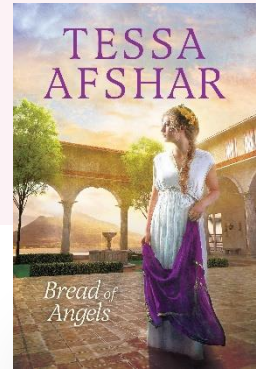




LEADER'S GUIDE

BREAD OF ANGELS BY TESSA AFSHAR



"There is nothing in the world so damaged that it cannot be repaired by the hand of Almighty God, Paul had said. And this Jesus was the key to that repair, the door-way to such restoration."

LYDIA

THEMES

Betrayal Fear Friendship Forgiveness Grief Hope Womanhood and Equality

HEADS UP! (TRIGGERS AND DELICATE TOPICS)

Death Abuse Violence Slavery

CHARACTERS

Lydia is a merchant's daughter who works alongside her beloved father producing purple dye. Adoring her Thyatiran heritage and making dye, she is crippled with fear and trauma from her mother's grizzly death – a memory she has long forgotten but is haunted by in her dreams. When everything she holds dear is ripped away from her, Lydia escapes to Philippi, hoping to start a better life. Suffering from debilitating trust issues, Lydia slowly begins to experience freedom from her pain as she encounters Paul, who introduces her to her saviour Jesus.

Eumenes is Lydia's father. He is a loving and kind man who has the utmost confidence in Lydia and her ability to produce the best purple dye available. Although Eumenes hidden purple dye formula produces the best purple money can buy, his business money handling skills are poor. His lack of interest in finances proves to be the unfortunate instigator of his business and future downfall.

Jason is a Roman citizen, a heartless manipulator, and a sneak. Worming his way into Lydia's affections, he works endlessly alongside his vicious mother to steal Eumenes secret purple formula. Ultimately becoming the causes of Eumenes downfall and Lydia's daring escape to Philippi.

Rebekah is a faith-filled Jewish woman who her family has harshly disowned. When all seems lost, she finds Lydia meeting her desperate need for shelter and food. Becoming fast friends, the two travel together to Philippi, where Rebekah proves herself a devoted and caring friend, a courageous woman of faith, and a steady ever-reliable presence in Lydia's journey.

STORYLINE

The story begins with Lydia as a young girl, working away in her father's shop making purple dye. Crippled with a fear of failure and haunted by trauma from her past, Lydia battles with a love-hate relationship with purple as she desires to help her father but seems to crumble under pressure. When her father Eumenes comes home injured, being assisted by Roman citizen Jason – Lydia's affections are stirred as he cunningly manipulates her to fall in love with him.

As it is revealed that her father's business is struggling financially, Lydia convinces her father to make a deal with Dione, Jason's mother, to help finance the business; not knowing they are secretly plotting to steal Eumenes formula and leave them with nothing. As the situation escalates, Lydia is forced to flee in distress and betrayal after her father's untimely death, with her only friend and companion Rebekah, a poor Jewish girl with who she just happened to cross paths.

When Lydia arrives in Philippi, she begins to run her purple dye business. She engages in a constant battle against societal norms as an unmarried female business owner – something unheard of and countercultural at the time. As Lydia meets Paul, the faithful apostle who introduces her to her saviour Jesus, Lydia joyfully accepts as Him the Lord of her life. As the Lord miraculously makes a way for Lydia to thrive abundantly in material wealth, He also helps to restore her weary soul and broken trust. As Jason follows Lydia to Philippi with the intent of destroying her reputation – all is miraculously worked out for Lydia's good, and the good of those around her.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & TALKING POINTS

1

Q. Lydia and Rebekah's friendship was an unexpected yet glorious gift from the Lord. We see them blossoming and thriving throughout the novel as their friendship supports and builds one another up. Which character did you relate to the most? Why?

TALKING POINTS

Some of the reasons we may feel connected to a particular character;

- Empathy/Sympathy.
- Pity.
- Similar character traits.
- Similar circumstances.
- Similar desires, hopes or dreams.
- Similar mistakes made in our own lives.
- We may like or dislike a particular character.

2

Q. "When my father died, I had no one left. Then you came to me, like an anchor, a sister of my own, a gift I did not deserve..." (p200). Here we see Lydia expressing her deep gratitude to Rebekah for her friendship, as well as acknowledging the Lord's part in bringing them together. Has the Lord gifted you with a friend in a time of need? Was the friendship for a short season or life?

TALKING POINTS

Friendship is a gift to be treasured; sometimes friendships last a lifetime, and sometimes friendships may be fleeting – yet profound and deep. The Lord sets the lonely in families (Psalm 68:6). With prayer and a willingness to be vulnerable, we can expect the Lord to provide for us in times of need.

Jen Wilkin (in the "Closer than a Sister" book preface) explains that friendship should be sought and stewarded with wisdom and grace;

- Sought; The seeking of life-giving, sister-friendships is a very intentional activity.
- Stewarded; As good stewards of our gifts, we lavishly pour into our sister-friend's lives, seeking to be more others-focused and entering relationships wanting to bless others. Ultimately thinking more about our sister and less about what we can get out of the friendship.
- Wisdom; God generously pours wisdom into our lives when we ask for it. We need His wisdom to enter into the right relationships, and to maintain those relationships as we grow and learn together.
- Grace; As imperfect women, we require grace to cover one another's faults, to forgive one another, and to flourish together.

3

Q. Fear is a theme throughout the novel. As an adult, Lydia is still traumatised by her mother's death, and as she grows up, fear takes hold of her heart; "Now fear has made a home in you. You worry about everything" (p111). How does Lydia begin to break the cycle of fear in her life?

TALKING POINTS

The fear Lydia experiences is referred to as the "monster in her heart". Fear has become a part of her existence and debilitates her sense of hope and trust.

- "All my life I have contended with a makhaira-wielding enemy of my own. Fear. I cannot see the Lord as clearly as you do. I cannot draw near to him because of it." (p200)
- Lydia deeply desires to live a life free from fear but doesn't believe it is possible.
- It isn't until she hears the gospel of Jesus that her heart is transformed, and she slowly begins to trust those around her, and most importantly, trust her Heavenly Father believing His promises of freedom and hope are also for her.

How can we overcome fear in our own lives? Sheila Walsh gives us some helpful steps in her book; "It's Okay Not to be Okay";

F - FALL on your face before Him

E - EARNESTLY seek Him

A - ASK for peace

R - REST in His presence

4

Q. The phrase "actions speak louder than words" rings true for us all. How does Rebekah's strong faith influence Lydia's readiness to hear and receive the gospel message of Jesus?

TALKING POINTS

On page 200, we see Lydia's powerful declaration, "Your God is my God". The Lord draws people towards himself, and His Holy Spirit softens our hearts to receive the good news. The Lord also uses others around us to represent Him and tangibly show us the grace He is ready to pour out on us once we accept Him as our Lord and Saviour. In this case, Rebekah and her faith, hope, and genuine love and affection for Lydia practically show God's grace to Lydia, making it real and tangible. When she hears the radical gospel message from Paul, she is willing to accept the love of Christ, because it has been lived out visibly before her eyes.

5

Q. Rebekah is a woman who had endured extreme hardship and sufferings - yet maintained her joy, peace, and hope in the Lord. Can you think of a time of suffering in your own life when these emotions have prospered despite your circumstances?

TALKING POINTS

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus ~ 1 Thesolonians 5:16-18

Joy, peace and hope are chosen heart postures, which those safe and secure in Jesus Christ can experience during any season of life. "If every good thing he has given were to vanish, we would still be safe in Christ - and our basis for gracious gratitude would have no reason to be changed at all." ~ Mary K Mohler. Mary says those secure in Christ can practise gracious gratitude no matter our circumstances through the knowledge that our hope rests in Jesus alone;

- Ultimately, we can have our hearts focused and thankful on God and His goodness.
- We can express gratitude towards the Lord for His holiness, justice, and faithfulness. We can marvel at God's creation and how it reveals His character and sovereignty.
- We can praise and find delight in the Lord when we are enduring trials, hardship, and suffering.

6

Q. "Lesser men would have left bitter, filled with hatred. Marcus, she sensed, was a man at peace, unmolested by the storms of rage" (p279 + 309). When we maintain our peace, joy and hope during hardships and sufferings, how does this protect our hearts from bitterness, unforgiveness, and anger? And overall, maintain our faith?

TALKING POINTS

Our hearts are like delicate gardens which require tending to. As Christians, we should allow the gentle Holy Spirit to tend to and correct our hearts, reveal sin, and assist us to begin the weeding process – ultimately nurturing gardens with good fruit in bloom for all to see. When we quench the Spirit, or nurture the weeds in our heart (such as anger or bitterness), the roots of these weeds grow deep and we produce rotten fruit. The weeds begin to spread, suffocating whatever good fruit is left and we no longer live fruitful lives. How can we weed our hearts well?

- We can remember that the Lord has forgiven us a great deal and that we ought to forgive others.
- We can extend grace and love to others who have sinned against us.
- We can remove ourselves from toxic situations where sin is allowed to thrive (such as gossiping friendship groups).
- We can respond in thanks to our friend who has lovingly shown us our sin and prayerfully work alongside the Spirit and this friend to overcome the sin.
- We can acknowledge the sin and pray for the will and desire to rid ourselves of it, instead of nurturing it.
- We can be brave and accept help from an accountability partner where necessary.

- We can be kind to ourselves; deep hurts, betrayal, abuse, and trauma all take time to heal from and often is a process of continual forgiveness. Even when we are struggling to forgive, let go of anger, revenge, or hate, we can actively make the daily decision to work with the Spirit to take baby steps towards the restoration of our own souls.
- We can remind ourselves God is a Holy God who will seek justice for us – we need not seek it out ourselves.
- We can seek professional support when needed.

7

Q. "Sometimes, in the wilderness of life, that is your greatest act of faith. Trusting that God will provide for each day..." (p169). As Rebekah shares the exodus story, Lydia begins to understand how the Lord desires to provide for her and meet every need she has. Rebekah calls this the "bread of angels for my heart..." Can you share a time when the Lord has met a great need of your heart?

TALKING POINTS

Our hearts are a tender place, and we are called to guard them carefully, for everything we do flows from them; yet the Lord can be safely trusted with them, and we needn't guard them from Him.

Some great needs of our hearts may include;

- Forgiveness
- Restoration
- Confidence in our salvation
- Hope
- Healing (emotionally, physically, mentally)

8

Q. We can all be guilty of keeping secrets, sometimes for selfish reasons, yet sometimes to protect others. How can authentic Christian friendships help us to share our secrets in a biblical way?

TALKING POINTS

On page 363 Lydia's secrets are finally revealed. Although the experience was terrifying initially, she soon experiences the freedom which comes from a heart made light and no longer hiding dark secrets.

We all have secrets. Sometimes they may be secret sin (such as addiction, jealousy or unforgiveness), secret hurts, trauma or shame or simply anything we're not ready for the world to know. In a world which embraces harmful oversharing, gossip and ranting, how can we safely share secrets in order to lighten our burdens, share the heavy load, and experience God's grace?;

- Seek an accountability partner; someone who is Christian, you trust and desires to help you.
- Seek a mentor; someone who desires to grow alongside you and pour wisdom into your life.
- Seek trustworthy, life-giving friendships; confide in one or two friends who intentionally point you towards Christ and love you unconditionally.
- Seek support from your book club leader and/or sisters.
- Seek support from your Pastor or church leadership.
- Seek a professional counsellor.

You may only need to choose one of these avenues to get the help you need. It's important to remember we must first take everything to God and prayerfully consider who might be the best person to help us.

9

Q. On page 268, Lydia's purple dye, which was thought ruined, is miraculously restored. It's a beautiful illustration of the tender care our Heavenly Father has for us and His deep desire to take care of the seemingly "little" things in our lives. What has the Lord miraculously restored in your own life?

TALKING POINTS

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 ~ Matthew 6:26. The Lord cares about every detail of our lives, even the things we may feel are silly or "not big enough to concern God with". Some miracles we may have experienced could include;

- Healing from a minor health concern after prayer.
- Provision of an unexpected gift.
- A financial blessing during difficult times.

10

Q. "Are you aware what a treasure you are? I suspect you do not know your own worth, your importance to the kingdom of God" (p338). Here is a quote from Paul encouraging Lydia in her God anointed calling. He reminds her that she is blessed to be a blessing, and that the fruit from her faith has resulted in the first Philippi church where many will come seeking and find the 'Light of the World' as she shares Jesus. How might you be underestimating your own importance in the kingdom of God?

TALKING POINTS

Our lives matter, and our mission is not for tomorrow when we may feel more equipped, but for today, right now, exactly where we are and as we are;

- Our mission field may be our families, workplace, school, or community.
- Every day we breathe is a day ordained by God to see us bring the kingdom of heaven to earth – to show and tell others about Jesus. Our role in this is important because God does not make mistakes, and He has a special purpose and calling for your life which only you can carry out.
- We do not need to know every step; we simply need to follow Jesus obediently.
- Our efforts for the kingdom may go unnoticed by others, but God sees our everyday faithfulness and obedience.
- If we do not abide in Christ here and now, we will be tempted to continuously look to the future, missing out on the mission of God right now.
- As we put one foot in front of the other, we can fulfil the gospel mission one step at a time.
- "If we aren't faithful now, when will we ever be?" ~ Gretchen Saffles



ADDITIONAL NOTES FOR LEADERS

The author provides very thorough and well thought out questions at the end of each chapter for personal reflection. You may like to encourage your book club sisters to keep a journal while reading the text and answer these questions, and as the month progresses discuss these through your group's online platform (a facebook group/ messenger or whatsapp chat group etc) to keep connected and engaged throughout the month.

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