

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

The Pastor: A Memoir

by

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1. In the introduction, Eugene Peterson mentions a phrase used by the poet Denise Levertov: “every step an arrival.” How might every step in Peterson’s life have been an arrival into the vocation of pastor? If you are a pastor, has this step-by-step learning been a part of your formation process? How might this process be true of people in all types of vocations?
2. On pages 2–4, Peterson describes his view of the pastors and church leaders he met and observed during his childhood. How did these experiences shape his view of pastors? What were your experiences with pastors? How did these experiences shape your opinions regarding pastoral ministry and those who choose it as their vocation? How did they shape what you think of the Christian faith?

3. Peterson advocates having a quiet, sacred place where you can spend time reflecting, listening to God, and learning. Do you have a place to which you can retreat to quiet yourself and reflect on your life? If not, do you think having a quiet, sacred place could be beneficial to you?
4. On page 37, Peterson describes humility as “submission of will to the conditions at hand.” Do you agree with this definition? If not, how would you describe humility?
5. To Peterson, a congregation is “composed of people, who, upon entering a church, leave behind what people on the street name or call them. . . . Before anything else, it is a place where a person is named and greeted, whether implicitly or explicitly, in Jesus’s name. A place where dignity is conferred” (p. 40). Before you read this description, how would you have described the word “congregation”? What is your reaction to Peterson’s description?
6. Peterson’s Uncle Sven was a loving brother when he was with his family, but he was also an alcoholic who abused his wife. From seeing these two conflicting identities, Peterson concluded that people are complex and sometimes act completely differently depending on the people they are with. Think about your interactions with other people. In what ways have you acted differently depending on who you are with, such as your colleagues, extended-family members, friends, spouse, or children? Why do you think this is?

7. On pages 72–74, Peterson tells a story about watering the tree-lined Main Street of his town in the middle of the night. During those dark hours before dawn, he memorized and meditated on Psalm 108 as a way to guide his prayer. Have you ever used a verse or passage to work through a difficult time or to celebrate a happy phase in your life? If you've never done this, how might doing it benefit you?
8. During those night hours, Peterson regarded that street as not only his place but God's place. "Life always occurs in place. It is never an abstraction, never a generality. Place: Sinai, Galilee, Bethany. Place: Kalispell, Kila, Creston, Somers, Bigfork. Holy lands, holy places" (p. 76). Where is the holy place you now find yourself? Have you recognized and acknowledged it as holy? Do you believe that all places are holy, or not? What would recognizing your town or city as holy mean for how you live your life there? Would anything change?
9. When Peterson was young, he used to curse at those who angered him by calling them Edomites. Over the years, he learned that "Psalm 108 used Edomite not as profanity but as a prayer" and that instead of cursing those who angered him, he should pray for them (pp. 78–79). How might praying for your enemies benefit you? How might it benefit them?
10. "I realized that for most of my life the people I had been living with and who had taught me had been primarily interested in getting the truth of the gospel and the Bible right, explaining it and defending it. . . . [Karl]

Barth wasn't indifferent to 'getting it right,' but his passion was in 'getting it lived'" (p. 90). What is the difference between "getting it right" and "getting it lived"? Which do you tend to strive toward? If you strive toward "getting it right," how might "getting it lived" affect your life? And vice versa?

11. What did being a pastor's wife mean to Jan (p. 95)? How did Jan's definition lead to a different view of ministry as compared with Eugene's? Do you believe that, like pastors, spouses of pastors have their own forms of ministry? If so, what's the best way you've seen this lived out?
12. Peterson describes church as "a colony of heaven in the country of death, a strategy of the Holy Spirit for giving witness to the already-inaugurated kingdom of God" (p. 110). Before you read this book, what was your understanding of church? Has reading Peterson's memoir changed your view or given you ideas for how to experience church differently?
13. According to Peterson, some congregations become "Americanized," or converted into "ecclesiastical businesses" (p. 112), and the idea that a church should be turned into a "market for religious consumers" felt like a lie. Are you a part of a church that emphasizes a consumer environment, or have you seen this type of church? Do you think this "Americanization" of church is contrary to the purpose of church? Or do you feel that the direction churches are going in is necessary to remain relevant in a changing society?

14. Peterson writes, “In the secularized times in which I am living, God is not taken seriously. God is peripheral. God is nice (or maybe not so nice) but not at the center” (p. 142). Do you agree with Peterson’s assessment regarding God in our culture? Is it our society that creates this mentality, or are there other factors at play? Do you think this is true for people in other societies and cultures around the world?
15. In chapter 18, Peterson describes pastors he met with on Tuesday mornings who were of different ages, from different communities, and led churches in different stages of growth. They also represented different theological viewpoints. Do you think people who hold different beliefs can meet and have meaningful conversations about their beliefs or vocations? Have you ever been part of a group like this?
16. What is the distinction Peterson makes between a job and a vocation (p. 165)? Do you agree with his distinction? Do you know pastors who have treated their positions as jobs instead of vocations? How does this affect the faith community? If you’re a pastor or pastor-in-training, how can you continue to treat your position as a vocation rather than a job?
17. Peterson describes art as “using the sensory (material, sound, texture) to give access to mystery, to the ‘behind the scenes’ of our ordinary lives—to see, hear, touch, taste, and smell the vast world of beauty that inhabits, underlies, and permeates space and time, place and each person” (p. 176). Does this description comple-

- ment or conflict with your understanding of art? Do you think art can be used as worship?
18. “We were getting it: worship was not so much what we did, but what we let God do in and for us. These months of worship in our catacombs sanctuary had made their mark on us: we were a people of God gathered to worship God” (p. 172). Do you agree with this definition of worship? How would you have defined worship before reading this description? Does Peterson’s view change your opinion? Why or why not?
 19. Jan’s vocational calling, as Peterson describes it in chapter 21, was “Eucharistic hospitality.” What does hospitality mean to you? Have you ever thought of the Eucharist as a form of hospitality? How might it function that way?
 20. Peterson says that we are facing an “epidemic of inhospitality” (p. 189). Do you think our society is ambivalent about, resistant to, or even hostile to hospitality? If so, what do you think we should do about it?
 21. In chapter 23, Peterson describes a time in his life that was difficult because the people in his congregation, and he himself, began to experience a lack of enthusiasm about their church, a period he calls the “Badlands.” Have you ever experienced a similar period in your life? Can there be beauty in these times? Have you seen any parts of your life flourish as a result of your time in the “Badlands”?

22. Peterson wondered if he “could develop from a competitive pastor to something maybe more like a contemplative pastor—a pastor who was able to be with people without having an agenda for them, a pastor who was able to accept people just as they were and guide them gently and patiently into a mature life in Christ but not get in the way” (pp. 210–211). Have you known any contemplative pastors? What set them apart? Would you consider yourself contemplative or competitive? How might it benefit you to become more one or the other?
23. “Presbycostal” is the word that Peterson uses in chapter 25 to describe his integration of Presbyterian traditions with his Pentecostal upbringing. How might understanding the history of a religious tradition enhance your experiences within that community? Can you incorporate more than one tradition into your faith? What might you gain by incorporating multiple traditions into your beliefs? What might you lose?
24. In chapter 26, Peterson describes how he and Jan would take Mondays off from work to enjoy the earth on which they lived. Soon these walks turned into something more: a Sabbath of silence. How is taking a day off different from keeping a Sabbath? Do you keep a Sabbath? If so, do you practice silence? How can practicing silence during these Sabbath days bring you into closer communion with the people around you and with God?

25. Have you ever considered what role a pastor plays during the week and how it differs from the pastor's role on Sunday? Why do you suppose that so much of a pastor's work is done behind the scenes? Can this shift from visibility to invisibility be seen in the lives of all people of faith? Why or why not? Is this shift visible in the lives of people in different vocations?
26. Different people and events throughout Peterson's life formed him into the man he became, both personally and as a pastor. Often, Peterson was not aware of the way events shaped him until much later in his life. How do people and events in your life contribute to the person you are becoming? Can you choose to let these people and events affect you, or is the change involuntary? Have you, like Peterson, noticed this change happening in an "every step an arrival" way, or another way? Do you notice when these changes are happening, or do you find it easier to see the significance of people and events much later?