

**BONUS STUDY GUIDE FOR DIGGING DEEPER
INTO THE ALLEGORY OF
ABBY AS THE AMERICAN CHURCH**

Chapter 1 – Surprise Party

- 1.) Did you notice Josh's surprise birthday party was on December 25th? How do American Christians celebrate Jesus' birthday? How do you think he would like for them to celebrate his birthday? Do you think Jesus would appreciate your Christmas traditions or was he an after-thought when you established them?
- 2.) How about non-Christians? In light of this allegory, do you think that Josh would want Abby to force others to acknowledge or celebrate his birthday? How do you think the American church or American Christians could lovingly invite non-Christians into their celebration of Christ's birth?

Chapter 2 – The Happiness Project

- 1.) Twisstale and Ariam both emphasize the importance of the narrative that Abby believes. What narrative would you say that the American church believes about itself? In what ways has it changed from 400 years ago until today? What similarities and differences do you see between the American Church and Abby in this regard?
- 2.) Americans love their self-help and improvement projects, and Abby is no exception. What do you think of Abby's happiness commandments—especially the three she came up with herself: act the way I want to feel, remember things that bring me joy, and connect meaningfully with others? Do you think that following these commandments leads to happiness? Do you think most American Christians believe that? What do you believe leads to happiness?

Chapter 3 – Lucas

- 1.) If Abby represents the American church in the allegory, who or what do you think Lucas represents? Who attempts to lure Christians away from their first love and whispers pernicious lies in their ears that Christ doesn't appreciate them or even like them?
- 2.) Do you think picturing yourself as the bride of Christ would change the way you interact with Him—not just “Jesus loves me” in a generic way of Jesus loving everyone in the world, but Jesus choosing you, pursuing you, committed to you, sacrificing to cover your sins, and desiring an intimate, faithful relationship with you?

Chapter 4 – Ivy

- 1.) Abby was surprised by Josh's father's appearance. Abby writes, *“I had envisioned an imposing silver-haired old man with a Charlton Heston voice, or maybe a slick Gordon-Gecko tycoon in an Armani suit. He was neither. I don't know why I didn't think he would resemble his son.”* How do you envision God? Has that vision of God changed over the time as you have gotten to know Him better?
- 2.) As many parts of the book do, the story of Josh's proposal of marriage to Abby works on two levels—micro and macro:
 - a. Micro: Like Abby, have you ever personally said “yes” to Christ at some point in your life? Have you ever felt Him asking you to? Was your experience similar to Abby's? Was it a hard decision or did you agree gladly to give up your old life for what you received in return?
 - b. Macro: Viewing Abby as the American church, how do you now read this passage differently?

I would have followed him to the end of the earth. In fact, I kind of did. For heaven's sake, I gave up a chance to stay in England and moved with him to the east coast instead. If that's not love, I don't know what is. But I never looked back, not for a second. Not even when we lived in a tiny shoebox of a house the first year. It was so drafty and cold that first winter that I thought I'd never be warm again, but we'd just snuggle closer at night on our twin mattress on the floor, and I'd thank God again this wonderful man had chosen me.

Now we live in a great big house in the middle of the country, have raised two beautiful children, and enjoy the financial resources to do most of the things we like (including hire Ruthie to help). But I miss those days when I never doubted Josh's love. When I talk to him now, it feels like an information dump between appointments on my part while he politely counts the seconds until he can get back to whatever he was doing. We sleep on opposite sides of a giant king bed, waking and sleeping on our own schedules.

Do you think this is an accurate depiction of the way the American church started compared to what it is today?

Chapter 5 – Eden

- 1.) Abby resents the fact that Josh doesn't enjoy the same things she does. What things do you think the American church enjoys that Christ does not?
- 2.) Like all humans, Abby isn't always a reliable narrator. In this chapter, she describes Josh as distant, disapproving, and judgmental. Knowing what you know now about Josh from the finale of the book—that he was working to cover and redeem Abby's failings throughout their marriage—what advice would you give to Abby?
- 3.) Who or what do you think Eden represents?

Chapter 6 – Victor

Abby's stalker, Victor, represents sin: *"You never think of someone as a stalker. I met Victor long before Josh. Let me be clear—I never dated him. I only talked to him. He seemed harmless enough, interesting even, but that first conversation was enough to let him into my life, and then I couldn't get him out. A chance conversation turned into long emails, regular texts, then phone calls. Soon his ridiculously long messages began to seem manic instead of intriguing, his persistence invasive instead of flattering, and his talk of the future downright frightening. When he starting coming over to my house uninvited, I knew I had a problem."*

- 1.) Realizing that Victor represents the enslaving sins that Christ freed Abby from, what sins does this passage and this chapter remind you of in your own life or in the history of the American church?

- 2.) Most of us know what personal sin and personal repentance look like, but what is corporate sin? Does it exist? What does it look like? What would corporate repentance look like?
- 3.) What do you think Abby's single years, her years before she met Josh or committed to him, represent?

Chapter 7 – Subterfuge

Abby's friends represent major influences on the American church. Eden represents materialism, and in this chapter the demons use her and Abby's new preoccupation with house hunting to deepen the divide in Abby and Josh's relationship. *"Josh isn't encouraging my new habit. He won't go to open houses or even look at listings with me. Big surprise: he once again doesn't like to do the things I do."*

- 1.) Can you see ways materialism and consumerism has seeped into your own life and perhaps separated you from Christ and the things He loves? How about in the American church? How do you think that the influence of materialism and consumerism have separated American Christians from the core of the Gospel message over the past few centuries?
- 2.) *"We aren't bothered by whether she gets a new house or not, by the way,"* Ariam clarifies for Corel. *"Our Lord is not more glorified by his children living in austerity than by them living in abundance. He cares more about the condition of Abby's heart than the size of her home."* While materialism is a danger, can physical things ever bring us closer to God? What are some examples?
- 3.) Abby writes, *"I brag now about my pioneer roots like they're a badge of honor, but the truth is there are lots of dark places in my past that are nothing to be proud of."*
What do you think she is talking about? What are some of the dark places in the history of the American church?
What about you? What some of the dark places in your past? Do you still feel guilt or shame about those places? Have you tried to camouflage them with false pride like Abby? Or has Christ redeemed them? Why or why not?

Chapter 8 – Operation Subterfuge

- 1.) Abby says it has always bothered her that Josh isn't more patriotic. Do you think Jesus is patriotic? Have you ever struggled with Christian nationalism (trying to untangle your love of country from your love of God)? Do you think the American church struggles with this? What are some examples?
- 2.) Abby writes, *"I tried to talk to him about it, but he just gave me the old 'give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's' line. Like that even applies in this case. Then he said maybe we should focus more on what America can become than trying to hold onto what it has been."* What might that look like?

Chapter 9 – Jessica

- 1.) In light of the allegory with Abby as the American church and Josh as Christ, how does the story of Jessica's pregnancy take on new meaning?

I knew what I was supposed to tell her as a Christian, didn't I? Abortion is a sin. It's killing another human. It seems so cut and dried when it's theoretical. But in this case...I didn't know what I was supposed to tell my friend when her world was falling apart. I knew what Josh would say. He would say, "Babies are a precious gift! We'll get through this together. Abby will throw you a baby shower. We'll figure it out." But the words felt callous when I looked into her eyes brimming with tears, when I knew firsthand the pain of childbirth and the years of sacrifice that children demand.

Telling her that nothing matches the sweetness, love, and joy my children bring to my life somehow felt like I would only be pouring salt in the wound.

My mouth went dry. I pressed my lips together and tried to turn up the corners of my mouth as I squeezed her hand. It was all the support I could muster. I heard all the voices in my head.... For fear of saying the wrong thing, I said nothing.

Does your church say anything? Do you? What do you think Christ would have us say or do in this very sensitive area?

- 2.) In the same way, re-examine Twisttale's instruction to Stumbletrick in light of the allegory.

Once you identify their particular forte, start to convince them that it is actually their weakness. At the same time, assure them that their greatest weakness is what the world truly needs. For example, in this case, I've taken one of Abby's strengths—her love of righteousness—and I've convinced her that it's bad, whispering, "You can't tell others what to do!"

Then, I've taken her weakness—her pride—and I've used it to fuel the worst version of herself. "What am I supposed to say? What's the current, most enlightened view of an unplanned pregnancy?" The brilliance is that I've convinced her that this watered-down version of herself, carefully engineered for the greatest acceptance and societal approval, is her best self. Take some time to think about this one. Admire it for the art that it is.

Does this description of the American church ring true to you? Why or why not? How about in your own life? Do you care more about holiness or the opinions of other people?

Chapter 10 – Ruthie

- 1.) In the allegory, Ruthie represents all the disenfranchised people groups who have been wronged by the American church. What groups do you think that might include?
- 2.) What wrongs have been done to these groups by the American church as opposed to by America? For example, the American church may not be guilty of bringing slaves from Africa to America, but did it defend the institution of slavery or wrong Black people in other ways?

Chapter 11 – Josh

- 1.) Abby is frustrated with Josh's passivity toward Ruthie and her lawsuit. She writes, *"I know he has a pure heart, and I love him for that. But when someone is attacking us, I want a champion fighting for me, for our family. I want a hero on a white horse, not a meek and mild peacenik on a donkey singing Kumbaya."* Have you ever been frustrated with Jesus' commandment to love our enemies? How did you resolve that discomfort? Did you simply ignore the commandment? Did you rationalize your feelings or actions? Or did you seek to obey His command?

- 2.) How do you think American Christians as a whole over the centuries have resolved the conflict between Jesus' teachings to love our enemies with the reality that there are people who seek our harm? What do you think they could have done better?
- 3.) Abby obviously believes at this point that Ruthie is her enemy. Ariam maintains she is not. Should it matter? Would Abby's response be justified if Ruthie truly hated Abby and her family and intended them harm?

Chapter 12 – Storm Brewing

- 1.) This chapter centers around Abby's perception of Ruthie—as a threat, as inferior, as entitled—or perhaps, to Twisttale's consternation, as her partner and possible friend. What applications could you make between Abby's changing and conflicted views of her relationship with Ruthie and the American church's historic and current attitude toward disenfranchised people groups?
- 2.) For a host of reasons, Western artistic representations of Christ have traditionally depicted him as a white European. Abby writes, *"I've never thought of Josh as a minority, but he's not white and neither is Ruthie. His family's Middle Eastern, but they've been away so long I'm not even sure which country they're originally from. I've never had too much interest in that part of the world, except maybe to travel to Israel someday. We met in England, so I think of Josh as English, if anything."* How do you picture Jesus? Do you think it matters how we picture him? Do you think we would view other people groups differently if we viewed Christ as a member of those groups?

Chapter 13 – Shirley

- 1.) The character of Shirley in the story represents the Holy Spirit. Abby can be a little embarrassed and afraid of Shirley. *"Shirley is both super easy and super hard to be with. When she's happy, she's great. She oozes positive energy, loves to laugh, and would give you the shirt off her back. But when she's not, boy, lock the door and turn out the lights. She's not afraid to break right through societal conventions. You never know what she might do or say."*

Or ask. Because of that, I generally hold her at arm's length until I know which Shirley she's going to be."

Do you think most American Christians are comfortable with the manifestations of the Holy Spirit? Are you?

- 2.) Have you ever felt the prompting of the Holy Spirit telling you to do something? Did you obey?

Chapter 14 – Ash Wednesday

- 1.) Read the account of Abby's visit to Ruthie's home again recognizing that Abby represents the American Church and Ruthie represents the disenfranchised people groups who have been wronged by her. What do you think these first steps of repentance might look like in real life?
- 2.) Twisstale orders Stumbletrick to use the tool of false accusation to counteract the damage done by Abby's first step toward true repentance. *"Think about your victim going along, trying so hard to do better. Then wham! Sucker-punch her with an allegation for a crime she didn't commit."* What would do you think that would look like in the case of the American church? What crimes might she be accused of that she didn't commit? Remember, the government of the United States of America or even American citizens and the American church are not the same thing.

Chapter 15 – Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

- 1.) As Abby contemplates canceling dinner, she writes, *"What has happened to me? I used to be brave. Or maybe I was just naïve. Regardless, when we were first married, I wasn't afraid to do the bold, daring thing. Marrying Josh, moving across the ocean, facing the unknown, trying new things, starting a new career—those things take courage. In fact, the surest way to get me to do something was to tell me I couldn't.... That deeply ingrained optimism sprang from the belief that Josh had my back. Together, we could do anything. I always believed that if I did my best, surely everything would turn out the way it was supposed to."*

Does that sound like American Christians to you? Was there a time when Christians in America did brave, hard things? Like what? If so, where do you think they got their optimism and boldness?

- 2.) Have you thought about who or what Abby's children, Cash and Destiny, might represent in the story? In this chapter, the demons flame Abby's concern for their welfare in order to override her desire to make amends with Ruthie.

Chapter 16 – A Place of Power

- 1.) Twisstale writes, *“What a delightfully ghastly report! Exactly what we like to see: your victim is trapped. She's seeking an escape from guilt for a sin she's not even willing to admit or name, and so desperate she'd do almost anything to get rid of the shame—except the one thing that could cure it—repentance. Perfect.”* What institutional sin(s) do you think the American Church is afraid to name or repent of? What does she fear/believe that her husband would look down or judge her for?
- 2.) *“I've got a rebellious streak a mile wide and twice as long. I don't like to be told what to do,”* Abby writes. Do you think this statement resembles the American Church? How so?
- 3.) People often expect the same behavior or treatment of others than they themselves give, ie thieves expecting others to steal, but trustworthy people believing others will be honest as well. Based on how shocked Abby is the little church's treatment of the smelly disruptive stranger or her fear of facing all her sins, do you think Abby believes in real forgiveness? Do you think the American church in general truly practices forgiveness? Have they historically?

Chapter 17 – Church

- 1.) This chapter tells the tale of two churches: a rundown one for “broken people” and Abby's comfortable home congregation where the demons successfully distract her with their “speaking the truth in love” trap. Of her surprise that Josh and his father like the little church,

Abby writes, “*Josh and his dad both have a thing for underdogs. They hate pretense and showmanship. They value authenticity and sincerity, insist on kindness and gentleness, and above all else, they prize genuine expressions of self-less love. By those criteria, I guess that old decaying building rivals Notre Dame.*” What do you look for in a church? Are your values the same as Christ’s?

- 2.) At the end of the chapter, the Holy Spirit character advises Abby to go home and talk to Josh directly about their problems instead of rehashing them over and over again in her mind or with her friends. How much time do you spend replaying your problems in your mind or with your friends versus praying about them? How much time does the American church devote to prayer in solving their problems versus talking about them?

Church 18 – Girls’ Night Out

- 1.) Viewing the story through the allegory, Josh suggesting that Abby invite Ruthie to her girls night out becomes Christ suggesting the American church interact with the people they have wronged and the Holy Spirit character advising her to listen, ask questions, and try to see things from the other person’s perspective. How does that work out in the story? How do you think it would work out in real life? What advice do you try to follow when interacting with someone you have a conflict with?
- 2.) During the evening, Ruthie drops a bombshell on Abby when she reveals she has been talking to Josh and suggests Abby ask Josh why she chose to sue. Again, viewing the story through the allegory, how do you interpret this part of the story?

Chapter 19 – Guess Who’s Coming to Church

- 1.) Martin Luther King, Jr. famously observed in 1964, “We must face the sad fact that at the eleven o’clock hour on Sunday morning when we stand to sing, we stand in the most segregated hour in America.” Many argue that is still true today sixty years later and that any advances in desegregation have not been led by the church but government, sports, and other

influences. If Abby represents the American church, why is she so afraid of going to Ruthie's church?

- 2.) When Abby finally confronts Josh and spills out all her feelings of betrayal, he assures her he loves her. She responds, "*'Then why don't you support me? Why don't you say anything nice? You leave everything up to me. You send me out with Ruthie alone. I ask you what you think, and you don't respond. Then I do what I think is best, and you waltz in all disapproving after I've invested tons of time and energy.' He doesn't love me the way a husband should. He loves me in a pitying, pious, saint-saving-a-sinner sort of way. Who wants that? I can't live under the weight of that judgment.*"

Can you relate to Abby's frustration? Does God sometimes seem distant to you? Does he not express His love in the ways that we want Him to? Does knowing the ending of the story change the way you view Josh's response or did you sympathize with him before you knew the final outcome?

Chapter 20 - Porch Confessions

- 1.) Ruthie confronts Abby on the porch: "*You never wept for my baby. You gave me time off work—even a sabbatical when the kids went to school. You gave me extra money and a ride even if I didn't say what I needed it for. But you didn't stay with me, and you didn't cry... Why didn't you cry over my baby's life like you did [for Jessica's]?*"

The undeniable truth is that most abortions in the United States are and have historically been obtained by minority women, yet these facts are rarely discussed in the abortion debate. In the early 20th century, the abortion rate for black women in America was five times that of white women according to statistics from the Guttmacher Institute. Compare Abby's response to Jessica's pregnancy to her response to Ruthie's. Do you think that Abby's behavior accurately represents the attitude and actions of the American church in response to the abortion crisis in America? Why or why not?

- 2.) In response to Ruthie's accusation that she cared more about Jessica's baby than hers, Abby admits, "*When Ruthie needed help all those years ago, I didn't show her the same concern*

I'd shown Jessica. I may have asked the same question—'What do you want to do?' But we both knew the words hadn't carried the same meaning in my heart." Think about a time when you entered into a person's suffering or they entered into yours versus simply giving a handout or contributing to a cause. What did it look like? Which would you prefer? Which do you think fulfills Christ's command for us to love our neighbor as ourselves?

Chapter 21 – The Final Chapter

- 1.) If Abby represents the American church, what would this chapter look like in real life? What would letting go of control, trusting in Jesus, and resting in his love for us look like as a corporate body versus as individuals?
- 2.) In the epilogue, we see Abby living and serving in community with Ruthie, Jessica, Josh and others. Have you ever experienced healing through service?