

**Three Simple Rules: A Wesley Way of Living, by Reuben P. Job**

Back to basics. In this short, but powerful, book the late Bishop Job lays out John Wesley's three General Rules of Methodist societies: To do no harm, to do all the good you can, and to stay in love with God.

This is a very short book--less than 100 pages--but it is packed with wisdom. This would be a fantastic tool for small groups to read together for three weeks (one for each rule) and find ways to be intentional about each of the rules in their day to day lives. I would even suggest that, after your group reads this book you could use the rules to check in every week.

**Lies My Preacher Told Me: An Honest Look at the Old Testament, by Brent A. Strawn**

Have you ever felt that the Old Testament was inaccessible, unrecognizable, or irrelevant? In this book, Duke Divinity Old Testament professor Brent Strawn examines common misconceptions or objections many Christians have about the Old Testament. Thinks like, "Isn't it too violent?," "Why is this God so mean?," "Didn't Jesus overrule all of this?," and others.

This book covers ten "mistruths" about the Old Testament, each one covering about ten pages. It would be easy to use as a ten week study, but could just as easily be condensed into 5 weeks. Each chapter includes questions for personal reflection and group discussion.

**The Art of Neighboring: Building Genuine Relationships Right Outside Your Door, by Jay Pathak and Dave Runyon**

The two greatest commandments, according to Jesus, are to love God with everything we've got and to love our neighbors as ourselves. The trouble we have is how to understand these commandments as more than abstractions--how do we actually and actively love God and our neighbors? This book is based on a simple premise: what if Jesus meant for us to love our actually neighbors--the people just outside our door? How might the world change if we all made a concerted effort to take the Great Commandment literally?

This book has twelve chapters and a study guide.

**Jesus Wants to Save Christians: A Manifesto for the Church in Exile, by Rob Bell**

"If our church was taken away--from our city, our neighborhood, our region--who would protest?" This is the central question of this book. What is the best expression of the church in our privileged context?

With six chapters and an epilogue, this is a great book for a seven-week study. It does not come with a discussion guide, but if your group doesn't want to be totally self-directed, we can make one for you.

**Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again, by Rachel Held Evans**  
What do we do when an obstacle to our faith is the Bible itself? How do we navigate our beliefs when the scriptures that are so dear to us are also often so unsettling? Just what do we mean when we say that the Bible is “inspired” anyway? Rachel Held Evans walks us through her own personal journey from faith, through disillusionment and doubt, and into an even deeper faith where the scriptures exist as a living witness to the living God.

This book has eight chapters and would be great for an eight-week study.

### **A Crazy, Holy Grace by Frederick Buechner**

In this book American theologian Buechner examines the ideas of pain and memory and the ready availability of God’s grace in those moments. He talks about some of his own experiences of pain, loss, and wondering why God seems so silent in those moments. This would be a good study for any group as, unfortunately, we all experience pain and loss throughout our lives.

This book has 6 chapters that are really separate essays, so they would be good to use for a six-week discussion series. There is a leader guide and DVD (each video seems to be about 15 minutes) if you’d care to use it. The guide compresses the book into 4 sessions, so you would do it in 4 weeks rather than 6.

### **Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I’ve Loved by Kate Bowler**

I cannot recommend this book enough. It is beautiful, poignant, and utterly devastating. Kate Bowler is a professor at Duke Divinity school who, at the age of 35 and with a 2 year old son, was diagnosed with a terminal cancer. In this book she is brutally honest about her struggles finding God while coming to terms with her own death.

There are 9 chapters that span the first year of her diagnosis and treatment, and there are two wonderful appendices entitled, “Absolutely Never Say This To People Experiencing Terrible Times: A Short List” and “Give This a Go and See How It Works”.

### **Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life by Rev. Tish Harrison Warren**

This is one of my favorite books that I’ve read recently! Warren, an Anglican priest, argues that Christian formation happens most in the small, dull, and mundane moments of our daily lives. The book walks through a single day and connects things like waking up, brushing your teeth, eating leftovers, and sipping tea to weighty theological topics like baptism, communion, ritual, confession, sacred space, community, and more.

There are 11 chapters, each around 10-15 pages and appendix with discussion questions and practices from each chapter to try. This would be great for either a full 11-week study using one chapter per week, or to condense into a 6 week study doing two chapters per week.

### **Prayer in the Night: For Those Who Work, or Watch, or Weep, by Rev. Tish Harrison Warren**

Warren examines a particular period of personal loss and struggle through the lens of a prayer from Compline, or evening prayer. In doing so she helps us see how a regular practice of prayer can help make sense of a world brimming with uncertainty and pain--not with easy answers or trivial niceties, but by honest connection with a God who sees.

### **With by Sky Jethani**

With looks at four ways people relate to God (under God, over God, from God, and for God) and argues that a better way of understanding the divine-human relationship is “living in communion with God.” There are nine chapters and an appendix with a group discussion guide. This is a good study for groups of all types grappling with what it means to be in relationship with the God of the universe.

### **The God Who Sees: Immigration, The Bible, and The Journey to Belong by Karen Gonzalez**

Immigration is most often talked about as a political policy issue. Karen Gonzalez uses her own experience as an immigrant from Guatemala to remind us that the experiences of people fleeing fear and violence are deeply tied to the Scriptures and are ultimately a personal and spiritual issue. This book is not only timely, but is uniquely interesting for a congregation like Northbrook that has a deep connection to the people of Guatemala.

This book is 11 chapters long and includes a discussion guide as well as an appendix full of ideas for taking action.

### **The Story of God, The Story of Us by Sean Gladding**

Stories are one of the most powerful forms of communication we have, this is one of the main reasons that Jesus spoke in parables. Stories are the central way that we get to know one another. In this book & DVD, Sean Gladding looks at the overall narrative (metanarrative) of the Scriptures and how that story connects to our own stories. The book has 12 chapters, and there is a video with 6 sessions, & a discussion guide. This would be ideal for a 6 week series.

### **Celebration of Discipline by Richard Foster**

This one is as close to “required reading” as I have the power to make it. We tend to recoil at the idea of discipline—it strikes us with negative visions of punishment and self-denial. Quaker theologian Richard Foster challenges that. Spiritual disciplines stand contrary to a highly consumerist culture intent on instant gratification. The spiritual disciplines are a pattern of life that lead to a holistic, mature, and healthy spirituality.

These are 12 disciplines looked at in this book. I would suggest doing two a week (meditation & prayer, fasting & study, simplicity & solitude, submission & service, confession & worship, guidance & celebration) to make a 6-week study. There are study guides available for this.

### **A World Worth Saving: Lenten Spiritual Practices for Action by George Donigan**

A great study to take up, particularly after you have done Celebration of Discipline. This Lenten study connects our worship with our lived expression of God’s love for our neighbors.

This is a 6-week study for Lent and has a leader guide.

### **Simon Peter: Flawed but Faithful Disciple by Adam Hamilton**

Peter was an unlikely tool for the establishment of a spiritual movement. He was not a part of the spiritual, social, or economic elite and had no influence. What made him ideal wasn't his qualifications, but rather his willingness to listen, his eagerness to learn, and his passion.

This is a 6-week study with a leader guide and a DVD.

### **Falling Upward: A Spirituality for Two Halves of Life by Richard Rohr**

In the first half of life so much energy is spent trying to figure out just who we are, but this won't entirely serve us in our further journey. We have to go beyond establishing an identity to discerning just what it is that we are doing with this life anyways. To go up, you have to go down. This paradox is an important piece of spiritual wisdom, and the heart of Rohr's book. Our failings are most often the best foundation for ongoing spiritual growth.

This book has 12 chapters, so would work well with one chapter per week.

### **Searching for Sunday by Rachel Held Evans**

A lot of attention has been paid to Rachel Evans since her untimely passing earlier this year. If you have never heard of her or read her before, this is a great place to start. With more than a healthy dose of self-aware humor, and honesty, Evans struggles to find her place in the institutional church.

Evans breaks down her book into seven chapters, looking at the two sacraments (communion and baptism) and five other major means of grace (confession, ordination, confirmation, anointing the sick, and marriage) of the Episcopal church that she joined in the years preceding her death. There is a discussion guide available.

### **A Way Other Than Our Own by Walter Brueggemann**

Another Walter Brueggemann title, this time for Lent. God challenges us to choose paths that we would not choose on our own--paths that require sacrifice and risk. In this devotional, Brueggemann challenges readers to walk an alternative path of humility, justice, and peace.

Rather than a weekly study, this is a daily devotional for the 40 days of Lent. Each devotion is only a page, though, so it would be a good tool to use for class discussion of the week's readings.

### **Names for the Messiah by Walter Brueggemann**

This is a good Advent study by one of the best Old Testament theologians of the past century. Brueggemann looks at the names given to the messiah in Isaiah 9:6--Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace--how those names put certain expectations of the Messiah in the minds of first-century Israel, and how Jesus met them in very unexpected ways.

This is a 4-week Advent study.

### **Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi by Amy-Jill Levine**

Levine, a professor of New Testament and Jewish studies at Vanderbilt, has a particular and much-needed perspective. As a Jewish woman, Levine brings both a lifelong experience of Jewish tradition and a deep respect for the Gospels to her reading of a number of Jesus' parables. Her unique perspective helps to illuminate things that modern Christian readers might miss that Jesus' contemporary Jewish audience would have found obvious. This book looks at 9 different parables and has a leader guide to help with discussion. It would be good for a 10 or 11 week study.

### **An Altar in the Word by Barbara Brown Taylor**

Taylor reveals meaningful ways to discover the sacred in the small things we do and see, from simple practices such as walking, working, and prayer. Something as ordinary as hanging clothes on a clothesline becomes an act of meditation if we pay attention to what we're doing and take time to notice the sights, smells, and sounds around us. Making eye contact with the cashier at the grocery store becomes a moment of true human connection. Allowing yourself to get lost leads to new discoveries. As we incorporate these practices into our daily lives, we begin to discover altars everywhere we go, in nearly everything we do. Through Taylor's expert guidance and delicate, thought-provoking prose, we learn to live with purpose, pay attention, slow down, and revere the world we live in.

### **Grateful by Diana Butler Bass**

We know that gratitude is good, but many of us find it hard to sustain a meaningful life of gratefulness. Four out of five Americans report feeling gratitude on a regular basis, but those private feelings seem disconnected from larger concerns of our public lives. In *Grateful*, cultural observer and theologian Diana Butler Bass takes on this "gratitude gap" and offers up surprising, relevant, and powerful insights to practice gratitude.

### **Sacred Rhythms by Ruth Haley Barton**

Spiritual disciplines are activities that open us to God's transforming love and the changes that only God can bring about in our lives. Picking up on the monastic tradition of creating a "rule of life" that allows for regular space for the practice of the spiritual disciplines, this book takes you more deeply into understanding seven key disciplines along with practical ideas for weaving them into everyday life.

Each chapter includes exercises to help you begin the practices--individually and in a group context. The final chapter puts it all together in a way that will help you arrange your life for spiritual transformation.

### **The Road Back to You by Ian Cron and Suzanne Stabile**

The Enneagram is an ancient personality type system with an uncanny accuracy in describing how human beings are wired, both positively and negatively. In *The Road Back to You*, Ian Morgan Cron and Suzanne Stabile forge a unique approach - a practical, comprehensive way of accessing Enneagram wisdom and exploring its connections with Christian spirituality for a deeper knowledge of God and of ourselves.

This book contains two introductory chapters, one chapter on each of the nine types, and an epilogue. For any class interested, I would recommend having everyone take an enneagram test to help discern their type and using this book to engage in conversation and forge deeper connections with class members.

### **The Class Meeting by Kevin Watson**

Dr. Kevin Watson has written a fresh new guide to the theory and practice of the Wesley class meeting, an essential element of truly Wesleyan spirituality. Watson has resurrected the class meeting and given it new meaning, showing its relevance for the church today and how it may be a perfect means for church renewal.

### **Blood Done Sign My Name by Timothy B Tyson**

Tyson's memoir tells the story of a murder of a black man and subsequent acquittal by a white man in the North Carolina town in which he grew up, how he perceived the event and its aftermath as a child, and his search for understanding as an adult.

### **Learning to Walk in the Dark by Barbara Brown Taylor**

In *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, Taylor asks us to put aside our fears and anxieties and to explore all that God has to teach us “in the dark.” Through darkness we find courage, we understand the world in new ways, and we feel God’s presence around us, guiding us through things seen and unseen. Often, it is while we are in the dark that we grow the most.

### **Soul Feast by Marjorie Thompson**

A book for seekers who wish to explore the riches of Christian spirituality. Marjorie Thompson offers a framework for understanding and nurturing classic spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, spiritual reading, self-examination, worship, and hospitality.

### **N.T. Wright for Everyone**

Anglican bishop and theologian N.T. Wright has a very good series of individual and group studies on books of the New Testament. For any groups wanting to engage in more straightforward Biblical study, I would recommend this series as a companion to your Bible.

