

JESUS
THE GREAT
PHILOSOPHER

Study Guide

BY JONATHAN T.
PENNINGTON

We're glad you've chosen to read *Jesus the Great Philosopher*! This discussion guide is a resource for both individuals and groups reading through the book.

If you're reading by yourself, take time to reflect on the questions provided for each chapter. Write your answers down in a journal, or simply take mental notes on how the content in the book applies to your own life as you process the questions.

If you're reading the book with others, we suggest you take time to read through the discussion questions before you meet up to discuss with others. Jot down some thoughts you'd like to share with others pertaining to the questions so that you arrive prepared and ready to discuss. You may not find it necessary to discuss all the questions provided for each chapter, so you're welcome to focus on one or two that stand out to your group in order to go deeper into the content.

Feel free to come up with your own questions as you read as well!
Happy reading!

Philosophers, Martyrs, and Canoes

1. This chapter talked about “alternative gurus.” To start off, think about who you follow—someone on social media, or someone whose books you read, etc. Who is one “guru” (not Jesus) you look to for wisdom—a “guru” generally or specifically related to a particular discipline or subject matter?
2. When you hear the word “philosopher,” what comes to mind? Anything at all? Who comes to mind? Does this word have positive connotations for you?
3. “Christianity is the true philosophy that through faith and the power of the Spirit enables people to see the world in a certain way and to live accordingly. It is the way to the truly Good Life” (page 7). Have you thought about Christianity being a philosophy before? If not, is it compelling to think of it as such? How does this impact you?
4. Pennington mentions four different reasons as to why we fail to see Christianity as a philosophy in our day (page 10). Does one of these reasons stand out particularly to you in your own life? Or in what you witness as you experience the state of the church? Describe why.
5. In the “Loss of questions” section, Pennington describes the difference between vertical (religious) and horizontal (human) questions when approaching the Bible. Identify a well-known story in the Bible. Are you able to think of a possible horizontal question that it asks? And answers to this question?

The Genius of Ancient Philosophy

1. Maybe you're in school now, or maybe you graduated many, many years ago. Is there a subject or class that has had more of an impact on your life than you originally anticipated? Is there a subject or class that still feels fairly useless?
2. You might not consider yourself a philosopher, but if you define the purpose of philosophy as Pennington does on page 21, "helping people live a certain way," what do you think people might learn from you? If you're unsure, ask someone! This could be from explicit teaching, or from implicit observations of your actions, and it could be positive or negative (if you're willing to share).
3. On page 29, Pennington talks about ancient philosophy being described as a "spiritual exercise." After reading this chapter and gaining understanding on the meaning of philosophy, describe in your own words how studying philosophy is of spiritual benefit (just as much as intellectual benefit).
4. "It is only through guided practice in all areas that one can achieve the fullness of what it means to be human, to become . . . a *teleios anēr* (a whole/mature person)" (page 25). If this is how ancient philosophers thought of maturity, how is maturity defined today? What are the similarities (if any) and differences?
5. The entire chapter defines philosophers as people who not only teach but model the good life. While there may not be many examples of true philosophers, especially in the public eye, can you identify someone you have a relationship with that "practices what they preach?" How has their life impacted you? Provide a specific example if you can.

The Philosophical “Big Ideas” in the Old Testament

1. “Moses and his writings are the foundation of the rest of the Bible for a great truth that we have forgotten in modern times—that *the Hebrew Scriptures present themselves as a work of divinely revealed ancient philosophy*” (page 39). Have you thought about the Old Testament in this way? How would thinking about it in this way change how you read it?
2. How do the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes engage in philosophy differently? In your own words, what purpose do they serve on one’s quest for knowing?
3. Since it is often a hot topic, how would you summarize how the Old Testament speaks about “politics”—not according to our modern understanding of politics, but in the older, more constructive sense? How would this understanding impact discussions among your church and other believers?
4. “The point of the history of Israel is not simply to give facts about historical events but to cast a vision of the true and the good for all the world” (page 51). Give an example, either mentioned in this chapter, or from your own reflections as you read, of an Old Testament event that casts a vision of the true and the good for all the world—in other words, an event that addresses a philosophical question and answers it.
5. It is mentioned toward the end of this chapter that Dallas Willard saw the ministry of preaching, teaching, and philosophy as one in the same. If you are in this profession (or hoping to be), how does this thought impact your calling? Your daily practices?

The Philosophical “Big Ideas” in the New Testament

1. When you picture Jesus, what does he look like in human form? What has influenced your picture? Beyond his physical features, consider the emotions he would have portrayed, what his status may have been, etc.
2. What role does a biography (or a “bio”) play in presenting a philosopher’s ideas and life? How do we see the New Testament as fitting with this ancient model?
3. In your own words, why was it significant that Jesus taught in parables? What can a parable do that other forms of teaching cannot?
4. Jesus is described as a quick-witted, winsome, and powerful reasoner in this chapter—with proof given from the Gospels as to how he can be viewed as a philosopher. Does this change your perception of Jesus? Grow your understanding of him? Provide clarity to any of his teachings?
5. In this chapter, Pennington proposes that one of the grand themes of all Scripture is “knowing.” How do we see this play out in the books of the New Testament that come after the Gospels?

A Big Emotional Debate

1. Would you consider or describe yourself as an “emotional” person? Why/why not? Has this always been the case? Has anything changed how you think about this in relation to yourself?

2. Think about the community you most often find yourself in—church, family, etc. How would they describe or label emotions? Are they more likely to think and talk about emotions as bad/good, irrational/rational, psychological (mental)/neurological (physical)—as outlined in the introduction of this chapter? Or do they have a diverse approach?

3. “To be virtuous, which is necessary for flourishing in the philosophical understanding, we must intentionally function as a whole human. Only the wholeness between all the parts of our humanity enables life in its fullness—and this includes our emotions” (page 96). How do you encourage “whole humanity” for yourself, with regard to assessing and connecting to emotions? Or do you have a plan for doing so after reading this chapter? Additionally, how do you encourage this in others—maybe those who come to you for counsel, or those you disciple, etc.? Feel free to assess current practices as well as future goals.

Christianity's Sophisticated Solution

1. Can you identify a time (perhaps in a season of suffering) where your primary emotions had to be reconciled with your faith? What was particularly encouraging to you in that time—words spoken by a friend, a passage of Scripture, a book? What made that encouragement particularly meaningful as you processed your circumstances?
2. How is Christianity both similar to and distinct from the philosophies of emotion offered by the world? Use examples from the book or personal illustrations.
3. What evidence do you see in Scripture that shows God has emotions? How does this evidence comfort you in your emotions?
4. “Even if we don’t adopt a fully antiemotion view from the train illustration, many people, like I did, take away the sense that emotions are suspect and to be kept somewhat at bay, a kind of unarticulated Christianized Stoicism” (page 112). Is there any teaching in regard to emotion that stands out to you in this same way? What were you taught about emotions when you were discipled as a young Christian? What does this chapter have to say about it?
5. What two habits are mentioned in this chapter that speak to Christianity’s practical advice on emotions? How do these habits affect our emotions? Have you personally seen them influence yours? How might you implement them as you go forward?

The Necessity of Relationships

1. This chapter opens with the idea that friendship is essential for human flourishing. Have you found this to be true in your own life? Do you agree with this notion? Who has been a great friend to you, and what is it about your relationship with them that stands out?
2. Why do we talk about political philosophy in the context of relationships? What does this chapter say about how we should think about politics in this way?
3. How did Aristotle classify types of friendships? Do these definitions align with our society's classification of types of friendships today? Is there one type that our culture tends to value more? Ignore? Why do you think this is?
4. If you were to write a book on how to be a friend, what advice would you include?
5. What myths are identified at the end of this chapter that attribute to our diminished understanding and practice of friendship? Is there one myth that's been especially limiting or damaging in your life, or one that you've witnessed as especially problematic in your community?

Christianity's Renewed Relationships

1. In Christianity, every person is of equal worth and value. What proof do we see for this in the Scriptures (explicitly or implicitly)? How does this differ from the philosophies of the ancient world?
2. The Bible speaks of the importance of the biological family and the family of believers. Practically, how should a Christian reconcile caring for both of these families?
3. How should people relate to their nation/culture/government? In other words, what is the Christian philosophy of how kingdom citizens are supposed to relate to the visible kingdoms of this world?
4. What does it look like practically to “live in such a way that is worthy of the gospel of Christ?”
5. How should Christianity's interior society be structured? In other words, if being a Christian means entering into a new society, what does this new community look like?
6. What can we learn, and apply, about friendship from the examples of Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan, and Jesus and his disciples in the Bible?

Humans, We Have a Problem

1. What do you think the difference between “happiness” and “meaningful happiness” is, as the author implies at the beginning of this chapter?
2. “What people vary wildly on is what this happiness looks like and how to obtain it” (page 187). If you’re willing, share with others where you’ve sought out happiness and have come up empty-handed. Or brainstorm as a group ways in which people look for happiness but often end up unfulfilled.
3. We see in this chapter that happiness and meaningfulness share a close relationship. Have you experienced the coexistence of these in your own life? If so, share how the two were related to each other (positively or negatively).
4. “We long for flourishing, and the only way to find it is through living intentionally and thoughtfully in particular ways. Neither virtue nor its eventual fruit, happiness, comes to us accidentally” (page 193). Are there any teachings from the Bible that come to mind when thinking about this definition of happiness? How does God’s Word support this idea of happiness?

Christianity's Whole, Meaningful, and Flourishing Life

1. Page 207 describes the distinction between the desire for happiness and the way in which people pursue it. Why is this an important distinction? Have you found that you label your longing for happiness as a bad thing?
2. How do you recognize when you are approaching God with an attitude of duty or obligation as a primary motivation, instead of love and desire? How do you adjust your motivation?
3. What does Jesus's command about self-sacrifice and bearing our cross call us to? What does it NOT call us to? What does it look like in relation to happiness?
4. How would you explain the concept of "finding joy in suffering" to a nonbeliever?
5. How does hope differ from optimism?

Questions to wrap up your study:

1. For some, the subject of philosophy may be new. For others, this may have been what originally attracted you to the book. Either way, what have you learned by reading this book? About philosophy, or Jesus, or about how Christianity and philosophy fit together?
2. Does thinking about Jesus as a great philosopher change the way you've thought about him as you've processed the ideas in this book?
3. This book contained sections on emotions, relationships, and happiness. What was most life-impacting for you to consider in each of these sections? Was one section more applicable to your current life? If so, what can you take away from what you read?
4. How has your life changed (hopefully for the better!) from reading this book?