

A DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Philip Yancey's

UNDONE:

*A Modern Rendering of
John Donne's Devotions*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Welcome	1
How to Use this Guide	2
Session 1: Introduction to a Writer Who “Burned, Raved, and Raged” (Reading: Preface–Chapter 6)	3
Session 2: Body and Spirit Under Assault (Reading: Chapters 7–12)	5
Session 3: Only Be Present to Me (Reading: Chapters 13–18)	7
Session 4: Patience in the School of Affliction. (Reading: Chapters 19–25)	9
Session 5: Restoration of Body and Soul (Reading: Chapters 26–30)	12
Appendix: Session Resources and Additional Reading	15

WELCOME

Welcome to the discussion guide for *Undone: A Modern Rendering of John Donne's Devotions*. This five week guide is designed to dive deep into the human struggle to understand both the reality of suffering and the reality of a loving God, and create a safe environment to help your group wrestle with these ideas together. We hope that by ploughing this difficult soil your group can uncover the buried treasure of the kingdom.

Leading the exploration of these difficult yet important ideas are two literary figures known for their power in bringing human questions before God: contemporary writer/journalist/pilgrim Philip Yancey and the “companion in crisis” he found in 17th-century writer/poet/cathedral dean John Donne. “I know of no better account of someone confronting God during a health crisis,” Yancey observed in explaining why he edited *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* to make Donne’s erudite, early-modern-English prose accessible for today’s readers (p. viii). The thirty chapters of *Undone* include Yancey’s personal reflections surrounding Donne’s essays, lending the book to daily devotional use in a month’s time. This guide is sectioned out to be used over the course of five sessions.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

In the five sessions that follow, you'll find several book excerpts plus key discussion questions to help you enter together into the assigned readings.

With the excerpts, take turns having volunteers read one out loud and ask for short comments such as "What grabbed your attention in this excerpt? What surprised you? What about this quote made you want to go back and read or reread this part?"

Use the discussion questions (or substitute your own) to help guide your reflection on the content and engage with one another in ways that facilitate insight and connection.

SESSION 1

Introduction to a Writer Who “Burned, Raved, and Raged” (Reading: Preface–Chapter 6)

BOOK EXCERPTS TO READ ALOUD

EXCERPT 1

“My first book explored the question *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, a question that had hung over my brother and me like the shadow of a missing father. In the years since, my writing has often circled around the issues raised by pain and suffering. Then came 2020, when a global health crisis put everyone on the planet at risk. Within weeks, a tiny virus overwhelmed hospitals, disrupted economies, and upended everyday social interactions. For a time, everything came undone.” (p. vii)

EXCERPT 2

“We inhabit a planet subject to the whims of nature, which are duplicated in our own frail bodies. Storms buffet us, flashes of lightning blind us, earthquakes cause sudden trembling, our life-giving blood overflows its banks. Is this God’s idea of honor, to grant us humans the awareness that at any moment suffering may strike, with one of these torments leading to our death?

What other creature has the ability to hasten its own execution by fueling sickness with apprehension on the one hand or depression on the other—as if the natural fever wouldn’t destroy us fast enough on its own. What a miserable state we humans live in!” (pp. 13–14)

EXCERPT 3

“O most mighty and merciful God, though you have knocked me off my feet, you have not separated me from my foundation, which is yourself. Though you have felled me from an upright posture, in which I could stand and see the heavens, you have not dimmed that light by which I can see you. Though you have weakened my knees so that they cannot bow to you, the knees of my heart are bowed to you forever.” (p. 24)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR GROUP ENGAGEMENT

QUESTION 1

In what ways, if any, has your experience of the COVID pandemic raised daunting questions?

Question 2

These early chapters show Donne wrestling with fear—such as dying from his illness, isolation from others, losing the capacity to keep up with his life commitments. Behind them all looms the fear of how God views him in his sickbed. What echoes of your own experience—either when you or a loved one lay ill—do you hear in Donne’s outpouring to God?

Question 3

At several points Donne makes reference to the healing miracles of Jesus (Matthew 4:23). He asks, “Will this universal physician pass by this hospital, and not visit me?” If you were visiting Donne at his bedside, how would you help him wrestle with this question?

SESSION 2

Body and Spirit under Assault (Reading: Chapters 7–12)

BOOK EXCERPTS TO READ ALOUD

EXCERPT 1

“Paradoxically, fear and joy go together. The women who first heard from an angel about the resurrection ran from the tomb on legs of fear and joy. Love, too, coexists with fear. In many places we are called upon to fear God, and yet the underlying command is, You shall love the Lord your God; whoever does not both, does neither.” (p. 37)

EXCERPT 2

“Open my eyes to the meaning of this illness. When I have read it in the language of correction, allow me to translate it into another, and read it as a mercy. Your mercy or your correction: which of these is the original and primary message, and which the translation, I cannot conclude, though death may conclude me. For though it certainly feels like a correction, I can have no greater proof of your mercy than to die in you, and by that death to be united to him who died for me.” (p. 43)

EXCERPT 3

“This is nature’s nest of boxes: the heavens contain the earth; the earth, cities; and cities, people. All are subject to decay and ruin, and in each of them, the most dangerous

threats are the ones most difficult to detect. When the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, God knew their many grievous sins, but charged them with one: the inward rebellion of murmuring. Secret sins are the most deadly and pernicious. . . .

So, too, with diseases of the body. In my case, the urine, sweat, and pulse have all sworn to say nothing, and thus disguise the sickness inside. My strength is not enfeebled, and I've regained my appetite. My mind remains clear, unclouded by anxiety. And yet my doctors see invisibly, and I feel insensibly, that the disease is prevailing." (p. 53)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR GROUP ENGAGEMENT

QUESTION 1

Donne speaks of the coexistence of fearing God and loving God. Realistically, how can we do both at the same time?

QUESTION 2

Donne puzzled over whether God willed the illness as a punishment or a catalyst for his transformation, or simply permitted it as a vehicle to show divine mercy. What experiences in your life have given you perspective on this perennial question of what God is up to—or not—when suffering hits home?

QUESTION 3

Donne confesses concern about "secret sins" such as the Israelites' "inward rebellion of murmuring" even as God sustained them with manna in the wilderness. Where, if at all, in your life are you most likely to withdraw from God, and what do you find most helpful in bringing light to those dark places?

SESSION 3

Only Be Present to Me (Reading: Chapters 13–18)

BOOK EXCERPTS TO READ ALOUD

EXCERPT 1

“This illness presents a bitter pill, O Lord, which has made me reticent around you. Today you have given me another morning, though, and my heart beats on. My heart seized up when I numbered my sins, but that pain is not terminal, because those sins are not terminal. Rather, my heart lives in you.

As long as I remain in this great hospital, this sick and polluted world, and as long as I remain in this leprous body, the heart that you have prepared will be subject to malign invasion. But I have my medicine in your promise: that when I know the plague of my heart and turn to you, you will preserve that heart from the deadly force of its infection, and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard my heart and mind through Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7).” (pp. 59–60)

EXCERPT 2

“I know, O Lord, the anxiety that accompanies the phrase, ‘the house is visited,’ when a physician finds a dwelling whose inhabitants bear the marks of plague. Perhaps you leave your own marks upon a patient, but what a wretched hermitage is the house

not visited by you, and what outcasts are those who have none of your marks upon them. These fevers, O Lord, which you have brought upon this body, are but the melting of the wax that will seal me to you. These spots are but the letters in which you have written your own name and conveyed yourself to me.

Whether you take me now, or in a later exchange by glorifying yourself in my stay here, I don't care. Only be present to me, O my God, and this bedchamber and your abode shall be all one room, and the closing of my bodily eyes here, and the opening of the eyes of my soul there, all one act." (p. 68)

EXCERPT 3

"Let this prayer, O God, be my last gasp, my expiring, my dying in you. If this is the hour of my departure, may I die the death of a sinner, drowned in my sins, saved in the blood of your Son. And if I live longer, may I die the death of the righteous, by dying to sin, which is a resurrection to new life. You bring death and give life. Whatever comes, comes from you; no matter what comes, let me come to you." (p. 80)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR GROUP ENGAGEMENT

QUESTION 1

Perhaps you can recall a season in your life when suffering has seemed especially prolonged and unrelieved. What were your thoughts and feelings toward God in the midst of that trial? Consider writing down your responses in a short letter or prayer.

QUESTION 2

Now think of a time when, in the midst of great struggle, God surprised you in a profound experience of comfort or consolation. What was surprising about it, and what it did show you about God?

QUESTION 3

How would you help a friend who is having trouble experiencing the presence of God in the midst of a trial of suffering? Choose a short quote from your readings in *Undone* that is a marker for one way you might answer this question.

SESSION 4

Patience in the School of Affliction (Reading: Chapters 19–25)

BOOK EXCERPTS TO READ ALOUD

EXCERPT 1

“Who doesn’t look up to the sun when it rises, or to a comet when it streaks across the sky? Who doesn’t incline his ear to a bell, wondering what prompted it? This bell that I hear signifies a passing of a piece of myself from this world. No one is an island, isolated and self-contained. If a chunk of earth be washed away by the sea, Europe is diminished—as much as if it were a promontory, or a friend’s manor, or my own. Anyone’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in all humanity.

Therefore, never ask for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for you, and for me.” (p. 82)

EXCERPT 2

“Forgive me for asking though, my God: If I have a sturdy ship, and faith in your Son the master of the seas, why aren’t we nearer land? When the disciples took Jesus into a boat, immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading (John 6:21). You can accomplish what you want whenever you want. Why the delay that dampens my hope?

I need the patience of your prophet, who said, The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord (Lamentations 3:25-26). You put off many judgments until the last day; can’t I endure the delay of your mercy for another day?” (pp. 95–96)

EXCERPT 3

“When you created angels, and then they watched as you produced fowl and fish and other animals, I’m sure they didn’t badger you and say, Will we have no better companions than

these? They waited, and then had humans delivered over to them, a species not much inferior to themselves. Similarly, now that I’m able to rise, I’m not complaining about the lack of immediate healing. I am practicing patience, learning in the school of affliction.” (p. 106)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR GROUP ENGAGEMENT

QUESTION 1

Donne’s entry “The Passing” Bell (ch. 19) contains some of his most powerful and well-known imagery, rippling down the centuries in echoes such as Ernest Hemingway’s novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and Thomas Merton’s classic *No Man Is an Island*. In addition to these metaphors of the bell tolling for all humankind, and the continent of humankind of which each one of us is a piece, Donne also describes how each of us is bound up by one author in the “same volume” of humankind: “When one person dies, a chapter is not torn out of the book, but rather translated into a better language.” As God’s own hand guides that translation, so will God bound up our “scattered pages for an eternal library in which every book will lie open” to one another (p. 81).

It would be easy to toss a cliché at such masterful imagery, such as “we’re all in this together.” Instead, take a few minutes and choose one of these metaphors to meditate on. Visualize your life through this lens, and then write down what comes up for you.

QUESTION 2

Donne asks a lot of “why” questions (you’ll see in the next session that Yancey picks up on this element), so much so that he even asks God to forgive him for what could seem like impertinent interrogation. Reflect on when you have put your own “why” questions before God with intensity or anguish. What benefits do you think we get from giving voice to these yowls even when we know in advance we’re not likely to get “the answer”?

Note: Eugene Peterson, translator of *The Message*, reminded us that more than half of the Psalms are psalms of lament, full of the “why” questions.

QUESTION 3

Unless two or more people are reading a book aloud together, the act of reading is first a personal, private experience. A book-group adds another layer by pivoting the personal into the social, individuals into a relational network. The content of the two writers in *Undone* suggest yet a third layer of relationship, a transcendent meeting of human spirit to human spirit together drawing near to God.

Consider the experiences you are having with others in the group as you explore *Undone*—not just as a book discussion, but in contemplation of some of the deepest questions of human existence. How would you say that your reading experience on your own has been affected by your reading experience in this group? Does any of it rise to the level of “spiritual community” in your definition of it? If so, in what ways?

SESSION 5

Restoration of Body and Soul (Reading: Chapters 26–30)

BOOK EXCERPTS TO READ ALOUD

EXCERPT 1

“In his crisis, Donne managed to achieve a ‘holy indifference’ to death: not by a discounting of death’s horror—his later sermons contain vivid depictions of those horrors—but rather by a renewed confidence in resurrection. Death, which appears to sever life, actually opens a door to new life. ‘O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?’

If Donne could somehow time-travel into modern times, he would no doubt be aghast at how little attention we give to the afterlife. Today, people are almost embarrassed to talk about such a belief. We fear heaven as our ancestors feared hell. The notion seems quaint, cowardly, an escape from this world’s problems. What inversion of values, I wonder, has led us to commend a belief in no afterlife as brave, and dismiss a hope for blissful eternity as cowardly?” (pp. 120–21)

EXCERPT 2

“I have read many words on the problem of pain, and written some myself. Nowhere, however, have I found such a concentrated, wise meditation on the human condition as in the journal John Donne kept during the weeks of his illness, as he lay preparing for death. Having braced himself to wrestle with God, he instead found himself in the arms of a merciful Physician, who tenderly guided him through the crisis so that he could emerge to give comfort and hope to others.” (p. 125)

EXCERPT 3

“In his disputation with God, Donne has changed questions. He began with the question of cause—’Who caused this illness, this plague? And why?’—for which he found no answer. The meditations move ever so gradually toward the question of response, the defining issue that confronts every person who suffers. Will I trust God with my crisis, and the fear it provokes? Or will I turn away from God in bitterness and anger? Donne decided that in the most important sense it did not matter whether his sickness was a chastening or merely a natural occurrence. In either case he would trust God, for in the end trust represents the proper fear of the Lord.” (p. 143)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR GROUP ENGAGEMENT

QUESTION 1

Yancey quotes Viktor Frankl, Nazi concentration camp survivor: “Despair,” he said, “is suffering without meaning” (p. 128). How do you think John Donne would describe the “meaning” of suffering and death for those with Christian faith and a belief in resurrection? How would you describe the “meaning” of suffering?

QUESTION 2

Yancey writes of the irony of turning in the manuscript for this book only to turn around and hear his physician pronounce the diagnosis of Parkinson’s Disease. Can you imagine how this event might have colored his work in completing this book? In what ways, if any, does it affect your own consideration of Donne’s devotions?

QUESTION 3

Yancey quotes Stanley Hauerwas that the church is “a company of people who have learned how to be ill and to ask for help and how to be present to one another in and out of pain” (p. 136). Write down the thoughts that first come to you in considering how

this exploration of Undone has helped you . . .

- learn how to be ill,
- learn how to ask for help, and
- learn how to be present to God and one another, in or out of pain.

APPENDIX

Note: This discussion guide was first used for a Zoom discussion group hosted by the Rabbit Room during the Lenten season in 2024. These videos are available to watch as an additional resource but are not necessary to follow this guide.

[You can access the following list of videos and resources at RabbitRoom.com/Undone.](https://RabbitRoom.com/Undone)

RESOURCES FOR SESSION 1

A recording of the Zoom group's discussion, including a group analysis of *Undone* alongside the original text of John Donne's *Devotions*.

The complete text of John Donne's *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*.

RESOURCES FOR SESSION 2

A recording of the Zoom group's discussion with historical background on John Donne and guest commentary from Jonathan Rogers, 17th-century scholar.

A PDF download with background on John Donne's life and historical context.

RESOURCES FOR SESSION 3

A recording of the Zoom group's discussion with guest commentary from author/playwright A. S. Peterson on perseverance through suffering, including insights from the story of Corrie ten Boom.

RESOURCES FOR SESSION 4

A recording of the Zoom group's discussion with guest commentary from writer-lyricist Doug McKelvey on resources of the liturgical tradition for grief and healing.

PDF downloads of the liturgies based on *Undone* from *Every Moment Holy vol. 3*

Free download: "For Relapse"

Free download: “For the Tolling of the Passing Bell”

Free download: “On a Day of Recovery from Sickness”

RESOURCES FOR SESSION 5

A recording of the Zoom group’s discussion with guest commentary by author Philip Yancey.

Link to an interview with Philip on The Habit podcast.

Link to an interview with Philip on the Wade Center podcast.

Link to read Philip Yancey’s blog on the process of writing *Undone*.

ADDITIONAL READING

My Bright Abyss, by Christian Wiman

The Wounded Healer, by Henri Nouwen

Where Is God When It Hurts, *Disappointment with God*, and *The Question That Never Goes Away*, by Philip Yancey

The Problem of Pain and A Grief Observed, by C. S. Lewis

Creative Suffering, by Paul Tournier

Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved, by Kate Bowler

The Goodness of God, by John W. Wenham

Walking with God through Pain and Suffering, by Timothy Keller

God on Mute, by Pete Greig

A Walking Disaster, by Jamie Aten

A Grace Disguised and A Grace Revealed, by Jerry Sittser

The Gift of Pain, by Dr. Paul Brand