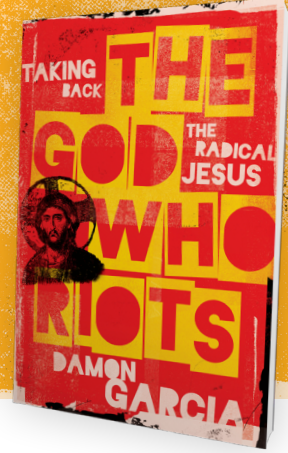


# THE GOD WHO RIOTS: TAKING BACK THE RADICAL JESUS BY DAMON GARCIA

## REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION GUIDE



I wrote *The God Who Riots* for those of us trying to take our faith and activism further than what we may be comfortable with. This discussion guide is written for the purpose of helping you go even deeper with a group of people, whether it be your church group, friend group, or book club. I wrote this guide along with my friend Casey Overton. Follow Casey's work on Twitter [@CaseyOverton1](https://twitter.com/CaseyOverton1)

To go yet another step, visit [damongarcia.com/workwithme](http://damongarcia.com/workwithme).

**Damon Garcia**

### INTRODUCTION, AND CHAPTER 1: SAVED FROM WHAT?

1. What stood out to you in the introduction and chapter 1? What did you learn? What surprised you?
2. How would you define your relationship to faith today? If you identify as Christian, what does that mean to you? Why do you still call yourself a Christian? And if you don't, why don't you?
3. How do you see your faith in relation to the history of the Christian legacy (for better or worse)? How has that changed throughout your life?
4. Damon writes about the apostle Peter letting go of his old conception of God to embrace a new one as he began to see the world in a new way. What are some conceptions of God that you have let go of? What conception of God are you currently struggling to let go of?
5. Damon writes:

*Those without power are always the first ones to experience the constraints of the conditions of the current world as a result of poverty and discrimination. The process of transitioning to a new world begins with these people's dissatisfaction. Initially the constraints are ignored because not everyone else has experienced them yet. As the current world remains unchanged, more and more people begin to experience its constraints. As more and more people have this experience, they become stronger by uniting with others who share the same experience. (p. 13)*

What societal problems have been ignored in the past by those who have had the privilege to ignore them? What about today?

## CHAPTER 2: AN ALTERNATIVE TO YOUR DEHUMANIZATION

1. What stood out to you in chapter 2? What did you learn? What surprised you?
2. Damon writes about how our value is often reduced to our usefulness, instead of our inherent beauty. Name some situations where you feel like you need to prove your value, such as the workplace, church, or family gatherings. How does this affect the way you see yourself?
3. Who has historically been dehumanized in our society? If you are a part of a spiritual community, how has your community contributed to that dehumanization? How has your community worked against that dehumanization?

4. Damon writes:

*When Jesus declared God's blessing on people, he asserted that those without power, privilege, wealth, and property are blessed. He announced that God is on their side. The criterion Jesus used to determine on whom to bestow God's blessings was the direct opposite of the criterion developed through the Protestant work ethic. (p. 32)*

How has our upside-down concept of blessings as privileges and possessions affected the way we see God? How has it affected the way we see those without particular privileges and possessions?

5. Damon writes:

*If we want people to relate to themselves in healthier ways, then we must fight against the exploitation that causes their unhealth. If we want people to love themselves, then we must build new material conditions that enable people to love themselves. (p. 37)*

What are the material conditions that make it difficult for people to love themselves? Working too many hours? Criticism from family, friends, and coworkers? The increasing cost of living? Where do these pressures come from?

## CHAPTER 3: WHITE CHRISTIANITY ALL THE WAY DOWN

1. What stood out to you in chapter 3? What did you learn? What surprised you?
2. Damon writes:  
*The violent categorization and classification of diverse cultural groups into “white” and “black” was the same method of categorization and classification of diverse cultural groups into “Christians” and “pagans.” The labels were switched simply out of a logical necessity to continue justifying the destruction and exploitation of non-Christians and their land. (p. 46)*

In what ways do we see this method of colonial classification of humans still operating today? What material impact has this form of othering had on communities?

3. Do you have relationships with communities of other faiths? How does your spiritual community describe people outside of your faith? How has your personal perspective on this changed over time?
4. If your church owns property, who are the stewards of the land? Who are the previous inhabitants of the land? What communities have been displaced to create space for you? Who is your church taking resources from? What is your responsibility to those communities?

Resources to localize the history of colonization in your specific city and neighborhood:

[Native Land Digital's indigenous lands map](#)  
[Mapping Inequality: Redlining in New Deal America](#)  
[School funding and racial demographics](#)

5. What steps have been taken to repair harm caused to communities marginalized by your faith tradition? How do you articulate your own religious mandate to see to the completion of these repairs? Is there similar rhetoric shared among your faith community?
6. Are you ready to take the next steps to materially address and repair the colonial impacts of your faith practice? Who would be willing to accompany you in this process? What do you need in order to be equipped to begin this decolonization work?

## CHAPTER 4: TAKING AND RESHAPING JESUS

1. What stood out to you in chapter 4? What did you learn? What surprised you?

2. Damon writes:

*Over the last couple of decades, many white Progressive Christians have become successful authors and influencers, having been propped up as the leaders of a new Christian reformation. However, most of their success is due to their ability to popularize these liberative Christian expressions for white liberal audiences. If we are in the middle of a historic Christian reformation, it is because of the liberative theologies developed by colonized and marginalized Christians over the last century, not because of the white theologians who profit off them. (p. 71)*

Who are the primary influencers in the history of your particular faith tradition or denomination? How has it silenced the voices of people at the margins? How has it been representative of people at the margins?

3. Damon writes:

*Progressive churches preaching against racism and embodying a spirit of repentance is not enough. Providing a space for repentance may be fulfilling for white Christians, but Christians of color need our own space for healing. We also need spaces like this in which to support one another as we reshape our faith on our own terms. (p. 69–70)*

Does your spiritual community have spaces like this for BIPOC folks? How about LGBTQ+ folks? Or any similar space for those with similar identities and interests? Are any of you a part of any groups like this within or outside your spiritual community?

4. Take a piece of paper and map out your circle of influences. Draw a small circle in the center and label it “me.” Think of three to five people who are the most influential to your theology, spiritual practice, personal philosophy, and worldview, whether it be people you know, authors you like, or thinkers of the past. Draw circles for these three to five people around your circle, draw lines connecting them to your circle, and label each of the circles by name. Then think of the three to five people (or however many you can think of) that you know have had an influence on each of your three to five people, and draw more circles connecting those people. It should look like a family tree, but branching out from the center instead of the top. Remember to be honest about who your influences actually are, instead of who you would like them to be.

Once you are done, consider following questions: What kind of people are overrepresented in my circles, and what kind of people are underrepresented? Who is missing? How is my worldview influenced by people at the margins?

5. How would your faith be reshaped by more closely associating with the most vulnerable of society?

6. What voices would you like to prioritize from now on?

## CHAPTER 5: REVELATIONS AND REPARATIONS

1. What stood out to you in chapter 5? What did you learn? What surprised you?
2. How does a larger systemic view of sin, forgiveness, and reconciliation change the way you think about these familiar concepts? What actions are required of you in an individualistic understanding of these concepts? What actions are required of you in a systemic understanding?
3. Damon writes:  
*The kind of repair that Christians should strive for requires a radical collective imagination, as well as radical collective action, to transform our world so that the wrongs of the past are made right. The restoration of all things, the reconciliation of all things, and the renewal of all things are what drives us.* (p. 92)

Where do you see a lack of imagination in our political engagement today?

4. Based on the history of your congregation and neighborhood, who do you owe reparations to? Is your church paying reparations? Why or why not?
5. How close are you to an area where poverty is concentrated? What role does your church play in contributing to that area being under-resourced?

## CHAPTER 6: ABOLITION COME, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN

1. What stood out to you in chapter 6? What did you learn? What surprised you?
2. Damon writes about discovering churches that functioned as community centers with service on Sundays instead of churches centered on the Sunday service. How have teaching and liturgy become how we define what the church does? How have they distracted us from the work we're called to do?
3. Damon writes about the reign of God being within us and growing around us right here and right now. What has been the impact of Christians reducing the reign of God to something in the future, somewhere else? What impact would it make if we reclaimed a material understanding of the reign of God?
4. Damon writes about a prophetic pessimism and a necessary hopelessness required to build something new. When we lose hope in a specific relationship or system or ideology getting better, then we can have space to build entirely new relationships, systems, or ideologies. When has this form of pessimism helped you move toward something new? In what ways do we need more pessimism?
5. What stops people from believing in the possibility of a world without police and prisons? What makes you still feel hopeful about the prison industrial complex, and why?

Resources to help your group with your reflection:

[“What is prison abolition?” from the National Catholic Reporter](#)  
[#8toAbolition](#)

More in-depth resources:

[Prison Industrial Complex \(PIC\) Abolition 101 video](#)  
[Critical Resistance Resources for Abolishing Policing](#)  
[Christians for the Abolition of Prisons](#)

## CHAPTER 7: THE OBEDIENT, UNRIGHTEOUS SON

1. What stood out to you in chapter 7? What did you learn? What surprised you?

2. Damon writes:

*From the perspective of the version of God [Kyle] and I grew up with, [his story is] a story of a man who started out passionately following God and living out his calling, but over time he started to go astray. Then he gave into his “homosexual desires” and really went off the rails. Now, as a Communist labor organizer, he couldn’t be further from God as he leads other people astray with secular ideologies in this sad story of a fall from grace. Then I think of the God of the Exodus, who freed the Israelites from slavery. And I think of Jesus, when he quotes the prophet Isaiah and announces his mission to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, restore sight to the blind, and let the oppressed go free. From the perspective of that God, Kyle has been on one long path of fulfilling the work of liberation that was planted in his heart as a child while serving people with his church. From that perspective Kyle followed God out of the church and into the world to help people who have no one to advocate for them. (p.123)*

What kind of God did you grow up with? How has your view of God changed over time?

3. Read the parable of the two sons in Matthew 21:28-32 together and discuss what stands out to you.

4. Damon writes about the son who said “yes,” but didn’t do the work, as a symbol for the church that doesn’t do the work of God, even though they verbally commit to it. But if the story continued and the son joined his brother after seeing his work, then this could also be a symbol for when the church shows up late to social movements. The church often responds to social change, instead of igniting it. How have you seen your church be late to social change? What is your church late on right now?

5. Where does your faith community spend its time? How do you use your building or space? Does it benefit the community?

6. What are the needs of the people in your community? To what extent are you or your community directly involved in mutual aid that benefits vulnerable people?

Resource: [“How to Create a Mutual Aid Network,” from the American Friends Service Committee](#)

7. What organizations led by the most vulnerable in your area are you partnered with? Do you even know who they are? How are you supporting their work?



## CHAPTER 8: A RIOT AT THE TEMPLE

1. What stood out to you in chapter 8? What did you learn? What surprised you?
2. In the temple Jesus shows us a faith that is disruptive. In what ways is your faith practice disruptive to harmful systems? What kind of disruption would you like to see more of?
3. Jesus accuses the religious leaders of turning the temple into a den of robbers, which is where robbers go and hide. How is today's church used as a refuge to hide from confronting injustices?
4. Both Jesus and Jeremiah's prophetic messages are rejected for being done at the wrong time and the wrong place in the temple, just like many protests today. How has the church contributed to the silencing of protest?
5. What are the challenging messages that need to be proclaimed loudly in today's churches? Whose voices need to be centered as we listen to these challenging messages? What is "upsurging from below," as Damon writes?
6. Damon writes:  
*There are many in this country whose lives are intolerable, and in order to bring attention to their struggle they must make others experience a glimpse of intolerability. When that happens, people are exposed to all the ways we tolerate the intolerable every day. We gain "eyes to see" and "ears to hear" through the aggressive experience of being exposed to what we can no longer unsee and unhear.* (p. 157)

In what ways do we tolerate the intolerable every day? What would change if we refused to tolerate these issues?



## CHAPTER 9: JESUS, THE OUTSIDE AGITATOR, AND CONCLUSION

1. What stood out to you in chapter 9 and the conclusion? What did you learn? What surprised you?

2. Damon writes:

*Jesus's crimes were not harmful. The harm came from the Roman state that crucified people. But, of course, crucifixion was not a crime. State violence hardly ever is. Protesting state violence, however, no matter how unarmful, is always framed as immoral when interpreted through the lens of crime.* (p. 170)

How does making a distinction between crime and harm change the way we talk about protest? How does it change the way we talk about violence? Or morality?

3. Damon writes about different understandings of the concept of “picking up your cross” and the suffering that comes with it. When we resist oppressive systems, we suffer when those systems suppress our efforts. To embrace this suffering is not a type of passivity, but a type of perseverance. How have Christians glorified passivity in suffering? What would perseverance look like in these situations?

4. Damon writes:

*Taking away the ability to oppress from those in positions of oppressive power is difficult, because to the oppressor, taking away their power feels like a form of oppression. They won't have the ability to understand how oppressive their role in society is until their ability to oppress is taken away. Just as Jesus said, “they do not know what they are doing,” because by dehumanizing others they have dehumanized themselves to the extent that they can't comprehend the impact of their actions.* (p. 178)

How have you seen this double dehumanization function in positions of power?

5. Who needs to be stripped of their power to oppress others? How can that happen without them relinquishing that power?

6. Damon writes:

*Authentic transformation can come only from below, not above. Only those who experience the constraints of the current world can figure out how to build a better world and then build it. Those who significantly benefit from the power and privilege they hold in the current world cannot lead the transformation our world desperately needs because they “do not know what they are doing.”* (p. 178)

Based on this idea, whose lead should we follow when it comes to building a better world? Who is leading these movements and organizations locally? How can we be of service to these organizations?

7. How would you answer the question posed in the conclusion, “Which side are you on?”