



HOLY UNHAPPINESS

DISCUSSION GUIDE



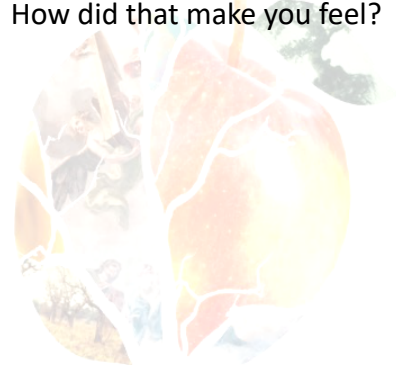
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INTRODUCTION

- What is your reaction to the concept of the emotional prosperity gospel? Does it accurately describe some of the values and messaging you have received from faith communities?
- Can you relate to Amanda's experience of restlessness and disappointment? Despite the blessings you experience or the prosperity you may have "on paper," is life sometimes more emotionally difficult than you anticipated it to be?
- What is your current working definition of "the good life?" Is happiness something you believe to be in your control?

CHAPTER ONE – WORK (GET A GOOD JOB)

- In what ways do we see God blessing work and labor in the creation narrative? How does knowing that God created man and woman to co-labor with him in the garden influence your thinking about the nature of work?
- How do you think vocational and socioeconomic immobility impacted the way previous generations thought about their work and the purpose of labor?
- Have you ever had a "dream job?" In what ways did that job meet your expectations and in what ways did it disappoint you?
- What does it mean for the ground of our labor to be cursed? Can you think of a time when you sowed seeds but reaped thorns and thistles? How did that make you feel?



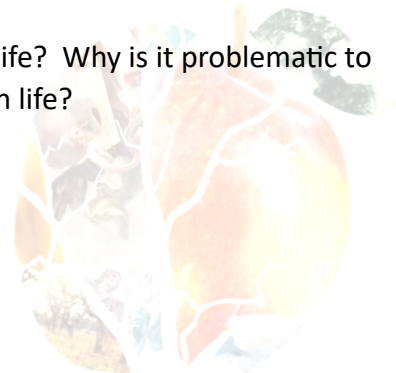
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CHAPTER TWO – MARRIAGE (MARRY THE LOVE OF YOUR LIFE)

- Growing up, what were you taught was the purpose of marriage? What expectations did you have of a romantic partner?
- How have you seen the Church elevate the institution of marriage? In communities of faith, is singleness celebrated or do single people often find themselves relegated to the margins?
- Why do you think so many communal institutions are in decline? What are some ways we can re-establish more robust relational networks?
- How does the idolization of romantic love harm married people? How does it harm single people?

CHAPTER 3 – PARENTHOOD (HAVE LOTS OF KIDS)

- In what ways does the Church communicate to women that motherhood is their “highest calling?” Where do you believe this idea originated? How have you experienced this in communities of faith?
- How did you respond to the concept of “arrival fallacy?” Is this experience something you can relate to?
- Why do you think we are so eager to categorize our experiences as either good or bad? Can you think of a blessing in your life that, even though you cherish it, has come with a cost?
- What are the pitfalls of ranking “callings” or stations in life? Why is it problematic to elevate the status of parenthood above other stations in life?



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A BLESSING – DELIGHT

- Read Ecclesiastes 3:9-13. Does this feel like a hopeful response after observing “the burden God has placed on the human race?” What do you think it means to truly find satisfaction in your toil?
- How is delight a building block of true blessing? In what ways might Christians bless the world if they were to embrace embodied delight?

CHAPTER FOUR – CALLING (DISCOVER GOD’S WILL FOR YOUR LIFE)

- What is your understanding of the concept of calling? Can you relate to Amanda’s story from her pre-teen years at summer camp? Did you ever feel pressured to “find God’s will” for your life?
- How does an increase in choice and agency create anxiety? How does it impact our sense of entitlement? How does it impact our expectations?
- Amanda writes about the value of self-discovery that is present in the self-help and wellness movement. How do you think this ideology has impacted the way Christians think about the concept of ministry and calling?
- Is it wrong for Christians to long for adventure, impact, and importance? Why or why not? In what ways can an “ordinary” life lived for God be beautiful and freeing?



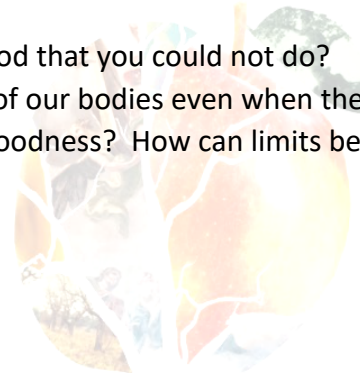
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CHAPTER FIVE – COMMUNITY (SHARE LIFE TOGETHER)

- How did you experience community growing up? Were you surrounded by people who were religiously, racially, politically, and socioeconomically similar to you, or were you raised in a more diverse community?
- How have you previously understood the story of the Good Samaritan? What is the point you believe Jesus is trying to make with this parable?
- Is there value in the Christian subculture? How do faith-based publishers, record labels, media companies, and online influences serve us? How might they be a detriment to the Church?
- What was your reaction to the concept of “bridging” and “bonding” organizations? What are some ways the Church might build more bridges into diverse communities? How might you connect and form deeper relationships with people who are different than you?

CHAPTER SIX – BODY (SERVE WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH)

- Can you relate to Amanda’s feeling of limitlessness in her youth? Was there ever a time when you were confronted with your own fragility?
- How has culture and the Church shaped your internal sense of what a “good” body is? Have you ever experienced or observed the Church imposing unfair standards in regard to beauty, health, or physical abilities?
- Has there ever been something you wanted to do for God that you could not do?
- What does it mean to honor the image bearing nature of our bodies even when they don’t meet our expectations or society’s standards of goodness? How can limits be a gift?



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A BLESSING – HUMILITY

- Read Philippians 2:3-8. How is valuing others above ourselves, as Paul commands, particularly countercultural in this day and age? What is the freedom that can be found in the emptying of the self?
- Why do you think Amanda refers to humility as the “great gift” of the faith? How does humility make other virtues possible? How can it lead to deeper happiness?

CHAPTER SEVEN – SANCTUARY (GO TO CHURCH)

- What are your thoughts on why so many people are leaving traditional religious institutions today? What do you think Amanda means when she says it is a season of reckoning for the Church in America?
- Have you ever noticed how many stories of failure there are in the Bible? Is this alarming to you or is it comforting?
- Why do you think so many churches avoid accountability? Why is abuse or misconduct tolerated?
- What are the consequences of God choosing to use imperfect people to build his church? How do you see yourself contributing to both the faithfulness and failure of the Church?



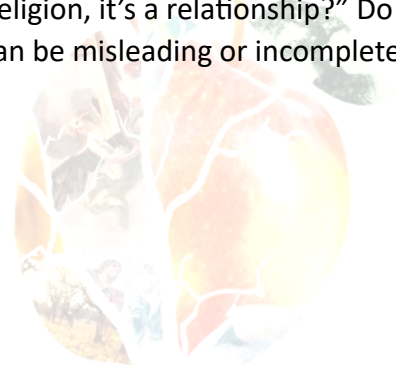
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CHAPTER EIGHT – SUFFERING (FIND PEACE AND PURPOSE IN PAIN)

- Could you relate to Amanda's story from the coastal village in India? Have you ever tried to impose a redemptive purpose on someone else's story of suffering?
- What expectations do you have of the experience of suffering? Namely, how do you expect God's presence to *feel* in the midst of your pain?
- How were you impacted by the idea that peace is not simply about feeling good but rather about being whole? How does this refined definition change how we approach suffering?
- How does knowing that God is a suffering God as well as a sovereign God impact your own experience of suffering?

CHAPTER NINE – SANCTIFICATION (GROW CLOSE TO GOD)

- Did you grow up hearing the phrase, "There's a God shaped hole in everyone's heart?" What did this phrase lead you to believe life would be like for believers? What about unbelievers?
- Can you relate to the life of Thomas? How is the famous story of his doubt impacted by the lesser known stories of his faith?
- How did you envision your own journey of sanctification? Has it been as steady and continuous as you thought it would be?
- What do you think of the phrase, "Christianity is not a religion, it's a relationship?" Do you agree with Amanda's assessment that the phrase can be misleading or incomplete?



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A BLESSING – HOPE

- Read Romans 8:22-25. Here Paul speaks of a hope that is unseen. Does waiting for this unseen hope sometimes include groaning inwardly? How can we faithfully wait for this hope in a way that is honest about both sorrow and joy?
- What do you believe is the biggest difference between optimism and hope? How might we do as Amanda suggests, and allow hope to both enliven our thoughts *and* set our bodies in motion?

AFTERWORD

- How would you answer the question Amanda poses at the beginning of the Afterword? Does God want us to be happy?
- Have you ever found yourself viewing your relationship with God as a contractual agreement rather than a covenant of love? Have you ever leveraged your relationship with God or your good behavior as a means to an end?
- Do you agree with Amanda's statement that the relentless pursuit of happiness is a "tyrant" or taskmaster? How might greater peace and deeper blessing be found if we were willing to allow ourselves to experience difficult emotions? Is there holiness in our unhappiness?

