

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Letters to Marc About Jesus

by

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Letters to Marc About Jesus is a series of letters Henri J. M. Nouwen wrote to his nineteen-year-old nephew Marc about the spiritual life. Written with publication in mind, this collection of letters chronicles Nouwen's insights about Jesus and the spiritual life as inspired by the rhythm of the liturgical calendar and the people and places he visited.

JESUS: THE HEART OF OUR EXISTENCE

1. Henri Nouwen draws a distinction between what is urgent and what is essential. He writes, "It's so easy to spend your whole time being preoccupied with urgent matters and never starting to live, really to live" (p. 3).

What in your life falls into the urgent category? Into the essential? How can we keep our lives from being taken over by the urgent?

2. Nouwen muses that Marc has the time and space to think about larger questions because many things come easily for him. Has this ever been true for you? How can we use the seemingly easy times in our lives most advantageously?
3. Nouwen describes a spiritual person as someone who has knowledge or personal experience of the place where we find “the meaning and goal of our human existence” (p. 5). Later he goes on to say that, for him, living spiritually is “living with Jesus at the center” (p. 7). How do these perspectives match up with what our culture might define as a “spiritual” person or living the “spiritual life”? What does it mean to you to live the spiritual life?
4. Nouwen defines the spiritual life as having to do with the *heart* of existence. For him, our heart is “the center of our being, that place where we are most ourselves, where we are most human, where we are most real” (p. 5). Is this how you think of your heart? How do you connect with this part of yourself?
5. When Nouwen was young, society forced young people to consider the spiritual life, but for his nephew and others coming of age in today’s world, the spiritual life is something they must take the time and effort to face alone. What brought you to face the question of the

spiritual life? Do you agree that this has become a more solitary endeavor?

JESUS:
THE GOD WHO SETS US FREE

1. “Decomposition is surely the most telling symbol of human desperation. Whatever we do or say, however learned we are, however many our friends or great our wealth—in ten, thirty, fifty, seventy years’ time—we shall rot. That’s why we are so deeply affected by life’s disappointments and setbacks. They remind us that, sooner or later, everything decays” (pp. 13–14). Do you agree that we are so affected by life’s disappointments because they’re a reminder of our own mortality? Have you ever considered what effect the knowledge of your impending physical death has on your actions and attitude?
2. Nouwen describes the life-changing encounter Cleopas and his friend had with the resurrected Jesus (Luke 24:13–35): “At the center of their being, of their humanity, something was generated that could disarm death and rob despair of its power . . . something that can be described only as a new life or a new spirit” (p. 15). How has encountering Jesus led you to a new way of living?
3. When Jesus explained to Cleopas and his friend that death was the way to liberation, “their hearts burned within them” (p. 15). What does this mean to you?

When has something affected you this way, within your heart as opposed to your mind or intellect?

4. According to Nouwen, spiritual freedom enables us to stand on our own two feet in the world and to resist being manipulated by that world. This spiritual freedom must touch every sphere of our lives, even those places where it is not yet visible (p. 18). How can you be spiritually free even when you are being oppressed (held back by some kind of force, such as another person or a government)? Have you ever experienced this?
5. Nouwen describes the Eucharist—through confession, hearing the Word, partaking of the Lord’s supper, and then returning to the world—as our own journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus and back. The next time you share in the Eucharist, how might you view it as a journey to Emmaus, a path to spiritual freedom?

JESUS: THE COMPASSIONATE GOD

1. Nouwen expresses concern that the story of Jesus’s death and resurrection is such a familiar part of Marc’s culture that it has lost the power to astound him. How can we keep from taking for granted what Nouwen calls “the most fundamental, the most far-reaching event ever to occur in the course of history” (p. 27)? When have Jesus’s death and resurrection and the implications of these things been most immediate and powerful for you?

2. Nouwen describes Jesus's entire life as a conscious preparation for suffering and death. According to Jesus, "A person who wants to live a spiritual life cannot do so without the prospect of suffering and death" (p. 29). How does this knowledge affect our understanding of how we are to live our lives?
3. What does Nouwen mean by describing compassion as "the way to freedom" (p. 31)? Why is the idea of God suffering with us so radical?
4. Nouwen writes, "I discovered that the victims of poverty and oppression are often more deeply convinced of God's love than we middle-class Europeans are, and that the question of the why of suffering was raised less by the people who had tasted suffering themselves than by you who had only heard and read about it" (p. 32). Has suffering ever led you to a deeper sense of God's love? If you haven't experienced this personally, can you think of anyone whose understanding of God's love was deepened by suffering?
5. Nouwen describes the Eucharist as Jesus demonstrating his compassion for us by uniting with us, thus freeing us from solitude. How has the Eucharist helped you feel that you belong to Jesus?

JESUS: THE DESCENDING GOD

1. Nouwen draws a distinction between the ascending style of university life and the descending style at

L'Arche (p. 41). Which style do you find yourself most drawn to? Which have you been most accustomed to in your life?

2. To Nouwen, the goal of the ascending style of life—prosperity—comes at the cost of community as people grow too busy, too envious, or too anxious to spend time together. “The higher up you get on the ladder of prosperity, the harder it becomes to be together, to sing together, to pray together, and to celebrate life together in a spirit of thanksgiving” (p. 43). Are prosperity and community mutually exclusive? If so, what are some repercussions of lack of community? What can we do to encourage more community?
3. Jesus chose the descending, the downward, way. As Nouwen writes, “Again and again you see how Jesus opts for what is small, hidden, and poor, and accordingly declines to wield influence” (p. 44). How does this downward way show us God’s love?
4. What might Jesus’s downward way look like in your own life? How can you better discover it? What is the role of the church, the Eucharistic community, in discovering this path?

JESUS: THE LOVING GOD

1. Nouwen writes that while Lent made him think of the descending way of Jesus, the coming of Easter makes him think more about the glory of Jesus and the joy of

being his disciple (p. 53). What role do the rhythms of the liturgical calendar play in your own faith? What other calendar rhythms affect your life? The fiscal year, the school year, the changing seasons?

2. Nouwen suggests that the descending way of Jesus serves to convince us of God's love, love which we have done nothing to deserve but which can fulfill us completely. Can you trust unreservedly that you are loved? If so, how did you come to that place? If not, how might you help yourself grow in faith and trust?
3. Why are the words "love your enemies" some of the most important words in the gospel (p. 59)? Who is hardest for you to love?
4. Nouwen writes that he knows of no more concrete way to love than to pray for one's enemies (p. 62). Have you practiced praying for people you consider enemies or those who are difficult to love? If so, what was the experience like? How did it affect you and your relationship?

JESUS: THE HIDDEN GOD

1. Nouwen describes the Christian life as "a life which doesn't seek influence, power, success, and popularity, but trusts that God is secretly at work and, in secret, is causing something new to grow" (p. 70). What is your reaction to this statement? Why do you think it's so difficult to live the Christian life as Nouwen describes it?

2. Nouwen writes of the hiddenness of Jesus's life and even of his resurrection (pp. 71–72). What does Jesus's hidden life reveal to you about God? Have you ever practiced the discipline of secrecy? If so, what were the results?
3. The spiritual life requires what Nouwen terms discipline of the heart, which he defines as “mak[ing] available the inner space where God can touch you with an all-transforming love” (p. 75). How does your way of life lead you into or keep you from this discipline?

LISTENING TO JESUS

1. To remain attentive to the voice of God's love, Nouwen recommends three forms of listening: to the church, to the book, and to the heart. Which of these is easiest for you? Which is most difficult? How can you try each in a different way? What goals would you set for yourself in learning to listen better?