

## Discussion Questions and Practices

Here are some questions and practices that will help you discuss *Take Root* with a group or further reflect on your own. It is designed as a ten-week study. Each week, before reading the chapter(s), pray that God will work in your heart. I find it best *not* to read the discussion questions prior to reading so that you are not distracted, searching for the “right” answers. Most questions do not have a “right” answer, particularly application questions, but instead work to sow God’s truths deeper into your heart. For the suggested practices, just pick the one that appeals to you (it’s not a to-do list!). If you’re working through the book with a group, it may be fun to share what you tried and how it went.

### Week 1:

*Read* Introduction & Chapter 1| Grand Re-Opening of God’s Garden

*Questions:*

- 1) What is your take on the Beatitudes? Have you ever studied them before? If yes, what can you recall?
- 2) In a typical day, how do you see God working in the “ordinary” things of your life? What do you think the unrecorded “ordinary” years of Jesus’ life looked like?
- 3) Do you believe that your story is part of God’s grand story to redeem and restore the world? If so, how might this frame and impact your day?
- 4) How would you describe the message of Jesus’ ministry? Are you surprised by the author’s claim that if Christ had a banner it would have read “The Kingdom of God Has Come!”?
- 5) Just as Jesus’ words challenged the values of those in charge in the first century (the Romans and Jews), how do Jesus’ words in Matthew 5 still overturn what we are told is “good” and “important” today?
- 6) The author outlines the use of garden imagery in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation and explains how the image of a flourishing tree is a robust metaphor for a life rooted in God. Before reading, were you aware of the use of trees in the Bible? Does this visual appeal to you that you are a tree of God’s garden?

*Practices:*

- Each morning, first thing, try to think about your day ahead as part of God’s story. Remember how the miraculous God of Christmas and Easter is the same God at work in *your* life.

- If you had a banner spelling out the aim and purpose of your life, what would it say?
- Spend 10-15 minutes sitting under a tree with this book. Re-read the list of verses on page 7.

## **Week 2:**

*Read Chapter 2| Seeds of Faith*

*Questions:*

- 1) What to-do lists do you keep? What things do you rely on to measure “today was a good day”?
- 2) What are the “norms” (the standards or how things work) in your home? Or at school? Name ways things would be different if God was your principal or parent – would you be less hurried, less anxious, less ambitious?
- 3) What do you make of the author’s metaphor: “We come to God like those rigid, flat, dry animal sponges that you plunk in the tub and watch grow ten times their size.” How have you seen God grow you in the last year, the last month or even since you started this book?
- 4) Consider those who have “made it” by the world’s standards. The author says chasing success can lead to a life of endless striving. Do you believe this to be true in your own life and others?
- 5) Is it hard to believe, truly believe, that God requires nothing of us but faith? Examine your prayer life and share when/if you see God as “transactional” (if I do \_\_\_, God, you’ll do \_\_\_).
- 6) Have you ever grown anything from a seed? Do you remember what it felt like to see the first little green sprout? How do you think Jesus – the Great Gardener – delights in seeing you take root and grow?

*Practices:*

- Consider C.S. Lewis’ quote “Think of yourself just as a seed patiently waiting in the earth: waiting to come up...in the Gardener’s good time, up into the real world, the real waking.” For Lewis, what is the “real world” and how do we live there, day by day?
- Pop into the hardware store and purchase a small packet of seeds. Keep one in your pocket all week, reminding yourself how little God requires of us to be His child.
- Talk to a friend or family member about how you measure your worth or success. Pray together that God will root your identity in your reliance on Him.

### Week 3:

*Read Chapter 3| Life from Barren Branches*

*Questions:*

- 1) Can you recall a moment when you started to figure out that the world was not as it was meant to be – that things were “broken”?
- 2) Jot down or brainstorm words that you associate with “mourn.” How do those differ from the meaning Jesus intended in the second beatitude?
- 3) Share small, habitual ways you try daily to cover up, fix, or manage your own brokenness, faults or ickiness (e.g. 8-step plans, how you dress, how you relate on social media). How would your days play-out differently if you instead shared your insecurities, fears and doubts with God?
- 4) The author explains that it was Jesus’ times of mourning that “motivated Him to endure the struggle set before Him, never losing sight of the joy that was promised beyond the cross.” If we share in this future hope, how does that change how we deal with our struggles – still leaving room to mourn even as Jesus did?
- 5) What “buds” – signs of hope – has God given you in a difficult season? Share how that helped you get through that hard time.

*Practices:*

- Go to a bookstore and peruse through the Self-Help aisle. How do you relate differently to these book titles knowing God’s promise to renew and restore all things? Are there any you’re still tempted to try?
- Read the story of the death of Lazarus in Scripture (John 11). Consider what it means that we have a God that will weep *with* us.
- Try to notice this week how you resist mourning. Carve out some time to acknowledge your own sadness or those of others. Does it leave you with a longing for things to be made right?

### Week 4:

*Read Chapter 4| Bending, not Breaking*

*Questions:*

- 1) How does our culture today define meekness? Is that something people try to be at school or work? How does this contrast with Christ’s definition of meekness?
- 2) Re-read the analogy describing meekness as “riding an ocean wave” (p. 40). Think of a time in your life when you had to let go of your plans and be carried

by God, rolling with the plans He had for you. What would have been different if you had resisted and stubbornly tried to stand by your own strength?

- 3) Scripture tells us that any identity outside of Christ can be easily shaken, like the leaves on a tree in a storm or gust of wind. What good works are you using to define yourself (good grades, athletics, performance)?
- 4) What are some practical ways on a daily basis that you can begin to embrace more fully your identity in Christ?
- 5) Christ faced “the fiercest storm of all eternity,” submitting to the Father’s plan for Him. How does that encourage you when you face “storms” in your life?
- 6) Read 1 Peter 2:21-25 describing how Jesus “entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly.” How might you follow His example of meekness (strength under control) when dealing with a difficult person or situation.

*Practices:*

- Stop and watch a tree bend and sway in a storm or strong winds. Observe how the tree relents but, in turn, is strengthened at the roots. How is this encouraging for you?
- Talk around the dinner table with your family about people in your community/school who had well-laid plans but God led them down a different path. How did they handle it?
- God works in plain sight (like a big, purple rhino right in front of us) but we have to have eyes to see Him. Take time each morning to pray that you will have a child-like heart, not preoccupied with being too busy or too important.

**Week 5:**

*Read Chapter 5| Expansive Roots*

*Questions:*

- 1) Jot down or chat with your group about things you found fascinating as a little kid. How have things changed now that you’re older?
- 2) It is easy to get caught up in the “If \_\_\_, then \_\_\_” cycle so common in our culture. What circumstances do you find yourself wishing for so things will be different? What things do you hope for so that you will finally feel “full”?
- 3) Re-read the summary of the Samaritan woman at the well on pages 55 -57. Where are you trying to draw up water when you feel weary and worn out? What is in your bucket?
- 4) Righteousness is a work of the Spirit but how does someone resist finger foods and set their eyes on the Lord’s feast? How can you daily try to put down your

bucket, filled with our hopes and desires, and draw instead from Christ's "eternal spring"?

- 5) Tree roots can grow despite very difficult conditions—in deep sand, under sidewalks and even on rock surfaces. Think about times in your life God has used hard circumstances to root you more deeply in God's love.

*Practices:*

- Flannery O'Connor wrote that we must "push as hard as the age that pushes against you." What does our culture say is the path to happiness? Reflect on whether these things can truly satisfy.
- Each morning this week pray the promise in Ephesians 3:16-17: *"I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources [Christ] will empower [me] with inner strength from his Spirit. Then Christ will make his home in [my heart] as [I] trust in him. [My] roots will grow down into God's love and keep [me] strong."* (NLT, modified).
- Stand under a tree in your yard or in a nearby park. Think about the hidden, underground root system that is even wider and more far-reaching than the tree's branches. Ask God to do the same work in you: that your faith would expand, making you unshakeable in Christ.

## **Week 6:**

*Read Chapter 6 | Intermission & Chapter 7 | The Giving Tree*

*Questions:*

- 1) What stood out to you in the "Intermission" recap? Are you surprised by the parallels between the first four and last four Beatitudes?
- 2) The fifth Beatitude flows out of the first: "the more we understand we come empty-handed before God (feeling desperate and unworthy), the more likely we are to extend mercy to others. Knowing this, what do you make of Corrie Ten Boom's account of forgiving the Nazi guard?"
- 3) The author explains that showing mercy requires action, big or small, nudging us out of hiding places to show Christ's love to others. Brainstorm ways you can show mercy to others in your day-to-day life, even in small ways.
- 4) Consider the parables of the good Samaritan and the unmerciful servant summarized on pages 74-76. In what ways do you let inconveniences ("my day is just too busy!") and keeping score ("it's their turn..") hold you back from helping others?
- 5) The author paraphrases Tim Keller, "Wanting to appear worthy and sufficient, the one with power or control, we don't like mingling with the weak. We divide

the world into good and bad people, deserving and undeserving.” Do you agree or disagree?

- 6) Hanging on an uprooted, lifeless tree, Christ profoundly extended mercy to us all. How does that truth empower you to reach out, knowing you in contrast are deeply rooted, fed by the life of His Spirit?

*Practices:*

- Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree* has been controversial for some readers (they argue it’s a tale of destructive self-sacrifice). What do you remember about the story and how did it make you feel reading it?
- The author cites several excuses we often tell ourselves when, in reality, Christ might be nudging us to help: “She probably just needs space,” “It’ll work out,” or “I shouldn’t get in the way.” Note times this week you do this.
- Take a little time online to research all the benefits of trees.

## **Week 7:**

*Read* Chapter 8| Tree Ring Patterns

*Questions:*

- 1) The author uses her own dog and others as an example of undivided loyalty. Did that analogy resonate with you? How would you describe a picture of singular devotion?
- 2) What things are you holding back on...areas in your life that you really don’t want the Lord to enter because you’ve got your own plan or design for how things should go? Where have you let busyness or good works cover up areas that deep down need to be mended?
- 3) Is it hard to believe that God will give you a NEW heart? Have you witnessed evidence of this in other believers as they come to know Christ?
- 4) Even Christ had to meet with God, listen to God and be taught by God (Isaiah 50:4). Discuss how Jesus was fully God and yet fully man. What does that mean for us?
- 5) Like tree rings, God lays down the details of our lives, uniquely designing our story. Think of seasons that have been spiritually dry (narrow rings) and others that have been characterized by great growth (wider rings). How does that affect your view of God, knowing He’s always at work in you?

*Practices:*

- Think about someone you misjudged in the past because you focused on their outward appearances, not on the inward things of their heart.
- Spend some time reading and studying Hebrews 5:7-9.

- For fun, take a stab at drawing your tree ring pattern, recording how your walk with the Lord has unfolded over the years. If you choose to share in a group, you'll see how no two are alike!

## Week 8:

*Read Chapter 9| The Way of the Woods*

*Questions:*

- 1) What are the “no man’s land” places in your own life? The lunch table at school? The conference room at work? In what ways do you struggle to keep peace with those nearest you?
- 2) Think about and/or discuss the parallel between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Beatitude. How would a meek person be equipped to seek peace with others?
- 3) The author makes the distinction between peacemaking and peacekeeping (p. 101). Can you cite some examples in your life where you kept the peace but perhaps God was calling you to do more? What would it have cost you to *make* peace?
- 4) How do you see your ordinary days (at school/work, in the car, gathered at the table) as part of God’s mission to bring about his kingdom? Is it a new idea for you that God is using your small acts to unfold the BIG news of the gospel?
- 5) Jesus did much of his peacemaking around the table, often over a simple meal. Why do you think He did this instead of big, radical acts of peacemaking (e.g. reconciling whole nations, etc)?
- 6) Does it surprise you that trees are model peacemakers? How does this change how you view the use of trees throughout the Bible?

*Practices:*

- The author writes, “For Jesus, sharing a meal was never about filling bellies. It was a lavish act of peace that fed hearts and welcomed strangers, like us, to come, sit and be filled as part of God’s family.” Try planning a dinner or a little gathering this week with this in mind.
- Spend time praying for God to bring about peace/shalom in your home, school and community.
- Take a walk through a forest or group of trees. Take notice of larger, flourishing trees and the saplings on the forest floor. Imagine how they listen, respond and support each other, like one big family.

## Week 9:

*Read Chapter 10| “Rejoice” for Winter is Here*

*Questions:*

- 1) Do you think of yourself being in a battle for Christ’s sake? Discuss the battle Christians face in this world.
- 2) This eighth and final Beatitude ends with Christ’s promise “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” This loops back to the first Beatitude which claims the same promise. Why do you think Christ said it twice? And how would you go about your day differently if you had eternal promise in mind?
- 3) The phrase “because of righteousness” is often misunderstood. Pulling from the examples given of Daniel, Moses and Paul, how would you define “because of righteousness”?
- 4) Oftentimes our thoughts about persecution are too BIG to touch our daily lives. But the author explains it includes those times when you feel left out, laughed at or judged on account of your faith. With this new definition, are there moments in your day when you feel like you’re in a sort of battle for Christ’s sake?
- 5) The author cites *The Message* translation of this final, eighth Beatitude when explaining that trees “give a cheer” when they feel threatened and attacked (Matthew 5:11-12). Do you think you could rejoice to that extent even in the face of difficulties? If so, where would that strength come from?

*Practices:*

- Read the story of Jesus’ baptism in the Bible (Matthew 3:13-17). Try to begin each day this week by remembering that God speaks the same words of approval over you, “This is my son/daughter, whom I love; with him/her I am well pleased.”
- Paul speaks of our hardships “achieving for us an eternal glory” that far outweighs any of the troubles of this world (2 Corinthians 4:17-18). Discuss with your group how you could recall this promise as you face your current difficulties.
- On youtube, search “autumn tree time lapse.” Watch as the tree bursts into color and then loses all, waiting barren for the promised new growth of spring.

**Week 10:**

*Read Chapter 11| Conclusion: Living as Oaks of Righteousness*

*Questions:*

- 1) There are more trees on earth than there are stars in our galaxy. The author concludes, “It is as if at every turn God has placed a reminder, a guide-post for



how we are to live in His kingdom.” How will you look at trees differently after reading this book? Will their symbolism be a help as you seek to follow Christ?

- 2) Re-read the short intermission chapter (p. 60-64) and review the parallels between the first four and last four Beatitudes. Describe, in your own words, how this picture of a life in Christ conflicts with the values of this world.
- 3) The author quotes Eugene Peterson, theologian and translator of *The Message*, “The easiest thing in the world is to be a Christian...The Christian life is in balance with all of creation.” Do you agree or disagree?
- 4) How has Christ gone before us in everything He is calling us to in the Beatitudes? Is it a comfort that He is the Great Gardener, still interceding on our behalf?
- 5) You, like all those huddled on a hillside more than 2,000 years ago, have heard the words of Christ and His description of a life in His kingdom. How has it changed you?
- 6) Each one of us is a part of God’s grand story as He works to turn the wilderness of this broken world into a Garden-Paradise for eternity. Over the course of this study, how have you seen Him work in the details of your daily life to redeem and restore His creation?

*Practices:*

- On your next drive to school/work, take notice of the trees by the roadside. If we too are to be a sign for what life looks like planted in God’s kingdom, how does that change our priorities? Try to be specific.
- Talk about the Beatitudes with a close friend or someone in your family. Practice sharing what you learned in this study.
- Pray about how to be a part of God’s redemption of the world. Repeat His promise in Isaiah as you go about your day: I am an “oak of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor” (Isaiah 61:3)