

Total Abandon
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Book Discussion Guide

Foreword

Dr. Joseph Stowell ends his Foreword with this challenge: “It is my prayer that because you have read this book, you will be far more willing to live courageously and with a fresh commitment to the high calling of being a follower of Christ . . . regardless.” Do you believe that the world is more dangerous for Christians today? What things have taken place worldwide that support your opinion?

At the beginning of the book Andrew Murray is quoted: “Come out for God and say: ‘Lord, anything for Thee.’ . . . He will teach you what it means.” Have you ever prayed that type of prayer? How has it been answered?

Chapter 1: A World Ends

The story begins with Gary answering the devastating phone call about Bonnie’s murder. Have you ever received a phone call that changed your life instantaneously? Can you remember any of the details surrounding that moment?

Throughout this book are journal entries that Bonnie, Gary, and other people wrote. Do you journal? What would you say are the overall benefits of journaling? Can you remember a specific instance when your journaling was critical? When it revealed something you hadn’t realized about yourself?

Chapter 2: A School, a City, and a Woman

Gary writes letters to his future wife—a person he hasn’t met yet. Have you ever written one or more similar letters? Did an actual person eventually receive it?

Do you agree with Gary’s approach to dating—to only date the person you are certain you will marry? Do you believe that God brings the right person into our lives, even if we don’t specifically pray for that to happen?

Chapter 3: There Must Be More

Did you go to a Christian camp as a child? What memories do you have of that experience? Many children make their first commitment to follow Jesus at camp. Was that true for you? Why do you think that happens so often?

As a teenager, Gary rebelled against the church and “religious” hypocrites, although he still believed in Jesus. Did you have a similar rebellious stage? How did your family react?

Why do you think Gary's youth leader, Aden, stuck with him? Did you have a youth leader or other adult mentor who was always there for you? Were there specific ways they showed God's love to you? How did their investment pay off? Have you ever thanked them?

Three separate events helped Gary become more missions-minded: the field trip to the MV *Logos*, the challenge by Melody Green, and the movie, *The Killing Fields*. Have there been one or more events in your life that gave you spiritual direction? Did you realize it at the time that it happened?

Chapter 4: An Adventurer for Christ

In his first evangelistic outreach in Austria, Gary came face to face with Christians from different church backgrounds being overtly hostile to each other. Have you ever encountered this? How did you deal with it? What advice would you give to someone who may encounter this?

At the end of the chapter, Gary writes a poem dedicated to a homeless man who "lives" on the "L" platform in Chicago. In the poem, Gary poses the question, "What drives a man to surrender proudly without money to this place? Perhaps this is the only way someone will listen." What goes through your mind when you see a homeless person? Have you had any memorable incidents with a homeless person?

Chapter 5: A Soul on the Edge

Andrea Arzikakis, Bonnie's mentor, appreciated her friend's effervescence and joy. What do your family and friends appreciate the most about you?

When Bonnie left for her summer of ministry in the Philippines, she said she didn't believe in God any longer. Have you ever dealt with a similar crisis of faith? Or been close to someone who had? Was your approach to reconnecting that person to God similar to Andrea's?

Chapter 6: The Oregon Trail

Gary and Bonnie, now married, were inspired by a line penned by James Joyce: "Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age." What are you passionate about? Have you seen your passions fulfilled?

Chapter 7: Eat Sand!

What did you think of the cryptic e-mail message that Mike Hack sent Gary and Bonnie? Do you think, like some of Gary and Bonnie's friends, that the couple's decision to go to the Middle East was hasty? Why or why not?

On page 58, Gary doesn't mince words about the difficulties of being a missionary. Do you think his honesty was beneficial or detrimental to their

ministry? Do you feel that missionaries should avoid countries that are potentially volatile?

Gary describes Muslims as “people like us—people who sleep, laugh, cry, pay bills, work, have kids.” Do you share that view of Muslims? Why is that easy or difficult for you to do?

Have you ever “dialogued” someone into God’s kingdom? Was that a long process? Did you learn anything about yourself through that process?

Chapter 8: Love in a Time of War

Being in a predominantly Muslim country at the time it happened, the Witherrals’ experience on September 11, 2001, was probably quite different than what most of us went through that day. Where were you that morning? How did you get the news about the tragedy? Did what happen change your life in any way?

Do you think that Gary and Bonnie’s decision to stay in Lebanon was the sensible thing to do? If you were in that situation would you too have “stayed no matter what”?

Chapter 9: Life is Hard, But God is Good

On what would turn out to be their last night together, Gary and Bonnie recalled their wedding vows and told the other spouse how grateful they were to have them in their life. Have you unknowingly had “a last conversation” with someone that in retrospect turned out to be a precious gift? Please explain.

Chapter 10: Laying It All Down

Gary’s life seemed a blur in the immediate aftermath of Bonnie’s death. But that night (as described on pages 99 and 100), God dramatically revealed Himself in the midst of Gary’s anguish. Have you ever felt God’s presence so vividly? Was it an answer to a specific prayer?

Chapter 11: A Princess of the Kingdom

With the world’s cameras focused on him, Gary boldly forgave his wife’s unknown killer. In your own experience, have you forgiven someone for an “unforgivable act”? Do you need to?

Chapter 12: A Long Journey

The night of Bonnie’s funeral, Gary gathered his closest male friends together for “the fellowship of the fire” (recounted on pages 114 and 115), a unique face-off with grief.

If you have suffered loss in your life, what step(s) have you taken to help the healing process begin?

Chapter 13: The Astonishment of His Grace

With the help of Dr. Allan Adams, Gary explains the universal stages of crisis (pages 126-127) and his response to them. Do you resonate with Gary's reactions?

If a grief story has been part of your life, how have your reactions been the same as or different from Gary's?

Chapter 14: To the Limits!

Gary begins this chapter describing his favorite "quiet places" where he is rejuvenated. Do you have one or more quiet places you love going to? What draws you to that specific place?

Reflecting on how rapidly the world is changing, Gary says, "Clearly, the world believes that anyone who calls himself a missionary must be wacko." What's the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of missionaries? Do you think the whole concept of missions needs to change to be effective? What changes are you aware of that have been implemented? What changes do you think still need to take place?