

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

George MacDonald

by

C. S. Lewis

George MacDonald is C. S. Lewis's attempt to present the extensive work of George MacDonald, one of his great literary influences. Why focus an entire book on MacDonald, whom Lewis calls "my master" (p. xxxvii)? "This collection," Lewis says, "was designed not to revive MacDonald's literary reputation but to spread his religious teaching" (p. xxxiii). The excerpts Lewis presents are taken from MacDonald's sermons, and he hopes they will do for readers what they did for Lewis himself—"to convert, even to baptize my imagination" (p. xxxviii). We hope these discussion questions, though touching on only a portion of the 365 excerpts, play a helpful role in your discovery of your religious imagination.

1. Have you ever thought about the Bible as being "wronged" by being overly revered and not treated primarily as a vehicle to lead us to Jesus, as George MacDonald says it should be (p. 6, excerpt 10)?

2. MacDonald asserts that committing murder in a moment of passion is less evil than refusing to forgive someone: “The latter is the heart’s choice. It is spiritual murder” (p. 7, excerpt 12). Do you agree? Why or why not?
3. What do you think of the idea that love for your neighbor is so important that without it you can’t “believe that God is willing, yea wanting, to forgive [you]” (pp. 7–8, excerpt 13)?
4. How do you think the miracle of the fish and bread in Matthew 14:18–20 took place? Could it be that it was a “hastening of appearances”? MacDonald suggests that God isn’t contained by time, so an act that required time in our minds happened in an instant (pp. 14–15, excerpt 26; p. 52, excerpt 99). Have you considered that God’s time and our time might be different? Aside from miracles, in what other ways might we see God working in a different type of time?
5. MacDonald believes that God provides, through our free will, the choice for us to love him (pp. 20–21, excerpt 37). Do you agree that free will is of such importance that the freer a person is, the stronger that person’s bond to God?
6. What do you suppose MacDonald means when he writes, “Our Lord never thought of being original” (p. 23, excerpt 43)?
7. “Man is not made for justice from his fellow, but for love, which is greater than justice” (p. 28, excerpt 51).

Why then is it so easy to want justice and yet so difficult to love sometimes? What might it look like in your life to practice love over justice?

8. If God is most interested in our “inward part” of a good heart and not simply “notions of good things, or even good actions” (p. 29, excerpt 54), how then should we reorient our devotion and discipline to be wholly devoted to Jesus?
9. “The next hour, the next moment, is as much beyond our grasp and as much in God’s care, as that a hundred years away.” MacDonald is picking up on the truth expressed in Matthew 6:34 and later in Philippians 4:6, that we ought to worry only about today and be anxious about nothing (pp. 39–41, excerpts 74–78). Do you find it challenging not to worry about tomorrow? What helps you manage this anxiety?
10. Losing things is part of life. It’s the “mercy of God,” says MacDonald. “It comes to teach us to let them go” (pp. 42–43, excerpt 81). Why is it difficult to live life lightly, caring most for the things of God and focusing on loving people?
11. MacDonald presents prayer in various ways: as confession, as request for the miraculous, as reliance on a God who intimately cares for us, and as a way to bring us in step with his righteousness (pp. 45–50, excerpts 87–94; p. 54, excerpts 103–4). Do you pray? If so, do you find yourself favoring one type of prayer more than the others, or are you able to find a balance?

12. “There is no heaven with a little hell in it,” MacDonald says, “no plan to retain this or that devil in our hearts or our pockets” (p. 59, excerpt 112). Do you agree that it has to be so black and white, all in or all out? Why is it difficult to surrender our whole selves in the call to holiness, to heaven?
13. Does natural science work “with its back” to God and his revelation? MacDonald seems to think so (p. 94, excerpt 185). Has the relationship between God and natural science changed since the late nineteenth century? If so, is the closer companionship between science and Christianity problematic or enlightening?
14. MacDonald writes, “One who went to the truth by mere impulse would be a holy animal, not a true man” (p. 98). Why did God permit humanity to have free will? Do you agree with MacDonald’s conclusion in excerpts 192, 201, and 239 that our righteousness lies in our ability to choose God (pp. 98, 102–3, excerpt 118)?
15. Why is it difficult to be a “full-grown Christian” or, as MacDonald explains, one who “feels joy” for God and others before oneself (pp. 114–15, excerpt 231)? Can you think of people in your life who exemplify finding joy in God and others before themselves? What does that look like, and how can we learn from them?
16. “There is no word to represent that which is not God” (p. 123, excerpt 253). What does MacDonald mean by this statement? Do you agree or disagree?

17. In many excerpts (see 157–159 and 300, specifically), MacDonald comes across as self-deprecating and conscious of his need for God and of his own inadequacies: “I sickened at the sight of Myself” (p. 142, excerpt 300). How does this constant refrain reflect the life of a believer and the call to be like Christ? What are some ways that we can try to forget ourselves and focus more on God (p. 142, excerpt 300; pp. 81–83, excerpts 157–59)?
18. Those who believe in Jesus for the first time are ready to follow him as soon as they hear him call. Those who have believed for years often want to examine Jesus’s call, and when they find he is not like their conception of him, they “turn their backs” (pp. 144–45, excerpt 306). How do we maintain the freshness of new faith and not drift into forming a Jesus to our own liking?
19. Is someone who complains about God closer to God than someone who is simply indifferent (p. 167, excerpt 359)?
20. Did you know much about George MacDonald’s religious beliefs before reading this book? If so, what has Lewis’s collection of his writings illuminated for you? Or if not, what will you take away from this collection?