



Study and Discussion Guide





The Prayers of Agnes Sparrow
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by
Joyce Magnin

COMPANION STUDY GUIDE FOR GROUPS

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The Prayers of Agnes Sparrow

Companion Study Guide for Reading Groups

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It has been said that all fiction is a search for truth. Perhaps that's one of the reasons we read—we're looking for something only a good story can provide, a connection to others, the knowledge that we are not alone. Tucked away inside a ripping good tale we find reflections of our lives, experiences and feelings. A book group is an excellent way to share those insights and hopefully learn a little about each other, God and ourselves. *The Prayers of Agnes Sparrow* can be used as an in-depth study guide to explore many of the quirks, issues, struggles, failures and victories we all face.

Using the book's thirty-two chapters as a resource, this two week study helps readers consider their own lives and faith journeys – having fun along the way. The lessons provide the follow structure and support:

- • Lesson Topic/Theme
- • Related Scripture
- • Related Devotional
- • Food for thought
- • Discussion Questions based on the lesson
- • Recipe from the book
- • Community service and issues
- • Character connections

A Brief Synopsis

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The Prayers of Agnes Sparrow is the story of an unusual woman, Agnes Sparrow. No longer able or willing to leave her home, where she is cared for by her long-suffering sister Griselda, Agnes has committed her life to the one thing she can do—besides eat. Agnes Sparrow prays and when Agnes prays things happen, including major miracles of the cancer, ulcer-healing variety along with various minor miracles not the least of which is the recovery of lost objects and a prize-winning pumpkin.

The rural residents of Bright's Pond are so enamored with Agnes they plan to have a sign erected on the interstate that reads, "Welcome to Bright's Pond, Home of Agnes Sparrow." This is something Agnes doesn't want and sends Griselda to fight city hall. Griselda's petitions are shot down and the sign plans press forward until a stranger comes to town looking for his miracle from Agnes. The truth of Agnes's odd motivation comes out when the town reels after the murder of a beloved community member. How could Agnes allow such evil in their midst? Didn't she know? Well, the prayers of Agnes Sparrow have more to do with Agnes than God. Agnes has been praying to atone for a sin committed when she was a child. After some tense days, the townsfolk, Griselda, and Agnes decide they all need to find their way back to the true source of the miracles—God.

About the Author



Joyce Magnin is the author of short fiction and personal experience articles. She co-authored the book, *Linked to Someone in Pain*. She has been published in such magazines as *Relief Journal*, *Parents Express*, *Sunday Digest*, and *Highlights for Children*. Joyce attended Bryn Mawr College and is a member of the Greater Philadelphia Christian Writers Fellowship. She is a frequent workshop leader at various writer's conferences and women's church groups. She is married to Peter and they have three children, Rebekah, Emily, and Adam; one grandson, Lemuel Earnest; one son-in-law, Joshua, and a neurotic parakeet that can't seem to keep a name. Joyce leads a small fiction group called StoryCrafters. She enjoys baseball, football, cream soda, and needle arts but not elevators. She currently lives in Havertown, Pennsylvania.

Joyce Magnin writes:

*It is my prayer that as you read *The Prayers of Agnes Sparrow* and discuss whatever insights you may find snuggled inside the humor and pathos - you come away with a greater sense of your self and maybe a friend or sister.*

Suggestions for Group Leaders

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This book and the accompanying study are versatile enough to work with women or mixed groups, high school age through senior adults. Because each topic is biblically based, the discussion is appropriate for a small group setting, book groups or Sunday school class, or even a Christian school history or literature class. It could also be used for home schooling. To get the most out of the discussion, participants should read the book in advance.

Open each session with prayer, asking for God's presence in the discussion. Throughout the session, invite group discussion, but do not try to force anyone to share. As the weeks unfold, you will likely find members more eager to open up. Keep in mind that some of the subjects raised in this book can cause controversy such as the obesity issue. The idea is not to argue, but to recognize the issue and learn from it.

A Sample Session

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- Open with prayer and chat casually as participants settle in. Ask individuals to share updates from their own lives since the group was last together. Some may want to jump right into questions sparked by their reading, but encourage them to wait. Let this be a comfortable, casual time that flows easily.
- Consider the **Lesson Theme** of the session.
- Ask someone to read aloud the **Scripture reference**.
- Present the related **Devotional** and **Food for Thought** included in the lesson plan.
- Lead the group to discuss and answer the **Discussion Questions**. They are meant not only to talk about the book but to encourage dialogue on matters of faith and living as a Christian in society.
- The **Character Poll** gives your group an opportunity to connect with a character in the book and discuss their reasons why.
- **Community and Issues** are available for anyone who wishes to begin a community project or discuss important issues.
- **Time to Relax!** This quick, fun, ending activity that will allow you to close on a relaxed note.
- End the session with prayer requests and a prayer for God's guidance for each person as you seek to know and do the Lord's will.

Week 1

Reading Group Session

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Topic/Theme: Hope, Redemption, Hunger (not only physical), Shame, Living Bread

Related Scripture: Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. John 6:49-51 (NIV)

Related Devotion: (hope, hunger, living bread)

Several years ago I developed a life-threatening illness. I was in the hospital for 42 days. That's right, 42 very long days being fed intravenously from a bag of white fluid. I stayed sane by imagining it was mashed potatoes. But of course it wasn't anything more than a mixture of the nutrients necessary to keep me alive. It didn't fill my stomach or my soul. I hoped for real, creamy mashed potatoes with butter and gravy. I desired mashed potatoes that I could taste, swallow and experience. In the same way we eat and drink food that doesn't truly satisfy the real hunger, the soul hunger that God has placed inside each of us. Only the bread of life—Jesus Christ—will satisfy that hunger. In *The Prayers of Agnes Sparrow* the residents of Bright's Pond place their faith and hope in Agnes Sparrow. They look to her to provide, through her prayers, the things they are incapable of doing or acquiring on their own—healing, happiness, prize-winning pumpkins, etc. They place all their faith in Agnes until her feet of clay are exposed and the people are forced to their knees. Hopefully on the way down they get a glimpse of the true source of their miracles.

Food for thought for this lesson:

Hoagies and the Bread of Life

Philadelphia is known for many things—The Franklin Institute, Scrapple and the World Series Champion Phillies among them. But perhaps more famous than these is our bread. That's right, the bread. They say it's the water. Whatever it is, there truly is nothing better than a sandwich made with a Philadelphia-baked roll. I prefer Italian hoagies with a little oil and oregano, without peppers or onions and maybe a bottle of cream soda to wash it down. Some like their hoagies filled to overflowing with onions, peppers, every deli meat possible and several kinds of cheese. Agnes prefers hers with everything. She's even willing to risk an asthma attack to eat one. But no matter how you like them a Philadelphia hoagie is irresistible. The trouble is they don't last—the next day you're ready for another. Even Philly bread cannot satisfy the hungers of the soul. It can't meet the desires of your heart—not really. And eating your way through a six-foot hoagie will not provide redemption. But there is bread that lasts, bread that lasts forever—bread that produces hope and wisdom and eternal life. Once you've tasted it you'll never go back to the other stuff. It is Bread that has been raised to redeem and save. The people of Bright's Pond put their faith in Agnes Sparrow. They revered her and brought glory to her, giving her the credit for their miracles. It took a painful tragedy to reveal the truth. Even

we Christians who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ put our hope in people. But people fail. The name Agnes means Lamb of God but only Jesus is the true and perfect Lamb.

Some questions to chew on:

- One of the first things you discover in the book is that the townsfolk have decided to erect a sign in Agnes's honor. Why is this not such a good idea in Griselda's opinion?
- What is happening as the people continue to turn to Agnes to pray for them? How do you respond to this?
- Hezekiah comes to town looking for his miracle. He doesn't come right out and tell Agnes what he needs. Agnes prays for him because he says he is incapable of praying for himself. Does Hezekiah seem hopeless? Why or Why not? And what does he do with the last shred of hope he can muster?
- The people love to bring Agnes food, almost like offerings of thanksgiving for her powerful prayers. What does the food stand for in this book? What is really being satisfied—Agnes's hunger or something else in the life of the townsfolk, in Agnes's life?
- Would you say that any of the townspeople experience spiritual growth after their prayers was answered or did they continue to feast on the wrong bread? Explain your response.

Week 2

Reading Group Session

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Related Scripture: My dear children, let's not just talk about love; let's practice real love. This is the only way we'll know we're living truly, living in God's reality. It's also the way to shut down debilitating self-criticism, even when there is something to it. For God is greater than our worried hearts and knows more about us than we do ourselves. 1 John 3:18-20 (The Message)

A quote from C.S. Lewis (Shame, Guilt)

“Some people feel guilty about their anxieties and regard them as a defect of faith but they are afflictions, not sins. Like all afflictions they are, if we can so see them, our share in the passion of Christ.”

Food for thought on this lesson:

Jelly Bean and the Day the Earth stood still

My sister had a pet guinea pig named Jelly Bean. Elaine loved her dearly and Jelly Bean loved her back. But then again, Jelly Bean was not an ordinary guinea pig. She thought she was a dog. She did tricks, ate from your hand and went outside on warm days. That's right, my sister would open the front door and sit Jelly Bean down and off she'd scamper into the yard to graze on dandelion. When she had her fill or was just ready to go inside Jelly Bean would wait at the front door until someone let her in. She tried to knock but no one ever heard her and she was too short to reach the bell. But once she was inside she'd scurry off to her cage to sleep-off the morning's dandelion harvest. Until one day, tragedy visited. I was in the front yard when I heard Jelly Bean squealing and hollering like mad. The horrifying sound was coming from the side yard. I went as fast as I could, but only in time to see a neighbor's dog, a giant German Shepherd with teeth the size of pencils tossing Jelly Bean around like bean bag. My eleven-year-old heart crumbled. I chased the dog away and picked up Jelly Bean's near lifeless body and carried her inside. My sister was devastated—completely and utterly devastated. My father took the animal to the vet but there was nothing he could do. Every bone in her tiny body had been broken. I'll never forget the look on Elaine's face when Pop brought Jelly Bean home to be buried. I couldn't tell Elaine the whole story. I couldn't tell her that I left the back gate open and that was how the dog got in the yard. I couldn't tell her it was my fault. Not for a very long time. I was scared and ashamed and still carry the guilt of Jelly Bean's murder. My sister has forgiven me. I know Jesus has forgiven me. I know it wasn't intentional. It was just an accident. But sometimes just an accident can be thoroughly and totally devastating—as it was for Agnes Sparrow.

Some questions to chew on:

- Both Agnes and Hezekiah harbored a secret. How do they compare? How do they contrast?
- Hezekiah never named his prayer request to Agnes for fear of reprisal. Agnes never told anyone about what she did. What is the difference between their secrets or is there any difference?
- Griselda became frustrated with Agnes after Agnes finally confessed. Was Griselda justified in her anger? Take it a step further. Was Agnes justified in what she did?

..... **The Buffet**

Much of the story takes place at the Full Moon Cafe. Is there a diner or café nearby where your group could hang out and eat pie as you discuss the book?

Here’s the recipe for Cora Nebbish’s Famous Lemon Squares. Bake up a batch and enjoy with coffee or tea. As Ruth Knickerbocker says, nobody makes lemon squares like Cora. Please don’t forget the most important ingredient—the love. They look so nice when served atop one of those dainty white doilies you can get down at the five and dime.

Crust

- 2 cups flour
- 1/2 cup powdered sugar
- 1 cup butter (real butter gives the crust a delicious richness)

Combine flour and powdered sugar. Cut in butter until crumbly. Press into a 9x12” baking pan and bake for 20 minutes at 350*

Filling

- 4 unbeaten eggs
- 2 cups granulated sugar
- 1/3 cup lemon juice
- 1/4 cup flour
- 1/2 tsp. baking powder
- The grated zest of one lemon (Cora says it gives them a little extra zing)

Beat ingredients together and pour over baked crust.
Bake 25 minutes.

When cool, sprinkle with powdered sugar and cut into squares.
If you sprinkle the squares with powdered sugar before they’re cool, the sugar will turn brown and melt into the squares. And that just won’t do. You want the powdered sugar to look like new fallen snow.
So make sure your squares are cool before you sprinkle them, okay dearie.

Community Service and Issues:

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Helping our community: The Society of Angelic Philanthropy is always busy giving necessary items to folks in need. Why not deliver new socks and shoes to a nearby shelter. Now wouldn't that make your heart a little lighter?

Related Current Event: Turn on the TV, open a newspaper or magazine and you'll likely see a story on how fat America has become. We are struggling with our weight and it's not only adults. One in four toddlers is considered overweight. TV is scattered with stories about morbidly obese people. Oprah has done several shows. Ruby Gettinger has a new reality show on the style network that chronicles her desire to drop a tremendous amount of weight. Maybe you all could pray for Ruby.

Character Poll

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Which character did you connect to and why? If you could be one of the characters in Bright's Pond who would you be? Share your thoughts and observations with the group.

- Agnes
- Griselda
- Ivy Slocum
- Studebaker Kowalski
- Ruth Knickerbocker

Time to sit a spell and relax:

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The downside to finishing a good book is that you're eager for another. But we also need to relax and unwind in different ways. I like to play around with needlework, counted cross-stitch mostly, or play Parcheesi with my young son, even watch a movie. I'd love to hear from you. What's your favorite way to relax?

- Read another book
- Needlework or similar creative outlet
- Watch TV
- Run/Walk/Workout
- Cook or bake
- A bubble bath with candles and the Brandenburg Concertos (or Jazz or the soulful stylings of Rosemary Clooney)

General Discussion Questions for Prayers of Agnes Sparrow

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1. Griselda is the narrator of *The Prayers of Agnes Sparrow*. But who do you think is the main character? Is there just one? Would you call Griselda a reliable narrator?
2. Griselda says that she feels her prayers are diminished by the magnitude of Agnes's. Have you ever felt that way?
3. Hezekiah keeps saying he is in need of some powerful prayers but never tells Agnes for what exactly? Was this fair of him? What would you do?
4. In what way(s) was Agnes's attitude or treatment of Griselda inconsistent with how she treated the townsfolk? Should Griselda have told her?
5. Is the sisters' relationship a healthy one? Do you have any personal experience with a similar relationship?
6. Eugene Shrapnel claims, among other things, that Agnes is in league with the devil. He later tells Griselda that he believes God doesn't answer prayer like this. Why would he say this?
7. What's up with Mildred Blessing? What is she getting out of all of this besides a paycheck? How would you describe her pursuit of the dog?
8. Food is an overarching character throughout the book. Talk about food. What does it represent in the book and in your own life?
9. Agnes was adamant about the sign, but she eventually acquiesces to the townsfolk's wishes. Why did she give in? Was she really looking out for the town's best interest?
10. Talk about bullying. Could the Bright's Pond tragedy have been prevented? Would that have been a good thing?
11. Which character in Bright's Pond do you most relate to? Which character do you respect most?
12. Did Hezekiah get his miracle? How is God's holy justice revealed?

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