

TRICIA LOTT WILLIFORD

This Book Is for You

*Loving
God's
Words*

*in Your
Actual
Life*



Reading Tricia Lott Williford is like sitting down with a friend who is crazy smart but so warm, funny, and relatable that you're fascinated and not the least bit intimidated. Her perfectly-named new work is exactly the kind of book you want to press into the hands of others with a wink and a nod at the title. In *This Book Is for You*, Tricia leads us on a winsome journey through knowing, loving, and navigating the Bible, not as a know-it-all tour guide but as an empathetic fellow pilgrim. This book is for you. And for everyone you know.

MAGGIE WALLEM ROWE, speaker, dramatist, author of *This Life We Share*

I'm in absolute awe of what Tricia has created here. Whether you're new to studying the Bible or you've been doing it for decades, you'll come away from this book with a new love for the Scripture. This book is for you because *God is for you*. He craves for us to be people who understand the importance of learning to study his Word ourselves, not merely content on being spoon-fed the thoughts of others. Tricia writes in a magical way that makes you feel like you're simply having coffee with her. You'll come away understanding the hows and whys to studying the Bible in an attainable way. Grab a highlighter, friend—you're going to need it.

TERESA SWANSTROM ANDERSON, author of the Get Wisdom Bible Study series

Tricia is a trusted and winsome guide, taking us gently by the hand, inviting us to look into God's Word—either as a cynical longtime student or a curious bystander. What a delightful experience to have such a thoughtful guide to her beloved Bible. With the depth of a sage, she kindly concludes each chapter with practices for our actual life. This is a book you will underline and highlight. Read slowly and savor.

DON PAPE, curator of Pape Commons

This book is like a deep breath of refreshing air after a summer rain shower. It's not just a collection of real-life stories and relatable Scripture for each of us in today's spirit-oppressive environment. It's a how-to: how to fall in love with the One who first chose you—the intimate lover of your soul. We need his most excellent words of comfort, promise, and hope now more than ever. What an appropriate and wonderful double entendre title: *This Book Is for You*. Yep. On both counts. Tricia's short chapters and conversational writing style compel you to keep turning her pages for more. And her pages point you directly to *his* pages. The chapter-ending "Practice for Your Actual Life" personal-application exercises are spiritually eye-opening and perspective game-changing. Highly recommend!

DEBORA M. COTY, speaker, award-winning author of the bestselling *Too Blessed to be Stressed* series

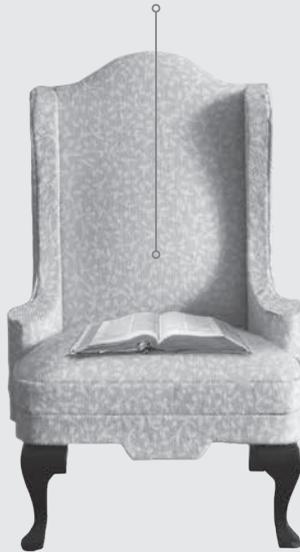
Winsome, warm, down-to-earth. Thanks to Tricia's wise and gentle guidance, I found my love for God's Word rekindled, and I didn't even think I needed a renewed perspective. I can't wait to share this book with friends and family all along the spiritual journey. No matter your past or current relationship with the Bible, Tricia's book is for you.

ANGIE WARD, PhD, assistant director of DMin at Denver Seminary, author of *I Am a Leader*

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Contents

INTRODUCTION: *This Book Is for You* 1

- 1 LET'S START AT THE VERY BEGINNING: *Claiming a Posture* 11
- 2 BUT MAYBE DON'T START AT THE VERY BEGINNING: *Figuring Out What to Read* 19
- 3 MODERN-DAY PSALMIST: *Make It Yours* 27
- 4 HOW IS THIS "A FUTURE AND A HOPE"?: *Understand the Promises* 43
- 5 AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE: *Unbuilding to Rebuild* 55
- 6 WHEN I DIDN'T KNOW: *Discovering the Only Rule That Really Matters* 67
- 7 IMAGINE THAT DINNER TABLE: *Know the People* 81
- 8 EVEN IF HE DOESN'T: *When God Says No* 93
- 9 IN THE MARGINS OF YOUR ACTUAL DAYS: *For When You Have No Time* 103

- 10 FEAR: *The Inhale and Exhale of Truth* 113
- 11 WORSHIP: *Living Out of the Overflow* 121
- 12 TOGETHER WORK: *That Time with the Loaves and
the Fishes* 127
- 13 QUICKSAND: *When You Know Just What to Say* 137

EPILOGUE 151

FIFTEEN THINGS TO KNOW AS YOU NAVIGATE
THE BIBLE 154

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 158

NOTES 161

INTRODUCTION

This Book Is for You

Hi. MY NAME IS TRICIA, and I have not always loved the Bible.

I mean, I *wanted* to love it. I felt like I *should* love it. But I spent a lot of years of my life feeling like I was reading something meant for someone else.

That sounded like the opening sentence of a twelve-step program, I do realize. But I have a growing awareness of a tiny black pearl of a secret, and I suspect a lot of us are carrying it: In our private heart of hearts, many of us secretly feel like the Bible is boring. It seems to be irrelevant, questionable, meant for someone else living a much holier or more religious life than ours. That kind of secret doubt can make us feel like we need an anonymous support group fueling its members with acceptance and strong coffee.

Here's me raising my coffee cup. Cheers.

THIS BOOK IS FOR YOU

Perhaps that is not quite how you expected “a book about the Bible” to begin. Perhaps you are feeling right now that a book like this one should begin with stories about mission trips and sacrificial giving and spring-break fasting. But I’ve discovered that living and loving the Bible right where I am in my everyday life looks a little—or a lot—different from what we all may have expected.

I am not a seminarian, an academician, or a theologian; I am not a Bible teacher or even a Bible scholar. I am a lover of messy people, a tarbled mom of two teenage boys who are often late for school and wearing mismatched socks. My vacations are not called mission trips; I have been known to absentmindedly doodle in the margins of overdue library books; I have battled depression and anxiety to degrees that have nearly drowned me; I have begged the Lord for miracles that only he could provide; and somewhere in the midst of all of that, I fell hopelessly in love with the Word of God as a light for my next step and the air for my next breath.

So if you were hoping that a book about “loving God’s words in your actual life” would open with a deep dive into the Pentateuch (or if you are actually looking for a book that tosses around the word *Pentateuch*), then please forgive me. And please (truly, *please*), do not go on Amazon to write a review about how you tossed this book into the trash because my writing voice sounds more like your friend than your Bible professor.

(That actually happened. It was a sad day that made me wish two things: (1) that my teenage sons did not enjoy reading my bad Amazon reviews aloud at the dinner table; and (2) that I was the kind of author who doesn’t care to make friends with her readers.)

Here’s the thing: *I am more like your friend than a Bible professor.*

I won’t sound like an Old Testament scholar in this book. I mean, I probably could, if I tried really hard.

(Exceptionally hard.)

INTRODUCTION

But I feel like there are enough books like that, written that way, with all those appendices and footnotes and small print. I've read many of them. I have passed exams about them. I have a deep respect for them, and I even like them. (Well, some of them.)

I'm just not here to write a book like that. Because, honestly, I think some of us may need a path to take a closer view of God's words that meet us right where we are. We don't need more information. We need community. We need inspiration. We need hope.

Maybe this idea, this path of reading the Bible and following Jesus, is new to you. Maybe you've kept your distance a bit from God and this book called the Bible because you're a bit wary of the people who follow him. Perhaps you've been deeply and personally wounded by Christians because I'm sad to say we have a long history of doing and saying truly terrible things in the name of Ignorance and Arrogance and groupthink.

If you find yourself there at the beginning of this book, please let me say: Those people were not following Jesus through that behavior that hurt you. Jesus was not—*is not*—ignorant, arrogant, or a shepherd of Groupthinking, asking us to do what everyone else is doing because it's accepted as the standard for what everyone has always done. He is—*and was*—an all-knowing, patient, gracious, question-asking, peacemaking, humble revolutionary. (He was not peacekeeping, however, because sometimes you have to get in a little bit of good trouble² on the path to making peace, and the Prince of Peace showed us this, indeed.)

Maybe a part of you, though, still wonders what it's about. This God, this Bible supposedly full of his words.

Or maybe you once knew a Jesus follower who intrigued you. And you wondered if that could be a path for you, but it seemed too different. Too much of a stretch. Too far from anything you have been taught, learned, known, lived.

Here's the part where I set down that coffee cup I raised a moment ago, where I lean in like a trusted friend, where I tell you this thing I want you to know: *This story is big enough for all of us, no matter where we come from or what we've gone through.* And this book of God's words tells us that he's not far from any of us.³

Maybe you're already in this commitment, though. You're an explorer, new to the Christian faith, and want to find your way through the Bible for the first time. You may be looking for some starter suggestions and a road map to begin the journey. My heart bursts with anticipation for you and all that you are about to encounter, my friend. Buckle up! Many have stepped onto this road over the years, and they found it to be life-changing in the most incredible ways.*

Or maybe you're in the group I like to call the "once-agains." You've been following Jesus for a while and have a basic understanding of the Bible—you can navigate your way through the table of contents and you know how to find Psalms and the stories about Jesus in the Gospels. You've listened to more sermons than you can count and you feel like you know what the Bible says, but you're bored with it. Maybe you'd like to fall in love with it because *you* want to, not become someone else told you to—and especially not because you have to pass a test at the end of this reading. Perhaps you're looking for some ways to ignite your fire again. Let's remember together what we once loved so much and seek new understanding, as well. Let's get to know more than the contents of the Bible—let's get to know the God of the Bible.

Or perhaps you may fall in the "want-to" category. You feel like you need to put a brown paper cover over this book because you've been hiding the fact that you've never really loved the Bible at all.

* If you're in that category, check out "Fifteen Things to Know as You Navigate the Bible" on page 154, where we talk about some easy ways to figure out all those books and references.

INTRODUCTION

You *wanted* to love it.

You *intended* to love it.

And you so wish that you loved it.

But you just don't.

Maybe you don't enjoy reading much of anything, or perhaps you really love to read books—but not *this* book. Maybe you met Jesus a long time ago, but you never picked up your Bible back then, and now it seems too late to join the party that other believers seem to enjoy so much. Maybe you feel like everybody else already knows what you should have learned a long time ago. My heart is so tender for you, my friend. *You don't need to feel any shame or guilt in learning what you want to learn, at whatever life stage the knowledge finds you.* Let's dive into these pages together, where I promise you'll find joy, love, and life in abundance.

Or maybe you've thought this invitation to know him surely couldn't include you because you don't often feel invited or included. Because it's too much too soon, too little too late, too different and too exclusive, or—God, forgive us—too judge-y and too ugly. But no matter what your relationship with God and the words he inspired has looked like till now, here's what I want you to know.

(And here's where I need you to imagine me again, making eye contact, making sure you can hear me, making sure you are really, truly listening.)

You are holding this book in your hands. That means that I am inviting you, but far more important, God is inviting you. He has chosen you. Not because my particular book is a divine tool of any kind but because God can use anything he wants—from divine texts to absolute drivel—to get your attention. And if these first pages have pricked your heart, if you feel even remotely interested in falling in love with God's words in God's book, then I daresay that God is getting your attention.

He chose you.

He is choosing you right now, in this very moment of your actual life.

His book is *for you*.



It is fun to be invited.

Invitations are the opposite of exclusion. They're not pushing you away or passively letting you wander by; when you're invited, someone is reaching out, pointing at you—*yes, you*—and saying, *This day, this table, this story, this time will not be the same if you are not part of it.*

I have a friend who, whenever she is planning an event at her house, intentionally invites more than she thinks will come, maybe more than her home can hold. When we met, I was newly widowed and transitioning from one church community to another, and all of my traditions and plans and sense of stability and belonging were up in the air. Kim was planning a party for Easter Sunday, complete with Easter eggs and an Easter egg hunt, and she called and said, "I don't know if you have any plans, but I wanted to invite you. Because isn't it fun to be invited?"

I have never forgotten the beauty of how she said that, how simple and how true.

You see, it doesn't take much for me to encounter the opposite of invitation, the kind of feeling that took root inside me the first day of middle school. I call it Cafeteria Syndrome, that visceral memory of standing in the cafeteria, holding my tray, not knowing where to sit. I have always hated that crippling fear of being left out, of not knowing where I belong, of wishing someone would

INTRODUCTION

tell me what to do next. I secretly loved assigned seats—even if I didn't like where I landed, at least I knew where to go.

I think most of us have that old familiar feeling lying dormant just below the surface, that inner middle schooler who just wants to be invited. By someone, nearly anyone. We want a spot at the cool table, an invitation to the premiere, our names listed among *Who's Who*. We want to be invited to the book club, the dinner party, into the important conversations in the room where it happens.⁴ We want to make the team, to open the acceptance letter, to get the matching T-shirt. There's something deep within each of us, a longing to belong, to be wanted, to be known.

And yet, we also don't want to blindly follow just because somebody told us to. We are not so committed to belonging that we are willing to abandon our own sense of purpose and influence in exchange for a club membership.

I've read that "religion is for people who are afraid of going to hell, and spirituality is for people who've been there."⁵ For a lot of us, a list of rules and guidelines and an "in or out" mentality are a stifling, suffocating personal hell. We're not into that.

When it comes to spiritual things, so many of us—especially in Gen X, the Millennial generation, and Gen Z—yes, we want to know that we're cared for, loved for who we are, and accepted where we are. But also, we are more hungry for *why* than *what*. We have a deep thirst for purpose, influence, and meaning. We want relationships, not rules. We want authenticity, not traditions. We want community, not clubs. After all, we have a deep suspicion of formulas and structured approaches to religion, and that's why we might not be so intrigued by Christians or Christianity.

And so we leave the Bible on the shelf, or asleep in the app on our phone, because we think it's a book of formulas and words written for people who know how to decode the secret language. If

we're going to read anything, then we want to know it was written for us. And if we're going to read the Bible, we want to know that God and his Word are relevant, pertinent, and personal. We want to know if all this matters right where we are, in our actual lives.

When Jesus walked the earth in his public ministry, he often invited people into conversation with him. He ate dinner in their homes. He attended their weddings. He told stories they could relate to. He listened to the women who had been ignored. He welcomed the children who had been silenced. When Jesus spoke to people, he drew them in, right where they were. His invitations sparked such curiosity among the people who first heard his words that fishermen left their jobs, sons left their hometowns, and people followed this man just to see what he was about—and others stayed right where they were, in their jobs and circles and communities, now with a new, life-giving sense of direction. They were drawn to him, to everything he was about. Because he saw them and spoke about things that actually mattered to them. Because he loved them first.

Jesus was God before our very eyes, and the Bible is God's words right before our very eyes. And just like Jesus, the Bible loves us first, before we open its pages. The sacred pages are alive, and they invite us into a conversation.

No matter what we feel about Christians and the church, which so often can make us feel like that middle-school kid, wondering if there's a seat for us, this Bible full of God's words is itself an invitation for us to listen, to taste and see, to come along, and to follow. Jesus' most personal and direct invitations are buried well into the second half of the Bible, but even the sometimes-hard-to-understand Old Testament is the story of the grander invitation, of God inviting his people into relationship, of how he moved toward them again and again, even when they lost their way. The Bible

INTRODUCTION

starts with the story of an invitation, and then we get to Jesus and we discover the most delicious truth: *We are invited too.*

The Bible is a literary collection of books and letters, but it is also a living, organic text that contains echoes of the timeless and eternal voice of God. It is words on a page, but it is also a pathway to meet God. What if you could discover that the Word of God is alive, relevant, and for *you*?

I was sitting in a Bible class when I discovered that the woman near me, just two chairs away, was quietly dabbing her eyes with a tissue, hiding behind the curtain of her long blonde hair. We were classmates, we had spent many weeks alongside each other, but I only knew her name. I didn't know her story or why she was crying. At the whisper of an invitation to talk about what was on her mind, she came into the hallway with me, and she dissolved into a puddle of emotion. She was brokenhearted over her family, her kids who had wandered from church and home and love, and she was so sad that they didn't want to come to church with her.

I understood her heartache. As a mom who loves Jesus, there is nothing I want more than for my children to feel known, loved, and secure—particularly in the truth of Jesus Christ.

But as a Millennial, I also understood her kids. They didn't necessarily want to be in church with their mom on a Sunday morning. The young professionals and adults entering the world now want to feel seen and known for who they are, where they are, what they bring—not because they jumped through the hoops and followed the formulas set in place by generations who've come before. And, if we're honest, lots of how church has been done over the years is a lot of hoops and formulas.

Church is different now. It doesn't have to happen on Sunday morning, inside four walls. The process of studying, learning, and knowing the Bible can look and feel different too. Just because this

woman's kids weren't learning in the traditional ways she had didn't mean they weren't learning. And this I know for sure: The God who made them was still pursuing them with his love. He doesn't need a building for that.

I assured my new friend that God is bigger than the will of our children and he exists outside the walls where she spends her Sunday mornings. I reminded her that it's our job to love our children, and it is our job to teach them, but it is not our job to change them. Only they are responsible for their choices. And I reminded her that God is bigger than anything we can imagine, his voice is alive in ways we can't wrap our minds around, and he is capable of reaching her kids in the way he chooses . . . and it may not be inside the walls of a church or a traditional Bible study.

She looked at me. A rivulet of mascara spilled down her cheek. And she said, "You really love him, don't you? You really love God. Like, really."

I was surprised by my own tears in reply. "I do. I really, really do."

And I've found him over and over again in the pages of his book.

We are invited—all of us—into this grand and beautiful story of God.

The story will not be the same if we are not part of it.

And now, he's inviting you to come along. Let him teach you. You're invited.

This book is for you.

Let's fall in love with this book—with this Jesus—in our actual lives.

Let's Start at the Very Beginning

Claiming a Posture

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, I had lots of tactics for that nightly window of sleeplessness, the long moments that stretched between “bedtime” and “actually sleepy.”

I memorized the introduction music of *St. Elsewhere*, my parents' favorite medical drama that happened to coincide with bedtime. The fact that I can still recall the intro music likely means that I was interrupting the first few minutes of their weekly appointment with NBC's best lineup. (How parents ever effectively navigated the bedtime routine with any grace at all before the invention of the DVR is a theology beyond me. God bless the makers of pause-able live television and the umbrella of grace for the thousand nightly interruptions of the preschooler in violation of bedtime code.)

Sometimes I counted (again) the starry constellations of glow-in-the-dark stickers on my ceiling.

Sometimes I made my brother laugh from his bedroom across the hall with my uncanny impersonation of Ed McMahon. (Another glimpse into my parents' post-bedtime TV routines.)

Sometimes I played a tricky game of my own invention, stretching my body out of my bed, putting my head on the floor but keeping my legs and feet in the bed, thereby technically following my parents' mandate to stay in bed and "not let one foot touch the floor one more time, young lady." As I inched my head farther and farther away, I sometimes got too far away from my own feet and toppled to the floor like an overturned wheelbarrow of apples. And God help the child who makes that kind of ruckus while her parents are watching *St. Elsewhere*.

But most times, I lay awake trying to wrap my head around the concept of eternity. (Anybody else out there an existentially conflicted five-year-old? Just me? Great.) I imagined a long yellow brick road of time, unfurling like a ribbon in the directions before and after my life, never beginning and never ending. I imagined walking down that path as far as I could in either direction, left into the past and right into the future. From the very beginning to the very end. And it bothered me deeply to realize that even my greatest imagination could not wrap around a reality that big.

Never beginning? Never ending? Like . . . *never*?

I let myself explore as my mind dared, millions and billions of years. Sometimes it played like a VHS movie on rewind, going back and back and back in time, until I found this black vastness of outer space before anything existed, before anything was made. And in my imagination, there I found God, sitting by himself, in the dark, waiting to make something that could notice him.

That makes God sound needy, and I definitely don't mean to

imply that. God the Father, the Son, and the Spirit have existed as Three-in-One since the beginning of anything, and their relationship together is love exponential, spilling with the compounding overflow of fierce happiness. He already had love in this perfect three-in-one situation that is impossible for us to understand because it doesn't exist anywhere else. All we have to know is that God did not create humanity because he needed to be loved. He created people so he could share that love with us.

Anyway, I didn't get that yet when I was a sleepless little girl. I imagined him all alone, lonely, timeless, and bearded. (With exceedingly large hands.) I would lie in my bed and consider the fact that he had always been there, this Unmade Creator with no beginning. And I would get a little freaked out, feeling my heart beat faster, until it seemed wise to go back to counting the stickers on the ceiling.

Out of his bottomless love and creativity, he spoke light and he separated it from darkness. He spun spiraling galaxies sugared with more stars than we will ever discover, sprawling in directions and spanning distances that can only be measured in light-years. And of all the gazillions of spaces he created, he could have placed the human image of himself anywhere he chose. He picked this planet, this blue and green marble, as the palette for his imagination. He crafted thumbnail moon and blazing sun, ocean waves and powdery sand, green apples and blood oranges, daisies and tulips, giraffes and lime-green inchworms, eyelashes and freckles, songs that make your eyes water, and contagious laughter that makes your belly ache.

This God of the Bible has always been and always will be. Existence is his domain. Anything and everything find their life, meaning, and purpose. In him, we "live and move and have our being."⁶ This will never not be true. God is vast and impossible

for us to fully grasp, and the more I read his words, the bigger he becomes to me.

Here's one of the things that boggles my mind: Genesis wasn't written in the same season as it unfolded. It was written at least two million years after all that history had taken place. This opening book of the Bible gives us a glimpse of what happened, what God has done, and how he has interacted with his favorite creation since the first sun rose on the first morning. And since the first pen landed on the first page, people have been questioning who wrote it, analyzing the timeline, and arguing over who was really in charge.

People debate whether the week of creation happened in a literal week of seven days, or if the week is figurative language, a metaphor for a God for whom a thousand years are like a day.⁷ Some don't buy it, don't believe it, consider it to be the vivid imagination of a writer for whom science did not yet exist. Honestly, does it matter how long it took? I just don't think that was the primary concern of whoever wrote the book of Genesis. (Tradition says that it was likely Moses, but we can't know for sure.)⁸ I suspect he was less concerned with clarifying *how* God created the world, and far more concerned that generations to come understand *that* God created the earth. It happened, and God did it. All the specific details of how it happened are above our pay grade and capacity. Those fall under the category of "God Only Knows." What matters is our willingness to understand that God is vast and impossible for us to fully grasp—and therefore that the Bible is full of things we won't be able to 100 percent pin down. But that's okay. We get the freedom to not have all the answers, to have the humility to say it doesn't fully matter whether God created the world in seven days or whether that's a literary device, because what matters is that he did it.

LET'S START AT THE VERY BEGINNING

Let's acknowledge that some of this stuff is hard to imagine, and if you're working to nail down proof before you'll step into faith, then you might have things backward. As I read the stories of the Bible, I am comfortable with the audacity, the unknowing, the question marks. I am less concerned with whether the remnants of Noah's ark can be found,⁹ whether Job's travesties were literal or a parable,¹⁰ whether Jonah was really in the whale for three slimy days,¹¹ or whether these are stories written to paint a picture and teach a lesson. To be clear, I personally choose to believe they happened as it is written, but that's because I generally tend to believe in things I can't understand when God is the One behind them, regardless. I choose to believe that he is who he says he is, and he is still mysterious, powerful, close, and loving whether everything in the Bible is literal or not.

So whether the world was formed in seven days or seven millennia does not change the Author of the story. I've decided I want to meet him in these pages, even if he shows up in ways I don't expect, even if he reveals himself in ways I don't understand. I want to trust him. Nothing about all of the debated pieces of the Bible can change the fact that I believe God is who he says, that he knows me and loves me, and that the greatest pursuit of my life is to know him and love him in return.

I want to know the heart of this God, and to become more like the One who authored this whole giant timeline that kept me awake at night as a child—and keeps me awake as an adult. Back then, I wanted to understand the timeline. Now, I am restless to know the One who invented time. I am hungry for more than information; I am thirsty for a transformation. I want to know this God who desires and delights in relationship, who values creativity and conversation, who created time but is never bound to the clock, who believes in rest even though he never tires. I

want to know this God who has dominion over all things, yet knows my name, chose the color of my eyes, and recognizes my handwriting.

When God made his most prized and most privileged creation, man and woman, he made the first image of himself. When he created Eve—and I dearly love this discovery—he simultaneously created friendship and community, partnership and teamwork. He created the brushstrokes of love, affection, human connection. I want to know *this God*.

That's where we have to start with the Bible—not with our preconceptions, our biases, our understanding of different points of theology . . . but with God.

In my research for this book, I found this great guideline: “The main character in the Bible is God. As tempting as it may be to read these stories and ask, ‘What does this tell me about me?’ we must first stop to think about what these stories reveal to us about the character and nature of God. Otherwise, the stories become about the people of God instead of being about the God of the people.”¹²

If you don't know whether you believe in God, if you're starting with the Bible and feeling uncertain because you don't know any of the things yet, then you're in really good company: God is beyond all of us. We all must have the ability to lay down our preconceptions of who he is, and we need to be willing to embark on a journey of discovery through his words. When we have a rightsized view of the mystery of God, we can approach the Bible with humility, curiosity, and open hands.

It's good to be amazed by something so much bigger than us. And, similar to my sleepless nights as a child, we might need to let ourselves get a little bit freaked out by how much we don't understand.

Practice for Your Actual Life

Write a list of everything you honestly believe about God right now. Not the stuff you “should” say, but who he actually is (or isn't) to you and what you think the Bible says about him. If you don't know at all how to feel about him or whether you believe in him, write what makes you curious and why you're picking up his book.

*Resist the urge to tidy up your gut-level God-concepts.
Even when it is messy, honesty is still a friend of intimacy
with God.*

ALICIA BRITT CHOLE, *The Sacred Slow*