

Chasing a God You Don't Want to Catch

Introduction & Chapter 1

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, as we enter this study about you together, open our minds and hearts to a better understanding of you and your purpose for our lives. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

- **Background – Darren Wilson – 44 years old**

- Founder of Wanderlust Productions (film/TV production company)
- Artist in residence at Judson University in IL
- Also wrote:
 - *Finding God in the Bible: What Crazy Prophets Fickle Followers and Dangerous Outlaws Reveal about Friendship with God*
 - *Filming God* – three-year journey filming supernatural realm of God

- **Introduction**

- [xix] Opening paragraph – “I think I always loved God. I just didn't like Him very much. And I certainly didn't trust Him at all.”
 - What do you think Wilson means by not liking God very much?
 - What does he mean by not trusting him?
- [xx] “He is not afraid of your questions, your doubts, or your anger. What He cannot engage with is your pretending.”
 - What are your reactions to this statement?

- **Chapter 1 – The Battlefield of the Mind**

- Wilson talks about checking out during sermons
 - How frequently do you find yourself checking out?
 - Why do you think you do so?
 - Do you consider this a problem with you, the preacher, or the sermon – or is it a problem at all?
- People instructed Wilson to let go of his “head faith” and “let God get hold of his heart”
 - Have you heard or given this same advice?
 - How could it be harmful/helpful?
- [2] Wilson also talks of being judgmental (“As soon as the speaker would make some statement I didn't deem biblical, I'd write off the entire sermon.”)
 - When do you find yourself falling into the trap of being judgmental?
 - What's the difference between “discernment” and “judging”?
- “Faith is about turning your mind in the right direction... less about just believing theological truths and more about making a conscious decision of trust. Trust, in the end, is the essence of faith.”
 - Think of someone you trust implicitly. What is it about them that earns your trust?
 - Who are the trusting figures in the Bible? *Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, David, Stephen, Paul, Apostles*
 - *Hebrews 11:1 - Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*
 - Do you agree that trust is the essence of your faith in God?
 - To what extent do you trust God? What about Him earns your trust?
- Do you ever get the sense that Christianity is being preached as “simply white knuckling it through life until we die, when the *real* fun will begin”?
- Wilson's biggest frustration with God – inability to interact with Him on a physical level

- How much would a more physical encounter with God change you and the way you interact with others?
- [6] “We are not transformed by encounters... We are transformed by the renewing of our minds”
 - What does Wilson mean here?
 - In what ways do you agree/disagree?
- Romans 7:14-25
 - Have a volunteer read, perhaps from *The Message* translation
 - Why would God make us this way?
- Wilson’s initial thinking was that Christian transformation occurred in the moment you accepted Jesus
 - *You obviously need to factor in different journeys*
 - In what ways do you see transformation as an *event*? As a *process*?
- Read Romans 12:12

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

 - How do you know you’ve reached this level of transformation – to be able to test and approve God’s will?
- Other reflections?
- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Italics imply important points or example answers the leader can convey

Chapters 2 & 3

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, sometimes we struggle with the different images of you that appear in the Bible. Help us to continuously strive for an understanding of your true nature. In Christ's holy name we pray. Amen.

- **Chapter 2 – Trusting a Dangerous God**

- What different images come to mind as portrayed in the Bible?
 - Which most closely represents your perspective on him today?
- How much of your life do you feel is targeted at “pleasing God”?
- Do you agree with Wilson that the main thing we should focus on when pleasing God is our level of faith?
- [17] “God cannot reveal Himself to us physically, because if He were to do that our choice to love Him would cease to be a choice at all.”
 - If God were to reveal himself physically, how do you think that would affect our love for him?
- Wilson talks about our similarity in approach as Elijah – waiting for God to take mountain-breaking action, as opposed to a still, small voice of love.
 - Why do you think God approaches us this way?

- **Chapter 3 – The Sin Game of Hide and Seek**

- What are your first memories of the concept of sin?
- In what ways are you more focused on sin these days vs. your youth? Less?
- [24] Wilson outlines several “sin afterhaze” mindsets...
Do you land on any of these more frequently? Are there others?
 - God is ticked off at me
 - I just hurt God
 - God has turned away from me
 - Punishment is looming
 - I may have reached God’s threshold
- If you think the Adam and Eve story is allegorical, what is the point of the original sin story?
- [26-27] Satan’s modus operandi – 1) sow doubt, 2) spread lies with a dusting of truth
 - Wilson then overlays this with world religions (Islam, Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witnesses)
 - He says there is a dusting of truth, but they’re no longer “pure and holy and true.”
 - What’s your reaction to this?
- God wanted Adam and Eve to avoid the fate of sin because the knowledge of good and evil isn’t required to be fulfilled.
 - Do you think you could be fulfilled without such knowledge?
- God’s reaction to Adam and Eve, and the father’s reaction to the prodigal son is to *pursue* them.
 - How have you experienced this sense of pursuit in your life?
 - *The prodigal son’s father subjected himself to shame (running) to prevent his son from experiencing the shame of the community*
 - *Harkens to the shame of the cross*
- Religious-minded have a hard time accepting *grace* because it isn’t *fair*.
 - Is it harder for you to accept grace for others, or for yourself? Why?
- [33] “God desires obedience above all else.”
 - Thoughts?
- [36] Story of David’s sin with Bathsheba and Uriah, and David’s reaction when his child dies
 - God doesn’t want us to wallow in our wretchedness. He wants to bless his friends.
 - Do you think God appreciates a little wallowing?
 - How do you think he wants us to behave in response to our sin?

- Other reflections?
 - **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**
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Chapters 4 & 5

- **Opening Prayer**

Dear Lord, Hell is a very difficult concept for us to grasp. Lead us to a clearer understanding of its meaning and purpose in relation to our lives. In Jesus' holy name we pray. Amen.

- **Chapter 4 – What the Hell?**

- Do you believe in Hell? If so, what is it like? If not, why did Jesus talk about it?
- [39] Wilson's "constants" growing up in church:
 - Be as good as you possibly can
 - Believe the right stuff
 - The goal is salvation
- Are these in line with your raising? Were there any others?
- "I just hoped there would be some free time in heaven, because I wasn't sure I could worship non-stop forever"
 - Do you ever feel this way?
- What message do you think is more effective in our day and age...
 - Do right by God or you're going to burn in Hell
 - God loves you and wants you to come to Him
- Wilson struggles with a loving Father sending his kids to eternal torture because they didn't believe in something they couldn't see; an eternity for ~70 years of bad choices on earth seems to be overkill
 - God is the one doing the judging
 - God knows all
 - It will thus be fair/just
 - Does this work for you?
- [47] Wilson claims that in our culture, consequences for actions are no longer highly valued, and thus weakens accountability
 - In what ways do you agree or disagree?
- Read Romans 9:15-21
 - This plays the "Because I say so" card
 - Do you struggle with this?
 - Wilson explains that God has simply reached the end of what He can explain to us
 - Does this help you deal with this message?
- *Love must be a choice, not programmed into us*
- *Hell is just giving people what they want – an existence without God*
- Has God hidden himself too well for people to see?
 - Read Luke 16:27-31 (Rich man and Lazarus)
 - *If their [rich man's family's] hearts were open to God, Moses and the prophets would be enough*
 - *A physical manifestation wouldn't be enough to convince them*
- Wilson points out that God has left the choice up to us.
 - Has God given this choice to everyone?

- **Chapter 5 – It's Time for a Spanking**

- Wilson describes the "orange chair" in his house to await spanking
 - What methods of discipline did you have growing up?
 - What methods did you practice with your children?

- In what ways have you found yourself trying to “hide” or distance yourself from God?
 - Moses was Wilson’s hero from the Bible – Who is yours?
 - Moses pushes back on God’s call to save the Israelites
 - In reading this story in the past, how has it shaped your image of Moses?
 - What does it reveal about yourself as you put yourself in Moses’s shoes?
 - Exodus 4:13 – “please send someone else” - Moses doesn’t want to obey God.
 - [69] “disobedience is the big no-no if your goal is friendship with God”
 - What’s your reaction to this?
 - Exodus 4:14 – “Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses”
 - Aaron is to do the speaking...pick up your staff and go
 - Does this seem like anger to you?
 - 1 Peter 5:5 – God “opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble”
 - How is humility treated in our society?
 - Wilson recalls Moses’s punishment for ignoring God’s instruction and hitting the rock [twice]
 - What is your reaction to this story?
 - Wilson relays a friend’s counsel that “this was not a punishment as much as it was a mercy”
 - Moses’s pride shows a lack of trust in God.
 - God still protects their friendship
 - Wilson says that his friendship with God is the thing he holds most dear – above family, children, accomplishments
 - Is a friendship with God as important to you?
 - *Moses returns at Jesus’ transfiguration – evidence that God’s punishment was not an eternal sentence since he came into “the promised land” after all*
 - Other reflections?
- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapters 6 & 7

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, sometimes we're hesitant to ask what you truly want from us, and are unsure what it will take to accomplish it when we do. Help us get beyond this hesitancy to realize your purposes for us. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

- **Chapter 6 – What Will He Take From Me?**

- Review the backstory to “It Is Well with My Soul”
 - Lost son; business failure to Chicago Fire; wife and kids on sunk liner; wrote hymn at spot where the liner went down
 - What is your reaction upon hearing the backstory?
- Do you ever feel that God is putting us to the test by throwing challenges in our way?
- God puts Abraham to the test. Why?
- [81] “What exactly makes a man walk in this level of obedience to God without even a moment’s hesitation? One word: *friendship*.”
 - Do you agree/disagree?
- Later in the chapter, Wilson suggests that obedience to God is the key to true *friendship* with Him.
 - Do you consider your relationship to God a friendship?
- *Parable of the talents* – *God gives us the right portion for us to handle at the moment in time.*
- Wilson talks about people reacting positively to his first film – “...to want more from their Christian faith than just a God-themed country club.”
 - In what ways is our Christian community like a God-themed country club?
- [85] “If He continually asks you to do things, and you continually say no, eventually He’s going to move on to someone else.”
 - Does God lose patience with us?
- Abraham was proven righteous because he believed in God.
 - Do you feel righteous due to your faith?
- [87] Wilson thought the Bible was boring to read as a kid.
 - What was the very first Bible you remember holding in your hands and reading yourself?
 - What are your earliest impressions of the Bible?
- [89] God hates it when we lie to him to make ourselves look better than we are.
 - Do you find yourself lying to God?
- Sodom and Gomorrah
 - What are the key takeaways you’ve had from this story in the past?
 - *Rescue mission for Lot and his family*
 - *God didn’t need to tell Abraham, but did so out of friendship*
- The Final Exam
 - God’s test of Abraham with Isaac parallels God sacrificing His own Son Jesus
 - God spoke to Wilson, letting him know this, and that unlike with Isaac, He actually went through with it
 - Had you ever thought of the parallel here?

- **Chapter 7 – What Will He Make Me Do?**

- [97] As a Christian youth, did you find yourself being urged to “pretend that you think God and Christianity are as amazing as everyone else seems to think they are”?
- [98] Wilson’s early impression was that “being a missionary kind of sucked.”
 - Do you feel a sense of responsibility/call to do missionary work?
 - Is this something shared by all Christians or only those with associated skills?

- [99] How do you reconcile the apparent contradictions in:
 - Matthew 11:30 – “For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”
 - Luke 14:26-27 – “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”
 - [101] Wilson states that Jesus isn’t trying to force you to do something that terrifies you, but rather is looking to separate you from your idols.
 - From what “idols” have you found Jesus trying to pull you away?
 - [106] Why do you think God didn’t just find another prophet when Jonah ran away from his task?
 - [108] “one of the most destructive reactions I’ve seen is the idea that somehow God cares more about your ‘heart’ (desire) than your obedience. This is flat-out not true.”
 - What are your reactions to this statement by Wilson?
 - [109] *Wilson makes the closing observation that if you’re looking for evidence of God asking us to do things we don’t want to do, just look at Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. [Luke 22:42]*
 - Other reflections?
- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapter 8

- **Opening Prayer**

Dear Lord, we frequently hear stories of faithful people who are miraculously saved by your hand. We also struggle with stories where people are not as fortunate. Help us to better deal with this disparity and gain an appreciation for your care and control of the bigger picture. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

- **Chapter 8 – God's Love is Like the Lottery**

- [111] "Most of the people I'm looking at probably don't know Jesus"
 - Do you ever struggle with similar thoughts when you are in crowds?
 - Are you **saddened** by their predicament, **grateful** for yours, **confused** by the seeming disparity, or something else?
- Wilson wanted to make a film entirely inspired by the Holy Spirit.
 - Have you ever sought to be completely led and directed by the Holy Spirit in any of your endeavors? Describe it.
- [113] "I've found that often He will be vague, ...I think He delights in giving me some leeway to go places I would like to see."
 - How does this compare with the way you interact with children?
- [114+] Story of being led to Monaco and a fleeting image of a brown boat and the need to get aboard...going there on a shoestring budget...rain...meeting bar owner...storm stops...owner's brown boat...witness to her aboard boat
 - Where do you think God's hand was in Wilson's story?
 - Have you ever experienced God speaking to you in a vision? Describe it.
 - Of the thousands of people in Monaco needing a touch, the bar owner received it. Story of two car wrecks – one child survived and one died.
 - Do you have a problem with this apparent favoritism?
- Story of Russian survivor of submarine mishap, and being pulled from smoky compartment by strong hands when apparently no one was there. Story of girl who fell overboard... leg hit propeller... entangled in ropes... screamed out "Jesus"... strong hands unentangled and pushed her to surface
 - When you hear stories of intervention such as these, how do you react?
- There are many other stories where victims aren't saved, but rather die.
 - Wilson points out Jesus' response to this in Luke 13:1-5 [have someone read aloud]
 - What is Jesus' point?
 - *"Accidents happen, and bad people do bad things. A tragedy is not divine judgment on an individual."*
- The Forgotten Element – free will
 - *Love is risky and must be chosen in complete freedom*
 - *God wants us to choose to love Him*
 - *That is why he remains invisible*
- From our perspective, if something bad happens to a stranger, it's a *senseless tragedy*, but if it happens to someone we love, it can be a *spiritual crisis*.
 - From God's perspective, he feels the same with everyone since he's deeply invested in all his children
 - If that's the case, why do you think he chooses to intervene in only some cases?

- Romans 8:28 – *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*”
 - How do you interpret this passage?
 - [126] Wilson says he has no idea why God intervenes in some cases, but not others – and that this is the root of faith
 - “This is where faith gets its potency, because faith with no opposition isn’t really faith at all.”
 - In what ways does this ring true for you?
 - “But true faith is what you do when nothing makes sense anymore. That’s the faith that moves mountains”
 - What’s your reaction to this? Is this *blind faith*, and is blind faith a good thing?
 - We’re just going to have to trust him [God] at his word.
 - Might this be at the heart of why some people can’t accept God?
 - Other reflections?
- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapters 9 & 10

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we don't always understand your purposes, but we have faith in your ultimate plan. As we ponder your Son's story, inspire us with your Holy Spirit and help us to emulate the love and empathy you modeled for us. In Jesus' precious name we pray. Amen.

- **Chapter 9 – He'll Make Things Difficult Just to Prove a Point**

- Review the Story of Gideon
 - How would you characterize Gideon?
 - In what ways do you see yourself in Gideon's story?
 - *Questioning God / looking for proof*
 - *Feelings of inadequacy or lack of confidence*
 - *Ultimately obeying out of faith*
- [136] "...it's the things you fear the most that are going to be at the heart of God's call on your life."
 - Has this been true in your experience?
- [137] "nothing taught me more about how to tell a good story than reading a boatload of bad stories"
 - What does this tell you about Wilson?
- "Gideon wanted to see God move"
 - Do you share that sentiment today?
- Witch doctor story
 - *Filming in India; man who often heard the Lord speaking in an audible voice*
 - *While there, God gave the man a name and address (of witch doctor)*
 - *Decided to go to him*
 - *Later, awakened at 2am by "demonic atmosphere"... terror/dread*
 - *Arrived at address and see the man in fear of them because two hours earlier he had "lost his powers"*
 - Reactions to the story?
- God's invisibility is a hindrance to belief
 - God catches us right before we fall to momentarily rip the invisibility cloak
 - What do you think of this analogy?
- "Friendship, faith, trust – that's always the endgame for God. Always."
 - What do you think is God's endgame?

- **Chapter 10 – He is Selfish**

- Are there any things in God's nature that strike you as selfish?
- What are your experiences with memorizing Bible verses, either in childhood or as an adult?
- [151] Wilson wonders whether Jesus' popularity was more a function of his healings as opposed to his preachings.
 - Do you think Jesus intentionally used healings as a way to draw more people to him? Why or why not?
- What are ways you can keep your approach to Bible reading from becoming just a task to complete on your daily to-do list?
- [155] "God is always presenting us with moments of choice for our faith. He has often given me peace for a situation or a decision, but rarely does He give me full clarity of what is to come. Clarity is not God's currency; faith is."
 - What does Wilson mean here, and do you agree?
- [160] Wilson states that Jesus cried not because Lazarus was dead, but because of the emotions experienced by his other friends.
 - What's your reaction to this explanation of "Jesus wept" as reflecting his empathy for us?

- Other reflections?
 - **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**
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Chapter 11

- **Opening Prayer**

Dear Lord, sometimes we get frustrated when we don't hear an answer from you. Open our ears and our hearts so that we might better listen to your message for us. In Christ's holy name we pray. Amen.

- **Chapter 11 – He is Silent**

- “Friends who talk to God”
 - What is “talking to God” like to you?
- In what ways does God speak to you? *Dreams? Thoughts? Other people?*
- Like Wilson, do you really want to hear a “shout rather than a whisper”?
- “Great art is almost never overt”
 - What is an example of great art to you? Why is it great?
 - Did you have to work to understand its meaning? Do you need help to interpret it?
 - Do you like abstract art? Why or why not?
- In what ways is the Bible like great art to you?
- Wilson’s greatest gift ever received was a laptop instead of a rudimentary word processor
 - Do you have a “greatest gift” ever received?
 - What made it great?
 - *Wilson says it’s a combination of surprise and being costly to the giver*
- What do you think about Wilson’s observation that our Christian experience today is steeped in the overt rather than recognizing God’s hiddenness? (*preachers teach us clear messages, movies/stories do the thinking for the audience*)
 - When was the last time a movie, book, or story forced you to think about the message rather than just handing it to you?
- Story of Joseph
 - What have your impressions been of Joseph?
 - What do you think is the point of including Joseph’s life in the Bible?
- During the good times in your life, do you have a sense that God is “super happy” with you?
- God waited two years before giving Pharaoh the dream that eventually sprung Joseph
 - How do you deal with God’s apparent silence in times of despair?
- Could God’s silence be an encouragement to seek him out in a different way?
 - What are ways you can seek God? *Prayer, Bible study, conversation with Christians, participation in service*
 - Do you think seeking God in different ways is important to Him?
- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapter 12

- **Opening Prayer**
Amen.
- **Chapter 12 – The Only Trust You Need to Know**
 - Two primary “God is” statements in the Bible
 - 1 John 4:8 – “God is love”
 - 1 John 1:5 – “God is light”
 - Do any others come to mind?
 - *Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd”*
 - *What about all the “I am” statements?*
 - *Way, truth, life, resurrection, door, gatekeeper, vine, bread of life, light of the world*
 - *Exodus 20:5 “...I...am a jealous God”*
 - *Spirit, The Holy One, Alpha & Omega, almighty, creator, infinite, all powerful, all knowing, ever present, unchangeable, merciful, mighty to save, redeemer teacher*
 - Why do we try to make God so simple?
 - *Even Wilson says “...understanding more of God is like pulling on an infinite string – you’re never going to get to the end.”*
- **1 Corinthians 13**
 - Read the chapter aloud
 - How many had this read at their weddings? Why did you choose it?
 - Give me an example of each attribute of love – big or small, both for God and that you’ve experienced in your life...
 - Patient
 - “every major blessing that has happened to me came simply because I was obedient to what the Lord was asking me to do. Every one.”
 - Do you agree?
 - We’re grateful for God’s patience with us, but it feels like “indulgence” when he extends it to others we feel need “a kick in the pants”
 - Examples?
 - Kind
 - God’s kindness “brings us to our knees” and turns us away from sin
 - Have you experienced this? Can you share an example?
 - “He’s gentle with us. There is a reason sinners flocked to Jesus.”
 - Why is a sinner more likely to follow someone who is gentle?
 - Does Not Envy
 - Does Not Boast / He is Not Arrogant
 - Is Not Rude
 - In what ways are Christians “by far...the rudest people on the planet”?
 - Does Not Insist on His Own Way
 - Is Not Irritable
 - Is Not Resentful
 - Does Not Rejoice in Wrongdoing, but Rejoices with the Truth
 - Bears/Endures All Things

- Tolerance - “To some Christians it’s become a dirty word that implies a weak view on sin. To others it is a lifeboat to cling to in order to avoid the judgment of others for their choices. To others...”
 - In what ways do you see “tolerance” as negative or positive?
 - Believes/Hopes All Things
 - Never Ends
 - Other reflections?
-
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