

## READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

# *Secrets in the Dark: A Life of Sermons*

by

Frederick Buechner

### THE MAGNIFICENT DEFEAT

1. Frederick Buechner highlights two conflicting truths: that Jacob profited from his dishonesty, and that when an angel confronted and wrestled him, he saw something that changed him, something “more terrible than the face of death—the face of love” (p. 7). Why might the “face of love” in the angel’s gaze be more terrible than the face of death?
2. Buechner calls God our “beloved enemy” (p. 7). How can both be true—God as beloved and God as enemy?
3. “Remember Jesus of Nazareth, staggering on broken feet out of the tomb toward the resurrection, bearing

on his body the proud insignia of the defeat that is victory” (p. 8). The suffering and death of Jesus seemed a catastrophic loss until the resurrection. By his rising, the loss became a stunning victory. Have you ever experienced a devastation that was transformed into an unexpected victory?

## THE BIRTH

1. Buechner assumes the perspective of various characters in Jesus’s birth narrative. As the innkeeper, he says: “All your life long, you wait for your own true love to come—we all of us do—our destiny, our joy, our heart’s desire. How am I to say it, gentlemen? When he came, I missed him” (p. 11). Has there been a time when you failed to see the nearness of God even when he was coming right to you?
2. As the shepherd, Buechner says: “[That night was like] things just coming into focus that had been there always. And such things! The air wasn’t just emptiness anymore. It was alive. Brightness everywhere, dipping and wheeling like a flock of birds” (p. 14). What does Buechner mean by “the air wasn’t just emptiness anymore”? Have you experienced this emptiness? Have you ever felt it come alive?

## MESSAGE IN THE STARS

1. “If God really exists, why in heaven’s name does God not prove that he exists instead of leaving us here in our terrible uncertainty?” (p. 16). How would you answer this question?
2. According to Buechner, God speaks to us more than we realize (or choose to realize). He adds that often “God speaks to us most clearly through his silence” (p. 19). Have you experienced God speaking through silence? What implications does this carry in a world filled with the clamor of cell phones and other distractions?
3. He concludes the sermon: “It is precisely into the non-sense of our days that God speaks to us words of great significance” (p. 20). In what, if any, nonsensical moment in your life have you felt convinced that God had a message for you?

## THE FACE IN THE SKY

1. Buechner recalls a particularly ridiculous scene in the Italian film *La Dolce Vita*, in which a Jesus-like statue is dangling by a harness from a helicopter over a scene of revelry and sensuality. He describes a moment in the film when the audience went silent upon seeing a close-up of the face: “There was no sound, as if the face [of Jesus] were their face somehow, their secret face” (p. 23). The scene then takes on a sublime quality. How, in

your life, has the sublime been juxtaposed with the ridiculous?

2. “Once they have seen him in a stable, they can never be sure where he will appear or to what lengths he will go or to what ludicrous depths of self-humiliation he will descend in his wild pursuit of humankind” (p. 24). To what “ludicrous depths” has Jesus gone to reach you?

### THE SIGN BY THE HIGHWAY

1. Buechner writes that we often “wince” when hearing the name of Jesus: “We wince because there is something in the name ‘Jesus’ itself that embarrasses us” (p. 28). Have you ever winced at the name of Jesus? Is it fair to suggest that we all wince at times? Why do you think we do so?
2. Do you agree with Buechner that truth can be seen only “on the other side of pain” (pp. 32–33)?

### THE CALLING OF VOICES

1. During his temptation in the wilderness, Jesus answered the devil’s misleading voice with his own authoritative one: “Man shall not live by bread alone” (p. 39). Have you ever listened to the wrong voice? What were the consequences?
2. Buechner writes about the importance of living a meaningful life: “There is nothing moralistic or senti-

mental about this truth. It means for us simply that we must be careful with our lives, for Christ's sake" (p. 39). What might being careful look like in your life? Could you be more careful? If so, how?

### A SPRIG OF HOPE

1. Buechner highlights the absurdity of Noah's predicament when the Lord tells him to build an ark. "Only a fool would heed such a voice at all when every other voice for miles around could tell him, and probably did, that our proper business is to keep busy: to work, to play, to make love, to watch out for our own interests as everybody else does" (p. 46). In the past, what foolishness did God call you to? How did you respond? What do you feel God is currently calling you to do? What does Noah's story teach us about how to respond, even when God's instructions seem nonsensical?
2. Buechner concludes, "We must build our arks with love and ride out the storm with courage and know that the little sprig of green in the dove's mouth betokens a reality beyond the storm" (p. 48). What do you make of this image? What has served as the "little sprig of green in the dove's mouth" in your storm?

### COME AND SEE

1. Regarding the birth of Christ, Buechner writes: "Ever since the child was born, there have been people who

have gotten drunk on him no less than they can get drunk on hard liquor” (p. 53). What does it mean to get “drunk” on Christ? Does this suggest losing your critical faculties? Have you ever felt this way? If so, did you feel it was a good thing?

2. Jesus “says to follow him, to walk as he did into the world’s darkness, to throw yourself away as he threw himself away for love of the dark world” (p. 54). Do you agree with the notion that Jesus threw himself away? What might throwing yourself away look like in your life?

### A ROOM CALLED REMEMBER

1. We receive hope in looking back on our lives because God was always present (p. 61). Can you recall a time when you felt alone but now can see that God was near?
2. Buechner believes that we all must “remember our own lives” (p. 63). What about the axiom “forgive and forget”? Does remembering suggest not forgetting transgressions against us? Can we have it both ways?

### FAITH

1. Buechner speaks of a place in our interior lives where we can go “to find healing and hope” (p. 72). Do you have an interior place like this where you can go?

2. Faith requires us to believe even when we don't quite see "the homeland we have seen from afar in our dearest rooms and truest dreams" (p. 72). What does Buechner mean by this? What are your dearest rooms and truest dreams?

## HOPE

1. "If we come to a church right, we come to it more fully and nakedly ourselves, come with more of our humanness showing, than we are apt to come to most places" (p. 75). What might this look like in your local congregation? Are you able to feel this vulnerable in your church? Why or why not?
2. Of the church, Buechner says, "In spite of all the devastating evidence to the contrary, the ground we stand on is holy ground because Christ walked here and walks here still" (p. 81). If this is true of physical church buildings, would it not also be true of any place where "two or three are gathered" in Christ's name (Matthew 18:20)? If so, is a church any more holy than other places?

## THE TWO STORIES

1. Buechner draws a distinction between peddlers and storytellers, describing peddlers as those who communicate to sell something (p. 84). In what ways might

one “peddle” Christ’s story? Do you think you have ever peddled it?

2. Christ’s story is “full of darkness as well as light” (p. 85), and the same is true of our stories. In telling Christ’s story, what elements of darkness and light would you include? What about in your own story?

## EMMANUEL

1. Buechner colorfully describes the frenzy of the holiday season: “Canned carols blast out over shopping-center blacktops before the Thanksgiving turkey is cold on the plate. Salvation Army tambourines rattle, and street-corner Santas stamp their feet against the cold” (p. 94). Even so, he says, “the world speaks of holy things in the only language it knows, which is a worldly language.” What holy things do you hear amid the cacophony of a consumer-based Christmas?
2. Buechner likens the moment of Christ’s birth to the image of ice being split “starwise”: “The child is born, and history itself falls in two at the star. . . . The world of AD is one world, and the world of BC is another” (p. 94). He then applies the metaphor to our own lives. What is the closest you have come to experiencing a star-splitting moment in your life?

## LOVE

1. Do you agree with Buechner that one can truly love God only after passing through grief, terror, and near hopelessness? Why or why not?
2. Buechner describes the kind of love that followers of Christ must move toward: “Through the wilderness times, on broken legs, and through times when we catch glimpses and hear whispers from beyond the wilderness” (p. 103). Have you loved Christ on broken legs? What “whispers from beyond the wilderness” have you heard?

## DELAY

1. Buechner refers in this sermon to the “darkness of our time,” when light is “random and elusive” (p. 112). Even so, we as God’s people are to make advances, if only tentative, toward these glimpses of light. How do you understand the “darkness of our time”? How could it apply to an individual’s circumstances in life?
2. These glimmers of light are a prelude to seeing God in his glory (p. 113). What glimpses of light have enabled you to keep going?

## AIR FOR TWO VOICES

1. In this sermon, Buechner juxtaposes two voices that speak to the human soul: the cantor’s voice (a sung

voice) and an interrupting voice (“a little nasal”) that tries to get everything straight (p. 115). Which of these voices speaks to you most in your own spiritual journey?

2. Buechner continues, “The poetry of the first voice [is] fleshed out in the prose of the second” (p. 118). What does this statement mean to you? How do the poetry and prose voices complement each other?

### THE CLOWN IN THE BELFRY

1. Buechner cites a record of the repair of a New England church belfry in 1831: “When the steeple was added . . . [o]ne agile Lyman Woodard stood on his head in the belfry with his feet toward heaven” (p. 129). He suggests that this is an apt image of what it looks like to follow Christ, where “everything goes topsy-turvy” (p. 130). In what way, if any, have you experienced this kind of topsy-turvy obedience?
2. He concludes, “Let us join him in the belfry with our feet toward heaven like his, because heaven is where we are heading. That is our faith and what better image of faith could there be? It is a little crazy. It is a little risky. It sets many a level head wagging” (p. 130). Is it possible to be both faithful and levelheaded, or must one be a little crazy?

## THE TRUTH OF STORIES

1. Buechner suggests that many Christians have heard Jesus's stories so often that they have lost the ability to hear them (p. 133). Is this the case for you? If so, how might you look at these stories with new eyes?
2. Jesus enters our individual stories by overlapping them with an aspect of his own, "like searchlights in the dark" (p. 137). Have you experienced Jesus coming into your story like a searchlight? What did he find?

## GROWING UP

1. Buechner asserts that real growing up means listening "farther back than the rhymes of our childhood" (p. 139). Is there something else we can hear beyond our memories and experiences? Have you heard it?
2. Kindness, Buechner says, is not itself holiness, but the way into holiness (p. 144). Do you agree? Can any other attribute lead to holiness?

## THE CHURCH

1. Buechner highlights the definition of *church* based upon the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means "those called out" (p. 148). If *ekklesia* is the true sense of *church*, what, if anything, does this suggest about the present model of the local congregation, in which people live settled lives in comfortable homes?

2. In manifesting Christ's church, "we are called to be Christs to each other" (p. 152). What does this look like in your local congregation?
3. Ultimately, Buechner suggests that the Kingdom of Heaven is everywhere—"in the movie theater as the old woman gets up to leave, shaking popcorn crumbs out of her lap" and when "the fat man goes driving by in his pickup with the bumper sticker he can't believe in" (p. 153). Does this suggest that one can experience God somewhere other than church? If so, what is the purpose of the local church?

### THE KINGDOM OF GOD

1. When John the Baptist announces that the Kingdom of God is at hand, he is referring to the time when it will no longer be humans in their lunacy who are in charge of the world but God in his mercy who will be in charge of the world" (p. 157). How does this affect the way we think about the end of the world?
2. Buechner remembers New York City: "Buried beneath the surface of all the dirt and noise and crime and poverty and pollution of that terrifying city, I glimpsed the treasure that waits to make it a holy city—a city where human beings dwell in love and peace with each other and with God" (p. 159). What do you think of Buechner's description? Have you experienced any such glimpses where you live?

## TWO NARROW WORDS

1. In this sermon, Buechner cites Sir Walter Raleigh, who wrote of death: “Thou hast drawn together all the far-stretched greatness, all the pride, cruelty, and ambition of man, and covered it all over with these two narrow words: *hic jacet*.” These words, which mean “here lies,” are a reminder that darkness and death form “shadows [that] gather around us and within us” (p. 164). Is it helpful or disturbing to feel as if one’s existence is shadowed by the constant specter of death? Do you find hope or despair when you think about living in the shadow of these two narrow words?
2. Referring to Job’s suffering, Buechner describes how these shadows rendered hope: “What Job was really after was not God’s answer, but God’s presence” (p. 167). Have you ever felt that God answered your questions with his presence? Was this enough?

## FAITH AND FICTION

1. “In the world of fiction it may take many pages before you find out who the major characters really are” (p. 174). Could this be true of your life? Why or why not?
2. What is the difference between a photograph and a portrait? How does the latter reflect a deeper “invisible truth” (p. 175)? Why do you think Buechner likens fiction to a portrait?

## THE GOOD BOOK AS A GOOD BOOK

1. Buechner describes the Bible as a book of drama, law, tragedy, treachery, skulduggery, poetry, and prophecy. He adds, “It is a world where, although God is sometimes to be known through his life-giving presence, there are other times when he is known only by his appalling absence” (p. 191). Why would biblical writers include such despairing narratives? What, in your opinion, is the Bible for? Why should we believe it?
2. “The Bible is held together by having a single plot. It is one that can be simply stated: God creates the world, the world gets lost; God seeks to restore the world to the glory for which he created it” (p. 194). What role do you play in the plot of the book?

## PAUL SENDS HIS LOVE

1. Buechner introduces Paul as one of the most complex personalities in the New Testament: controversial, ironical, often biting and irascible (p. 204). Are Paul’s complexities and human failings indicative of someone to be dismissed? Pitied? Reverenced?
2. Paul’s teachings, in part, call you “to start becoming yourself fully by giving of yourself prodigally to whoever needs you, to love your neighbors” (p. 199). What would “giving of yourself prodigally” look like? How might it help you become yourself?

## ADOLESCENCE AND THE STEWARDSHIP OF PAIN

1. Buechner defines adolescence as growing toward something (p. 205). He observes that this often means experiencing pain, and that, rather than burying, ignoring, or becoming trapped by it, we ought to become stewards of it. Have you ever buried, ignored, or been trapped by pain? Explain. How might you become a steward of it instead?
2. Buechner quotes Walter Brueggemann: “Living right is trading what you have been given, Jesus says in his parable. It is living out your humanness in a way to call forth the humanness of the people with whom you are living and your own humanness” (p. 219). What does this mean? How can you trade what you have been given to call forth your own “humanness” and that of others?

## THE LONGING FOR HOME

1. Buechner defines home as being more than a place where you live, in fact the place where “you belong” (p. 221). What elements do you think make a place a home? What about your own home makes you feel as though you belong—or don’t?
2. He concludes that the closest to being “home” we can get is when we become and experience “life-giving, life-saving, and healing power” (p. 236). Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

## THE GREAT DANCE

1. Reflecting upon a graceful show of killer whales and their trainers at a water park, Buechner writes that he caught a glimpse of “the Peaceable Kingdom . . . the great dance that goes on at the heart of creation” (p. 240). The message of the Peaceable Kingdom, he says, is that “we are above all things loved” (p. 241). Have you witnessed anything like “the great dance”? Did it invoke a similar sentiment?
2. Buechner describes “the joy of not just managing to believe part of the time that it is true that life is holy, but of actually running into that holiness head-on” (p. 242). Unless you are open to it, that holiness can easily be overlooked. Can you recall an occasion when you encountered holiness head-on but did not recognize it as such?

## THE NEWS OF THE DAY

1. Buechner contrasts the news of the day, which often includes war, poverty, and tragedy, with the security and abundance of his own existence. He reproaches himself for his position amid the unending heartache of so many. Do you agree that this is an appropriate response to the news? How do you respond to it?
2. “To be really at home is to be really at peace, and our lives are so intricately interwoven that there can be no real peace for any of us until there is real peace for all

of us” (p. 250). Is this attainable? If not, how should one respond to the ongoing news of the day?

### THE SECRET IN THE DARK

1. Reflecting upon the obliviousness of the travelers on the road to Emmaus who encountered the risen Christ, Buechner asserts that we don’t always see, and even when we see, we don’t always recognize. Have you experienced an “Emmaus moment,” when the active presence of God was right in front of you but you did not recognize it? Do you think the travelers should have recognized Christ when they saw him? If you were a traveler on the same road, would you have responded similarly?
2. “I believe that whether we recognize him or not, or believe in him or not, or even know his name, again and again he comes and walks a little way with us along whatever road we’re following” (p. 257). Does this statement suggest that even those who deny God are covered under his grace? Do you agree?

### THE SEEING HEART

1. Recalling Thomas’s doubt after the resurrection, Buechner writes, “What we have to remember is that our eyes are not all we have for seeing with, maybe not even the best we have” (p. 261). He refers to the “eyes of the

- heart” (p. 262). What do you see with the “eyes of the heart” that your physical eyes miss?
2. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” Jesus’s words, cited by Buechner, highlight the importance of seeing Jesus with our “hearts peeled”: “What makes all the difference in the world is the one whom from time to time, by grace, I believe we have seen with our hearts or who is there to see always if we will only keep our hearts peeled for him” (pp. 263–64). Do you keep your heart peeled? If so, what have you seen?

### LET JESUS SHOW

1. Buechner concludes that Jesus “does not say the church is the way. He does not say his teachings are the way, or what people for centuries have taught about him. . . . He says he himself is the way” (p. 270). What do you think Buechner is suggesting about the function of these other significant traditions? Can they get in the way of knowing Jesus? If so, how?
2. To find “the place where Jesus is” requires an act of hope, such as the time Buechner called his deceased brother’s phone in a moment of sadness only to hear it keep ringing without answer (p. 269). How might such a gesture take a person to where Jesus is? Have you ever made this kind of nonsensical assertion?

## JAIRUS'S DAUGHTER

1. In the face of the death of Jairus's daughter, Jesus says to him, "Do not fear. Only believe." Buechner emphasizes that Jesus does not specify what, exactly, to believe in, but interprets it to mean "believe that there's nothing to be afraid of" (p. 276). Would these words console you if you were in Jairus's situation? What would you believe?
2. Buechner describes the words Jesus spoke to the little girl as a "life-giving" message for all: "Get up" (p. 278). Has there been an occasion in your life when you heard these words or needed to hear them?

## WAITING

1. According to Buechner, each of us, at the depths of our being, is waiting for something, even if we do not know what we are waiting for (p. 281). Do you possess a profound sense of waiting for something? If so, what do you think it is?
2. "To wait for Christ to come in his fullness is not just a passive thing, a pious, prayerful, churchly thing." To wait for Christ is, he says, "to be Christ to those who need us to be Christ to them and to bring them the most we have of Christ's healing and hope" (p. 284). In your life, what is the "most you have of Christ"? How can you bring it to a person in need?

## THE WORD OF LIFE

1. Buechner recounts a ceremony he attended in which two friends of the same gender united in commitment (as if in a marriage). He came to the ceremony with ambivalence but left feeling “that something honest and loving and brave was happening before our eyes” (p. 290). How do you feel about this statement? Do you think God’s presence can show itself in ways that seem, on one level, to contradict certain passages in the Bible?
2. The above celebration reflected a kind of joy Buechner didn’t expect, noting that often churches seem “lifeless and joyless” (p. 290). How do you feel about this statement? Do you think churches would show more joy and life if they embraced unconventional celebrations such as the ceremony of these two women?

## A 250TH BIRTHDAY PRAYER

1. Celebrating the 250th anniversary of the founding of his alma mater, Princeton, Buechner urges the university and those in attendance to “keep going”: “Because to keep going is to keep living and to stop going is to stop living in any way that matters” (p. 296). What might it look like in your life to keep going on a particularly bad day?
2. “Christ sleeps in the deepest selves of all of us, and whatever we do in whatever time we have left, wherever we go, may we in whatever way we can call on

him” (p. 297). Where is your deepest self? How do you access it?

### THE NEWNESS OF THINGS

1. Buechner proposes writing a letter to yourself and then asking someone to send it to you in fifteen years’ time. Rather than doing that, ponder a few of the questions he says we should ask ourselves:
  - What is the last thing that made you cry?
  - What is the most beautiful place you’ve seen?
  - What is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for you and the nicest thing you have ever done for anyone else?

In answering these questions, reflect upon how you have grown over the years and how your answers show a newness in your understanding of life.