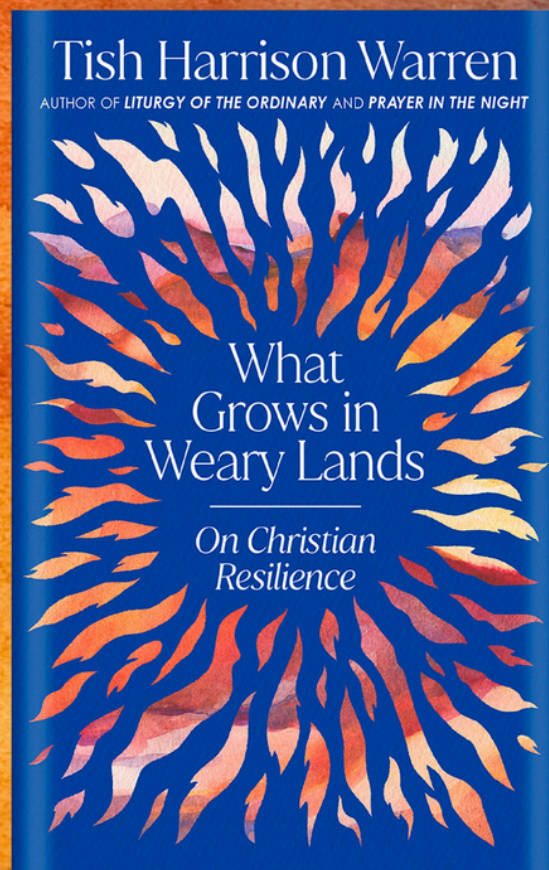


# *Discussion Questions and Practices:*

Here are questions for reflection after each chapter, for either individuals or small group/book group discussions. There are also practices listed to take up for each chapter, if you'd like to. If two practices are listed, pick which one seems best for you. If you are reading this book with others, discuss how these practices impacted you or what the experience was like for you.



# Chapter 1

1. Have there been seasons in your life where you have felt spent or like you've "run out of steam?"
2. What ways do you notice weariness or burn out in our culture? What do you think contributes to a sense of exhaustion in our culture?
3. Have you ever experienced aridity in your life? If so, what was that experience like for you and what resources did you find to draw on in that time?
4. What do you think about the (albeit imperfect) metaphor of faith as a craft? What are the strengths and limitations of that metaphor? How does it help us talk about faith in better or worse ways?

## **Practice:**

Warren discusses how as "life stretches on and we begin, more and more, to meet with suffering, sadness, or simply the cussedness of daily living," we can either "numb out, flame out, or go deep." Take some time to journal about how you see each tendency in your own life. Do you tend to flame out or numb out? Write about a way God may be calling you to deepen in your own life and struggles. (If you are reading with friends, share some ways you see these dynamics in your life).

## Chapter 2

1. Where in your life, or in our culture more generally, do you see acedia at work? Is there a place where you long for “the ease of indifference” or have a profound “sadness that the good is difficult”? What does that look like for you?
2. What is one way that you find it difficult to “stay in your cell”? And what is one habit or practice in your life that helps you cultivate “stability of the heart”?
3. How do you see religious faith or spirituality used not to seek God for God’s own sake, but as a means to spiritual pleasure, experience, or “something that works for us and makes our life work?”
4. Were you familiar with the idea of “illumination” and the “dark night”? Take time to map out or draw the stages you’ve experienced in the Christian life. Have you passed through times of abundance, desert seasons, valleys, mountain tops? Using whatever words or images resonate with you, draw a map or chart a timeline of your journey so far. Where was God amid each season? (Bonus: share this drawing with a friend and discuss it or pray for each other).

### **Practice:**

Warren discusses how we pray with our bodies and our hearts follow. This week, try lifting up your hands or kneeling (or choose some other physical way to pray) each day. Talk in your small group or with friends about how doing this was for you.

## Chapter 3

1. Warren quotes a saying of Amma Syncletica: “Just as the bird who abandons the eggs she was sitting on prevents them from hatching, so the monk or nun grows cold and their faith dies, when they go around from one place to another.” How do you think this applies (or doesn’t apply) to our moment and culture?
2. Are there places and circumstances in your life where you currently feel stuck? What have these “confinements” shown you about yourself, God, love, and/or the “arduous good”?
3. Warren discusses various ways she indulges in fantasy and how these can keep her “blind” to God’s presence, now, in the place she is in. Are there ways you resonate with this in your own life? What are your most revisited fantasies or escapism? How might these blind you to the work of God in your life?

### **Practice:**

This week, choose a way to embrace the place you are in (either as a small group or as an individual): Learn the name of the tree species in your yard, read a history of the town or state you are in, pray for your church leaders or friends by name, meet a neighbor, invest time or money in a local institution (school, church, civic group), pray for the needs of your city each day, subscribe to a local newspaper. Share about this experience with a friend.

Journal about how being “in place” in your cell is a gift and the ways you find it challenging or difficult.

## Chapter 4

1. What ways has stoicism or just “grinning and bearing it” affected your own “staying in your cell” or your church or family? How does hope change the way we experience resilience or perseverance?

2. Warren wrote, “We are a serious people. We do not pretend that the darkness is any less dark than it truly is. We do not presume that with enough money, technology, fame, or power, we could avoid trouble, death, persecution, or pain. We do not act as if the problems in the world or our own lives are easy to solve.” But, she says, “we remain, intentionally and authentically, ‘of good cheer.’” How do you see Christians today as people of “cheerful seriousness”? How do you feel the church fails to exhibit either this sense of seriousness or this sense of cheerfulness? Give specific examples.

3. How does Amma Syncletica’s metaphor of our lives as a womb shape how you might think about your specific day, tasks, or longings today?

### **Practice:**

Warren writes about how dishonesty and isolation cut us off from knowing hope and says, “If hope is to grow in us, it must be sown and nourished together, in community with other people.” Journal about ways you see “liturgies” or practices of isolation in your own life”

Ask a pastor or trusted friend out for coffee and tell him or her a place where you need hope right now.

## Chapter 5

1. What is one way you struggle to relax, let go, and be still? What would it mean to “try softer” for you?
2. Warren writes, “Perfectionism tells us that anything done poorly is not worth doing, but this fearful striving ultimately keeps us from growth.” Is this a tendency that you see in yourself or in others close to you? How might this inhibit growth?
3. How do you identify (or not) with the man in the story who saw a plot full of weeds and wanted to sleep for several days? What feels like “an unweeable” plot in your life, in the church, and in the world?

### **Practice:**

Write and keep a list (over the course of a week) of everything that you notice that offers you delight or joy and thank God for these things

If you do not regularly keep a sabbath, turn off all screens and cease work for 24 hours or so. Talk to a friend or journal about what this experience was like for you.

## Chapter 6

1. When you think of solitude or have a bit of time for it, what is that like for you? Do you crave solitude? Resist it? Feel guilty about having it? Feel guilty about not having enough? Anything else? Examine what the idea of solitude brings up in you.
2. Warren wrote, “Today...we can remain seemingly alone in our room, yet still have constant glowing access to crowds, noise, and hurry.” How has that reality shaped your own life and family or friendships? How has technology shaped your own experience of “spaciousness” in your day?
3. Warren mentions how Amma Syncletica spoke of carrying the desert with us wherever we go, practicing contemplation amid our ordinary life. What might this mean for you? How do you “take up small practices of silence or stillness, intentionally or consistently?”
4. What rhythms of engagement and withdrawal have you built into your week, your month, and your year? What ways do you struggle with these rhythms?

### **Practice:**

Take 10 min to 1 hour of solitude (if you are new at this, start with a shorter time) and sit in silence. Get away from all devices. Light a candle or sit in a comfortable place. Invite God to be present with you in silence and just sit. As thoughts bubble up, let them pass by, or jot them down quickly, if needed, and return to simply sitting, in silence, with God.

Go on a retreat for an afternoon, a day, or more, and spend time “warming yourself” in the fire of God’s presence. If you are in a small group or reading with friends, try doing this together.

## Chapter 7

1. Is doubt something you ever experience? What causes you doubt? Are you willing to share these doubts with others? Why or why not?
2. Warren writes, “Just as physical health cannot be sustained over a lifetime without seeing good doctors, our faith cannot endure for long without those we trust who faithfully practice the cure of souls.” Do you have someone like this in your life? Who are they? Or if not, what are obstacles to finding such a person?
3. Do you feel connected or disconnected from the faith and doubts of others in the historic church? How has that affected your own faith and life?

### **Practice:**

Warren asks, “Whose faithfulness makes you want to be faithful?” Write a list of these people (living or dead, those you know personally or not). Pray for them. If there are people you know on your list, perhaps call them or write them a note and let them know.

Read Psalm 44 each day for one week. Reflect on what thoughts or feelings this brings up in you.

## Chapter 8

1. Warren wrote, “To devote oneself fully to any craft requires the effort of a lifetime.” Can you look back and notice things in your life that have taken long seasons to learn or grow? Are there things you are still working on that have taken a long time? What has that experience been like for you?
2. Warren writes about how the reality of death undoes our sense of control. What does remembering mortality stir up in you? How does the practice of recalling our death shape our lives?
3. Debra Reinstra describes the tenacity of plant species that survive in harsh landscapes. In what ways are you growing in the “dogged and creative” resilience reflected in these plant species?
4. After reflecting on weariness, hope, and resilience for eight chapters, where do you see a need to “go deep” into God and into relationships with others?

### **Practice:**

Warren writes that she has witnessed “what grows in weary lands,” even as that work is incomplete and partial. Can you write a letter to a friend, to the author, to God, or to yourself about what you have seen grow and shift in you in seasons of weariness or what you hope will grow in you in these seasons?

As a final practice, look over the book and think about your reaction to each section: What most deeply resonated or encouraged you? What might be God’s invitation to you in whatever season of life you are currently in? It’s okay if you don’t know exactly. Offer up your reflections as a prayer, or if you are in a small group or book group, ask others to pray for you.