

THE PEASANT'S SCROLL

Discussion Guide

About This Guide

This discussion guide is designed to help you engage with the themes, characters, and challenging questions raised in The Peasant's Scroll. The questions are organized into sections, but feel free to explore them in whatever order works best for you.

Opening Discussion

1. First Impressions

- What was your immediate reaction to the novel? What scenes or moments stayed with you?
- How did you feel about Tom at the beginning of the story versus the end?
- Were you surprised by any aspect of the plot or themes?

Part One: Sheerah's Fears and the Modern Church

2. The Prophecy Fulfilled

Sheerah wrote: "I fear that those who follow him will speak more about him than live like him. They will praise his name but ignore his way."

- Have Sheerah's fears come true? In what ways do you see the modern church prioritizing worship over action?
- Sheerah feared temples would be built while doors stayed closed to the hungry. How does your own faith community balance building maintenance/programs with direct service to those in need?
- What specific examples from the novel illustrate Sheerah's fears being realized?

3. Belief vs. Action

Sheerah feared that "belief would become more important than mercy" and that people would "debate who he was instead of remembering what he did."

- Do you agree that Christianity has shifted from "what to do" to "what to believe"? Why or why not?
- How does your faith community define what makes someone a "good Christian"? Is it more about correct beliefs or compassionate actions?
- Tom says he's no longer a Christian but a follower of Jesus. What distinction is he making? Do you find this helpful or troubling?

Part Two: Following Jesus vs. Worshiping Christ

4. A Radical Distinction

Tom challenges his congregation: "What if we stopped concerning ourselves with being Christians and focused instead on actually doing what Jesus asked his followers to do?"

- How would the church look different if the focus were more on following Jesus's example than worshiping Christ?
- What practices or priorities in modern churches do you think Jesus himself would recognize? What might he find foreign?
- Is there a danger in Tom's approach? Can you follow Jesus without worshiping Christ?

5. Steak Love vs. People Love

Tom's metaphor about loving a steak because of how it makes us feel resonated with many readers.

- How does this distinction between "steak love" (based on feeling) and "people love" (based on action) challenge conventional understanding of love?
- In what ways might churches practice "steak love"—loving people for what they provide rather than for who they are?
- How can we cultivate "people love" that loves recklessly, even when it's costly or uncomfortable?

Part Three: The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats

6. Living the Parable

The six requirements from Matthew 25 structure the entire novel: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, visit the sick, go to those imprisoned.

- Tom initially gives Youssef water and food grudgingly. How does his attitude change throughout his week in Jerusalem?
- Youssef tells Tom he gave "with annoyance, then with resignation." When does Tom finally give "with joy"?
- How does the novel suggest we should interpret "I was in prison and you came to me"? Does the dog pound scene change your understanding?

7. The Least of These

"As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."

- Youssef functions as "the least of these" in the novel. Who are "the least of these" in your community?
- Tom initially sees Youssef as an interruption to his "real" pilgrimage. When have you been tempted to see people in need as interruptions rather than opportunities?
- How does Reverend Hartwell's confession at the barn service illuminate the difference between religious tourism and actual transformation?

Part Four: Unlikely Voices

8. Sheerah's Testimony

Sheerah was "a woman of no standing in the eyes of men"—unmarried, no social power, easily forgotten.

- How many of us have felt we were too insignificant to do something that would help others?
- Why do you think the church has historically marginalized voices like Sheerah's?
- What does it mean that a woman's testimony, preserved for 2000 years, becomes the catalyst for Tom's transformation?

9. Voices from the Margins

Throughout the novel, outsiders speak truth that insiders miss: Youssef the homeless man, Kayla the young seminarian, Patricia the widow, the veterans, Father Mikhail in his tiny church.

- Why are marginalized voices often better positioned to see truth clearly?
- What voices is your faith community not hearing? Why?
- How does the novel challenge us to seek wisdom from unexpected sources?

Part Five: Institutional vs. Incarnational

10. The Cost of Speaking Truth

Tom's final sermon splits his church. The board removes Kayla from ministry. Everything appears to fall apart.

- Was Tom's approach too confrontational? Could he have accomplished more with a gentler method?
- What does the novel suggest about the cost of prophetic ministry?
- Randolph Wescott says Tom is "destroying" the church. Tom says he's trying to save it. Who's right?

11. Death and Resurrection

Tom dies before seeing if his vision will take root. But 40 people show up at the barn for Vespers.

- What does the barn service represent? How is it different from traditional church?
- The novel ends with Kayla writing Tom's story. Why is bearing witness so important?
- In what ways does the novel embody its own theme—that seeds planted in faith may not bear fruit until after we're gone?

Part Six: Personal Reflection

12. Your Own Journey

Tom goes to Jerusalem looking for answers in holy places and finds them in the face of a homeless man.

- When have you found God in unexpected places or people?
- Tom struggles with the gap between what he preaches and what he practices. Where do you see this gap in your own life?
- If you were tested like Tom was (through encounters with someone in need), would you pass? What would hold you back?

13. Love as a Verb

The novel repeatedly emphasizes that love must be active, not just emotional.

- In practical terms, what would it look like for you to love someone this week as a verb rather than just a feeling?
- Who is your "Youssef"—someone God might be putting in your path to teach you what following Jesus actually means?
- What would it cost you to live Matthew 25 more fully? What would you gain?

14. Turning the World Upside Down

Acts 17:6 is Tom's touchstone verse throughout the novel.

- What would it look like for your faith community to be accused of "turning the world upside down"?
- The early Christians were accused of this because of their actions, not their beliefs. What actions might warrant this accusation today?
- Are you willing to risk being uncomfortable, being criticized, being misunderstood in order to follow Jesus more radically?

Concluding Questions

15. The Scroll's Message

- If you could ask Sheerah one question, what would it be?
- Do you think the church can recover what Sheerah feared we would lose? How?
- What is one concrete thing you will do differently as a result of reading this novel?

For Further Discussion

16. Literary Elements

- How does the structure of the novel (with parallel storylines in 30 AD and 1975) enhance the themes?
- What is the significance of Tom's physical decline mirroring his spiritual transformation?
- How does the author use settings (Jerusalem, the dog pound, the barn) symbolically?

17. Historical Context

- The novel is set in 1975, post-Vietnam, during a time of cultural upheaval. How does this setting inform the story?
- What parallels do you see between 1975 and today?
- Why might the author have chosen to set this story in the past rather than the present?

Additional Resources

For groups who want to dive deeper:

Biblical Texts:

Read Matthew 25:31-46 aloud together. Read Acts 17:1-9 for the "turning the world upside down" passage. Consider reading Luke 8:1-3 about the women who followed Jesus.

Worship Integration:

Consider incorporating "Get Together" by The Youngbloods (Tom's favorite song) into your discussion. The lyrics "You hold the key to love and fear" resonate with the novel's themes.

Action Component:

Following the novel's emphasis on action, consider having your group do one act of service together after your discussion—visit a nursing home, volunteer at a shelter, or simply reach out to someone who needs help.

Writing Exercise:

Like Kayla at the end, consider writing your own testimony about a time when someone showed you what following Jesus actually looks like.

A Final Thought

Sheerah ends her scroll with this charge: "We turned the world upside down not by our beliefs but by how we loved. If you carry anything forward carry that."

What will your group carry forward from this story?

*This discussion guide was created to honor the vision of Rev. Tom McGarvey (1936-1975),
who dared to ask uncomfortable questions and paid the price for speaking truth.*

May his tribe increase.