescriptive answer. What power do questions have in our uncertainties and difficulties in our lives? What power do the questions asked in the Bible have in shaping our response to the circumstances we face?
- Can you think of other powerful questions the Bible has asked of you (examples might be John 5:6, “Do you want to get well?” or Isaiah 6:8, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” or Genesis 3:9 “Where are you?”)
- The question asked in Psalm 11 names an awareness of the foundations destroyed (or “shaken”). What foundations do you think are threatened in this Psalm? What is at stake if the foundations give way to collapse?
- What is it in your life that you consider foundational? What is at stake for you if they give way and collapse? Have you ever experienced this?
- Read Psalm 11 in its entirety. How would you characterize the disposition of the Psalmist? Calm? Anxious? Despairing? Confident? Overconfident? Some measure of all of these or something else entirely? What do you think shapes the Psalmist’s perspective? Do you share that perspective? Why or why not?

Read 1 Corinthians 3:9-11

⁹ For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building. ¹⁰ By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

- Paul paints a picture of the church and the believers that comprise it as being founded on nothing other than Jesus Christ. Does this image give you stability, hope or confidence? Why or why not?
- In what ways does it deepen your reflection to consider the suffering and death of Jesus in light of this image? How would you describe the nature our foundation on him given this awareness?

Listening to God in Prayer

Psalm 130 (A song of ascents)

¹ Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord;

² Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.

³ If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But with you there is forgiveness, so that we can, with reverence, serve you.

⁵ I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope.

⁶ I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning.

⁷ Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.

⁸ He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.

Prayer Exercise (Session 1)

When we read scripture with our knowledge, thoughts, and wonderings, we are reading with our minds. We are reading the Bible from the outside in. This is the most common way to read the Bible. It is a good way, but it is not the only way. To read Bible stories from the inside out we must engage our bodies and our imaginations. When we move inside a Bible story with our imaginations and our bodies, we do not dismiss our minds. We still struggle to understand the meaning of the passage, but we have new and different knowledge to bring to our exploration. By visualizing ourselves as part of a Biblical passage, we may hear God's voice speaking into our lives in new ways. This technique can be used to pray through many Biblical passages.

Read Luke 5: 1-11 in its entirety. Then, go back and re-read verses 1-3.

Imagine that you are there in the scene. Visualize what it is like: Jesus by the lake...the smell of fish and salt of the sea...

The blue sky and warm sun on your body...a slight breeze moves across your face.

The crowd around you...eager to see, hear, and touch Jesus.

They are pressing and pushing to get closer...

The smell of sweat and dust...a sense of anticipation and excitement.

You look at Jesus there before you...you hear him – his voice is firm and strong yet there's also a quality of care and concern...

His voice tells you he is convinced of his message and he yearns for you to hear it.

Jesus pauses, distracted by the two boats that have pulled up by the bank of the lake...

There are fishermen washing their nets in the lake by the boat...

Hear the swish of the nets in the water...see the nets lifted up and down...

Smell the fish and the sea...

Jesus walks over to the boats...you watch him...

Hear him ask Simon if he can get into the boat...he asks Simon to put out a bit from shore.

Jesus sits in the boat...contented and ready to teach again.

He starts to speak...you listen closely....

This time, the words sink into your heart.

What does Jesus say to you that you need so much to hear?

Pause to write down what you hear Jesus saying to you.

Continue with the visualization by re-reading verses 4-11.

Imagine that you are Simon Peter... Jesus tells you to go out into the deep water...

Then he tells you to put your net into the deep water...

You remember how you worked all night and caught nothing...

You can feel your sore muscles and your tired eyes, but you are drawn by Jesus and his insistence...

So you toss the nets in...hear the nets splash, see it sink...

What are you thinking as you toss the net in and wait?

You begin to pull the net back in...

It is so heavy you can hardly pull on it and your heart beats faster and faster...

You call those in the other boat to come and help you...

Together you haul the net close to the boats...

You are surrounded by fish everywhere in the boat...

Everyone is full of surprise... you can hardly believe what is happening...

Then you look up at Jesus... you see joy, love, and delight on his face...

He seems to look straight into your heart...

Suddenly you feel humbled and awed by the presence of such a powerful love...

Jesus reaches out and touches you on the arm, takes your hand...

He speaks to you: "Will you leave your old things behind and follow me?"

Will you join with me in my life and work? Will you come with me?"

You go to the shore with Jesus... You ask to sit down and talk with him...

Spend some time in dialogue with Jesus about the invitation he has given to you...

You might reflect upon the following:

- What "old things" do you need to leave behind?
- What might the "deep waters" be for you?
- What would you hope to find in the "deep waters"?
- Write your response to Jesus' question: Will you come with me?
- Close with thanking Jesus for the time you have spent with him and see yourself walking along the shore of the lake with him.

Everything Happens for a Reason, Session 2 (Chapter 2)

Anyone who has lived in the aftermath of something like this knows that it signifies the arrival of three questions so simple that they seem, in turn, too shallow and too deep.

Why?

God, are you here?

What does this suffering mean?

(Everything Happens for a Reason, p. xv)

Listening to One Another

- Do the three questions that launch the book resonate with you? Is there a time when you've asked similar ones?
- The prosperity gospel, a system of Christian faith characterized by the belief that corresponds strength of faith with material or personal gain, is often contrasted with the plainclothes Mennonite faith. Describe how strands of faith practices have informed your experience of loss, suffering, or pain. What about the faith practices you've experienced have been most harmful? Most helpful?
- Share any insights, questions, or observations from the week's reading.

Listening to the Bible

Read John 9:1-12

¹ As [Jesus] went along, he saw a man blind from birth. ² His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

³ "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. ⁴ As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. ⁵ While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

⁶ After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. ⁷ "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means "Sent"). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

⁸ His neighbors and those who had formerly seen him begging asked, "Isn't this the same man who used to sit and beg?" ⁹ Some claimed that he was.

Others said, "No, he only looks like him."

But he himself insisted, "I am the man."

¹⁰ *"How then were your eyes opened?" they asked.*

¹¹ *He replied, "The man they call Jesus made some mud and put it on my eyes. He told me to go to Siloam and wash. So I went and washed, and then I could see."*

¹² *"Where is this man?" they asked him.*

"I don't know," he said.

- What is the condition of the man Jesus encounters in this story (physically, spiritually, emotionally and relationally)? Which of these various conditions do you think contributes most to his suffering? Why?
- What are the various dimensions of healing Jesus brings? For which dimension do you think the man is most grateful?
- Locate the various questions in the story. Who is asking them, and what motives do you think lie behind their asking?
- In the face of suffering or catastrophe, have you ever found yourself looking for answers to questions about your life or the life of others? What did you ask? Why did you ask? Were the answers ultimately satisfying to you? Why or why not?
- What does the man born blind understand about his condition and his healing? What doesn't he know or understand?
- What do those around them understand about his condition and his healing? What don't they know or understand?
- In this story, we find Jesus alternately present and absent. Where in your life are you aware of the presence of God? Where do you yearn for a more discernable presence?

Read Romans 8:22-27

²² *We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.*

²⁶ *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. ²⁷ And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.*

- What does Paul mean by having the "firstfruits of the Spirit?"
- In what ways does the presence of the Spirit promise hope in suffering? In what ways does the presence of the Holy Spirit also *promise* suffering?

- How is our perception of the presence or absence of God in our suffering and others' reflected in this passage? What meaning might be made of suffering in light of God's own prayerful participation in our suffering?

Listening to God in Prayer

Psalm 42 (For the director of music. A maskil of the Sons of Korah)

¹ *As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.*

² *My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?*

³ *My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"*

⁴ *These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I used to go to the house of God under the protection of the Mighty One with shouts of joy and praise among the festive throng.*

⁵ *Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.*

⁶ *My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar.*

⁷ *Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your waves and breakers have swept over me.*

⁸ *By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song is with me—a prayer to the God of my life.*

⁹ *I say to God my Rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?"*

¹⁰ *My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, "Where is your God?"*

¹¹ *Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.*

Prayer Exercise (Session 2)

Prayer of Presence

- Find a posture that allows you to be relaxed and alert. It helps to have your neck and spine aligned. Close your eyes and breathe deeply several times. Consciously release any muscle tension you become aware of. Breathe in peace, breathe out tension.
- Relax your mind. If particular thoughts keep returning, gather them up and give them to God to hold for you during this time. You can take them back later if you want.
- Turn your attention to God's presence. Let yourself be fully aware of the mystery of divine love that continually surrounds and upholds all of creation, including you. God is breathing life into you at each moment; take in the gift.
- Let God's presence fill your consciousness, and simply rest in this presence – just as you might with someone you love dearly and feel no need to speak to, just to be with. Let yourself be like a child cradled in the lap of a wonderful parent or grandparent, or nestled close to Jesus' heart, or gently supported in an ocean of light, or enfolded by peaceful warmth. Find an image that allows you to be held in God's tender embrace, then simply rest and soak up the love that holds you.
- Close your prayer by thanking God for any gifts received in this time. You can return to this communion of presence whenever you choose to receive it.

Everything Happens for a Reason, Session 3 (Chapter 3)

We have words to evaluate how likely it is that our attempts to harness the supernatural are of any use. Black cats and ladders and spilling salt are put in a box dubbed superstition, and failed prophecies are classified as fantasies or delusions. But the prosperity gospel asks you to set aside your doubts and bet it all to reach down and remake the world according to your prayer. When everything in your body says believe, believe, believe. When you find yourself turning to your neighbor and saying: "You can't believe what I just saw." You are not just an observer anymore, you are a witness. So the question is always, Will it work?

(Everything Happens for a Reason, p. 35)

Listening to One Another

- Think about a time when you experienced a difficult situation (an illness, divorce, death in the family, job loss). What do you wish your friends and family had said to you? What do you wish they would have done for you?
- Share any insights, questions, or observations from the week's reading.

Listening to the Bible

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

⁹ *How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?* ¹⁰ *Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.*

¹¹ *Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you.*

¹² *May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.* ¹³ *May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.*

(Paul is writing to the church he planted in Thessalonica, from which he had to flee and has just received a good report about their progress. However, the church has experienced hard times and faces deep, searching questions. Paul's first letter is written to encourage the believers and speak to some of the questions they face.)

- This letter, and the prayer of Chapter 1 included in it, are written from a distance. The first petition in verse 11 asks that God would close the gap between them. When you encounter others who suffer or are in hard times, do you find yourself closer to them or feeling far away? What do you think lies behind this?

- What do you believe the role of prayer to be for those who are suffering? For those who offer prayers for the suffering?
- Paul indicates that he is praying for this church “night and day.” Have you ever poured yourself that fully into praying for others? What was the circumstance and why did it matter so much to you?
- For what things does the apostle pray for those who are struggling or suffering? How does this compare to the ways you pray for others or yourself in crisis?
- The apostle implies that even in the midst of their struggles, those who struggle have something to share and give (v. 12). Do you think this is true? Have you experienced it in your life?
- Can you tell a story of “answered prayer?” Can you tell a story of a prayer that went “unanswered?” What have learned from that experience?

Read James 5:14-16

¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

- What is the place of those who are suffering in James’ teaching about the ministry of the church? What is the place of those who are suffering in our modern day?
- What connection do you think these verses are making between sick bodies and human sin? What are the ways this can be faithfully embodied in our ministry? In what ways can it be misused or misinterpreted?
- What do you think James means by “a prayer offered in faith?” (v. 15)
- How do you judge whether a prayer was “effective” or not? (v.16)

Listening to God in Prayer

Psalms 86

¹ Hear me, Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy.

² Guard my life, for I am faithful to you; save your servant who trusts in you. You are my God; ³ have mercy on me, Lord, for I call to you all day long.

⁴ Bring joy to your servant, Lord, for I put my trust in you.

⁵ You, Lord, are forgiving and good, abounding in love to all who call to you.

⁶ Hear my prayer, Lord; listen to my cry for mercy.

⁷ When I am in distress, I call to you, because you answer me.

⁸ Among the gods there is none like you, Lord; no deeds can compare with yours.

⁹ All the nations you have made will come and worship before you, Lord; they will bring glory to your name.

¹⁰ For you are great and do marvelous deeds; you alone are God.

¹¹ Teach me your way, Lord, that I may rely on your faithfulness; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name.

¹² I will praise you, Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name forever.

¹³ For great is your love toward me; you have delivered me from the depths, from the realm of the dead.

¹⁴ Arrogant foes are attacking me, O God; ruthless people are trying to kill me—they have no regard for you.

¹⁵ But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness.

¹⁶ Turn to me and have mercy on me; show your strength in behalf of your servant; save me, because I serve you just as my mother did.

¹⁷ Give me a sign of your goodness, that my enemies may see it and be put to shame, for you, Lord, have helped me and comforted me.

Prayer Exercise (Session 3)

Imaging Intercession

As you pray this week, consider using your imagination rather than words as a primary avenue of prayer. Here is a simple way to pray using imaging as a vehicle for “willing God’s will”:

- Relax and breathe gently. Become aware of God’s presence, imaging it as radiant light and warmth. Allow this *Shekinah* (glory) to fill your consciousness.
- When we are in God’s presence, we are not alone. We are there with all God’s children held in the divine embrace. Choose one of those children with need of healing in body, mind, or heart.
- Lift this person into God’s light. Visualize divine love bathing the person and gently penetrating defenses, dissolving pain, cleansing wounds. Use any images that seem appropriate: dark becoming light, ice melting, confusion ordered.
- See the person in a state of wholeness in God’s light, newly created, fresh and beautiful as seen through the eyes of divine love.
- Ask God that this beauty be fully realized according to God’s design for this person.
- Thank God for whatever gift of healing is given. Release the person into divine care until you pray again.

This exercise can tutor you to use your imagination more actively in other prayers: visualize restored relationships or “see” old animosities dissolve. You are not trying to manufacture results but envisioning with God the restoration of creation.

Everything Happens for a Reason, Session 4 (Chapter 4)

Contrary to reports that 33 (The Jesus Year) must end badly, this was officially the best year of my life. And if anyone is a notary, we can make it official. Thanks for supporting me until I got to this, my own little prosperity gospel.

(Everything Happens for a Reason, p. 52)

Listening to One Another

- What accounts for the differences between the way congregants of a prosperity gospel and Mennonite church react to Bowler's diagnosis and illness?
- What unique insights have emerged in *Everything Happens for a Reason* for you? In what ways does this book enhance the themes of suffering, love, grace, and redemption featured in Bowler's research on the prosperity gospel?
- Share any insights, questions, or observations from the week's reading.

Listening to the Bible

Read 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

¹ I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. ³ And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—⁴ was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. ⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶ Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, ⁷ or because of these surpassingly great revelations. Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

- Paul begins this section by describing an experience by a "man in Christ" (presumably himself) who experiences something wonderful. What is it? Can you relate to that sort exultant experience?

- In what ways do you equate our wonderful moments, experiences or accomplishments with divine favor? In what ways do you equate your losses with divine *disfavor*? What do you think lies behind this tendency?
- Is it helpful not to know precisely what the “thorn” in Paul’s flesh is? Why or why not? Does he articulate where it came from – or why?
- Why do you think Paul nicknames this thorn a “messenger of Satan?”
- What does Paul pray for? What does he receive?
- Have you prayed for one thing and received another? How were you changed in that exchange?
- If Paul were sitting with you or someone you know who was in the midst of suffering or crisis, what might he say or do? What might he not say or do? How does reading Paul’s story alongside Bowler’s inform your perspective on responses to your own struggles or others’?

Listening to God in Prayer

Psalm 123 (A song of ascents)

¹ *I lift up my eyes to you, to you who sit enthroned in heaven.*

² *As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a female slave look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, till he shows us his mercy.*

³ *Have mercy on us, Lord, have mercy on us, for we have endured no end of contempt.*

⁴ *We have endured no end of ridicule from the arrogant, of contempt from the proud.*

Prayer Exercise (Session 4)

The Daily Examen

The Daily Examen is a technique of prayerful reflection on the events of the day in order to detect God's presence and discern his direction for us. The Examen is an ancient practice in the Church that can help us see God's hand at work in our whole experience.

1. Become aware of God's presence. Look back on the events of the day in the company of the Holy Spirit. The day may seem confusing to you—a blur, a jumble, a muddle. Ask God to bring clarity and understanding.

2. Review the day with gratitude. Gratitude is the foundation of our relationship with God. Walk through your day in the presence of God and note its joys and delights. Focus on the day's gifts. Look at the work you did, the people you interacted with. What did you receive from these people? What did you give them? Pay attention to small things—the food you ate, the sights you saw, and other seemingly small pleasures. God is in the details.

3. Pay attention to your emotions. One of St. Ignatius's great insights was that we detect the presence of the Spirit of God in the movements of our emotions. Reflect on the feelings you experienced during the day. Boredom? Elation? Resentment? Compassion? Anger? Confidence? What is God saying through these feelings? God will most likely show you some ways that you fell short. Make note of these sins and faults. But look deeply for other implications. Does a feeling of frustration perhaps mean that God wants you consider a new direction in some area of your work? Are you concerned about a friend? Perhaps you should reach out to her in some way.

4. Choose one feature of the day and pray from it. Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you to something during the day that God thinks is particularly important. It may involve a feeling—positive or negative. It may be a significant encounter with another person or a vivid moment of pleasure or peace. Or it may be something that seems rather insignificant. Look at it. Pray about it. Allow the prayer to arise spontaneously from your heart—whether intercession, praise, repentance, or gratitude.

5. Look toward tomorrow. Ask God to give you light for tomorrow's challenges. Pay attention to the feelings that surface as you survey what's coming up. Are you doubtful? Cheerful? Apprehensive? Full of delighted anticipation? Allow these feelings to turn into prayer. Seek God's guidance. Ask him for help and understanding. Pray for hope.

Everything Happens for a Reason, Session 5 (Chapter 5)

They are addicted to self-rule, and so am I.

(Everything Happens for a Reason, p. 87)

Listening to One Another

- Discuss the nature of grief, both in the book and in your own experience. What are your go-to ways to process (or avoid) grief in your experience?
- *Everything Happens for a Reason* is a story to comprehend a paradoxical life and faith; God is good, yet God permits suffering. Mothers beg for the life of their child to be spared, yet children die. How does Bowler make sense of a seemingly paradoxical reality? How does your faith inform how you conceive of a life of both suffering and joy?
- Share any insights, questions, or observations from the week's reading.

Listening to the Bible

Read Galatians 2:20-21

¹⁹ "For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"

- Paul is writing to a congregation conflicted between commitments to lawful living (in the religious sense) and letting go of this in order to welcome new believers into the fellowship of the church. How do you see this playing out in church life? In your life?
- To what extent is Christian discipleship about adherence to a code (of conduct, belief, or other)? What are your "non-negotiables?"
- What are the advantages of a legalistic framework for your life (examples might be providing equity, fairness or predictability)? What are the disadvantages of this way of viewing God and our life with God?
- As it relates to hard times or suffering, how can such a rigid legal framework explain our suffering? What are the liabilities of this way of understanding our circumstances and God's place in them?
- Paul declares "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (v. 20) How does this declaration understand God's place in our suffering?

- How would you define the “grace” Paul speak of in verse 21? Can you tell a story of how it was revealed in your life?
- In light of your reflection, what do you think Bowler is speaking about when she writes about “surrender?” Surrender what? To whom? For what purpose?

Read Matthew 5:43-48

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. ⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

- In what ways is this section of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount a call to surrender?
- Jesus’ observation that “God causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (v. 45) pushes against our easy explanations of why our lives unfold the way they do. What implications do this teaching have for the way we view our own circumstances and the circumstances of others? Does it shape the way you envision your responses to God, yourself and others in times of crisis or hardship?

Listening to God in Prayer

Psalm 82 (A psalm of Asaph)

¹ God presides in the great assembly; he renders judgment among the “gods”:

² “How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked?

³ Defend the weak and the fatherless; uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.

⁴ Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.

⁵ “The ‘gods’ know nothing, they understand nothing. They walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

⁶ “I said, ‘You are “gods”’; you are all sons of the Most High.’

⁷ But you will die like mere mortals; you will fall like every other ruler.”

⁸ Rise up, O God, judge the earth, for all the nations are your inheritance.

Prayer Exercise (Session 5)

Lectio Divina

“*Lectio Divina*” is Latin for “spiritual reading” or “holy reading”. It is the ancient prayer practice that allows us to encounter the Living God through His written Word. We begin by quieting our heart and mind and turning our focus to God. As best as you can, let everything else go and set the time aside for being with God and hearing His voice. The simple prayer practice of *Lectio Divina* has four movements. Choose a short passage of scripture – just a few verses. Begin reading and praying through the four movements, described below with both the Latin and English word that summarizes each one. With time and practice, these movements will naturally flow from one to another.

- *Lectio* (READ): On the first reading, simply open yourself to the presence of God. Read the passage slowly and prayerfully, allowing short pauses between sentences. (Over time you will discover whether it is more helpful for you to read silently or out loud – try them both...). As you read, take in the words and the overall flow of the passage. Then allow a time of silence following the reading – continue to open yourself to the Spirit of God.
- *Meditatio* (REFLECT): On the second prayerful reading of the passage, listen for a particular word or a phrase through which God wants to speak to you. You will notice your attention being drawn to something (or if this doesn’t happen, just choose a word). Once you have “received” the word or phrase, begin to silently meditate on that. Reflect on why God would highlight this for you today, ask Him any questions that come to mind, and note things that seem important as you meditate on what He has given you. Remember that the focus is on listening to what God has to say to you.
- *Oratio* (RESPOND): On the third prayerful reading of the passage, listen now for God’s invitation, and respond from your heart. The Living God is always inviting us in some way...to let go of something, or to take up something; to do something or be something...the invitation can take innumerable forms. Following the reading, continue to listen for His invitation and then respond silently or out loud from an honest heart.
- *Contemplatio* (REST): The focus of the fourth prayerful reading of the passage is to simply rest now in the love that God has for you. Let the words wash over you – there is no further need to reflect or respond – allow God’s Spirit to draw you close and fill you with His love, grace, and peace. Linger in the place of deep connection, for you are being filled and refreshed for your continuing journey.

Take a word, phrase, or image with you when it is time to return to the day... something to which you can return throughout the day... something that will remind you of the love of God for you, and the special message He had for you today.

Everything Happens for a Reason, Session 6 (Chapters 6-7)

At a time when I should have felt abandoned by God, I was not reduced to ashes. I felt like I was floating, floating on the love and prayers of all those who hummed around me like worker bees, bringing notes and flowers and warm socks and quilts embroidered with words of encouragement. They came in like priests and mirrored back to me the face of Jesus.

(Everything Happens for a Reason, p. 121)

Listening to One Another

- In chapter 7, Bowler writes, “The pain of the world is being calculated, and according to some, compassion can be doled out only by the teaspoon.” How can you dole out more compassion to yourself today? To your loved ones?
- Bowler writes an op-ed for the *New York Times* and receives hundreds of letters from readers expressing their own fears, grief, theories and advice. Why do you think these readers were compelled to write to her, a stranger? What knowledge or connection do these readers seek?
- Share any insights, questions, or observations from the week’s reading.

Listening to the Bible

Read Romans 8:35-39

³⁵ *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?* ³⁶ *As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”* ³⁷ *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.* ³⁸ *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,* ³⁹ *neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

- This section of Romans 8 offers a comprehensive, though not all-encompassing, list of lived threats that trespass on our well-being and relationship with God. As you examine your life, what would you add to the list he provides? How do the threats on your list also impact your relationship to others?
- Paul quotes Psalm 44:22 in verse 36 to illustrate the gravity of these circumstances: “We face death all day long.” Does that ring true to you? Why or why not? If so, what are the consequences for your life, spirit, relationships and choices if life is lived constantly facing death?

- Bowler lists three common responses from strangers to her suffering, life lessons they are trying to teach her:
 - That she shouldn't be so upset, because the impact of death, in macrocosmic terms, is minimal. She should learn her place in the universe, stop complaining and accept the world as it is.
 - That she should view her suffering as a teaching time for her mind, body and experience, the ultimate test of her faith (a "Job experience").
 - That she should embrace a solution to her suffering through a change of mind or attitude – in essence, to save herself.

She finds them all ultimately lacking and missing her and her suffering. Have you encountered (or shared) these responses to suffering or hard times? Why do you think she rejects them?

- With similar confidence ("I am *convinced*"), Paul declares an alternative to these three kinds solutions to suffering in verses 38-39. What is it? In what ways is it really an alternative to the solutions offered by strangers?
- How did Paul become convinced? How will we?
- Over what are we "more than conquerors" (verse 37)?
- How do we declare and show that alternative in the way we are with one another in suffering times?

Listening to God in Prayer

Psalm 16 (A miktam of David)

¹ *Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge.*

² *I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing."*

³ *I say of the holy people who are in the land, "They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight."*

⁴ *Those who run after other gods will suffer more and more. I will not pour out libations of blood to such gods or take up their names on my lips.*

⁵ *Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure.*

⁶ *The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.*

⁷ *I will praise the Lord, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me.*

⁸ *I keep my eyes always on the Lord. With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.*

⁹ *Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure,*

¹⁰ *because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful[b] one see decay.*

¹¹ *You make known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*

Prayer Exercise (Session 6)

Centering Prayer

We may think of prayer as thoughts or feelings expressed in words. But this is only one expression. Centering prayer is a way of opening our minds and heart – our whole being – to God. It is not meant to replace other kinds of prayer; it simply puts other kinds of prayer into a new and fuller perspective. During the time of prayer, we consent to God's presence and action within. At other times our attention moves outward to discover God's presence everywhere else.

In the practice of centering prayer, we try to move beyond words, images, sensations, and thoughts to a deep abiding with God. Our minds and senses are normally very active, constantly bringing new ideas and thoughts. As we seek to rest in God's presence, we actively practice surrendering parts of ourselves – our emotions, thoughts, agendas – to God.

Typically, when we sit in silence for a period of time, our minds become like monkeys jumping around in banana trees. Long-time practitioners of centering prayer attest that over time, these monkeys fade away as you open yourself to God's powerful and deep working at the core of your being. This prayer is moving from communication with God to communion with God.

The Guidelines:

- Choose a sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent to God's presence and action within. Some examples of a sacred word might be: "Lord," "Jesus," "Abba," "Father," "Love," "Peace," etc. This word in and of itself is not important; it is not a mantra. It is a means of signaling our intention to be in God's presence and to bring our focus back from other distractions.
- Sitting comfortably and with eyes closed, settle briefly, and silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your consent to God's presence and action within.
- When you become aware of thoughts, return ever-so-gently to the sacred word.
- At the end of the prayer period (twenty minutes is a suggested time), remain in silence with the eyes closed for a couple minutes.

Everything Happens for a Reason, Session 7 (Chapter 8)

"We're all sinking, slowly, but one day, while everyone watches, I will run out of air. I am going to go under." Even explaining it, I feel more and more frantic. "There will be a day when I can't take my next breath. And I will drown."

I can picture it so clearly. People talk about heaven like it's a hop, skip and a jump. A veil between heaven and earth will part and I will pass through it.

The promise of heaven to me is this: someday I will get a new set of lungs and I will swim away.

But first I will drown.



"Happy Good Friday!" yelled the parking attendant, flashing his glowing traffic wand.

"Happy Good Friday!" chirped the woman stationed at the bottom of the escalator.

By the umpteenth greeting, "Happy Good Friday!" seemed the order of the day. This was, I suspected, going to be the hap-happiest Good Friday service I ever attended.

(Everything Happens for a Reason, pp. 65 & 130)

Listening to One Another

- How does Bowler's spiritual life change during the course of the book? Describe any shifts you've noticed in your spiritual life during a difficult season of your life.
- Bowler takes an unconventional path in the Lenten journey to Easter by taking up cursing for a season. What do you think this choice represented for her? In what way might she be trying to discipline her life by this curious practice?
- Share any insights, questions, or observations from the week's reading.

Listening to the Bible

Read Philippians 2:5-11

⁵ *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*

⁶ *Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;*

⁷ *rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.*

⁸ *And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!*

⁹ *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,*

¹⁰ *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

¹¹ *and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

- In this ancient Christian hymn, Jesus is described in two directions as descending and ascending. What words and actions characterize his descent? What words and actions describe his ascent?
- What is accomplished in Jesus' descent? In his ascent?
- Growing up, how was the significance of Jesus' suffering and death of Jesus portrayed on Good Friday? How was Jesus being raised up on Easter portrayed?
- What were the relative weights placed upon Good Friday and Easter? Was there an appropriate balance? Why or why not?
- What do you think is the significance of Jesus dying our death?
- What are the consequences for us of diminishing either the death of God in Christ, or in his rising again as we face our own suffering and the suffering of others?

Read Philippians 3:10-11

¹⁰ *I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.*

- Which comes first in Paul's heartfelt yearning in this passage, the suffering and death or the birth to new life? Can this insight deepen our own reflection in times of suffering?
- The first quote that begins the Session 7 Study Guide, "But first I will drown," is also a picture of Christian baptism: "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his." (Roman's 6:5) Do we honor the "dying" portion of our baptism as we ought? How might we view our relationship with Jesus differently if we took more time to do that?
- While we emphasize our unity in Christ's new life, what might we discover about God in remembering his death like ours?

Listening to God in Prayer

Psalm 22 (For the director of music. To the tune of "The Doe of the Morning." A psalm of David)

¹ *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish?*

² *My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest.*

³ *Yet you are enthroned as the Holy One; you are the one Israel praises.*

⁴ *In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them.*

⁵ *To you they cried out and were saved; in you they trusted and were not put to shame.*

⁶ *But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by everyone, despised by the people.*

⁷ *All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads.*

⁸ *"He trusts in the Lord," they say, "let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him."*

⁹ *Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast.*

¹⁰ *From birth I was cast on you; from my mother's womb you have been my God.*

¹¹ *Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.*

¹² *Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.*

¹³ *Roaring lions that tear their prey open their mouths wide against me.*

¹⁴ *I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax; it has melted within me.*

¹⁵ *My mouth is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death.*

¹⁶ *Dogs surround me, a pack of villains encircles me; they pierce my hands and my feet.*

¹⁷ *All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me.*

¹⁸ *They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment.*

¹⁹ *But you, Lord, do not be far from me. You are my strength; come quickly to help me.*

²⁰ *Deliver me from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dogs.*

²¹ *Rescue me from the mouth of the lions; save me from the horns of the wild oxen.*

²² *I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you.*

²³ *You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!*

²⁴ *For he has not despised or scorned the suffering of the afflicted one; he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.*

²⁵ *From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly; before those who fear you I will fulfill my vows.*

²⁶ *The poor will eat and be satisfied; those who seek the Lord will praise him—may your hearts live forever!*

²⁷ *All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him,*

²⁸ *for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations.*

²⁹ *All the rich of the earth will feast and worship; all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—those who cannot keep themselves alive.*

³⁰ *Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord.*

³¹ *They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!*

Prayer Exercise (Session 7)

Finger Labyrinth

The labyrinth is an ancient spiritual tool found in many cultures and religious traditions. Unlike a maze, a labyrinth is unicursal or a one-path design, with no tricks, decisions, or dead ends. Early Christian labyrinths date back to the 4th century. In the Middle Ages, Christians were expected to travel to the Holy Land on pilgrimage at least once during their lives. As travel became more difficult during the Crusades, certain cathedrals throughout Europe were designated as “pilgrim cathedrals.” Christians would travel to these cathedrals where they would walk the labyrinth laid into the stone floor. This is why the labyrinths were sometimes called the *New Jerusalem*.

The labyrinth is a tool for prayer. It is simply a place to walk and pray. It gives you the freedom to walk around while focusing your mind on God – and not worry about getting lost. The path itself can be a great metaphor for life’s journey with all the twists and turns, times when we feel far from God’s presence, and times when we draw near to God (symbolized by entering the center of the labyrinth). We sometimes walk alone, and at other times, we find ourselves on the path with companions.

Sometimes it is helpful to think of your walk and prayer as a three-fold path. The path inward toward the center can be a time of **RELEASING** – letting go of your cares, concerns, preoccupations, and other things that may be hindering you from fully being in God’s presence. When you arrive in the center of the labyrinth, this is a time to focus your prayer on **RECEIVING** what God has to offer you – perhaps a word of comfort, an urging to engage in service for others, or just the cleansing and healing presence of God Himself. As you make your way back out of the labyrinth toward the entryway, this is a time to focus your prayer on **RETURNING** back to your ordinary life, now carrying with you the gift the God has given; how can you integrate this gift into your day-to-day life?

Several churches and organizations in our area have labyrinths. They can be a very powerful tool for your prayer time. A finger labyrinth is provided below. You can simply trace your finger along the path as you make your way to the center and back out while praying.



Everything Happens for a Reason, Session 8 (Chapter 9)

I will die, yes, but not today.

(*Everything Happens for a Reason*, p.166)

Listening to One Another

- “The future can seem awfully like the present,” Bowler writes. In what ways does her present inform her ideas of the future, and vice versa? Do you find yourself living in the past, present, or future? What beauty and harm do you find when you reflect too much on the past? Too much on the present? Too much on the future?
- “Don’t skip to the end.” Bowler’s friend, Frank, gives her this advice on her diagnosis day. What do we lose when we assume the inevitability of our fate?
- Share any insights, questions, or observations from the week’s reading.

Listening to the Bible

Read Matthew 6:25-34

²⁵ “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

²⁸ “And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

- Jesus tells his disciples not to worry. In what ways are our lives and responses to life controlled by worry?
- What images does Jesus use to picture the provision of God? What images might you add from your own experience?

- Jesus' own awareness of suffering and dying as part of being his disciple is apparent in his teachings, such as "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23) What might a teaching like that mean in the midst of our suffering or the suffering of others?
- Consider Jesus' growing awareness of his own future. It is characterized by a deep pleading with God for an alternative (Matt. 26:39). Is this different than "worry." How?
- What does Jesus mean when he tells us to seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness?
- Does Jesus promise immunity from trouble? What does he promise instead? In what ways does Bowler's book illustrate this? Have you experienced this in your life? How?

Listening to God in Prayer

Psalm 23

¹ The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³ He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

⁵ Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Prayer Exercise (Session 8)

This week, return to one of the previous seven exercises you practiced across the study.

Perhaps you would like to try one again, or a particular practice held special meaning.

Whatever you choose, may you experience the presence of God in a way that encourages and strengthens your awareness of God's faithful companionship in your life. "Come near to God and he will come near to you." (James 4:8)

Summer Sermon Schedule: “Shaken”

June 3, 2018 (Chapter 1)

Sermon: “Shaken”

Scripture Reading: Psalm 11:3

June 10, 2018 (Chapter 2)

Sermon: “Three Questions”

Scripture Reading: John 9:1-12

June 17, 2018 (Chapter 3)

Sermon: “A Prayer for Hard Times”

Scripture Reading: 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

June 24, 2018 (Chapter 4)

Sermon: “Favor!”

Scripture Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

July 1, 2018 (Chapter 5)

Sermon: “I Surrender All”

Scripture Reading: Galatians 2:20-21

July 8, 2018 (Chapters 6-7)

Sermon: “Blessed Assurance”

Scripture: Romans 8:37-39

July 15, 2018 (Chapter 8)

Sermon: “But First I Will Drown”

Scripture: Philippians 2:5-11

July 22, 2018 (Chapter 9)

Sermon: “Don’t Skip to the End”

Scripture: Matthew 6:25-34

July 29, 2018 (Conclusion)

Scripture: Colossians 3:1-4

Sermon: “What Will the Righteous You Do?”

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