What book gives you a powerful glimpse of the Christian life?

10 writers respond.

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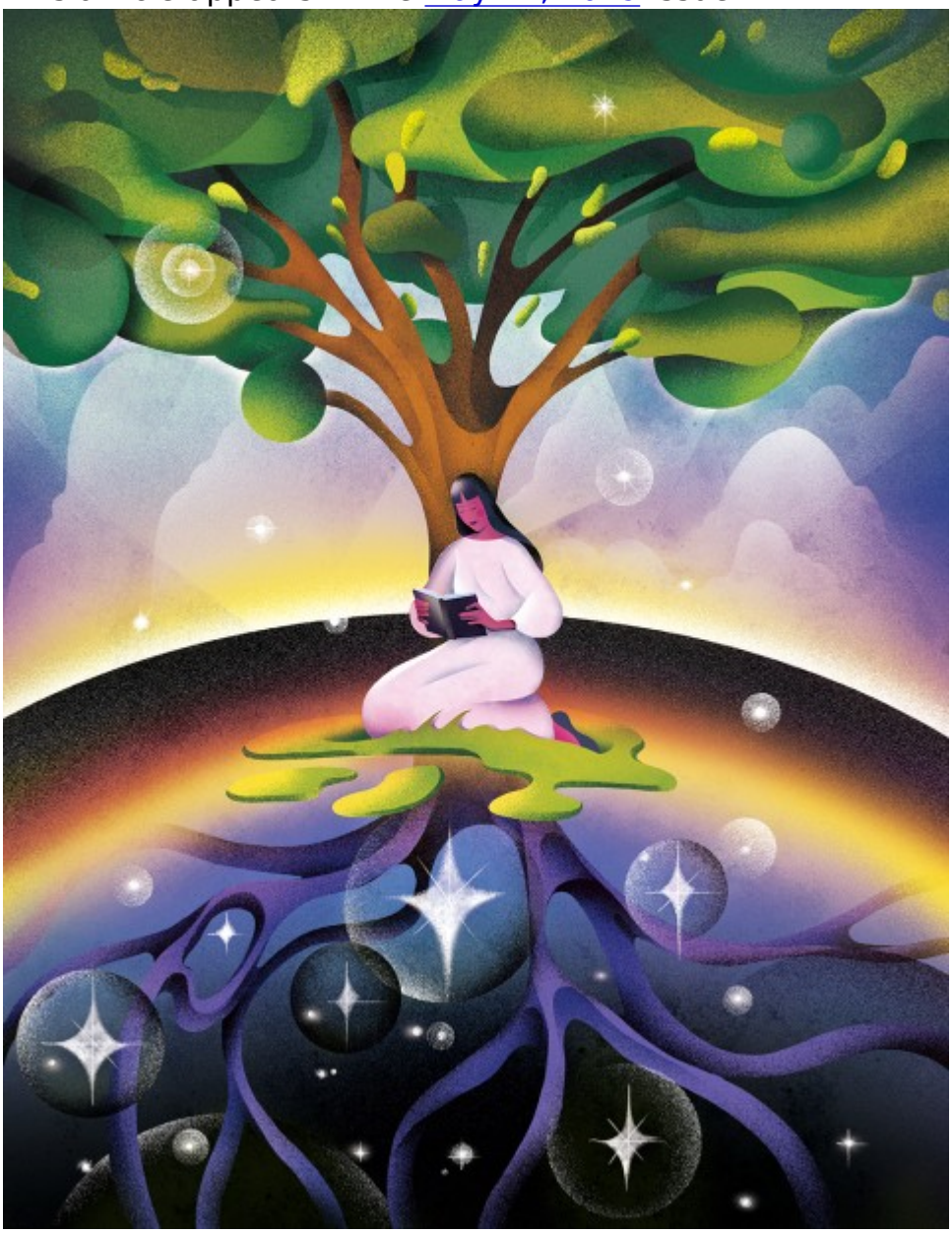

Illustration by Rebekka Dunlap

We asked pastors and writers to tell us about a book that has helped them envision what it means to live the Christian life.

L. Gregory Jones: Standing in the hospital elevator with a father whose son was in the ICU for reasons inexplicable, the book I should choose became clear to me. (I had been wrestling with multiple possibilities: portrait of community or saintly individual? Fiction or nonfiction? Classic or contemporary?) The father, a lifelong Christian, expressed his concern poignantly: “Where is God in the midst of such terrible things happening in our world?”

In that moment, I didn’t respond by saying, “Fyodor Dostoevsky’s ***The Brothers Karamazov*** explores this with great insight.” But in a world in which sin and evil continue to afflict us in horrifying ways, the novel’s portrait of faithful Christian life is indeed extraordinary. Dostoevsky’s response to the problem of evil is not Ivan’s rebellion, or even the legend of the Grand Inquisitor. His response is to show that the most faithful way to engage evil is through holiness, refracting the light of Christ in all we are and do. Alyosha glimpses such a life in Father Zosima. By the end of the book, Alyosha has become an exemplar himself while his brother Ivan, full of righteous anger, has gone mad.

In a time when it often seems as though things are falling apart, Dostoevsky’s call to holiness is a powerful witness.

L. Gregory Jones is dean of Duke Divinity School.

Sara Miles: If I were going to choose one book for evangelism, it would be Francis Spufford’s brilliant ***Unapologetic***. Spufford, who is also a novelist, deeply understands story. His compelling telling of the Gospel narrative comes almost as close as Mark’s to embodying the challenging strangeness and disturbing power of Jesus. His theology is fiercely attentive to the details of his own and others’ quotidian suffering, boredom, and pleasure. His relentless emotional realism and intellectual honesty make most contemporary religious writing irrelevant. Spufford’s devastating takedown of professional atheists is scathingly funny and as irrefutable as his dismissal of churchy niceness.

But the unapologetic purpose of this book is to share God's promise. Spufford is a man acquainted with grief; he knows in his bones the inescapable and universal nature of sin, which he terms "the HPtFTU" (the "human propensity to fuck things up"). And yet he's also tasted grace. "What does it feel like to feel yourself forgiven? I can only speak for myself, but speaking for myself: surprising. Like a toothache stopping . . . Forgiveness has no price we need to pay, but it exposes our illusions of control. Forgiveness is not flattering. Forgiveness starts something, if we let it."

Like God's forgiveness, *Unapologetic* is not flattering—but it starts something. May it continue to spark recognition, conversion, and new life.

Sara Miles, author of Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion *and* City of God: Faith in the Streets.

Gail Song Bantum: ***When Breath Becomes Air*** is the soul-stirring account of a young neurosurgeon's journey in search of meaning. A new father at the height of his career, Paul Kalanithi was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer at age 36. One moment he was a doctor caring for the dying; the next, a patient fighting to live.

Kalanithi's memoir beautifully captures our common humanity, revealing the significance and gift of something so simple as breath. Having lost both of my parents to cancer, I know that there's nothing quite like sitting with the one who heard my first breath and who now struggles to catch their last. And as a pastor, I'm familiar with situations that require me to hold another person's desperate moments, to face suffering and loss alongside someone as they gasp for breath and grasp for the resilience to press on.

Kalanithi writes, "The call to protect life—and not merely life but another's identity; it is perhaps not too much to say another's soul—was obvious in its sacredness. Those burdens are what make medicine holy and wholly impossible: in taking up another's cross, one must sometimes get crushed by the weight." Similarly, the burdens of being a pastor are felt in our work as midwives of hope, an endeavor that is also both holy and wholly impossible. It's these impossible moments, though, that keep me grounded as a pastor and more profoundly as a human—these reminders that I, too, am in need of breath.

Gail Song Bantum is executive pastor at Quest Church in Seattle.

Austen Hartke: I was captured by Deborah Jian Lee's book from the moment I glimpsed its title. ***Rescuing Jesus: How People of Color, Women, and Queer Christians Are Reclaiming Evangelicalism*** shows the present and future of the Christian church through the eyes of those who have been pushed to the margins. Lee, an accomplished journalist, uses her investigative chops to dig into the history of the evangelical movement to explain why racism, sexism, and homophobia became hardwired stumbling blocks within so many Christian communities.

But *Rescuing Jesus* doesn't end in the past. It focuses the camera on the progressive Christian leaders of all races, genders, and sexualities who are now at the forefront of movements for justice within the church. In the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, Lisa Sharon Harper reminds the church that black lives do matter. In the halls of divinity schools, women pursue their calls to ministry despite censure from popular but sexist pastors. At Biola University, LGBTQ students challenge school policies that call their very existence into question. In each of these places, justice is on the move.

Lee provides a vision of a church made stronger by diversity and powered by love. As someone who works in LGBTQ communities of faith—where it's easy to get discouraged by every new "bathroom bill" funded by Christian organizations—I've found a balm for my soul in the hope that's so visibly incarnate in the individuals Lee features.

Austen Hartke is author of Transforming *and creator of the YouTube series Transgender and Christian.*

Debbie Blue: There is nothing overtly Christian about Jenny Erpenbeck's novel ***Go Went Gone***. It's about a man who is transformed (almost accidentally, in spite of himself, without striving to be righteous) into clumsy participation in a loving, merciful story of not terribly dramatic redemption. I chose it because I think this is how the grace of God often works.

Richard, a newly retired classics professor, finds comfort in routine and a sense of order. But he finds he needs something else. He commits to paying attention to his neighbors (initially out of academic curiosity), a group of African refugees who have fled oppression in their home countries to find they are not welcome anywhere.

Richard doesn’t set out to save himself or anyone else. But in the manner of Matthew 25, he begins to see who is thirsty and gives them a drink—or a ride to an appointment, or a piano lesson. When the government decides to expel the refugees, Richard finds places for them in his previously meticulous house: one under the piano, another to the side of it, four in his library. Richard’s friends also begin to house refugees: in their guesthouses, shops, and back rooms. “In this way 147 of the 476 men now have a place to sleep.”

In one of the final scenes, Ithemba, a refugee from Nigeria, cooks a meal for the makeshift community. Each of the guests tears off a piece of yam bread and dips it into the thin stew, and then they sing together. Narratives like this one—where people are caught up in love and mercy through no real triumph of their own effort—keep me trusting, somehow, in the grace of God.

Debbie Blue is author of Consider the Birds *and* Consider the Women.

James K. A. Smith: In David Foster Wallace’s novel *Infinite Jest*, there is a character I often think of named Don Gately. A resident counselor at Ennet House rehab center, Gately is a recovering addict who now helps others recover from addiction. Leslie Jamison best captures Gately’s allure: “He was no saint. That’s why he made salvation seem possible.”

This is why I love Augustine’s ***Confessions***, and it’s why I love the Augustine who could write the *Confessions*. Here’s a bishop who will tell you his sins; here’s a saint who exposes his failures. Despite what some might think, *Confessions* is not your typical “I was once lost but now I’m found” narrative. It’s more like “I was once lost and now am found, and yet here are all the ways I’m still prone to wander.” *Confessions* doesn’t confidently locate sin and transgression in the past, looked back upon with disgust by someone robed in white. While the first nine books recount Augustine’s past, the work’s linchpin is book 10, where Augustine—now a bishop—confesses to the disordered loves that still dog him.

The result is what we might call a spiritual realism that nourishes Augustine’s pastoral realism. Unsurprised by his own sin but never despairing of the Spirit’s transformation, Augustine offers the same hope to his congregants in his sermons. And he continues to offer the same hope to not-saints like us.

James K. A. Smith is a philosophy professor and author of the forthcoming On the Road with Saint Augustine.

Theresa S. Thames: God and sex are two things that we, as a society, think about often. However, I have never heard a theologically sound and affirming sermon on the topic of sex or sexuality. Typical Christian hermeneutics and traditions regarding sexuality lack an exegetical approach that celebrates the gift of the human body and our innate human desire for intimate relationships. But that is exactly what Nadia Bolz-Weber does in ***Shameless: A Sexual Reformation***. She calls for a sexual reformation in the church, established on a foundation of scripture, an honest critique of history, and a recognition of the gift of relationships.

Shameless is relevant and timely. In the wake of the #ChurchToo movement and in the aftershock of a mainline denomination's use of scripture as the basis for discriminating against and ousting LGBTQ clergy and allies, the church is in the midst of a reckoning. Bolz-Weber identifies how Christianity has gotten it wrong when it comes to sexuality and points toward ways the church can get it right for the sake of the body of Christ. Challenged and inspired by the stories of members of her congregation, she proposes a sexual ethic of concern over and above loyalty to doctrine.

This pastoral and deeply personal book reads like both a diary and a worship liturgy. From the opening "Invocation" to the closing "Benediction," Bolz-Weber invites readers to reflect on their own stories of identity and understandings of sexuality. The book ends with a commission: remember your baptism and know that you were created in the image of God, which includes sexual flourishing.

Theresa S. Thames is associate dean of religious life and of the chapel at Princeton University.

Ched Myers: In late 1918, Karl Barth published his famous commentary on Romans, which animated a profound theological turn on the heels of the Great War. A century later, Canadians Sylvia C. Keesmaat and Brian J. Walsh have done something comparable. ***Romans Disarmed: Resisting Empire, Demanding Justice*** interprets Paul's manifesto into the headwinds of global authoritarianism, social

disparity, ecological crisis, and unrestrained militarism.

Building on recent scholarship, Keesmaat and Walsh engage Paul's ancient letter to early followers of Jesus laboring under the shadow of empire in a way that brings it alive for similarly struggling North American Christians. They employ three groundbreaking approaches: a robust analogical imagination grounded in their experiences with marginalized people in Ontario, invented interlocutors who periodically interrupt the argument to ask *why* we should transgress Protestant orthodoxies about how to read the letter, and—most uniquely—humanizing portraits of fictional members of the first Roman church, made plausible by keen historical literacy.

All of this frees Paul's liberating text from its captivity to dogmatic and pietistic formularies, restoring Romans to its sociohistorical context while revealing its disturbing parallels to our own. This Paul challenges us to reckon with how the wages of sin—such as our addiction to fossil fuels—are death (Rom. 6–8) and invites us to reroot ourselves in the deep theological soil of a people's salvation story (Rom. 1–5, 9–11), in order that we might more courageously resist empire by practicing radical hospitality, love of enemies, and solidarity with thAdministratione weak (Rom. 12–15).

I am deeply grateful for Keesmaat and Walsh's committed and brilliant study, and I pray that it will, like Barth's work, inspire a desperately needed theological and practical turning.

Ched Myers is activist theologian at Bartimaeus Cooperative Ministries.

Anna Carter Florence: When Mary Oliver died, many of us felt as if we'd lost a dear friend. We didn't know her, not personally, but she knew us. She knew the life we were longing to live and the beauty we were longing to see, and she wrote poems that made it seem possible: a holy way of moving in the world. Or standing still in the world: over and over, she reminded us that our primary work is to pay attention. To go to the fields, to fall down on our knees in the grass, to be astonished, and to be taught—by the deer and the grasshopper, the rose and the blue iris, the redbird and black snake. To join our praise song to theirs. To love the world.

Oliver's partner, Molly Malone Cook, died in 2005. ***Thirst***, which appeared a year later, contains the poems Oliver wrote during that period of grief. I read them like prayers, and many of them are. When I read them in one sitting, I feel like I've opened the book of Psalms and found 43 new psalm-poems to recite and treasure and make my own: laments and petitions, confessions and thanksgivings, and each one a cup of cool water. It's the first of Oliver's books to speak in a distinctively Christian language of faith. I also hear her deep in conversation with Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs in these poems—which makes me think they were keeping her company in the woods, along with Christ. Or maybe she found their words stashed in the trees, along with the pencils she hid there, in case inspiration met her at the pond.

Anna Carter Florence is professor of preaching at Columbia Theological Seminary and author of Rehearsing Scripture

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson: Mary Douglas's ***Leviticus as Literature***, an anthropological study of the most alien book of the Bible, transformed my view not only of Leviticus but of the gospel, too. Leviticus is not abstract principles; it's an aesthetic diagram. Mount Sinai is mapped onto the tabernacle, the tabernacle is mapped onto the sacrificial animal's body, and all three are mapped onto the literary structure of Leviticus itself. Within these concentric circles, distinctions—between clean and unclean, Israelite and sojourner, male and female—exist to make way for life. Leviticus is the book of life: separating life from chaos, reclaiming life from sin, acknowledging life's source in God. Hence blood is God's alone, because blood is life.

The deep structure of Leviticus is the deep structure of the New Testament, its source of possibilities and meaning: redemption through sacrifice, jubilee for the oppressed, holiness extended to creatures, abundant life. Jesus' ethical teaching comes right out of chapter 19, but his sacrificial death bespeaks all of Leviticus. Life is costly—there is blood when we eat, blood when we birth, blood when we are forgiven. All the "why" questions regarding cross and atonement shipwreck in bafflement if they aren't anchored in the Levitical portrait of reality.

Bodies matter so much to Leviticus that finally the only divine answer for their frailty could be resurrection from the dead. Differences matter so much to Leviticus that

the divine being had to be, ultimately, Trinity in unity. The gospel is not intelligible apart from Leviticus, and Leviticus was not intelligible to me until I read Douglas's brilliant study.

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson is associate pastor at Tokyo Lutheran Church

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Glimpses of the life of faith."