

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

What We Talk About When We Talk About God

by
Rob Bell

CHAPTER 1 HUM

1. When you talk about God, what do you mean? Have you ever tried to put it into words?
2. Have you ever had an experience similar to what Rob Bell quotes from Jane Fonda, “I could feel reverence humming in me” (p. 10)?
3. Rob asks: Is the concept of God like the Oldsmobile, belonging in the past? What do you think? Have you

ever thought about God being “ahead,” as Rob describes, “pulling us and calling us and drawing all of humanity forward—as God always has—into greater and greater peace, love, justice, connection, honesty, compassion, and joy” (p. 19)? What changes when we stop thinking about God as *behind*, someone that we need to get back to, and instead think of God as *ahead*, someone pulling us forward?

CHAPTER 2 OPEN

1. What does quantum physics teach us about the kind of world we’re living in? How does this connect with the possibility that there’s a God?
2. Does the fact that we’re made of “dust and stars”—the “paradox at the core of our humanity” (p. 55)—lead you to feel frustrated or inspired? Where do you see this paradox at work?
3. Rob compares our inability to locate the soul with our inability to locate God. And yet he talks about both soul and God existing. He calls this concept *grenzbegrifflich*, a German word that describes that which is very real but is beyond analysis and description (p. 63). Can you recall a time when you “knew” something without using your intellect? If so, describe that experience. Why can’t reason always be used to explain the world?

4. Rob uses an involved exploration of science to show us how miraculous the world is. He uses the very thing many people employ as proof against God to open us up to the possibility of God's existence and activity. Do you consider science a hurdle to belief? If so, or if you know someone who does, what do you think of Rob's perspective that science can actually inform our faith?

CHAPTER 3

BOTH

1. What convictions do you hold most tightly? How might you loosen your grasp on them while continuing to believe them wholeheartedly?
2. Rob writes that *how* you believe and *what* you believe are two different things. "Two people can believe the same thing but hold that belief in very different ways" (p. 93). Can you think of two people in your life who believe the same thing but in different ways? Does *how* they believe affect your attitude toward them?

CHAPTER 4

WITH

1. Rob cites the phrase "and then God showed up" (p. 97). What are the limitations of this phrase?
2. How does seeing the *ruach* of God help us understand how God is *with* us (p. 106)?

3. Rob writes that to believe in *anything* (for example, that we come from the Big Bang or that God is unknowable) is a leap of faith. Have you ever considered that we all choose what to have faith in? What things have you had faith in over the years? Have you ever had a moment in your life when you knew for certain that there was something more? What prompted this feeling?

CHAPTER 5 FOR

1. Do you believe that God is *for* you? Or have you been influenced by the belief that God is distant and detached, watching and waiting for you to mess up? What changes if God is actively *for* us?
2. How does admitting our downfalls and shortcomings, rather than posturing, allow us to let God in (pp. 138–39)?
3. Rob writes, “At the heart of Jesus’s message is the call to become the kind of person who is for everybody. Especially people who aren’t Christians.” (p. 150). How can we be for everybody?

CHAPTER 6 AHEAD

1. While we often think of the Bible as an ancient document, what does it mean to think about the Bible as being ahead of its time (p. 165)?
2. If God is always orchestrating a divine pull as single clicks of progress along a continuum (p. 165), where might God be trying to take us now?

CHAPTER 7 SO

1. In discussing why the temple was created and why it was destroyed, Rob describes the stages that God takes us through. “But if you don’t keep going, keep moving, keep evolving, there is . . . danger” (p. 181). Have you ever considered that religion needs to evolve? What does it mean for religion to be something constantly changing rather than static?
2. Have you ever “confessed,” whether to a spiritual leader or to a friend? How did you feel? Was there a sense of shame or liberation?
3. How can we go about living more fully integrated lives, becoming “more fully present to our own depths, which include our shadow side as well as our deepest desires” (p. 195)? Which are you more able to connect with, your shadow side or your desires?

EPILOGUE

1. “I sometimes wonder,” writes Rob, “if it’s as simple as saying *yes*, over and over and over again, a thousand times a day” (p. 210). How might developing a daily prayer of simply saying *yes* open your eyes to God’s presence in the world?