

An exploration of **Inspired**, by Rachel Held Evans

Week 1 - Introduction and maybe possibly Chapter 1 if we get to it

Ok, did you read the introduction section of the book yet? And, if you did, what were your immediate reactions to it?

Now, let's consider this quote from Rachel:

"If the Bible of my childhood functioned primarily as a storybook, then the Bible of my adolescence functioned as a handbook, useful because it told me what to do. ... The Bible of my young-adulthood functioned as an answer book or position paper, useful because it was *right*. ... [When I got older and studied the Bible more academically], the scholarship I'd encountered was sound, [but] I used it to render the Bible into little more than a curiosity, an interesting religious artifact to study for sport."

Do you relate to Rachel's stages of change as she viewed the Bible at all?

How has your relationship to the Bible changed across the stages of your life?

How do you view the Bible now?

What are passages of scripture or stories of scripture that have been particularly inspiring for you?

What are passages of scripture or stories that have been particularly challenging for you?

Have you ever had an encounter with someone whose beliefs about scripture were different than yours? Describe that interaction or experience - was it a positive or negative experience for you?

What do you know about the way Jews approach the interpretation of scripture in their faith?

How would a more traditionally Jewish approach to scripture benefit how Christians interact with each other when it comes to the way we talk about the Bible?

Is absolute agreement among people's interpretation of scripture necessary in order for scripture to be considered inspired by God?

Think about this quote from Peter Enns: "What if the Bible is just fine the way it is? Not the well-behaved-everything-is-in-order version we create, but the messy, troubling, weird, and ancient Bible that we actually have?"

Week 2

“The Temple” and Chapter 1: Origin Stories

What do you think about Rachel’s story, “The Temple,” about the family living in exile in Babylon telling stories about creation? What did you learn from that story?

Do any of you have stories about generations before you that have shaped part of who you are, or have shaped characteristics of your family?

Read Genesis Chapter 1

- How have you seen interpretations of this text used in different ways?
- For those of us growing up in the church starting as children, what are your memories regarding origin stories or the stories of the patriarchs as a part of your early spiritual education?
- Why do we think the Genesis 1 story is so important for everyone to know? Why are the stories of the patriarchs given so much time and attention in children’s education curriculum?
- What do these origin stories tell us about how the early Jewish people interacted with and related to God?
- What do these origin stories tell us about where we come from as Christians?

Read Genesis 32:22-32

- What do you think about the fact that Jacob challenged God to a wrestling match, and then didn’t let him go until he received a blessing?
- Do you think that Jacob was challenging God’s authority?
- If you met Jesus today, would you challenge him to arm wrestle? How do you think people in the church would react to you if you did that?
- What do you think it means for us to wrestle with God?
- Are we wrestling with God when we try to understand a difficult passage of scripture?

Jacob walked away with a limp from his wrestling match with God. What do you think the significance of that detail from the story might be?

- Does wrestling with scripture have consequences?
- Is it always safe?
- Does it cost us something?

Think about this quote from Rachel: “While Christians tend to turn to scripture to end a conversation, Jews turn to scripture to start a conversation. ... This style of engagement not only brings us closer to scripture’s many truths, but closer to one another.”

Week 3

“The Well” and Chapter 2: Deliverance Stories

What do you think about Rachel’s story, “The Well?” Let’s compare Rachel’s version to **Genesis 16**. How is Rachel’s interpretation of this story in the Well different from the narrative in Genesis 16?

Do you have a time in your life that you would describe as a “wilderness?”

- What brought you to that wilderness?
- What lesson did you learn in the wilderness that you still carry with you?
- How did you encounter the presence of God during your time in that wilderness? Did you feel the presence of God at all?
- Did you get out of that wilderness, or are you still in it?
- What eventually brought you out of that wilderness?

What does Rachel mean when she introduces the term “sacred appropriation” in this chapter?

- Think about this quote from Allen Dwight Callahan: “African Americans found the Bible to be both healing balm and poison book. They could not lay claim to the balm without braving the poison.... The antidote to hostile texts of the Bible was more Bible, homeopathically administered to counteract the toxins of the text.” How did the African American community engage in sacred appropriation of the Exodus story?
- What is an example of sacred appropriation from your own life? Is there a passage of the Bible that has taken on deeper personal meaning for you?
- Are there limits to how we should use sacred appropriation with passages in the Bible? Are there places where Christians insert themselves where they shouldn’t?

What does Rachel mean when she introduces the term “dislocated exegesis”, and says “where you read changes how you read?”

- Let’s try this. Read **Psalms 63:1-8**. How might your interpretation of this psalm change if you read it in the thick of the wilderness vs. looking back on a wilderness experience?
- Are there other passages in the Bible that change their meaning depending on how you read them?

When we talk about the Law in church, what is your initial reaction? Is it positive or negative?

- What was the law originally intended for?
- How have passages from the law been used to hurt or oppress others?
- Read **Matthew 22: 37-40**. According to Jesus, what is the purpose of the Law?

What do you think Rachel means when she says the following: “For those who count the Bible as sacred, interpretation is not a matter of *whether* to pick and choose, but *how* to pick and choose. We’re all selective.” Do you agree or disagree?

Week 4

“The Walls” and Chapter 3: War Stories

What do you think about Rachel’s thoughts about war in her brief passage, “The Walls?”

What are your thoughts about this quote from Rachel? “If you really want to understand what makes a community or culture tick, ask the people in it what they believe is worth dying for, or perhaps more significantly, worth killing for.”

What do you think when you hear the term “text of terror?” What texts would you identify as “texts of terror” in scripture?

Let’s look at **Joshua 6**.

- What is the importance of the Jericho story to the narrative of the conquest of Canaan?
- What do you think about verse 21?

Next, let’s look at **Joshua 11:19-20**.

- Is this a command to commit genocide?
- What sort of justifications and explanations have you encountered over the years regarding Israel’s conquest of Canaan? Have you found explanations satisfying? Why or why not?

Let’s look at **Judges 11:29-40**.

- What is your immediate gut reaction to this story?

Is cultural context important when reading these passages?

- Do you think that the authors are embellishing the language used in these passages to emphasize their own importance in these stories?
- Are these stories just hyperbole, or what Joshua Ryan Butler called “ancient trash talk?”

What can we take from these stories about the authors or the people who wrote them?

- What would military victories mean for the nation of Israel and Joshua as a new leader?
- What does the vow that Jephthah makes tell us about how he interpreted his recent military victory? How did this affect his subsequent actions?
- Consider this quote from Peter Enns: “Writing about the past was never simply about understanding the past for its own sake, but about shaping, molding and creating the past to speak to the present.... The Bible looks the way it does because God let his children tell the story.”

Let’s look at **Philippians 2:6-11**.

Rachel says: “The last thing I know is this: If the God of the Bible is true, and if God became flesh and blood in the person of Jesus Christ, and if Jesus Christ is – as theologian Greg Boyd put it – “the revelation that culminates and supersedes all others,” then God would rather die by violence than commit it.... At the heart of the doctrine of the incarnation is the stunning claim that Jesus is what God is like.”

Week 5

“The Debate” and Chapter 4: Wisdom Stories

What do you think about Rachel’s script for the debate? Do you think it is a good interpretation of the book of Job?

- What makes Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Psalms different from all other books of the Bible?
- What do you like about them?
- What drives you nuts about these books?

What is wisdom?

Think about this quote from Rachel: “Wisdom, it seems, is situational. It isn’t just about knowing what to say; it’s about knowing when to say it. And it’s not just about knowing what is true; it’s about knowing when it’s true.”

- Is the “wise thing to do” really contingent on the circumstances?

Let’s look at the following passages:

- Ecclesiastes 3:1-8
- Proverbs 3: 1-12
- Psalm 139

After reading each passage, ask the following questions:

- What is a helpful or appropriate way of using each passage?
- What might be an inappropriate or harmful way to use each passage?
- How do these passages reflect the circumstantial nature of wisdom?

Read Psalm 88 and consider the following questions:

- Why are songs of lament important in the Bible?
- Have you ever been angry with God?
- Did you find comfort or help in any of the passages from the wisdom literature books?
- Are there songs, poems, or scripture verses that help you express your own sadness or frustration?

How do you respond to the idea that the Bible contains contradictions?

Consider this quote from Rachel: “The owner’s manual Bible, with its single prescriptions for all people in all circumstances, just didn’t fit the complexities of actual life.” Can you relate to this quote at all? Why or why not?

How Much Longer By Common Hymnal and Ike Ndolo

In the silence, tell me, can you hear
The voices calling out, of the disappeared?
Broken spirits, dormant dreams
How much longer will justice sleep?
When a lawless heart is the voice we're hearing
We need freedom
How much longer 'til we sing a new song?
How much longer 'til we sing a new song?
Hearts of saints and sinners, too
Both have walked away from the destitute
Call them back to sing as one
A song of freedom now, a song to overcome
Come on brother, lay your weapons down
Where the river of justice rolls and all oppression drowns
It flows with life, love and truth
May the old be washed away and hearts be made anew

Kingdom Come by Common Hymnal and Kierre Bjorn

God, have you abandoned?
Are you still there?
We're hoping and we're waiting
The world that you created
Is in despair
There's war and violence everywhere
Restore in us a new mind
When hatred seems to come
Create in us a pure heart
And let your kingdom come
There are people marching
Hands in the air
They are hurting, they are scared
They are people trying
To understand
Why racial wars are here again
Let your Kingdom come

Week 6

“The Beast” and Chapter 5: Resistance Stories

Let’s start this week by reading Rachel’s poem “The Beast.” What thoughts does this poem bring to mind? What do you think about the last two lines of the poem?

Do you ever feel hopeless or cynical about the injustices you observe in the world around you? Is there anything in the chapter about resistance stories that encourages you?

What do you think of Rachel’s claim that “much of Scripture qualifies as resistance literature?”

- How, according to Old Testament texts, do the Jews view themselves in light of their relationship to God, and in light of their relationship to the world around them?
- Are there similarities or differences in how modern day American Christians perceive their relationship to God and their relationship to the world around them?
- What do you think of the author’s statement, “America’s no ancient Babylon or Rome, but it’s no kingdom of God either?”

What is a prophet?

- Rachel says, “Biblically speaking, a prophet isn’t a fortune-teller or soothsayer who predicts the future, but rather a truth-teller who sees things as they really are – past, present, and future – and who challenges their community to both accept that reality and imagine a better one.” Have you seen or met anyone that is a modern day prophet?

Let’s look at the following passages from the prophets in the Old Testament:

- Isaiah 13:19-22, Isaiah 25:6-12, Amos 5:21-24
- Who are the oppressors/offending parties in each passage? Who is the intended audience for each passage? What common themes do you see among these passages?

Next, look at these apocalyptic passages:

- Daniel 7:1-4, Revelation 13:1-10, Revelation 20:7-10
- What does the term “apocalyptic” mean? How does apocalyptic literature fit under the umbrella of “resistance stories?” What do these beasts represent? Why do you think the authors used symbols like this instead of speaking plainly?

What do you think about Rachel’s perspective on the Book of Esther? Why does it function as a resistance story?

Consider this quote from Rachel: “The story of Esther pulls back the veil on the empire to reveal that behind the golden chairs and packed harems and patriarchal edicts are a bunch of insecure, weak men whose attempts to puff themselves up only make them look silly. It is an empty, foolish power. The emperor has no clothes. ... the power of the empire is just a big show. In the end, the God of Israel – of Abraham, Moses, and Esther – gets the last word, using the weak to humble the powerful.”

Week 7

“The Well” and Chapter 6: Gospel Stories

What did you think about Rachel’s retelling of John chapter 4? Does her version give you new insight into the story at all?

Let’s look at John 9, and look at the Gospel according to the man born blind.

Next, let’s look at Acts 8:26-40, and look at the Gospel according to Paul.

What is the Gospel according to you? That is, what is your “how I encountered Jesus” story?

Think about the following passage from Rachel:

Jesus did not simply die to save us from our sins; Jesus *lived* to save us from our sins. His life and teachings show us the way to liberation. But you can’t fit all that on a bumper sticker. So we try to boil it down to a formula. Four steps. The “Romans Road.” John 3:16. And yet the gospel itself, in its eternal scope and scandalous particularity, defies reduction. Like it or not, the gospel is a story *unleashed*. Even Jesus had trouble keeping a lid on it. According to Matthew and Mark’s accounts, Jesus often asked those he healed not to tell anyone about his miracles, but to no avail. Sure enough, the crowds got so big, Jesus had to flee to the desert to get some privacy. Jesus predicted the gospel would reach people from the east and the west, the north and the south; John described them coming from every tribe, every language, and every nation. There’s just no way you can give this many people a story and expect them to stay “on message.” The gospel fails rather epically at brand management. And that makes some people nervous. That makes *me* nervous. Because it means every Christian gets a testimony, every Christian gets a “gospel according to…” whether you’re Desmond Tutu or Tim Tebow.

How do you feel about this passage? Does this idea make you nervous the way it makes Rachel nervous?

Consider one final quote from Rachel: “The church is not a group of people who believe all the same things; the church is a group of people caught up in the same story, with Jesus at the center.”

Week 8

“The Sea” and Chapter 7: Fish Stories

What do you think about Rachel’s “Choose Your Own Adventure” style story, “The Sea?”

- Which of the two endings did you choose?
- Why did you choose that ending?
- Is there a third option for an ending that you wish you could have chosen? What is it?

What is your favorite miracle story in the Bible?

- Do you have difficulty believing any of the miracle stories in the Bible? Which ones?
- How have you made sense of the Bible’s miracle stories in the past?
- What guidance have you received from faith leaders, family, and friends as you try to make sense of them? Has that advice been helpful or not-so-helpful?

What do you think about this quote from Rachel: “What makes the Bible’s miracle stories so compelling is the idea that God cares about people’s suffering, not simply their ‘spiritual blindness’ or ‘spiritual poverty’ but also their actual blindness and actual poverty.”

Let’s look at the following miracle stories:

- Matthew 14:22-33
- Mark 1:40-45
- Mark 5:1-20
- Mark 5:21-43

What do these miracles teach us about the character of God?

How do these miracles show God caring for the needs of others?

How have you seen people interpret these miracles in either helpful or harmful ways?

What do you think about this quote from Rachel: “The miracles of Jesus prefigure a future in which there is no more suffering, no more death, no more stigmatization, no more exclusion, no more chaos. They show us what it looks like for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven, and they invite us to buy into that future now, with every act of compassion and inclusion, every step toward healing and reconciliation and love. ... The miracles of Jesus aren’t magic tricks designed to awe prospective converts, nor are they tests from the past, meant to sort true believers from doubters. They are instructions, challenges. They show us what to do and how to hope.”

Why is the resurrection different from the other miracle stories of the Bible? What is so important about it?

Week 9

“The Letter” and Chapter 8: Church Stories

What did you think about Rachel’s short story, “The Letter?” Did it make you think differently about the way one of Paul’s letters might have been received by the church it was addressed to?

Have quotes from the Bible’s epistles ever been used to justify cruelty or injustice against you or someone you love?

- How did that affect your view of the Bible?
- How did it affect your view of the apostle Paul?

On page 208 the author writes, “To make peace with the Bible, I had to make peace with Paul.” Can you relate? What is your experience with the writings of Paul?

Let’s read the following passages:

- Colossians 3: 1-17
- Colossians 3:18-4:6
- I Corinthians 14:1-5, 26-40

And let’s ask the following questions after each passage:

- How do you think the church the letter was addressed to would have responded to this passage?
- Are there specific verses or details you think that the church would have struggled with or discussed in particular?
- What’s something in this passage that is valuable to a modern reader?
- What details or verses in this passage provide difficulties for modern readers?
- What’s something in this passage that needs to be contextualized in order to properly understand it?

What Bible story changed the most for you after reading this book? What parts of the Bible are you inspired to explore in more depth?

Let’s read a passage from the epilogue briefly, from page 221, starting with the first full paragraph clear to the end of the page. Does this way of thinking about scripture resonate with you in some way?