

Refined By Fire
Book Discussion Guide

Chapter 1

If you were in the same situation that Colonel Brian Birdwell found himself in, what would be the first three things you would think about?

Why were Brian's thoughts of dying somewhat bittersweet?

Chapter 2

What led Brian to believe Natalie Olgetree was a Christian?

Why do you think Natalie was able to remain calm and focused as medical staff hurriedly worked on Brian in the triage area, surrounded by rubble and death?

Why did the simple words, "*Sir, this is Major Collison. I'm here,*" mean so much to Brian?

Chapter 3

Why didn't Mel understand—or accept—the gravity of Brian's medical condition at the outset of his ordeal?

Why didn't Mel want to medically retire Brian? What reasons do you think there might have been in addition to the administrative side of it?

Why did Mel feel so comforted when the Clarkes—total strangers—invited her to their prayer circle?

Chapter 4

Why do you think the staff at Walter Reed were so matter-of-fact about Brian's condition and assumed he would die?

Why didn't Dr. Jordan express Brian's survival chances in percentages?

Chapter 5

Why was Jan Menig's 9/11 story so helpful to Mel?

Explain in your own words what the mystery that is the power of prayer means to you.

Chapter 6

Why did President Bush ask for Mel's permission to see Brian?

Put yourself in Mel's place when President and Mrs. Bush visited Brian. How would you have reacted? What would you have said?

What were the immediate and broader messages that Colonel Rota was sending to Specialist Pena when he corrected her regarding proper respect to him and addressing Brian by his rank?

When General Van Antwerp told Brian that Cheryle and Sandi had perished in the attack on the Pentagon, Brian immediately felt remorse, pain, and guilt in spite of his own great physical pain. What does this tell you about the breadth and depth of Brian's faith and his desire to share it with others?

Chapter 7

Why was it important for Brian to be able to think of and sometimes worry about seemingly trivial things, such as laundry pick-up, and cancellation of his government credit card?

Why do you think Brian was so concerned about Lieutenant Colonel McKinnon?

Chapter 8

Why did General Peake tell Mel that it was important for Matt to see Brian, even in the condition he was in?

Have you ever lost a close friend to sudden death? Describe how you felt when you heard about his or her death. What feelings still linger with you?

Why does God want us to lean on Him when things are at their worst?

Chapter 9

The maggots that Dr. Jeng used to clean Brian's arms of dead tissue are a marvelous example of God's infinite wisdom and grace in creating the smallest creatures to help man. Can you think of one or two other living things that outwardly seem useless, but in fact help humans?

Chapter 9 is extremely graphic in describing the numerous surgical and non-surgical treatments that became a part of Brian's life while he was in the ICU. He endured physical agony that most of us will never know. Why do you think God would allow this to happen to one of His own?

Chapter 10

Even though Brian and Mel gave their lives to Christ, they both initially had difficulty learning to accept God's grace and developing deep, personal relationships with Him. Why do you think this happened?

Brian and Mel's "courtship" was more traditional than we often see today; they took time to get to know each other, and their relationship wasn't based solely on physical attributes. Discuss what is good and right about this kind of "romancing."

Brian felt pressured to receive orders that would place him at a command and in a very favorable position for selection to Colonel. How would you handle this type of career pressure, based on your obedience to God?

Chapter 11

In spite of his severe and extensive wounds and burns, Brian never once pitied himself. How was he able to understand the nature of things—the attack on the Pentagon, his injuries, deaths of his friends, and his long road to full recuperation—without overwhelming self-pity or anger?

The Old Testament gives many examples of God’s judgment on civilizations, cities, and individuals: Adam and Eve, the Great Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, to name a few. Do you believe God is still exacting his judgment on us in the form of disease, terrorist attacks, sudden death, and other forms of physical and personal loss? Why or why not?

How were Brian and Mel able to see through this immense tragedy and concentrate on God’s love and grace?

Chapter 12

The ICU staff nicknamed Mel “The Pit Bull” because of her tenacity and assertiveness in ensuring her husband had the best possible care. If your spouse or other loved one was in Brian’s place, how would you have handled it?

Why do you think Brian’s first words after he had his tracheotomy plugged were “*I’m tired*” and not “*I love you*”?

Chapter 13

What kind of testimony do you think Brian and Mel have? In what ways are their testimonies alike? How are they different? In broad terms, what do you think each of them talks about when they present their testimony?

Given the entire scope and scale of Brian’s injuries, his daily battle against pain and depression, and Mel’s emotional suffering, in what ways do you think these things glorified God?

Chapter 14

On their way home from his first “day pass” from the hospital, Brian wanted to drive up close to the Pentagon and see the damage, but then changed his mind as Mel drove by the building. Why wasn’t it important for Brian to see the damage up close?

In the context of Brian’s ordeal, what did he mean when he said that he had “waited on God, and He proved faithful”?

Chapter 15

How did Mel cope with the overwhelming demands of attending to Brian and being “on call” 24 hours a day?

If you were Brian, how would you begin to thank Mel for her constant support, her positive attitude in the face of tremendous odds, and her ability to take charge of innumerable details and still provide strength and leadership to her family during his hospitalization and recuperation?

Chapter 16

What do you think were the most important points that Brian and Mel wanted to share with the public through the media about their ordeal?

Chapter 17

Why do you think Mel kept a journal? Have you ever kept one? Why or why not?

How did comparing his suffering to Christ's suffering help Brian through times of pain and affliction?

Chapter 18

Why was it so important for Brian to return to work?

Why was it essential for Brian to stand at the spot where he had been when the aircraft penetrated his work area?

Chapter 19

How did Brian use the word *soldier* to encourage and counsel burn victims?

In what ways do you think Brian and Mel benefited from speaking with other burn victims?

Chapter 20

Where was God during the attack on the Pentagon? When people say that He was not there, what examples can Brian provide that show God *was* there, looking out for him and others?

Contrast a humanistic, non-Christian view of God's presence—or absence—during the attack on the Pentagon with a believer's faith, understanding and assurance that God was in the midst of Brian's most horrible moments.

Chapter 21

Why, after the nearly indescribable pain, suffering, and permanently altered life that Brian and Mel had thrust upon them, do they not feel hatred or bitterness toward those who brought massive death and destruction to the United States on September 11, 2001?