

WHEN THE WORLD BREAKS

The Surprising Hope and Subversive
Promises in the Teachings of Jesus

DISCUSSION GUIDE

1

The Blissful Existence of the Gods?

- 1 Have you encountered these blessings – the Beatitudes from Matthew 5 – before? If so, how have you understood them in the past? What have they meant to you? Or how have you heard them explained?
- 2 If you haven't encountered these blessings before, how do they strike you as you read them or hear them for the first time?
- 3 *"This isn't just a book about bad things happening. It's about what happens when the fundamental picture we had relied on – our sense of how everything holds together – falls apart."* (pg 4) When have you experienced the feeling that your sense of how everything holds together fell apart? When have you walked with others in their own experience of this?

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2

The Soul is Not a Closed System

*Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

- 1 Do you relate to Cole Arthur Riley's description of "the nothing at all" that we experience in our interior world when we face the world's "traumas and terrors" (pg 23)? When was a time that you felt that? How would you describe that experience?
- 2 Have you ever encountered "dangling carrot theology," (pg 25) where "you try to bend yourself into whatever shape you've been told God most approves of, only to find yourself contorted with no carrot to show for it"? What was the effect of that theology in your life?
- 3 "We learn early... that we have been given vulnerable souls. So over time we learn to build a hard case to protect this permeable, vulnerable thing within." (pg 37)
How would you describe the case you've built to protect yourself? (It may help to look at the examples in the last paragraph on pg 37.)

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3

The Glory is Not Diminished

*Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.*

- 1 “...whether your world breaks or the world breaks – whether it’s personal or global or somewhere in between – we usually end up losing something...” (pg 47) What losses stand out for you as you think about the circumstances Jesus names for us when we mourn? (The rest of pg 47 and 48 give examples of the different kinds of things we may have to grieve. It may help to revisit those pages.)
- 2 Have you ever participated in an especially meaningful grieving ritual? It may have been in a traditional setting, like a funeral for a loved one. Or it may have been unexpected and creative, like burning artifacts in a fire to say goodbye to a relationship that ended. What was the ritual, and what made it so meaningful?
- 3 Is there a loss in your life or in the life of a loved one that hasn’t been grieved? What could you do to enact that mourning?

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4

The Real is Given, Never Taken

*Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.*

- 1 Have you ever found yourself in a situation like the one that Angela experiences in the beginning of chapter 4, where circumstances or the system prevented you from exercising your strength? Or have you ever seen someone else go through that? What was it like?
- 2 How do you feel about the promise of Psalm 37? (pg 79) Do you see progress toward a world where “the meek will inherit the land”? Or does it feel like that promise is far off or unbelievable?
- 3 If we all sometimes operate with a “grasping” posture, and sometimes operate with an open-handed posture of receiving, what’s the difference between those two in your life? How do you recognize the grasping when you’re doing it, and how do you choose an open-handed posture instead?

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5

The Hunger is the Feast

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.*

- 1 “Jesus has a blessing for people who hear the screaming inside, who know in their bodies and brains and feelings and souls that there’s a gap between what is and what should be.” (pg 97)
Whether it’s for your own life, the life of someone you love, or the world at large, when have you heard the screaming inside telling you that things should not be this way?
- 2 What habits or practices do you turn to in order to ignore your hunger and thirst for righteousness or justice?
- 3 What habits or practices help you honor the ache?

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6

The Turn

- 1 *"I hope you feel truly seen by these blessings."* (pg 109) Do you? Take some time to reflect on the first four Beatitudes and the effect they've had on you as you explore their connections to your life.
- 2 *"Reactions reenact whatever they're responding to."* (pg 111) Where have you seen this pattern play out, either in your own life or in the world around you?
- 3 *"Our strategies for holding things together are often the very things keeping us from being put back together."* (pg 121) Have you ever seen this firsthand? What was the strategy for holding things together, and how did it keep you from being put back together?

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7

We're Never More Sure of Our Righteousness Than When We Know That We've Been Wronged

*Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.*

- 1 “I remember [Robi] getting to this moment in [her story of the murder of her son] and wondering what it would be like to lose someone you love as much as a mother loves her son, and to lose them in such a horrific way. I remember trying to imagine what my response would be.” (pg 133) What do you think your response would be?
- 2 When have you “had to deal with the instinct that tells us we might need to hit back to make ourselves whole”? (pg 136)
- 3 Is there any person or situation in particular where you're having a hard time showing mercy? Does the reminder that you, too, are in need of mercy help you move toward showing mercy?

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8

Cynicism is a Liar

*Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.*

- 1 How did you feel when you read about Stephen Pinker's book about the decline of violence? Does it feel like we're living in an especially dangerous time?
- 2 "The shadows we carry end up being the shadows we see, even when they're not really there." (pg 159) Are there any past experiences or environments that were broken or that wounded you that negatively affect the way you see people or places today? What's the impact of that projection, both on others and on you?
- 3 Where have you seen God or goodness in an unexpected person or place? What's the effect of that surprise?

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9

Belonging Is the Problem Until You Know You Belong to God

*Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.*

- 1 This chapter talks a lot about group identity and group boundaries. What are the group identities you carry with you? (They may be obvious, or they may be subtle.) How are those identities a source of strength, and how do they make it harder for you to love people who aren't a part of those groups?
- 2 *"Peacekeeping usually looks like the careful avoidance of any disruption to the current arrangement... However if avoiding disruption isn't the same thing as peacemaking, then choosing to disrupt isn't always peacemaking, either."* (pg 176-178) Are you more likely to avoid disruptions when peace calls for disruption, or to flip tables for immature reasons?
- 3 What group of people is the hardest for you to love?

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10

Evil is a Limited Resource

*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

- 1 Does it feel to you that evil is a limited resource? Or does it seem unlimited? Whichever way you feel, why?
- 2 Do you see Jesus as someone who had integrity with his own teachings? (Forget about people who claim to be his followers for a minute. Consider him on his own terms.)
- 3 *“Jesus began these blessings by speaking to us in what feels like our deepest powerlessness. He blessed us in our sadness. In our suffering... But by the end, just a few blessings later, he’s speaking to us with the assumption that we’re going to need a blessing for the days when evil decides that we are the people who must be taken out. The sad sufferers have become the truly powerful ones.”* (pg 207) Have you seen this trajectory in your life or in the lives of others? What have you noticed?

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11

A Final Word

A blessing is more than an idea. It's an act. It's a word spoken over others. For the final chapter, take a turn at writing your own blessings for when the world breaks. They can be a paraphrase of the eight Beatitudes, like the one written at the end of the book, or they can leave behind that specific framework and speak more generally to experiences of suffering and hope.

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