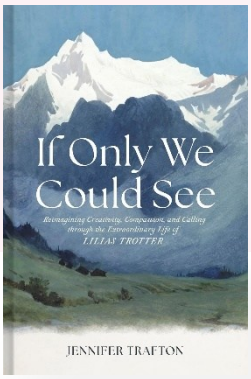
LEADER'S GUIDE

IF ONLY WE COULD SEE
BY JENNIFER TRAFTON



"After forty years in North Africa, she leaves behind no church, founds no schools or hospitals, leads no great movements. And yet at the time of her death in 1928, she is considered to be not only one of the beloved and respected missionaries of her day but 'a world-wide spiritual force'."

JENNIFER TRAFTON

THEMES

Creativity as Worship | Beauty | Grace-Filled Living | Compassion | Missions

BOOK SUMMARY

If Only We Could See introduces readers to Lilias Trotter, a gifted nineteenth-century British artist and missionary whose life took an unexpected turn when she chose Christian ministry over the artistic acclaim that seemed to be within her reach.

Trotter had been recognised by the famous art critic John Ruskin, who believed she had extraordinary artistic potential. Yet rather than pursuing the conventional path to artistic success, Lilias followed what she believed was God's calling into ministry among London's poor and eventually to North Africa.

Jennifer Trafton blends historical biography with theological reflection, exploring Lilias's creativity, compassion, faith, missionary work, and extraordinary ability to see beauty and possibility where others might not.

Rather than simply asking us to admire Lilias Trotter, Trafton invites us to consider what it might look like to see differently—to see God, creation, other people, our gifts, and even our own lives with greater wonder.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & TALKING POINTS

1

Q. Lilias had extraordinary artistic talent and the opportunity to pursue recognition. What does this book teach us about the difference between success and faithfulness?

TALKING POINTS

- We often assume that using our gifts successfully means pursuing the most prestigious opportunity available to us.
- Lilias's story challenges the idea that giving something up automatically means wasting it.
- Success is often measured by numbers, recognition, influence, money, or achievement.
- Faithfulness asks a different question: Am I obeying what God has asked me to do?
- A quiet life can be profoundly fruitful even when very few people see the results.

2

Q. How did the influence of John Ruskin and George MacDonald shape Lilias Trotter's understanding of her gifts, her faith, imagination, and the life she wanted to pursue?

TALKING POINTS

- John Ruskin recognised Lilias's extraordinary artistic talent and challenged her to take her art seriously. His influence raises the question of how the encouragement and expectations of influential people can shape the way we understand our own abilities.
- George MacDonald influenced Lilias spiritually and creatively, helping her see imagination, beauty, and art as things that could draw us toward God rather than simply bring personal achievement. His influence highlights the importance of mentors who shape not only what we do, but how we see the world.
- Both men influenced different parts of Lilias's journey, but ultimately Lilias had to discern her own calling before God. Their influence invites us to consider: Who are the people who have helped shape the way I understand my gifts, faith, and calling—and am I allowing their influence to point me toward God rather than toward dependence on their approval?

3

Q. Lilias had a remarkable ability to notice beauty. How might learning to "see" differently change our everyday lives?

TALKING POINTS

- Beauty can redirect our attention away from anxiety and toward gratitude.
- Creation can become an invitation to worship rather than simply something we consume or photograph.
- Slowing down enough to notice small things can cultivate wonder.

4

Q. Lilias's friendships played an important role in sustaining and shaping her life and ministry. What do we learn from the friendships she cultivated?

TALKING POINTS

- Lilias's story reminds us that a life of calling is rarely lived completely alone; faithful friendships can provide encouragement, companionship, accountability, and practical support.
- Her relationships also challenge us to consider whether our friendships are centred only on shared interests or whether they encourage us to become more faithful followers of Christ.

5

Q. Lilias was sharing the Gospel in a predominantly Muslim and African context. What does her story teach us about presenting the Gospel across cultural and religious boundaries?

TALKING POINTS

- Christianity began in the Middle East, so Lilias was not simply bringing a "Western religion" to an unfamiliar region. At the same time, the way Christianity had been expressed through European culture could easily be confused with the Gospel itself.
- Lilias's ministry raises important questions about cultural sensitivity: how can Christians communicate the unchanging truth of the Gospel while being careful not to assume that Western customs, traditions, or cultural expressions are part of Christianity?

6

Q. Lilias deliberately moved toward people and places that were easy for others to overlook. What can we learn from her compassion?

TALKING POINTS

- Compassion requires us to see people rather than categories.
- It is easy to care about "people" in theory while avoiding the inconvenience of actually knowing them.
- Ask yourself: Who might I be overlooking because I don't really see them?

7

Q. How did Lilias's understanding of God influence the way she viewed nature and creation?

TALKING POINTS

- Lilias saw creation as something that could point beyond itself toward its Creator.
- Beauty became theological for her—it told her something about God's character.
- We can cultivate a similar habit of asking what the ordinary things around us reveal about God.

8

Q. Lilias experienced illness, weakness, disappointment, and hardship. What does her story teach us about living faithfully when our circumstances are not what we hoped?

TALKING POINTS

- A limited life is not necessarily an insignificant life.
- Physical weakness does not make someone spiritually useless.
- Sometimes faithfulness looks different in different seasons: going, serving, creating, praying, resting, or simply enduring.

9

Q. Trafton invites readers to consider their own "beautiful possible life." What do you think that phrase means for you?

TALKING POINTS

- A beautiful life doesn't necessarily mean an impressive life.
- We may need to reconsider dreams that are driven by comparison, recognition, or other people's expectations.
- Ask: What would change if I genuinely believed God had possibilities for my life that I cannot yet see?

10

Q. After reading Lilias's story, what is one thing you want to see differently? What might we see if we learned to look at our lifves, gifts, other people, and God's creation through the eyes of faith?

TALKING POINTS

- Perhaps you want to see your work as a calling rather than merely a responsibility.
- Perhaps you want to notice beauty and God's presence more intentionally.
- Perhaps you need to see another person—with more compassion, patience, or curiosity.
- Lilias's life reminds us that God's calling may not look like the life we would have designed for ourselves—and that what appears to be a sacrifice may actually be the doorway into a far more beautiful life.

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