

Discussion
Questions

Letters
to Saint
Lydia



MELINDA JOHNSON

Discussion Questions

for the novel



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to

Saint Lydia



by Melinda Johnson



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Chapter 1



1. What does your name mean? Were you named for someone? For whom and why?
2. What do you know about Saint Lydia? Where would you look to learn more about her? Try Googling “Saint Lydia.” What do you find?
3. Are you an Orthodox Christian? How much do you think non-Orthodox people know about Orthodoxy?
4. What is your faith background? Do you hold the same beliefs as your parents? Why or why not?
5. Do you think parents who convert to a new faith should convert their children? Would you do this if you were the parents? Has this happened to you or someone you know?
6. Do you think Saint Lydia is real? Do you think people remain “real” after they die? In what way?
7. Why might you ask someone to pray for you? What do you think and do if someone asks you to pray for them?
8. Does your family eat meals together? What is your favorite way to spend time together as a family? What is your least favorite way? Why?
9. How much do our actions affect how God, the angels, and the saints interact with us and what they do or can do for us?

Chapter 2



1. Describe your family. Who are the members of your family? What roles does each member play in the family group? How are the members like or unlike each other?
2. Do you think Lydia is happy or sad that she was not asked to convert? Why? If you were Lydia, how would you feel about this?
3. How do you think Lydia's daily experience of her family will change now that they are all Orthodox—and she is not? What parts of their life do you think will be affected by their new faith? What might not be affected?
4. How do you think Lydia feels about her mother? Her father? How do you feel about how you interact with your own parents?
5. What do you think of the statement, “. . . one should never underestimate the inherent power of holy things”?
6. Why do you think Lydia is writing to Saint Lydia?

Chapter 3



1. Describe yourself.
2. How much do we learn from our parents in life? How much from our friends? What kind of information comes from parents? From friends?
3. Who is the “Rilla” in your life? Who loves you “just plain, just because” they love you?
4. Who are your best friends? Why are you close to them?
5. How do we know if the saints hear us?
6. How do we know if God hears us?
7. How does the Orthodox view of nonhuman creation, such as animals or the environment, differ from that of other Christian belief systems?
8. Talk about silence. When is it good? When is it bad? What are you, personally, doing when you are silent?

Chapter 4



1. Why does Lydia feel uncomfortable about her family's conversion?
2. How often do you go to church? How often does your family go to church? Why do you go to church? What do you know about your family's reasons for going to church?
3. Have you ever heard someone say they feel closer to God outside in nature than in church? What do you think about this?
4. How important are the beliefs of a mother and father in the life of a family? How are children affected by what their parents believe? How are they affected by what their parents teach them?
5. What should parents tell their children about their personal beliefs? Is there anything parents should not share about their beliefs?
6. If you had been at the church when Lydia's family was baptized, what would you have thought about her as she stood aside and did not get baptized? Do you think she is right that everyone there was judging her? What do you think people were thinking? What do you think people should think about a person in Lydia's situation?
7. What do you think about Lydia's feeling that God would not want her if she "caved under pressure" to become Orthodox?
8. How would you define "religion"? Do you think religion gives us reasons to "be good"? What else do we get from religion? What purposes does it serve in our lives?
9. How do you think Lydia's relationship with her parents will change now that they are Orthodox? How will her relationship with her sister be affected? How might her parents change the way they are raising their daughters now that they are Orthodox?
10. What do you think about Lydia's question, "Is it actually fine with everyone if I decide *not* to save my immortal soul?"

Chapter 5



1. How much do you read the Bible? Why?
2. What do you think of the story of Saint Lydia's conversion by Saint Paul?
3. Saint Lydia was a businesswoman. What might this tell us about her?
4. What experiences in your life were as special to you as Saint Lydia's baptism was to her?
5. What makes you feel alive? Why?
6. What effect do you have on the world that you live in? What effect do you want to have?
7. What do you celebrate? How do you celebrate?
8. What affects how well a person can "hear" another person? Who is the hardest person for you to hear in your life? Who can hear you? Who can't hear you?

Chapter 6



1. What is your experience with members of the opposite sex? Romantic? Platonic? Positive? Negative? Respectful? Disrespectful? Valuable? Harmful?
2. How would you define a “bad boy”/“bad girl”? Do you think this definition changes from one generation to the next? Why or why not?
3. Do you know anyone like Paul, a person who could be so nice if only he or she could break one big bad habit? Are you ever a person like that yourself?
4. What do you think of Lydia’s theory that Paul (or the hypothetical “bad boy”) is only interesting because there is something attractive about him in spite of his bad behavior?
5. How do you experience people who are an apparent mix of good and evil? Are we all like this? In what ways?
6. What is cynicism? Where does it come from? Where does it lead?
7. Would you “talk about boys with a saint”? Why or why not?
8. Whom can you talk to? Whom do you want to be able to talk to? Whom do you avoid talking to?
9. You can be a saint yourself one day. What do you think about this?

Chapter 7



1. What do you think is going on with Trella? Do you agree with Jill or Lydia? Why?
2. What are some reasons people withdraw from their friends and loved ones when they are in trouble? Have you ever done this? Why did you do it?
3. Why is it significant to Lydia that Chad never became part of their group of friends? What does she seem to think this says about Chad? What do you think it might say about Chad, or about Trella? What might it say about Lydia and her friends?
4. What seems to be the foundation for Lydia's friendship with Lauren, Jill, Trella, and her other volleyball friends? Do you agree that these friendships may not be as strong as Lydia thinks they are? Why or why not?
5. Why did Lydia choose not to tell her friends about her family's conversion? Was this a good choice? What would you have done in her place?
6. Have you ever had the experience of outgrowing a friendship? Have you ever lost a friend, gradually or suddenly, because you changed as a person and he/she did not? What happened? How did you feel about it?

Chapter 8



1. Talk about loaded questions. What question that is not really a question bothers you the most?
2. How do you handle situations in which someone wants you to have feelings you do not have? How do you handle situations in which you wish someone else had feelings they don't have?
3. What do you think when you hear the words "the body and blood of Christ"?
4. What happens when you take the Eucharist? What are you doing?
5. Do you have siblings? Describe them, or talk about being an only child.
6. When are children smarter or wiser than adults? Why?
7. Have you ever fasted? Why did you do it? What happened?
8. Give an example of something that is frightening when you don't understand it.
9. What is a secret? Why do people keep secrets? What determines what is kept secret and what is told?

Chapter 9



1. Do you think Lydia is really free to choose whether she will be baptized? Why or why not?
2. Who are the adults in your life who are important to you but are not your parents? What do you value about them?
3. If you were Aunt Aven, would you have talked to Lydia about her parents' conversion or about her choice not to go to church? Why or why not? What might she have said? What might Lydia have said?
4. Have you ever had an important or especially meaningful dream? Describe it. Where do dreams come from?
5. Do you know someone who has died? What happened to the person who died? What happened to the people left behind on this earth? Why?
6. How much do the circumstances of death matter? Why? In what ways?
7. How much does it matter whether Aunt Aven knows that marriage is eternal? What effect would this knowledge have?

Chapter 10



1. Lydia says Jill is good at handling awkward situations because she can make people laugh easily. Do you think this is a good way to handle awkward situations? When would it be a good way to handle the situation? When would it be a bad way?
2. Laughter happens for many reasons. It can be a genuine response to humor, but it can also happen to relieve stress, to hide inconvenient feelings, and for other reasons. What do you know about what makes people laugh? Is laughter ever a protection, a weapon, a tool? What makes you laugh, personally?
3. What do you think about Lydia's comment that whenever someone says "nothing" is happening, it is a sure sign that something is happening? What is your experience with this?
4. Do you ever feel like members of the opposite sex are "more trouble than they're worth"? Why or why not? Do you think they ever feel that way about you?
5. Do you like romantic movies? Why or why not?
6. Why does Lydia need to be reminded that "a man is a person"?
7. To say that the two sexes were created as the "perfect complement" to each other implies that there are distinctly female and distinctly male attributes or characteristics. Do you agree or disagree? What makes a person feminine or masculine?
8. How can you maintain a balance between protecting yourself from what is evil and opening yourself to what is good?

Chapter 11



1. What do you think of the Sampsons? What do you think of Lydia's attitude toward them?
2. Is there anything about the Sampsons you can sympathize with? Why or why not?
3. In your experience, how do various kinds of Christians view each other? Why?
4. Make your own list of what you do and/or do not like about "church people."
5. Do you consider yourself a "church person"? Why or why not?
6. How are "church people" portrayed or viewed in popular culture? How does this influence your own views of people who are active in church?
7. What does it mean to be the only person who has ever been or ever will be you? What effect does this or should this have on your life?
8. What do you think about the advice to "stop thinking about your faith in terms of your parents' faith"?
9. How much do your feelings about your fellow churchgoers matter? How much should they matter?
10. Why do people have feelings, positive or negative, about the other people in church with them? Are these feelings natural? Are they constructive or destructive? Are there times when how you feel about the people worshipping with you matters? Are there times when it does not matter?

Chapter 12



1. Do you agree with Lydia's mom's decision to go to Lorinda's weddings no matter how many times she gets married? Why or why not?
2. What is the difference between supporting someone and enabling them?
3. Lorinda makes Lydia feel uncomfortable. Why? Describe a person who makes you feel uncomfortable and explain why you feel that way.
4. Lydia asks, "What is it really? What is getting married?" How would you answer these questions?
5. Why is premarital sex harmful? What is the result of it? What choices lead to thinking that premarital sex is acceptable? What choices lead to thinking that it is not acceptable?
6. What are the implications of believing that marriage is eternal? What effects does this belief have in daily life? In marriage? In the choice to become married? In premarital choices? Brainstorm about this.
7. Although there is no need to discuss private family business in a public context, spend some time thinking about your parents' marriage and how you view it. How does it look to you? What do you know about how they met, why they married, and what they believe about marriage?
8. What does this mean: "True love cannot permit itself to be anything but eternal"?
9. Why is Lydia making an island of herself? What happens when a person becomes an island? How can this be prevented or undone? Why should it be?
10. Saint Lydia refers to "the labor of a lasting love." What "labor" or work is involved in lasting love?

Chapter 13



1. Have you ever had an experience like this? Describe it.
2. Do you believe God, angels, or saints appear in dreams? Why or why not? Why would such dreams occur?
3. Why did Lydia have the dream? Why was she unable to see Saint Lydia's letters?
4. If you could be visited by one saint in a dream, who would it be and why?
5. What makes us able or unable to believe in God?
6. What part do dreams play in reality? Are they "real"? In what way?
7. If you were Lydia, how would you respond to this experience? How would you want to respond?

Chapter 14



1. Describe the best and worst birthday parties you ever had.
2. If you were Lydia's parents, how would you have handled a birthday happening during a fasting period? Why?
3. What does Lydia mean when she says she decided to just "be there"?
4. If you could have one question answered directly by God, what question would you ask?
5. How do you feel when you think about leaving home, either to go to college or to begin your adult life? Where do these feelings come from? How will they be part of the decisions you make about leaving?
6. Who knows you better, people who have known you for your whole life or people who have only known you since you became a teenager? Why?
7. Are there people in your life that you can't really "see" anymore because you have known them for so long or because you have them linked so strongly with certain memories? Who and why?
8. Talk about people who "step out into the world and drown" in the "deep and sinister darkness." What makes them drown? What happens to their life when they drown? What can prevent this from happening? What can be done to save them after it happens?

Chapter 15



1. What do you think it is like to get pregnant while you are still a teenager and unmarried? What do you know about this?
2. Why might Trella's parents be "furious" about Trella's pregnancy? If your teenage daughter told you she was pregnant, how would you react? Why?
3. What do you think about Lydia's opinion that "a baby is a baby, no matter what"? Why is the baby the most important person in the situation? What do you think is the best thing Trella can do for her baby?
4. What do you think will happen when Lydia invites her teammates to throw a baby shower for Trella?
5. Why might someone choose to have an abortion? What happens to you and to your baby if you have an abortion?
6. Why might someone choose to put her baby up for adoption? What happens to you and to your baby if you put your baby up for adoption?
7. What are some ways that Lydia can be a good friend to Trella and her baby?
8. Have you ever done something that changed your life forever? What happened?
9. What do you think about the statement that "one must work *with* God's order, not against it, to achieve delight and fruitful living"? How can Trella work with God? How can you work with God in your daily life?

Chapter 16



1. What happens in a conversation when you get angry? What happens when the person you are talking to is also angry?
2. How do you think your parents see you as a person? Why do you think this?
3. How do you see your parents? How has your relationship with them changed over the years? How has it stayed the same?
4. Why do you think Lydia and her mom got into such a big argument about Trella? What do you think of Lydia's description of the argument? Do you think she is being fair? Why do you think Lydia's mom responded to the news about Trella by focusing on Trella's bad decision?
5. Why do you think Lydia felt the need to mention that her reason for abstaining from sex is "not because I've never had the chance"?
6. What do you think about Lydia's observation that people and their qualities can be contagious, that sometimes we just start acting like people around us without thinking? Have you had this experience? What kind of behavior is contagious? How do you respond when you feel like this is happening to you?
7. Do you believe you are aware of or conscious of your whole being? Do you believe there are parts of yourself that even you do not know? What might they be?
8. Think of someone you know who does not have much in common with you. Think of two or three experiences you might have if you spent one day "inside" that person's head.
9. How would you answer Lydia's question, "What would you do if you were me?"
10. What can you learn about motherhood from Mary, the Mother of God?

Chapter 17



1. What do you do after you have had an argument with someone in your family or with a close friend? What happens when you do this?
2. When someone you know well is talking to you, what is going on in your mind? Do you ever have Lydia's problem of trying to determine what is behind what someone is saying to you? What is helpful and what is harmful about how Lydia views her mother's words?
3. What is persuasion? When is it appropriate? When is it inappropriate? When you try to persuade someone, what do you do? Why do you do it?
4. Orthodox Christianity teaches that in order to truly know God, we must love Him. What do you think about this? What is your experience of God? What feelings are present between you and God?
5. What is love? Is love of human beings the same thing as love of God? Where does love come from? Where does it lead?
6. What are the differences between the ways we interact with God and the ways we interact with other people? What causes these differences? What should be different between our relationship with God and our relationships with people? What should be the same?
7. Give an example of a situation that appeared simple and easy to judge until you found out more about the people or events involved.
8. Have you ever been unfairly judged by people who did not know you or your situation at the time? Why did this happen? How did it feel? What harm or good came out of it?

Chapter 18



1. Think about married couples you know. What makes one spouse seem stronger or weaker than the other? How might the marriage look different from the inside than it does from the outside? How might the apparently “strong” and “weak” spouses view themselves and each other?
2. What does “being smart” have to do with being married? What does intelligence have to do with leadership in a relationship? How is leadership the same or different from “being the boss”?
3. How can you tell if “something unsought” that comes into your life is from the Holy Spirit?
4. All Christians are called to become like Christ, to follow His example in every aspect of life. In what ways are the roles of husband and wife the same?
5. What is the connection between romance and marriage? What is attractive or appealing about married love?
6. How is the Orthodox view of marriage described in this chapter like or unlike the traditional view of marriage as you might see it around you in the world, in movies, in books, among friends or people you know?
7. What are some of the positive and negative ways men are viewed in our culture? How do you think men are viewed in the Orthodox faith?
8. What are some of the positive and negative ways women are viewed in our culture? How do you think women are viewed in the Orthodox faith?
9. What are you looking for in a marriage partner? What qualities do you hope to find in the person you will love eternally?
10. What do you hope to offer to a marriage partner? What qualities in yourself will you bring to your marriage?

Chapter 19



1. Do you believe in “coincidences”? Why or why not?
2. Talk about an event in your life that you looked back on and saw as an act of God.
3. What do you love about your best friend? What do you hope your best friend loves about you?
4. Why do you think Lydia feels free to put her icon out where it can be seen now that she is no longer at home?
5. Do you believe there is a connection between beauty and pain? How might this work in life?
6. Suffering is a topic that can be hard to talk about. Why are we afraid to talk about suffering as a consequence of faith?
7. Have you ever talked about Christian martyrdom with a non-Christian? Would you ever talk about it? Why or why not?
8. What do you personally think about Christian martyrs, ancient or modern? What have they accomplished for themselves and for us?
9. Why would someone want to be “part of the pain that brings you back to life”? What does this mean?

Chapter 20



1. What is your favorite thing about school? What is your least favorite thing?
2. What makes someone “cool” in your social world? What makes someone “uncool”? Who decides this? Why?
3. What makes someone “cool” in your personal opinion? What makes someone “uncool” in your personal opinion? What are your reasons for these decisions?
4. What about a particular photograph makes you say, “Wow, that’s a good picture”? What about a picture would make you think it was boring or not very good?
5. What do you know about iconography? What purpose do icons serve? Who makes them? How are they made?
6. Do you have icons at home? What icons do you have? What icon or icons are most meaningful to you?
7. Many Protestant faith groups view all or much of religious imagery as idolatrous and will not have it in their churches or homes. Where do you think this belief comes from? What are its effects? How do you feel about the presence of icons in church?
8. Have you ever carried an icon in the procession on the Sunday of Orthodoxy? What icon did you choose, and why did you choose it? What is the meaning of this feast day? What is being celebrated? What personal rights are you asserting by participating?
9. Why does Lydia wish she could take a picture and discover Saint Lydia in it? How much of Saint Lydia herself can be seen in her icon?

Chapter 21



1. How is Lydia's college experience of her volleyball friends different (so far) from what she might have expected? Why?
2. What kind of person is Eleni? Why do you think Lydia likes her so much?
3. What do you think of Pogo? How do you think she might feel about her life? About herself? Why do you think so?
4. Why is confidence contagious?
5. What is the difference between self-confidence and arrogance or conceit?
6. What happens when you let someone treat you badly? What happens to you? What happens to them?
7. Do you think it is possible to study psychology in the light of faith? Why or why not?
8. What would happen if you studied faith in the light of psychology? What would and/or would not work about doing this?
9. What is the consequence of believing that every person, no matter what their current appearance, was created in the image of God?
10. What is mercy?

Chapter 22



1. What has Lydia discovered?
2. In what ways does nature bear witness to God?
3. Have you ever looked at anything through a microscope? What was it? What did it look like? How was the microscopic view different from what you could see with the naked eye?
4. What is an epiphany? Have you ever had one? Describe it.
5. Have you ever heard people argue about science and religion? Why do some people think that religious belief is only possible if you turn your back on parts of science?
6. What are your personal views about science and religion and how they relate to each other?
7. What do the two Lydias mean when they say that the existence of invisible things does not depend on your ability to see them? Or, to look at it another way, why do we think that only what we see is real?
8. What is the “more powerful lens” that Lydia needs? How would it help her?

Chapter 23



1. Why do you think Lydia decided to try to pray?
2. Why do you think she did it in the middle of the night, in the dark?
3. Why do you think she “totally freaked herself out”?
4. Talk about a time in your life when you had to make a big and important decision. How did you feel? How did you go about making the decision? What was your process? What was the result of your decision?
5. Why is it sometimes easier to keep on doubting, as Lydia says? At what point does questioning become an escape instead of a path to a solution?
6. Do you think that people sometimes underestimate the power of what they are doing when they pray? Is a person who prays “playing with fire”? What is another way you might describe it?
7. How much do people underestimate the power of what they cannot see with their natural eyes? What do you think is happening all around you every day that you cannot see?
8. Lydia worked hard to open her mind at all to the idea of becoming Christian, but that work was not enough. What was once the solution (considering Christianity) has become the problem (all she does is “consider” without taking any action). Think about a time in your life when the solution you chose became a new problem. What did you do? How did you move past this sticking point?

Chapter 24



1. Why do you think Lydia sent the photographs to Paul? Why do you think Paul posted them over his laboratory table?
2. Do you believe there is “more than one way to see”? What are some different ways of seeing? What determines what we can and cannot see in a given situation?
3. Describe a time when you experienced “a moment that is like a little room” in which something could be discovered or changed.
4. How well does Lydia know Paul? What does she know about him? What doesn’t she know about him?
5. What are some things about you as a person that are not well known to your friends and family? What might change in your relationships if these things were known?
6. What are some things you don’t know about the people who are closest to you in life? What are some questions you have never asked your parents? Your best friend? Your siblings? Your godparents?
7. Why is it important always to remember how much you do and do not know about another person when you are interacting with them?

Chapter 25



1. Describe someone you know who has constructed their own belief system. Why did this person make their own belief system? Talk about the sources of their belief system and how it works. What do you think of it? Could it work for anyone but the person who invented it?
2. How much do we all try to make our own religion? Why do we do this? What does it accomplish?
3. Talk about Jill, who is half Buddhist and half Catholic. What is she doing when she takes what she likes out of each religion? How long do you think her “own personal religion” will last? When and why will it fall apart?
4. Why do people fear death?
5. Make a list of trends and behaviors you see in popular culture that come from fear of death. For example, the obsession with looking young, plastic surgery, etc.
6. Some behaviors can arise either from a healthy cause or from fear of death. Take, for example, the popular interest in finding certain foods that may prevent certain diseases. How could eating in a healthful way be a good thing? How could it become a behavior that stems from fear of death?
7. What do you think happens when you die?
8. What does the Orthodox Church teach you will happen when you die? Is this comforting? Why or why not?
9. What is actually meant by the statement, “Christ has trampled down death by death”? If we all still die a physical death, in what way has death been defeated?

Chapter 26



1. What were you taught about premarital sex? How is that the same as what your friends were taught? How is it different?
2. What are your personal beliefs about when it is safe and right to have sex? Is it ever safe when it is not right? Is it ever right when it is not safe? What kinds of safety are at issue?
3. What is your experience of how the culture around you views sex? What is your experience of how the culture around you views marriage? How are these two views related or unrelated?
4. What does the Orthodox Church teach about the role of sexual love in marriage? What do Orthodox Christians believe about the use of contraception?
5. Does using contraceptives make premarital sex safe? Why or why not? What do contraceptives prevent? What is not prevented by contraception?
6. What is vulnerability? What makes a person vulnerable? When is vulnerability healthy? When is it dangerous?
7. What is the role of selfishness in sexuality? When is “lovemaking” selfish? When is it unselfish?

Chapter 27



1. If Pogo wanted to sleep in your room, what would you do? Why?
2. Do you think Lydia should tell the RA (resident assistant) that Pogo's roommate is breaking the rules by letting a man stay overnight in her room? Why or why not? What other options might she have for dealing with the situation? If she does report them, what should she say?
3. Should Lydia report the suspected drug use in the room down the hall? Why or why not? Are there other ways she could deal with this situation? If she does report it, should she tell the RA or the police or someone else? What should she say?
4. Describe a time when you felt like no one around you shared your beliefs. Were the people around you aware of your beliefs? What happened? What did you say and do? What did they say and do? Did you learn anything from the situation? What would you do differently next time? What are you proud of about the way you acted?
5. Many people find it hard to be different from their peers. Why do you think people feel this way? Would you feel uncomfortable about being different? Why or why not?
6. Lydia seems to be trying to avoid any action or decision. When does a lack of decision become a decision? How might the boyfriend situation change over time if she does not take action? How might the drug situation change over time if she does not take action?
7. What kind of situation becomes easier to handle as time passes? What kind of situation becomes harder to handle as time passes?

Chapter 28



1. Why do you think Lydia feels uncomfortable when she first arrives at Trella's house? Why do you think Trella's mom feels uncomfortable? What about Trella?
2. Write a list of everything you can think of that has changed in Trella's life since she became pregnant. How is her day-to-day life different? How is her body different? How are her plans different? Think of as many changes as you can.
3. If you were Trella, would you want to hear "secondhand stories" about your old life and your old friends? Why or why not?
4. Why do you think Lydia's visit is important to Trella? Why do you think it is important to Lydia?
5. What do you think about Trella's question: "How can I be a mother in my own mother's house?" What do you think will be the answer to that question?
6. Have you ever felt suddenly grateful for your own life when you saw how difficult someone else's life was? What made you feel this way? What did you do about your feelings?
7. What are some reasons Trella's old friends have drifted away from her?
8. Think about your friendships. Do you have different friends for different situations in your life? School friends versus church friends? Friends you can share deep thoughts with versus friends who are just fun to hang out with? What makes these friends different from each other? How are you different when you are around each set of friends?

Chapter 29



1. What is your favorite holiday? What are your favorite ways to celebrate it?
2. What is a ritual? What are some rituals you have experienced at church? What are some personal rituals that have special meaning to you?
3. What do you know about the history of the Divine Liturgy and other rituals of worship at church? Do you know how old they are? Do you know the story of when they were first practiced? Where would you go to learn more about this?
4. What do you think about the fact that in an Orthodox church, you are worshipping with chants and prayers that are more than a thousand years old?
5. What is the purpose of remembering all the saints when we worship?
6. Why can't believers be spiritual "grocery store farmers"? Why must believers do the spiritual equivalent of going out into the fields themselves?
7. Do you have a "sense of time passing"? What do you gain or lose by being aware that you can live each day only one time?
8. What is your favorite memory? What do you love that you know will never leave you?
9. What in our world and in our lives is dependent on memory? If we had no memories, what would we lose?
10. What would happen to the Orthodox Church if we had no memories? Why?

Chapter 30



1. Why do you think Lydia got up and lit a candle in the middle of the night?
2. Have you ever felt the need to be close to what is sacred? What did you do? Why?
3. Lydia feels like she is standing still in her spiritual life. If she asked you what she should do about this, what would you tell her?
4. Describe a person in your life who is the kind of friend who would not mind hearing your troubles over and over again until you solved them.
5. What kind of friend are you? How do your close friends experience you?
6. Explain one piece of evidence you can think of that God is sometimes closer to you than you realize.
7. Why does Lydia ask why her thoughts “tumble down” instead of wondering why they keep rising up? If you were in her position, what do you think you would be worrying about or focusing on?
8. Lydia says she knows the flowers will come in the spring, even though the trees are bare when she is writing the letter. How does she know this? How is this mental process like faith? How is it unlike faith?

Chapter 31



1. Why do you think Eleni and Lydia went to Pogo's party? Why do you think they got drunk?
2. Have you ever been drunk? Why or why not? If so, what happened?
3. How many unsafe things does Lydia describe in this letter? Make a list of all the results of getting drunk that she mentions.
4. Why is it frightening to be unable to remember what happened to you at a party?
5. What is the difference between acknowledging that someone's actions are wrong and passing judgment on them? What kind of judgment is unhealthy? What kind of judgment is healthy?
6. Hangovers are universal. Everyone who got drunk at the party will have one in the morning. Will everyone decide "never again" when they wake up? Why or why not? How many of them do you think will stick to that decision? Why?
7. In the early twentieth century, the sale and use of alcohol became illegal in the United States. This law was disobeyed by many people and is no longer in existence. At the present day, it is illegal in the United States to drink alcohol before a certain age, and it is illegal to serve alcohol to people below that age. Many people break this law on a regular basis. Why do you think laws about alcohol use are so frequently broken by otherwise law-abiding people?
8. What are the implications of the statement, "There is no one who lives who is without sin"? What does this mean for us? How should this make us feel about ourselves and other people?
9. What are your thoughts or beliefs about "divine order"? Why is order part of creation? Why is it helpful to understand how God's order (His way of organizing creation) works and doesn't work?

Chapter 32



1. Describe the best party and the worst party you have ever been to in the time since you began having your own social life.
2. Why do people get drunk? Why do people use drugs?
3. In what ways is drunkenness/drug high a loss of self?
4. In the event that you or one of your friends did get drunk at a party, what are some ways that you could make sure you got home safely?
5. Never, never, never get into a car with someone who has been drinking. Never, never, never drive after you have been drinking yourself. List three people you could call to come take you home, and list their telephone numbers. You should have their names and numbers with you every time you go out.
6. List all the people who would grieve for you if you were hurt or killed in a car accident. Write down the names of all the people whose lives it would affect.
7. Lydia mentions that some parents serve alcohol to underage teens at their homes, thinking that this is a way of protecting them. The logic behind this choice is that the teens are going to drink anyway, so it is better for them to drink at home. What do you think about this idea? What are the results of this kind of thinking? Is this really a good option? Is it really the only realistic option? What are some consequences of a parent deciding to do this? What does it say about how they raised/are raising their kids? What would you think if your parents did this? Why?
8. How can personal religious beliefs be a weapon against the temptation to drink or use drugs?
9. Why isn't escaping (chemically or otherwise) a solution to life problems? Why doesn't this work? What actual harm does it do?

Chapter 33



1. Describe your first memory of worshipping in an Orthodox church. How old were you? What did you see and hear? What did you think and do?
2. Why do you think Lydia did not have her usual reaction (having “a rash”) to the other people worshipping in Eleni’s church?
3. Why do Orthodox Christians fast before the Divine Liturgy?
4. Have you ever thought about Mary’s relationship to “Baby Jesus”? How much experience do you have with little babies? What is it like to care for a baby? What do you think it was like for Mary to care for Jesus when He was a baby?
5. Lydia saw Saint Lydia in church, but she did not know she was seeing her. Do you think you have ever seen a saint? When and where? Who was it? If you have not, do you think you ever will?
6. What are some differences between Sunday worship in an average North American Protestant church and Divine Liturgy in an Orthodox Christian church in North America?
7. What are some similarities and differences between Orthodox services in North America and in other parts of the world (Greece, Russia, etc.)? What do you know about Orthodoxy in countries other than your own?

Chapter 34



1. What can you tell about Lydia's dad from what you have read about him in the book so far? What does his contribution to the gift for Trella tell you about him? Why do you think it means so much to Lydia?
2. Why do you think Paul sent Lydia a Christmas card?
3. What do you think of Lydia's dad's theory that "women are always reading more meaning into things than men have actually put there"? Why might he think that? Do you think it is true or false? What is your experience of the ways men and women find or create meaning in a situation?
4. How do you think Lydia feels about Paul at this point? Why do you think so?
5. Why might it be "tasteless" to make the "Trella cookie" look pregnant? Given that Trella is actually pregnant, why might Lydia be uncomfortable about this reference to her pregnancy?
6. Describe your favorite Christmas memory from childhood.
7. Christmas is celebrated all over the world, even by people who are not Christian. In some places, it is celebrated solely as a secular holiday, but it is still celebrated. Why do you think this is true? What makes this holiday so universal and so powerful?
8. What are some ways of showing love without using many words? Who do you know who expresses love this way? How does this person show love?
9. What do you think of the statement, "Intellectual self-confidence is no replacement for social self-confidence"? What are the differences between these two types of confidence? Which type do you have, if either? Why?
10. Why do you think that something like the "Paul cookie" will stop being embarrassing after time passes? Why do our feelings about people and events change when we are looking back at them in our memories?

Chapter 35



1. How would you describe Lydia's relationship with her mom at this point in the story?
2. Why did Lydia's gift mean so much to Trella? Why did Trella's letter mean so much to Lydia?
3. Describe a time when you realized that your relationship with someone you love had grown and changed. What was your relationship like before the time you are remembering? Why did it change? How did it change?
4. Why do you think Lydia is worrying about the card she sent to Paul? Have you ever had a friend who analyzed and reanalyzed all his/her interactions with the opposite sex? Why do you think your friend did this? Have you ever done this yourself? Why is it sometimes difficult to be unselfconscious and natural with members of the opposite sex?
5. How might Lydia be "supporting Trella's efforts at her own redemption"?
6. What does it mean to "be yourself" when you are dealing with other people? When is it important to be yourself with another person? Are there ever times when it is not a good idea to be yourself? Why or when?
7. How can an appreciation of beauty (in nature or elsewhere) be a protection? In what ways could it connect you to God?
8. In many religious traditions, the body and the senses are seen as essentially evil and flawed; many people believe their natural life will only lead them away from God. In Orthodoxy, we envision the whole human being as a creation of God in His own image, and we believe that it is all redeemed, even the senses, even the body itself. What role do your five senses have in your spirituality? In what ways can your senses be involved in worship or communion with God? What choices might you make based on the belief that your body is not inherently evil?

Chapter 36



1. Whose side are you on, Lydia's or Saint Lydia's? Why?
2. Is it possible that Lydia is putting herself at risk? Why or why not? Is it likely? Why or why not?
3. If she is putting herself at risk, what are the risks? Think of physical, emotional, and spiritual risks involved with any level of intimacy with the opposite sex.
4. Do you think Lydia herself thinks she is at risk? How much do you think she knows about interacting with men? Why might that matter?
5. Lydia's description of her interactions with Jude suggests that Jude knows how to make himself attractive and how to keep her interested. She says, "There is nothing gauche about Jude." What does this tell you about Jude? Do you think Jude is just intrinsically appealing, or do you think he is skillful because he's had a lot of practice dealing with women? What might make an "experienced" man fun to date? What might be distasteful about an "experienced" man?
6. What determines attraction between a man and a woman? What makes a member of the opposite sex attractive to you?
7. Some people look for one kind of person when they want to "date" and another kind when they want to marry. Why do you think this happens? Does it make sense? What do you think are the differences between the "dating kind" and the "marrying kind"?
8. How much does it matter what your friends and family think of the person you want to date or want to marry? Why or when should it matter?

Chapter 37



1. What would you think and feel if your current love interest showed up at your door dressed as a pirate with a rose in his/her teeth? What do you think of Jude's gesture and Lydia's response?
2. Why do you think Lydia is not sure whether Jude is her boyfriend?
3. Why do you think Lydia is so angry about what Paul did?
4. Why do you think Paul did this? Is Jude right? Is Lydia right? Is Eleni right? Do you have another explanation? Given what you believe his reason to be, how might Paul have handled the situation more effectively?
5. Why won't Lydia let Eleni talk to her about Jude?
6. How important is gossip? Are there times when it is right to listen to gossip? If so, when is it right and why? If not, why not?
7. In your opinion, what would have to be different about Lydia and Jude's relationship for Saint Lydia to approve of it? What would it take for Eleni to approve of it? Do you think there are any conditions under which Paul would approve of it?
8. Do you agree or disagree that it is disrespectful of Jude to flirt so much with Lydia without making a commitment to be her boyfriend? Why?

Chapter 38



1. What did Jude do to Lydia? What did he do physically, and what did he do emotionally and spiritually? Why do you think he did it?
2. What is Lydia feeling? How does she feel about herself? How does she feel about Jude? How does she feel about Eleni? Why is she writing to Saint Lydia?
3. Why is it upsetting to hear about acts of violence between men and women?
4. Do you think Jude was ever romantically interested in Lydia? Do you think he was ever in love with her? How do you think he feels about her now?
5. Is it Jude's fault or Lydia's fault that Jude attacked Lydia?
6. Why was Lydia unprepared for Jude's attack? How can she protect herself from Jude? How can she protect herself from similar situations in the future?
7. What effects will this experience have on Lydia? On Jude?
8. In what ways is Jude's attack on Lydia "the absence of God"?
9. Why is it difficult to feel the presence of God when you are in pain?

Chapter 39



1. Why was it important for Lydia to tell the police what happened?
2. If someone you know is harmed in the way that Jude harmed Lydia, what should you do when you find out? What should you do right after it happens? What should you do if you learn about it months or years after it happened?
3. Why do you think Lydia's mother got in the car and drove 400 miles round trip in one night to be with Lydia? What did she do while she was with Lydia?
4. Why did Lydia's mother leave her sweater with Lydia?
5. What special possessions or rituals do you have that comfort you when you are sad? What are your personal treasures?
6. Whom do you go to for help and comfort during hard times in your life?
7. Describe a time when God brought you a gift "at the most surprising moment." Were you aware of the gift at the time or only after the time had passed and you were looking back at it? What was the gift? When did you realize you had received it?
8. Why is love "a guardian against all demons"?
9. Why do you think Lydia will ask Eleni to be her godmother?

Chapter 40



1. Why do you think Lydia can't sleep? Why isn't she leaving her room or talking to anyone?
2. Have you ever been so scared that you couldn't function normally? Have you ever talked about the experience? What happened? Why were you scared? Are you still scared, or did you overcome your fear? If you overcame your fear, how did you do it? If you are still scared, what can you do to get help?
3. If you were Lydia, what would you or could you do to help yourself?
4. Have you ever helped someone through a very bad time? Have you been the person who would not let someone "drown"? How did you do it? Why did you do it?
5. Why is it important for Lydia not to "give up"? What might happen to her if she gives up?

Chapter 41



1. What happened to Lydia in front of the icon?
2. If one of your friends came to you and told you she or he had an experience like the one Lydia had in front of the icon, what would you say? What would you think?
3. Have you ever felt especially close to God? Describe what happened and how you felt about it.
4. Why do you think Eleni took Lydia to church? How do you think she felt about what happened to Lydia at church? Why?
5. What are your thoughts about when we feel the absence of God and when we feel His presence?
6. What is your “right mind”? If Lydia is in her right mind and sitting at the feet of Jesus, what does this mean?
7. What makes a place holy or sacred? What is your experience of holy places? Where do you go when you want to feel close to God?
8. Why do we say that sin is death?
9. What is “the only safety there is”? Why?

Chapter 42



1. Why do you think Lydia touched all the icons and then rubbed her hands on her face? What was she doing? Are there other ways she could have done the same thing? What might they be?
2. Why did Paul come?
3. Why did Lydia go with Paul?
4. What role do you think the Holy Spirit played in Paul coming to help Lydia? What do you know or think about how the Holy Spirit works with people?
5. What does Paul's day escorting Lydia tell you about him? How do you think he might have felt while he was doing it?
6. How are Jude and Paul different? Do they have anything in common?
7. What is essentially Christian about what Paul is doing?

Chapter 43



1. Do you think Paul is judging Lydia? Why or why not?
2. Why is it so difficult to make eye contact with other people when you are upset? What makes eye contact so intense in some situations?
3. Why would it be upsetting to Lydia to feel like everyone on campus is talking about her? What is the difference between receiving positive attention and receiving negative attention? What makes attention positive or negative?
4. Why is Eleni trying to help Lydia keep her mind “focused on something harmless”? What are some benefits of keeping your mind busy and choosing what you want to focus on? When is this helpful? Are there any times when it is better not to “organize” your mind like this?
5. Why is it a Christian virtue to serve someone from love? Are Paul’s actions any less Christian if he is in love with Lydia? Why or why not?
6. What are some differences between genuine concern and the “idle curiosity and morbid interest” Lydia senses around her?
7. Why is it important not to lose “the habit of connection” with people around you, especially those who care about you?
8. Do you believe that time heals all wounds? Why or why not?

Chapter 44



1. What do you think about the things Lydia is doing to help herself? If you were her friend, what would you do to help her?
2. Do you think Lydia's counselor is right that her feelings of disgust will pass with time? What else might help these feelings go away? What will not help?
3. When Lydia says the idea of getting close to any man "disgusts" her, she is clearly not thinking of the time she spends with Paul. Why not?
4. What is your opinion about when Lydia should be baptized? Do you agree with Eleni?
5. When someone says, "That person is setting him/herself up to fail," what does it mean? What are some things you can do to keep from setting yourself up to fail in various situations?
6. What is a catechumen? What usually happens in catechumen classes?
7. Why do you think Lydia feels good when she goes to church for her classes?
8. What do you think of the idea that Orthodox Christianity comes naturally to human beings?
9. Why is an Orthodox church considered to be "heaven on earth"? What makes it heaven? What are Orthodox Christians doing when they go to church?
10. Do you believe that people were made to love and to be loved? What effect does love have on people? What happens when love is absent from a person's life?

Chapter 45



1. What do you think of Lydia's decision to "cut it short"? What would you have done in her place? Why?
2. How do you think Jude will react to her decision? What do you think he will learn from the whole experience?
3. Have you ever known someone who dates people like Jude, or who has one bad relationship after another? Why do you think this happens? What do you think about it?
4. What are some red flags to look for that tell you someone is not a safe person to date? What are signs that you would be physically at risk in the relationship? What are signs that you would be emotionally unsafe? Spiritually unsafe?
5. Why do you think the Christian martyrs confessed their faith? How strong would that faith have to be? Why?
6. If your town was invaded by hostile forces tomorrow, and everyone was commanded to convert to some specific religion, what do you think would happen? How would people respond? Would everyone give in and convert? Would some people go underground? Would some become martyrs? What do you think you would do? How can you know what you would do, or do you believe you can't actually know until/unless it happens?
7. How do your beliefs about the afterlife affect your daily life on earth? What kinds of decisions are affected by those beliefs?

Chapter 46



1. Have you ever thought about what you might like to name your future children? What are some names you like? Why do you like them?
2. What do you know about childbirth and newborn babies? Have you ever been present at a birth, or visited a new mother and baby in the hospital? Describe your experiences.
3. What did Lydia bring for the baby? Why?
4. What does Lydia mean when she says that Trella “has run the first lap of her race, and won”?
5. Why does Lydia feel so close to Amara? Why does she feel a bond with this baby?
6. Is it true that “we only achieve beauty after pain”? What do you think?
7. What is true creativity? Why is evil the opposite of creativity? Why would it “militate against any new creation”?
8. What is the connection between labor and motherhood? What is the physical connection between labor and birth? What is the spiritual labor that makes a woman into a mother?

Chapter 47



1. How does Lydia feel about Paul at this point? How does she see him? Why has it taken her this long to become curious about his romantic potential? What do you think made her start to wonder about him in a new way?
2. Why does Lydia want to explain everything to Paul? Why is this so important to her? What do you think she is telling him?
3. Why does Paul answer Lydia by telling her she “just needed a more powerful lens”?
4. Why do you think this moment by the river with Paul is special to Lydia? What meaning do you think it has for her? What meaning might it have for Paul? How do you think he felt about it?
5. How can you tell when a person is truly, genuinely in love? How would you know if you yourself were in love?
6. Why is it so important to be loved by someone “who can truly see and confirm the changes you make in your spiritual self”? Why would that be essential in a marriage?
7. Do you believe that “eternal love demands eternal faith”? Do you believe that you must marry someone who shares your religious beliefs? Why or why not? What are the results of marrying someone who does not share your beliefs? What are the results of marrying someone who does share them?

Chapter 48



1. Why do you think Father Paul decided to help Lydia “rejoin her family” soon, instead of making her complete the full year of classes? Do you agree or disagree with his decision? Why?
2. Do you have a godparent? Why or why not? If you do, who is your godparent?
3. Were you baptized as a baby or when you were older? Did you pick your godparent, or did your parents pick her or him?
4. What do you think it means to be a godparent? What is Lydia asking of Eleni when she asks her to be her godmother? What do you know about the history of the tradition of choosing godparents? What part of that history is still part of the role of godparents today?
5. What do you think it means to be a name saint? What is Lydia asking of Saint Lydia when she asks her to be her name saint? What do you know about the reason Orthodox Christians take the name of a saint at baptism?
6. Describe a time when you wished for something with all your heart and your wish came true.
7. What will change about Lydia when she is baptized? What will be true the day she is baptized that was not true the day before?
8. Orthodox Christianity teaches that in baptism, we die with Christ and are reborn with Him. What do you think this means? What is happening to us when this happens?

Chapter 49



1. Lydia sees Trella, Maria Louisa, Lauren, Jill, and Paul as a “map” of her year and of her spiritual journey. Which of these friends were important to her at the beginning of the year? Why? Which ones are important to her now? Why?
2. Why do you think Lauren and Jill won’t be coming to Lydia’s baptism? What about an adult baptism might make someone uncomfortable? Why might Lauren and Jill not want to be there? Why is inviting someone to your adult baptism different from inviting someone to your wedding or to an infant baptism?
3. Why did Lydia invite Paul?
4. How did Paul answer Lydia? How does she know what his answer was?
5. What journey in Lydia’s life has come to an end? What journey is she now beginning?
6. Do you think Lydia is “recovering her sense of love and goodness”? How did Jude damage this part of her heart? Why is it recovering? How do we know that it is?
7. Why, when, and how does love lead us into the presence of God?
8. What is grace? What is physical grace? What is spiritual grace?
9. In what ways is the Holy Spirit the “Giver of Life”?

Chapter 50



1. Describe the transformation Lydia has undergone from the beginning of the book to the end. What has changed about her? What has changed about her relationships? What has changed about her beliefs?
2. What healed Lydia's relationship with her mother?
3. What do you know about the experiences of people who were baptized as older children or as adults? Why would their experiences be different from those of people baptized as infants?
4. How is baptism like a heart transplant? What is being taken out? What is being put in its place?
5. What are some ways that a person's daily life would change after he or she was baptized?
6. If you were going to be baptized today, what inside of you might come to life? What old problems might come back to be solved? What parts of your spirit might be stiff and sore from lack of use? What parts of you might be healed?
7. What else would you like to say? What other ideas would you like to share about any portion of the book?

