

W O R T H Y

*Finding Yourself in a World
Expecting Someone Else*

MELANIE SPRINGER MOCK

STUDY GUIDE BY EMILY LUND



HERALD
P R E S S

Harrisonburg, Virginia

Chapter 1

THIS IS THE WORLD WE LIVE IN

1. What kinds of “presumably positive” generalizations (p. 34) have been assigned to you because of your gender, race, background, etc.? How did these messages fail to consider the ways you were individually, distinctly designed by God?
2. Have there been times in your life when you felt you would need to change in order to be accepted—and that you “absolutely deserved the condemnation” that would come otherwise (p. 36)? How did you respond to these feelings?
3. Melanie argues that popular culture should be “part of our regular diet—because you cannot change what you do not know.” We can then remind “others, and ourselves, that we are defined not by what we see but by who we are as image-bearers of God” (p. 38)? What do you think of this idea? How can consuming pop culture help us remember who we really are?
4. What similarities have you observed between Christian media and mass media? How do these features and trends show up in churches or in larger Christian culture?
5. What are some of the “store-bought granola bar” situations you’ve dealt with in your own life—times when the messages you received from peers or popular culture made you question your own worthiness?

Chapter 2

WHEN BIG JESUS DOESN'T SHOW UP

1. How did you come to realize that your own story—your own narrative about your own life (p. 44)—matters? Did a teacher, a mentor, or anyone else play a role in this process?
2. Melanie observes that “giving testimony, along with the other stories we tell about our faith, establishes expectations that sometimes distort our understanding of Jesus, salvation, faith, and belief” (p. 48)? Have you observed this in church contexts? How has it manifested itself?
3. Have you ever felt pressure to “embellish” your testimony? Why or why not?
4. Can you think of Christians you know—whether in real life or through stories told about them or by them—who may not have experienced especially dramatic testimonies but whose lives illustrate a faithfulness worthy of modeling?
5. In what subtle ways have you encountered Jesus recently? How might you miss such encounters if you are convinced Jesus can only show up in highly dramatic fashion?
6. Have you ever tried cataloguing your everyday experiences in order to be an “explorer of the self” (as Bret Lott refers to it)? Think through your day, your week, or the past month. When have you encountered “beauty and grace in the ephemera of daily living” (p. 58)?

Chapter 3

STICKY FAITH OR BEING STUCK?

1. Do you sometimes fear, as Melanie does, that “God might smack [you] down for [your] lack of trust” (p. 63)? Why or why not?
2. Describe the communities that have sustained you. What features do they have in common?
3. Rather than simply abandoning the church, Melanie advocates for “other ways to contend with Christian traditions that seem too limiting, too divisive”: namely, “remak[ing] the church from within” (p. 70). Reflect on your own church experience. How have you seen this play out in your life or in the lives of those you know? Have you been tempted to leave a church (or Christianity in general) only to be convicted and convinced to stay?
4. “We will learn that it is okay to say something surprising, or different, or even heretical once in a while. Raising questions and doubts about faith does not mean we are doomed” (p. 73). How do these statements make you feel? Have you arrived at similar conclusions in your faith journey? Or do you have concerns about whether it is okay to question, to doubt?
5. Do you know people who have lived by the supposed “truth” of their own insufficiency (p. 77)? What stands out to you about them?
6. How have you questioned the ways in which your roots have influenced your worldview, your faith, or your lifestyle? If you have begun that process, how has it transformed you?

Chapter 4

THERE’S A PROBLEM WITH YOU GUYS

1. Have you ever had a discussion—even an argument—over the language used to describe God, particularly when it comes to masculine pronouns and names like “Father”? Do you think the ways we refer to God matter? Why or why not?
2. What do you think when you hear the term *political correctness*? What kind of a reaction do you have to it?
3. Melanie poses this question: “If we understand that the words we choose can create barriers keeping others from being who God created them to be, shouldn’t we be willing to alter our ways of speaking?” (p. 89) Are there ways in which the language you use creates barriers? Are there any “small linguistic shift[s]” (p. 94)—or large ones—that you think need to take place?
4. If you grew up in the church, what religious clichés have you found to be confusing to others outside of your particular Christian culture? If you didn’t grow up in the church, what Christian words or phrases struck you as odd?
5. How might we “incarnate words of life” in ourselves, as Parker Palmer urges us to do (p. 90)? What might this look like, practically and concretely, in our lives?
6. Melanie notes that although most Christians believe God is not gendered, many believe “using masculine language for God is right, necessary, even biblical” (p. 95). Considering the arguments for this position laid out on pages 95–96, how would you approach a conversation about inclusive language?

Chapter 5

SEARCHING FOR THE GOOD LIFE

1. Have you (or friends who are single) ever found yourself frustrated at the church's "siloining" of singles (p. 104)? Have you seen such a phenomenon in the churches you've attended?
2. "We are promised that our lives will be as rigid (but wonderful!) as the Life board game, the road we travel mapped out in vivid colors, with clearly defined stops for our education, a spouse, and 2.5 kids" (p. 106). When you were a child, did you imagine your life mapped out in this way? Or did you expect or hope for something different?
3. Melanie observes that "the world is essentially built for pairs" (p. 106). Do you agree? How have you observed and experienced this?
4. What kinds of "cultural mythologies" (p. 118) about marriage and parenting have been especially prevalent in your life? How do you generally respond to them?
5. Can you think of a point in your life in which you felt constantly busy, in which your calendar was consistently full? (Maybe it is right now!) Did you feel that such busyness translated into success? What sort of thoughts and emotions fill you when your schedule is filled?
6. Do times of rest feel "empty" and "worthless" to you (p. 126)? Why or why not? Has your perception of unoccupied time changed over the course of your life?
7. How might you use social media to compare yourself to others in a *constructive* way—as a way of knowing that "other people [are] out there, making bold choices about their lives" (p. 129)?

Chapter 6

WHY MOWING THE LAWN CAN BE COMPLICATED

1. Reflect on the idea of "God's design" (p. 135). How would you define that idea? How has it been defined for you? How have you seen it misinterpreted or misapplied?
2. On page 136, Melanie recalls, "By the time I was twelve, I had already internalized messages about what was possible for me as a girl and what was not. I also knew that girls were not worth as much as boys and that boys would always get to do more fun, more challenging, more adventurous stuff, just because." Do you have any specific memories of messages you internalized about your worth—about what you could or should do—because of your gender?
3. Melanie writes that the apostle Paul has been used as "a fine surgical tool for removing women's voices and for compelling churches to split hairs about what women can and cannot do solely because of their gender" (p. 146). How have Pauline passages like 1 Timothy 2 been interpreted in your church experience? How has Paul been portrayed to you?
4. Have you ever experienced dissonance between what you feel God has called you to do and the expectations certain church traditions attach to your gender? If so, describe that time of questioning and wondering.

Chapter 7

HAIR (AND A THIGH GAP) MAKES A GIRL

1. How do you define the terms *feminine* and *masculine*? What words and images come to mind when you read those descriptors?
2. In your experience with Christian culture, how have you seen unhealthy or even destructive expectations about purity and sexuality at work? Have you ever encountered shaming from other Christians concerning their own expectations (and how you failed to meet them)? How did you respond?
3. Melanie argues that we rarely consider the fact that “our understanding of what makes a body beautiful is culturally driven” (p. 161) When you think of what makes someone beautiful, what comes to mind? When you consider beauty standards in other time periods and cultures, are there discrepancies?
4. What might the incarnation—Jesus taking on a physical, human body—mean for our bodies? What does it say about how God sees us?
5. “Hair does make a girl, after all,” Melanie writes (p. 176). Based on your own life and experiences, how might you write that statement: “_____ does make a girl, after all,” or “_____ does make a boy, after all”?
6. What does “your body is a temple” mean to you? Is it a sincere saying? A “kind of shaming mechanism” (p. 179)? Something of a joke?

Chapter 8

WHAT’S THE MATTER WITH BEING BLESSED

1. What do you think of the word *blessed*? How has this chapter influenced your thoughts on it?
2. Are there any theological words “freighted with expectation” (p. 188) that you try to avoid using? What are they?
3. How have you experienced blueprint theology—in your own life, in friends’ lives, and/or in Christian culture and media?
4. In times of mourning, do you picture God mourning alongside you? Or does God feel more distant when you are grieving? How might your theology of suffering influence this picture?
5. Melanie writes that “the language Christian culture uses about prayer can be confounding” (p. 195). Do you agree? Have you found Christian culture’s language of prayer to be helpful? Harmful? Both?
6. After reading this chapter, how might you respond to someone who reacts to a tragedy by declaring God caused it?

Chapter 9

THE CHURCH'S PROBLEM WITH THE BIG BUT

1. Melanie writes, “We are surrounded by messages that tell us to accept and love ourselves . . . but to seek transformation, buy the next product, do the next self-help treatment, imbibe the next ideology to be truly accepted and loved” (p. 202). Think back over this past week. Where have you seen these messages?
2. “Love the sinner but hate the sin” is listed as a phrase loaded with problematic expectations (p. 203). Why might that be so? Is it possible to love someone and hate their sin? Why do we feel the need to add “hate the sin”?
3. What have you heard others justify by saying, “Well, that’s what the Bible says,” or “It’s biblical”? What could be potentially problematic about that reasoning?
4. On page 208, Melanie lists some of the expectations she faced at her Christian college: “I knew that those who received Jesus were expected to be unswayed by temptation, able to pass up donuts and beer, and inclined toward pure thought and speech.” What kinds of expectations have you faced in your own experiences in Christian circles? Does this list resonate with those experiences?
5. Describe how your interpretive communities have formed your encounters with the Bible. How have they shaped and changed your understanding of it?

Chapter 10

CHALLENGING MESSAGES AND CHANGING THE WORLD

1. Describe a conversation you’ve had in which your expectations about the world, about yourself as an “image-bearer of God” (p. 219), were challenged. What were the outcomes of that conversation?
2. Reflect on Melanie’s question on page 221: “What would happen . . . if we made space for each other to question what the Bible really says, to challenge suppositions about the Bible, to think about the biblical narratives we’ve been told (some of us since childhood) and wonder about how we might understand those narratives differently?”
3. What kinds of “scriptural sound bites” (p. 222) have you heard used to explain or defend certain behaviors and choices?
4. Have you observed Scripture being wielded as a “scolding mechanism” (p. 223)? In what contexts have you seen this happen?
5. Melanie writes that while social media posts “give us a ready platform to argue our views and challenge others’ belief systems, it seems that Jesus is asking us for much more. We might need to log off Facebook and step into the real world, especially if we want equity to reign on earth as in heaven” (p. 225). How might you find chances to do this in your life?
6. Whose stories are you listening to? Whose worthiness are you affirming by staying quiet as they speak, resisting the urge to speak up yourself? How can you make space for this kind of listening in your everyday life?
7. What small injustices can you be fighting in your own context and community?

Chapter 11

REDEEMING A NOT-SO-SWEET SIXTEENTH

1. Have you ever struggled to find a community? Did that struggle raise questions about your worthiness or your identity?
2. “It’s a beautiful paradox: we are changed when we are given permission to be the same” (p. 240). Reflect on this paradox—what does it mean to you when you read it? What might it look like for you to live out?
3. Melanie writes that her parents “modeled the hard work of being uncomfortable for the sake of those who needed to belong” (p. 243). Who have you seen model this hard work in your own life?
4. “What if we saw sin . . . not as a list of prohibitions, but as a rejection of community, right relationship, and love?” Melanie asks (p. 245). What would such a shift look like, practically, in your day-to-day world?
5. Can you think of a moment when friends, family—or maybe complete strangers—were Jesus to you and reminded you of your worthiness (p. 246)? What happened in those moments?

Chapter 12

THE PROMISE OF EXPECTATION

1. Think about periods of waiting you have experienced. What prayers did you pray during that time? What encouragements or discouragements did you receive? How do you look back on that era of your life?
2. Have you ever had expectations spoken to you as biblical truths, such as “This is what God wants for you,” or “This is what God has promised for you”? Did such comments make you feel frustrated? Hopeful? Something else?
3. Melanie writes, “As part of our faith journey, we who are Christians contemplate the idea of expectation and what it means for light to break through our darkness, transforming everything” (p. 250). How have you discovered the idea of expectation in your own faith journey? Reflect on the different ways you have encountered it.
4. “When we hear countless messages telling us to be, do, and think differently, [Jesus] tells us there are only two expectations that matter: to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself” (p. 252). How can you remind yourself of these truths this week? How might you put them into practice?
5. When in your life have you acutely felt an expectation to be someone you’re not (p. 254)? How did you reconcile these expectations with your true self?