

BLESSED

Are the Crazy

breaking the silence about
mental illness, family, and church

Small Group Study Guide



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On page 10, The Lord's Prayer, adapted by Jim Cotter, from *Praying the Dark Hours*, published by Canterbury Press (2011). © Jim Cotter. All rights reserved.

On page 12 Our Mother prayer by Patricia Lynn Reilly, M.Div. Copyright ©1995 ImagineAwoman.com. All rights reserved.

BLESSED ARE THE CRAZY



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As a young girl growing up in the church, Kim Gage Ryan was the first female religious leader in my life. My first memory of Kim is how she presided over the celebration of the Lord's supper at my home church in Columbia. What I remember is not what she said, but who she was and what she did. Standing behind the communion table, in a place of holy authority, with blonde shoulder length hair and black robe, she held the loaf of bread, representing Christ's body, up in the air just above her protruding, very pregnant belly.

Through this picture of femininity, fertility, and Christlikeness, Kim showed me that God dwells in female form. This vision of a woman minister planted a mysterious seed in my heart, one that Kim herself would nurture over time. A decade later, Kim preached at my ordination service, and then when I wore a black clergy robe over *my* pregnant belly, just months later, Kim became my son's godmother. We share a sacred journey together, one that includes mentoring, friendship, spiritual pilgrimages, prayer, laughter, and tears.

Together we created this small group experience of discussion and prayer based on *Blessed Are the Crazy*. This guide is just that—a "guide" to help deepen the understanding and enrich your experience of engaging with the book. Just a few suggestions: You may find here ideas or suggestions unfamiliar to you—you are encouraged to stay open and even go a bit beyond your comfort zone. You could be surprised by the deeper experience of thought and prayer you may experience. However, it is always okay to pass on a question or suggestion. It is encouraged that a variety of Bible translations and versions be used in this study—not everyone in the group has to use the same kind of Bible; diversity enriches the experience. Occasionally, a specific one may be suggested.

Chapter 1



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SCRIPTURE: Psalm 22:1–5 (recommended version of the Bible for this reading is *The Message*)

PRAYER SUGGESTION: *Lectio Divina*¹

This method of prayer goes back to the early Benedictine monastic tradition. There were not Bibles for everyone and not everyone knew how to read. So the monks gathered in chapel to hear a member of the community reading from the scripture. In this exercise they were taught and encouraged to listen with their hearts because it was the word of God that they were hearing. As Cynthia Bourgeault says, “Lectio is founded on the faith that scripture is a living word—not just the history of an encounter with God that happened a long time ago, but one that continues to resonate and feed us in our own times.”² Ask someone to read the above passage out loud followed by a period of silence (2–3 minutes). The silence allows each person to savor what he or she has heard. Note whether any word or phrase became a special focus of attention for you. Invite members, if they so desire, to share the word or phrase that struck them. This is done without discussion—just simple sharing of word or phrase. Then a different person from the group reads the passage again, followed by a 2–3 minute pause for silence.

Close with the group praying together out loud The Lord’s Prayer (traditional version).

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be/ thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
on earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the Kingdom and the power and glory forever. Amen.

¹Information adapted from Douglas J. Leonhardt, “Praying with Scripture,” IgnatianSpirituality.com, and from Cynthia Bourgeault, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, 2004).

²Bourgeault, *Centering*, 66.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What in this chapter spoke to you or for you?
2. What surprised or challenged you?
3. How has your faith experience taught you about a loving God? How has it helped you to tell your own story of love or the lack of love? If someone were to ask you what you need saving from, what might you say?
4. Where have you found hope? Where do you identify the sources of hope in your life?
5. In Psalm 22 there is a movement from despair to hope. In Sarah's story there is a movement from despair into hope. When in your life have you experienced that movement from despair to hope?

CLOSING PRAYER PRACTICE:

Each person receives a 3x5 card with the invitation to write their request for prayer: "I would like to pray for hope in this situation (or for this person)." You can put your name on the card or not. The cards are collected and then handed out to the group members with the request that each person take the card they have received and over the next week(s) pray the request written there. One suggestion would be to read Psalm 22 with this prayer request in mind and heart.

GROUP CLOSING PRAYER:

God, give me grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
Courage to change the things
which should be changed,
and the Wisdom to distinguish
the one from the other.
Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking, as Jesus did,
This sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting that You will make all things right,
If I surrender to Your will,
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy with You forever in the next.
Amen.³

The more familiar version is: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

³You may be familiar with a shorter version of this prayer that is used by all AA-affiliated groups. The original and longer version was offered by Reinhold Niebuhr in a sermon in 1943. It was printed in a book for army chaplains and servicemen in 1944.

Chapter 2



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SCRIPTURE: John 3:16–17

OPENING PRAYER EXPERIENCE:

Have someone in the group read the above passage out loud followed by a period of silence (2–3 minutes). The silence allows for each person to savor what he or she has heard. Note whether any word or phrase became a special focus of attention. Invite members, if they so desire, to share the word or phrase that struck them. This is done without discussion. Then a different person from the group reads the passage again, followed by a 2–3 minute pause for silence.

Added option: During this second silence, mentally repeat the word/phrase that surfaced above over and over and over through two more minutes of silence, allowing that word/phrase to deepen in your mind and heart and spirit. The word becomes a tool for deeper quieting and centering.

Close with the group praying the *King James Version* of The Lord's Prayer (with the additional words that have been found in some biblical manuscripts and are footnoted in many Bibles).

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
on earth, as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread and our bread for tomorrow.

Forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the Kingdom and the power and glory forever. Amen.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What in this chapter spoke to you or for you?
2. What surprised you or challenged you?
3. On page 3 Sarah mentions “resurrecting God for herself.” What experience have you possibly had of resurrecting a new or renewed understanding or image of God for yourself?
4. Sarah describes her experience of moving into and out of a variety of faith communities along the way. What kind of faith communities have you

encountered along your spiritual journey? How do you know when it is time to seek a new and different community/church?

5. For Sarah and for many others, John 3:16 is the core scripture of Christianity's belief system. Some use this scripture to judge others, overlooking the part of the scripture that affirms that God did not send his son to condemn but to save the world. How have you heard this scripture used? What promise do you find in this scripture?

CLOSING PRAYER PRACTICE:

With a partner share the gratitude you feel for a community of faith that has nurtured you in your life. Commit to praying a prayer of thanks for this community on behalf of your partner and in the time between meetings: "Jesus, Light of the World, fill [*partner's name*]'s mind with your peace and [*her/his*] heart with your love." Repeat this prayer three times each day for your partner.

GROUP CLOSING PRAYER:

GOD, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Living ONE DAY AT A TIME, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as the pathway to peace. Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it. Trusting that God will make all things right if I surrender to God's will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with God forever in the next.

Chapter 3



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SCRIPTURE: Mark 5:1–20

OPENING PRAYER EXPERIENCE:

Have someone in the group read the above passage out loud followed by a period of silence (2–3 minutes). The silence allows each person to savor what he or she has heard, particularly noting whether any word or phrase became a special focus of attention. Invite members, if they so desire, to share the word or phrase that struck them. This is done without discussion. Then a different person from the group reads the passage again, with a pause for silence. In this second reading consider which character you are most drawn to in the story and why. Share with the group.

GROUP PRAYER: *The Message* version of The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
Reveal who you are.
Set the world right;
Do what's best— as above, so below.
Keep us alive with three square meals.
Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others.
Keep us safe from ourselves and the Devil.
You're in charge!
You can do anything you want!
You're ablaze in beauty!
Yes. Yes. Yes. (Mt. 6:9–13)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What in this chapter spoke to you or for you?
2. What surprised or challenged you?
3. Sarah brings up the question of theodicy/the why of suffering in the world and begins to explore her questions and discoveries around this issue and question of God's goodness. What have been your questions and discoveries around this important faith concern?
4. In the Bible there are many stories about Jesus using his power to heal people who suffered. What was the cause of the demoniac's suffering and what did his suffering look like? How did Jesus respond to him? What are some causes of mental illness? What does suffering from mental illness look like? How does Jesus respond to our suffering today?

5. Sarah describes the roller coaster of powerlessness and helplessness when one is accompanying someone with mental illness and her specific ways of coping. What are some of your ways of coping when you have experienced powerlessness and helplessness in your life?

CLOSING PRAYER PRACTICE:

Ask, "Is there someone you would like to bring into the healing presence of Jesus? Write this person's first name down on a 3 x 5 card." Collect the cards and then ask someone to read the names out loud while the group responds together after each name: "Jesus, fill [*the person's name on the card*]'s mind with your peace and [*his/her*] heart with your love. Hand the cards back to the participants so that each can continue to pray the above prayer for the person on the card in the week(s) ahead.

GROUP CLOSING PRAYER:

GOD, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Living ONE DAY AT A TIME, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as the pathway to peace. Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it. Trusting that God will make all things right, if I surrender to God's will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with God forever in the next.

Chapter 4



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SCRIPTURE: Romans 8:38–39

OPENING PRAYER EXPERIENCE:

Have someone in the group read the above passage out loud, followed by several minutes of silence (expand the amount of time this week to 5 minutes). The silence allows each person to savor what he or she has heard, particularly noting whether any word or phrase became a special focus of attention. Invite members, if they so desire, to share the word or phrase that struck them. This is done without discussion. Then a different person from the group reads the passage again, with a pause for another 3 minutes of silence.

Added option: During this second silence, mentally repeat the word/phrase that surfaced above over and over and over through 3 more minutes of silence, allowing that word/phrase to deepen in your mind and heart and spirit. The word becomes a tool for deeper quieting and centering.

GROUP PRAYER:.

Eternal Spirit,
Earth-Maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver
Source of all that is and that shall be,
Father and Mother of us all,
Loving God in whom is heaven:

The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!
The way of your justice be followed by the peoples of the world!
Your heavenly will be done by all created beings!
Your commonwealth of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on
earth.

With bread we need for today, feed us.
In the hurts we absorb from one another forgive us.
In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.
From trials too great to endure, spare us.
From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and for ever.
Amen.¹

¹The Lord's Prayer, adapted by Jim Cotter, from *Praying the Dark Hours*, published by Canterbury Press (2011). © Jim Cotter. All rights reserved.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What in this chapter spoke to you or for you?
2. What surprised you or challenged you?
3. When considering the absence or presence of God, how would you answer the question that Sarah raises in the chapter: “Did part of God get executed too?”
4. How do we understand the power of God’s love as expressed in Romans 8:38–39 in relation to murder victim’s families? In relation to the convicted murderers sentenced to death?
5. Sarah offers this affirmation of life and faith: “What life has taught me...” How might you finish a similar statement: “What life has taught me...”?

CLOSING PRAYER PRACTICE:

Pray a paraphrase of this scripture (Rom. 8:38–39) out loud as a group, pausing toward the end so that each person can offer the name of someone (could be yourself): “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate _____ and _____ and _____ and _____ from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

GROUP CLOSING PRAYER:

GOD, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Living ONE DAY AT A TIME, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as the pathway to peace. Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it. Trusting that God will make all things right if I surrender to God’s will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with God forever in the next.

Chapter 5



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SCRIPTURE: John 20:11–18

OPENING PRAYER EXPERIENCE:

Have someone in the group read the above passage out loud followed by several minutes of silence (5 minutes). The silence allows each person to savor what he or she has heard, particularly noting whether any word or phrase became a special focus of attention. Invite members, if they so desire, to share the word or phrase that struck them. This is done without discussion. Then a different person from the group reads the passage again, followed by a 3-minute pause for silence. In this second reading, consider which character are you most drawn to in the story and why. Share with the group.

GROUP PRAYER: The New Wineskins, Dallas, Texas, in 2008

Our Mother, who art within us,
we celebrate your many names.
Your wisdom comes, your will be done, unfolding from the depths of us.
Each day you give us all that we need.
You remind us of our limits and we let go.
You support us in our power and we act with courage.
For you are the dwelling place within us; the empowerment around us; and
the celebration among us.
As it was in the Beginning so it shall be now.¹

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What in this spoke to you or for you?
2. What surprised you or challenged you?
3. The author says, “When pain breaks open our hearts, there is a new opening for God’s light to enter in.” Where or how have you found sources of God’s healing light in your life?
4. Mary Magdalene’s encounter with the risen Jesus at the tomb reveals her deep love for him. Her relationship to Jesus changed her. What transformative spiritual experiences or encounters with God have shaped your faith and changed you?
5. Sarah poses the question: What would a crazy cross look like? What would you imagine the answer to that to be?

¹“Our Mother” prayer by Patricia Lynn Reilly, M.Div. Copyright ©1995 ImagineAWoman.com. All rights reserved.

CLOSING PRAYER PRACTICE:

Sarah poses the question: What would a crazy cross look like? Create a cross collage using pictures from magazines that represent the world's brokenness or the burdens you be may be carrying. Share your cross images with a partner, keeping what been shared in your thoughts and prayers for this person. You may want to exchange crosses, exchanging them back with your prayer partner at the next meeting.

GROUP CLOSING PRAYER:

GOD, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Living ONE DAY AT A TIME, enjoying one moment at a time, accepting hardship as the pathway to peace. Taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it. Trusting that God will make all things right if I surrender to God's will; that I may be reasonably happy in this life, and supremely happy with God forever in the next.

Chapter 6



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SCRIPTURE: Psalm 23

OPENING PRAYER EXPERIENCE:

Have someone in the group read the above passage out loud, followed by several minutes of silence (5 minutes). The silence allows each person to savor what he or she has heard, particularly noting whether any word or phrase became a special focus of attention. Invite members, if they so desire, to share the word or phrase that struck them. This is done without discussion. Then a different person from the group reads the passage again, followed by a 5-minute pause of silence.

GROUP PRAYER: Read Psalm 23 out loud together.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What in this chapter spoke to you or for you?
2. What surprised you or challenged you?
3. Sarah says, "To tell the true story is to heal." What hinders you/us from telling your/our true stories? What encourages you/us to share your/our true stories?
4. What resources are available in your local community for family members, loved ones, or persons who are suffering from mental illness themselves? What resources are there within your congregation?
5. Ultimately, Sarah declares, "It is my testimony that the God of love is with us, even when there's crazy in the blood." What might your testimony be: "The God of love is with us, even when _____." Fill in the blank out of your life and your story.

CLOSING PRAYER PRACTICE: Read out loud together Sarah's "psalm."

*Jesus is my light and gives me all that my spirit needs to carry on.
God invites me to trust in divine love so that when the still water runs thick
with crazy blood, my soul is restored.*

*God leads me down paths of giving my testimony for the sake of healing.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of mental illness, I will
fear no evil, for God is with me. God's Spirit comforts me.
God prepares a table for all who carry the cross of mental illness;
God makes sure there's abundance, more than enough of everything for
everybody.
Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all of the days of my crazy life.
And I will be in the presence of God's healing light and love forever. Amen.*