

A Bible Study for *The Tug*

A Memoir of Failure, Faith, and the Quiet Voice That's Been Guiding You All Along

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A ten-session study for individuals, small groups, and Sunday school classes. Each session pairs a theme from the book with Scripture, reflection, discussion, and prayer. This study, and a companion book club discussion guide, are free to download, copy, and share at www.johngoehle.com.

How to use this study. Each session is built for about sixty minutes. Read the listed chapters of *The Tug* during the week beforehand. Begin your gathering with the opening prayer, read the Scripture aloud together, walk through the reflection and the questions at whatever pace your group enjoys, and close with the prayer. There are no wrong answers here, only honest ones. The goal is not to finish the questions. The goal is to hear the voice.

A note on the last session. *The Tug* does not end with a feeling; it ends with an assignment. The final session puts that assignment into your group's hands, and the closing exercise sends everyone home with one specific, small, do-it-this-week step. If you can give the book only one thing, give it that.

Scripture quotations are from the World English Bible (public domain).

Session One — The Tug: Hearing the Voice

Read: Introduction; “The Farm and the Pond”; “The Boy with the Briefcase”

Scripture: 1 Kings 19:11-13 (the still, small voice); Psalm 46:10

God was not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire. God was in the still, small voice, the very thing we are most likely to miss. John calls it the Tug. Elijah heard it only after the noise

had passed.

Discussion

1. When in your life have you felt a “tug” toward something you could not fully explain? Did you follow it, or wave it off?
2. The flood story says God sent a canoe, a boat, and a helicopter. What “canoes” might God be sending you right now that you are waiting past, hoping for a thunderclap?
3. What is the noise in your life that makes the still, small voice hard to hear?
4. As a small boy, with his father away, John sat at the top of the stairs in the dark because he had decided he was guarding the house. What did you take responsibility for before anyone asked you to? Is that early instinct still in you somewhere?

Prayer: Lord, quiet us enough to hear you. Teach us to recognize your voice beneath the noise of our days. Amen.

Session Two — The People Who Are Sent: Mentors and the Marks They Leave

Read: “The Teacher Who Saw Something”

Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:1-10 (Eli helps Samuel recognize God’s call); 1 Thessalonians 5:11

Samuel could not recognize the voice of God until Eli helped him name it. We rarely hear our calling alone. God sends people, a Mrs. Castner, to see in us what we cannot yet see in ourselves.

Discussion

1. Who has been an “Eli” or a “Mrs. Castner” in your life, someone who saw something in you before you saw it yourself?
2. Have you told them? If they are still living, what is stopping you?
3. John went back to thank his teacher, and went back too late to thank a principal. Who is on your list, and how long has that list been sitting there?
4. Whom might God be calling you to see, and to call forward, this year?

Prayer: Thank you, God, for the people you sent to call us forward. Make us that person for someone else this week. Amen.

Session Three — Here I Am, Send Me: The Sound of Saying Yes

Read: “The Song in My Head”

Scripture: Isaiah 6:8 (“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” “Here I am. Send me!”); Psalm 40:1-3 (a new song in my mouth); Ephesians 5:19

There has been a soundtrack running under John’s whole life, and under this whole book. Music, he says, does a kind of theology a sermon cannot: it gets in past your defenses. And the oldest call-and-answer in Scripture is God asking *whom shall I send*, and a trembling human voice answering *here I am*. That is the Tug, set to music. It is the sound of a person finally saying yes.

Discussion

1. Is there a song, a hymn, or a piece of music that has said something to you that words alone could not? What does it say?

2. John admits he has had to turn away from his own congregation because a hymn brought tears he could not hold back. He calls those not the moments his preaching failed, but the moments it worked. Why do you think that is? When has something cracked you open when you did not plan on it?
3. Isaiah's answer is two words long: *Send me*. What would it cost you to say those two words honestly this year? What are you afraid God would do with them?
4. What might God use to get past *your* defenses, and when did you last let it?

Prayer: Lord, you are still asking whom you shall send. Give us the courage to answer as Isaiah did, the honesty to admit how long we have hesitated, and the ears to keep listening. Amen.

Session Four — A Complete Life: Time, Death, and Living Fully

Read: "Sixteen Years"

Scripture: Psalm 90:12 ("teach us to number our days"); James 4:13-14

At a graveside, a high school principal said quietly to the one boy still standing there: "*Some people take eighty years to live a complete life. Some do it in less.*" Kirk was sixteen. Scripture asks us to number our days not to frighten us but to free us, to spend our few and precious hours on what actually matters.

Discussion

1. If you truly numbered your days, what would you stop doing? What would you start?
2. John says that seeing death up close freed him from fear. Has loss ever changed the way you live?
3. What fear is keeping you from your real life right now?
4. What would it take for someone to say of *your* life, however long it turns out to be, that it was complete?

Prayer: Teach us to number our days, Lord, that we may gain a heart of wisdom, and the courage to live fully in the time we are given. Amen.

Session Five — Naming the Destination: Calling and Purpose

Read: "The Books That Built Me"; "The Voice in the Shower"

Scripture: Jeremiah 29:11; Proverbs 16:9 (we plan our way, but the Lord directs our steps)

John wrote a personal mission statement, and had the honesty to write his weaknesses down beside his strengths. God's purposes for us are usually discovered rather than invented, and they make use of our flaws, not only our gifts.

Discussion

1. If you wrote one sentence describing your life's purpose, what might it be?
2. John named himself "fearful" in his own mission statement. What weakness would you have the courage to name, and how might God use it rather than merely forgive it?
3. Proverbs says we plan our way but God directs our steps. Where have your plans been redirected, and can you see now what the redirection was for?
4. What destination should you be naming out loud, before you take another step?

Prayer: Lord, you knew the plans you had for us before we did. Give us the courage to seek them, and the honesty to bring our whole selves. Amen.

Session Six — The Donkey and the Limousine: How God Actually Arrives

Read: “The Donkey and the Limo”

Scripture: Matthew 21:1-11 (the King comes riding on a donkey); 1 Corinthians 1:26-29 (God chose the foolish and the weak); 1 Samuel 16:7

The crowds lining the road were watching for a conquering king. They were watching for the limousine. What came instead was a man on a borrowed donkey, and most of them looked right past the most important thing that would ever happen. John believes this is the single most reliable pattern in the spiritual life: **God almost never arrives in the limousine. God arrives on the donkey.** The Tug is a donkey. The canoe is a donkey. That is precisely why we miss them.

Discussion

1. What “limousine” have you been watching the road for, the big unmistakable sign that would finally make the decision obvious?
2. Name a donkey you nearly missed: something small, ordinary, or unimpressive that turned out to be the holy thing. What made it so easy to overlook?
3. Jesus chose fishermen and tax collectors, not the powerful and the polished. If God works mostly through the overlooked, what does that say about the people *you* overlook, and about the parts of yourself you think are too ordinary to be useful?
4. John says greatness is made in “ten thousand small, unglamorous, donkey-sized faithfulnesses that nobody applauds.” Which faithfulness is yours this week? Who would never know if you skipped it?

Prayer: Lord, you came to us humble, and riding on a donkey. Forgive us for scanning the road for something grander. Give us eyes to recognize you in what is small, and the humility to be small ourselves. Amen.

Session Seven — Take Up Your Cross: The Leap of Faith

Read: “A Beautiful Morning”; “The Leap”

Scripture: Matthew 16:24-26; Genesis 12:1-4 (Abram is called to leave everything)

Abram was told to leave his country and his comfort for a land he had never seen. Every real leap of faith asks us to leave something behind and trust that we will be caught. For John, a beautiful and terrible September morning was where a lifetime of resistance finally gave way.

Discussion

1. What is the “comfortable” thing God may be asking you to leave behind?
2. John says fear is “the toll at the bridge, not a sign to turn around.” Where have you mistaken fear for a stop sign?
3. On September 11th, surrounded by danger and uncertainty, John felt no fear and an unmistakable sense of God’s presence. Have you ever felt closest to God in your hardest moment? What did that teach you?
4. What cross, what specific and heavy and frightening thing that is *yours*, have you been stepping around?

Prayer: God of Abraham, give us courage to leave the shore. Catch us as we leap, and lead us toward the land you have prepared. Amen.

Session Eight — Meant for Good: Failure, Regret, and Redemption

Read: “That Which Doesn’t Kill Us”; “No Regrets”; “The Pattern or the Dice”; “Another Road”

Scripture: Genesis 50:15-21 (Joseph: “you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good”); Romans 8:28

Joseph could look back across betrayal, slavery, and prison and see the hand of God weaving all of it toward good. Nothing we survive is wasted in God’s economy.

Discussion

1. Is there a “failure” in your past that, looking back, delivered you to something you would never give up?
2. John refuses to regret his decisions, because to regret the road is to regret where it led. He calls regret “the fantasy that you could keep the good while subtracting the pain.” Is there something you regret that this reframes?
3. The book wrestles honestly with whether life is a pattern God set or simply the roll of the dice. Where do you land, and does it change how you live tomorrow?
4. Where do you need to trust that God is still weaving, even though you cannot yet see the pattern?

Prayer: God of Joseph, give us eyes to see your hand even in our pits. Help us trust that you are weaving all of it toward good. Amen.

Session Nine — Be Still: Worry, Trust, and Letting Go

Read: “Touch”; “The Anxious Dog”

Scripture: Mark 4:35-41 (Jesus calms the storm); Matthew 6:25-34; Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (a time for every season)

The disciples panicked in the storm while Jesus slept, perfectly at peace. Abigail fled the shelter of her own home to sit out in the rain. We so often run from the very refuge that would hold us. And sometimes the hardest trust of all is opening our hands to let someone go.

Discussion

1. Where in your life are you “sitting out in the storm,” running from the shelter that could hold you?
2. John pictures God as a father holding the reins so a child will not fall, and years later had to trust that same hand as he helped release his own father. Where are you being asked to hold on, and where are you being asked to let go?
3. John says holding on and letting go “are both just love, doing what the season requires.” Have you had to do both? What did each ask of you?
4. What worry do you need to lay down tonight, trusting that you are not the one holding up the ceiling?

Prayer: Lord, you are the one who calms the storm. Quiet our anxious hearts, and help us trust the hand that holds the reins. Amen.

Session Ten — Get Out There: Significance, Legacy, and the First Inch

Read: “Count Your Barns”; “What I Leave Behind”; “The Curtain and the Cross”; the Conclusion; and the Afterword

Scripture: Matthew 25:14–30 (the talents); Micah 6:8; Mark 10:43–45 (the greatest among you must serve)

Greatness, Jesus said, is service. The chorus makes the show possible whether or not anyone ever learns its name. A life is measured by what it gives away.

And then the book stops preaching and hands you a job. John does not ask you to leap. He is, as he cheerfully admits, the man who needed six months to change his brand of milk, and who moved a couch across a room an inch at a time. Every real change in his life looked like a leap only to the people who were not watching closely. Up close, it was inches. So the book ends not with a feeling but with an assignment: *name it, say it to a face, take the inch, look up, and do one thing for one person.*

Discussion

1. What are you building that has someone else’s name on it?
2. When people gather to remember you, what do you hope they will actually say, and does the way you spend your days match it?
3. In the Afterword, John admits he learned more about himself in the writing of this book than he managed to hand across to you in the reading, and he suspects your own life has a shape you have never sat down and looked at. When did you last look at yours?
4. Why do you think John refuses to ask for a leap and asks only for an inch? Is that a lowering of the bar, or is it the only thing that has ever actually worked?
5. Go around the group. **What is the inch?** Not the dream. Not the leap. The smallest, almost embarrassing step you could take in the next seven days.

The Closing Exercise: A Commissioning

Go around the circle, and have each person finish these two sentences out loud:

“The tug I have been ignoring is...”

“The inch I will take before we meet again is...”

You need not solve anything. Naming it, together, is the whole exercise, and the inch is the whole point. Write them down. And when you next gather, before anything else, go around once more and ask the only question that finally matters: **did you take it?**

Prayer: Make us great in the only way that lasts, Lord. Make us servants. We have heard you, and we are done waiting for the thunderclap. Give us the courage to move the first inch, and to trust that you will meet us there. Amen.

The Tug and this study are the work of John J. Goehle. This guide may be freely copied and shared for group use. For the companion book club discussion guide, for speaking and booking information, and for more about the book, visit **www.johngoehle.com**.