

# THE ADVOCATE

## STUDY QUESTIONS

*NOTE: This study is divided into a four-week discussion guide that sequentially tracks the book. Alternatively, book clubs or other discussion groups can pick and choose from the questions and discuss the book in just one setting.*

## WEEK 1

*A Thought from Randy Singer:*

— Before starting this week's lesson, view the video introduction at [http://www.randysinger.net/advocate\\_teaching/](http://www.randysinger.net/advocate_teaching/)

As a writer, *The Advocate* took me into the genre of historical fiction, something I've never attempted before. As a former history teacher, I loved the research. I even took a trip to Rome with my wife, Rhonda, in order to "touch the stones." With her astute iPhone camerawork, we put together a video introduction to *The Advocate* which you can watch at [www.randysinger.net/theadvocate](http://www.randysinger.net/theadvocate).

I am frequently asked, "Why did you write this book?" There are really three answers. First, it feels like the book I was created to write, bringing together the various streams of my life—lawyer, pastor, history teacher, and writer—into one story.

Second, I got sucked in by the subject matter. I occasionally teach a class at Regent Law School in advocacy. As part of that class, I talk about the greatest trials in the history of the world. The most important trial was the trial of Jesus (which we know a fair amount about) but the second most important trial was the trial of Paul in front of Nero. We know next to nothing about that. So how could an author of legal thrillers resist the urge to weigh in?

Third, one of the best ways to show the truth of the Christian faith is to take a hard look at the first-century Christians, including the contemporaries of Jesus, and consider the story of their transformed lives. What could account for that? Studying their courage and impact shows that their faith was real.

As Dr. Luke says in the introduction to his gospel: "I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning [and] decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught." Luke 1:3-4.

— In preparation for session 1, please read parts 1, 2, and 3 of *The Advocate*.

*Mentoring*

Much of the first two parts of the book focus on the relationship between Seneca and Theophilus. In first-century Rome, you needed a strong benefactor like Seneca to open doors of opportunity.

From what you know about Jesus and his disciples, how would you compare Seneca with Jesus in both their methods and the substance of what they taught?

Are you mentoring someone? Are you being mentored by someone? Is this even important in today's society?



*Blind Spots*

How did you react when you read about the gladiatorial games and the cavalier way the Romans watched prisoners get crucified during the lunch break in the games? What does this say about Roman culture?

Most cultures have their own blind spots—immoral practices that are so commonly accepted that even ethical citizens don't see them. How did Jesus challenge the blind spots in his culture? What are the blind spots in our own culture? What can you do to help yourself and others see them? Once you're aware of blind spots, how can you challenge them?

*Pilate*

Did the chapters on the trial of Jesus help you to better understand the motivation of Pontius Pilate? What kind of pressures contributed to his decision to order the crucifixion of an innocent man?

What kind of pressures keep you from being bold or outspoken for Jesus in your life?

*The Centurion*

Of all people, the Roman centurion at the foot of the cross was the one who recognized the divinity of Jesus and cried out: "Surely, this man was the Son of God!" (See chapter 29 of *The Advocate*.) Why do you think he made this declaration? How much do you think the earthquake and supernatural darkness contributed to his "conversion"? How has the natural world impacted your thinking about God?

*Application*

Theophilus tried to finesse his way out of a tough situation by crafting a compromise. "Release Barabbas," he whispered to Pilate. But it backfired and haunted him for the rest of his life.

Have you ever comprised your convictions in a tough situation and later come to regret it? How did that change your life?

Are there any tough situations right now that you need to address head-on but have been unwilling to do so? Maybe, like Pilate, you need to take a stand but instead have tried to wash your hands of the matter?

*"Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold us guiltless.  
Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act."*

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

## WEEK 2

*A thought from Randy Singer:*

— Before starting this week's lesson, view the video introduction at [http://www.randysinger.net/advocate\\_teaching/](http://www.randysinger.net/advocate_teaching/)

I love the story in the eighth chapter of John about the woman caught in the act of adultery and defended by Jesus. Theophilus, as a trained advocate, loved it as well. And he used what he had learned from Jesus during the trial of Mansuetus and Flavia.

Of course, we don't really know what Jesus wrote in the dirt. In fact, many scholars believe that the entire incident may have been a later addition and not part of the account originally penned by John. (Your Bible probably has a note to that effect.) They base their conclusion on the fact that the story is not contained in many of the oldest known manuscripts.

I think their conclusion is wrong.

For starters, a few of the ancient Greek manuscripts do, in fact, contain the story, and it's also in the original Latin Vulgate from the late fourth century. The story is also alluded to in some of the earliest writings of the church fathers. The question really becomes: Did somebody insert this story into the original manuscript or did somebody take it out?

Augustine, commenting on its omission in the fifth century, argues that the early church leaders took it out, "fearing, I suppose, lest their wives should be given to impunity in sinning."

This much we know: the early church was obsessive about the sin of adultery, making it improbable that they would have added this story, rather than deleted it. The early church, like many churches across the ages, quickly lost some of the essence of grace, becoming legalistic about certain sins. For example, the Shepherd of Hermas, writing in the second century, said that Christians who committed major sins could only be forgiven once, after public confession. He was criticized by his peers for being too liberal. Is it likely that these church fathers *added* a story about adultery being forgiven? I doubt it.

Which brings me back to what I love about this trial, where Jesus becomes the defense lawyer for a woman he *knows* is guilty. (As a lawyer, I get that question all the time: How can you represent someone if you think they are guilty?) The love of Jesus is so radical, his grace and forgiveness so pervasive, that it often doesn't make sense to our judgmental natures.

So instead of basking in the fullness of his grace, we tear the story out of Scripture. Amazing, unlimited, free-flowing, life-changing grace. It may be difficult to understand. But it wasn't given for us to understand; it was given for us to experience.

— In preparation for session 2, please read parts 4, 5, and 6 of *The Advocate*.

### *America's Culture*

By now, you've read about the politics of Rome, the treason trials, the gladiatorial

games, the public baths as gathering places, the Vestal Virgins and the religious ceremonies. What parallels can you draw between the culture in first-century Rome and the culture in America today?

What aspects of Roman society likely contributed to their decline? Do you see those same types of things happening in our world today?

### *The trial of Mansuetus and Flavia*

Read through the story of Jesus defending the woman caught in adultery in John 8:1-11. What do you think Jesus might have written in the dirt?

Though Theophilus suspected that Mansuetus and Flavia were guilty of violating her vestal vows, he still defended them. Do you think he should have? In today's society, should a Christian lawyer defend somebody he or she thinks is probably guilty?

### *Political Correctness*

Rome was replete with treason trials in the first century—you could not say hardly anything critical of the emperor or the state without being prosecuted by other private citizens. This was, of course, an extreme form of political correctness, punishable by death. Why is political correctness so dangerous?

What are the forms of political correctness that plague believers today and make it hard to live out their faith? What are the “punishments” for violators? What did Theophilus do in the face of the political correctness of his day?

### *Pointing to Jesus*

Blaise Pascal once said, “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man that cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.” Many religious practices and beliefs in ancient Rome seemed to point toward Jesus and the story of redemption.

What similarities did you see between Jesus and the mythical god Aesculapius? (Aesculapius is explained in chapter 18.)

How did the Roman sacrifices, such as those that were part of the Fordicidia ceremony, point to the cross? (Chapter 7)

Does anything about the freeing of Apronius after he crosses the shadow of a Vestal Virgin (chapter 40) point toward our redemption through Christ?

### *Application*

Is there someone in your life whom you have written off, maybe even subconsciously, as being beyond God's grace? Is there a situation, like the one Theophilus faced with the trial of Flavia and Mansuetus, that seems hopeless? If so, are you putting God in a box and limiting his power? Nobody is beyond his reach; no situation beyond his power. Begin praying in faith with an expectant heart.

*With God all things are possible.*

MATTHEW 19:26

## WEEK 3

*A thought from Randy Singer:*

— Before starting this week's lesson, view the video introduction at [http://www.randysinger.net/advocate\\_teaching/](http://www.randysinger.net/advocate_teaching/)

It was Valentine's Day evening, and I was on my way to a small church just outside Detroit, where I was preaching at a revival service. The snow was falling, thick and white, the roads covered, visibility poor. Why had I agreed to do this in the first place?

I was stopped at a red light when it happened. My rental car rear-ended from behind, the blow jerking my body backward and forward, causing my car to skid. I got out and surveyed the damage. The car that hit me looked undrivable. "Are you okay?" I asked the driver and his passenger.

"I think so. Are you?"

It was a moment of truth. My pastoral, evangelist side was whispering in one ear, assuring me I was fine, reminding me that this might be an opportunity for ministry. But the other ear was being counseled by my lawyer side, reminding me that this was their fault and that neck injuries often do not manifest themselves immediately. Some would call that the devil's advocate.

Of course, I wouldn't be telling you this if my better nature did not win out. I told them I was fine. I learned that the car belonged to the lady riding in the passenger's seat. The driver was from Jamaica and it was his first time driving in the snow.

Later, when I had the car owner off to the side, I asked her why she let her friend drive. "It was our first date," she said. "He asked to drive. I didn't want to tell him no on Valentine's Day."

I invited them to the revival services. They said they would come but needed a ride since their car would be towed. That night, at the services, the driver put his faith in Christ and the passenger rededicated her life to the Lord.

Even accidents are not accidents in the Kingdom of God.

Paul undoubtedly felt the same way. He knew that his mission was to take the name of Jesus to the Gentiles, their kings, and the children of Israel. (Acts 9:15.) His trial in front of the most powerful man in the Roman Empire was no accident. He would have seen it as his opportunity to share his testimony and urge Nero to turn to Christ. After all, that's exactly what Paul did with King Agrippa and everyone else who put him on trial.

I've thought about that scene for hours—Paul standing in the grandest judgment hall the world had ever seen, before the most powerful man on the planet, his own life on the line, yet still he preached Jesus. The thought of it always convicts me. It's one thing to invite a driver who ran into your car to revival services; it's quite another to tell the world's cruelest tyrant to repent.

And then I remember. It isn't that Paul was naturally bold; it's that Paul was driven by the power of the Spirit to say what needed to be said even when he should have



been afraid. The same power is available to each of us today. It's the same power that Theophilus would eventually find.

Courage isn't absence of fear. Courage is fear that has said its prayers.

— In preparation for session 3, please read parts 7 and 8 of *The Advocate*.

### *Killing Caligula*

Much of part 7 deals with the plot between Theophilus and Flavia to assassinate the emperor. Were the conspirators justified in what they did? Is there ever an appropriate time for Christians to seek revenge?

Was German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer justified in joining a plot to assassinate Hitler? Would that be any different from what Theophilus and Flavia did?

### *Scripture*

In part 8 we meet the apostle Paul, who is under house arrest in Rome, and Dr. Luke, his companion. Read the first four verses of the Gospel of Luke and the first four verses of the book of Acts. Do you think Theophilus was Paul's advocate for his case in front of Nero? If not, who do you believe Theophilus was?

Did reading this story about how Luke and Acts might have originated change your perspective on these two books of Scripture? If so, how?

### *Faith in Christ*

All three members of Theophilus's family came to a point where they put their faith in Jesus, but each of them did so in a different way. What things most influenced Mansuetus in his decision? Flavia? Theophilus?

What about you? What draws you to Jesus? What is the main thing that keeps you committed to him even when things around you get difficult and confusing?

### *Application*

What did you think about the interaction between Paul and Theophilus concerning whether Paul should share his testimony with Nero and call the Emperor to repentance? If you were Paul's advocate, what advice would you have given him?

Paul probably could have made a thousand excuses as to why it wasn't the right time, in the middle of his trial, to share the truth of Christ. Instead, he was faithful to God's calling on his life. When is the last time that you shared the Good News with somebody? When is the last time you tried? When is the last time you felt convicted to share but backed out because it wasn't "the right time and place"?

## WEEK 4

*A thought from Randy Singer:*

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One of the most stirring moments I had in Rome came when we toured the Colosseum and I thought about the martyrs who had died there. We also walked the Gemonian Stairs, the same stone steps that Paul and Peter may have walked, facing certain death and turning the empire upside down in the process. And I asked myself a haunting question: Would I have had that kind of boldness? Do I now?

I imagine Theophilus would have asked himself the same thing as he defended the fiery Paul in front of the volatile Nero: *Am I willing to die for this cause?*

It's a question that I hope resonated throughout the pages of *The Advocate*. Romans were fascinated with the mechanics of death. In Christianity, they confronted a religion that not only empowered people to live well, but also gave them the courage to die well. In fact, dying was a second birth, a passage to eternal life made possible by the resurrection of the Nazarene.

And not even Nero, in all his narcissistic splendor, knew how to deal with that.

This faith was solid. This faith was real. Researching this book inspired me. We stand on the shoulders of these early Christians, men and women like Theophilus and Flavia, who were willing to face down the fury of an emperor by the power of a resurrected Savior. My prayer is that *The Advocate* will inspire you as well and help you know, as Luke phrased it, "the certainty of the things [we] have been taught."

— In preparation for session 4, please read part 9 of *The Advocate*.

### *Our failures*

In chapter 87, Theophilus delivers his memoirs to Flavia for safekeeping. In writing his story, he had been encouraged by Paul to include the raw details of his own greatest failures. "Our weaknesses make room for God's power," Paul said. Read 2 Corinthians 12:6-10 and then answer this question: How have you seen this principle at work in your life?

### *Our suffering*

The Great Fire of Rome, and Nero's desire to find a scapegoat, led to a horrible and widespread persecution of the Roman Christians. How did this impact the spread of the Gospel?

A century later, Tertullian would say, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." How has God used tragic events or suffering in your life, or the lives of those you love, to spread the gospel?



### *Forgiveness*

The book ends with Theophilus, hanging on a cross, praying for Nero, the same way Jesus had prayed for his persecutors. Do you believe you could have done this? How does it compare to Theophilus's reaction earlier in the book after Caligula orchestrated the death of Mansuetus? Why did Theophilus react differently this time?

Now let's get more personal. Is there somebody in your life who has wronged you and caused you pain? Are you praying for them? Are you seeking revenge? Holding a grudge? Or have you forgiven them?

### *Application*

The last line of the book says, "Still, it's my belief that there is a small part of Theophilus in all of us." Is that true for you? What aspects of this main character did you identify with? Could it be that the books of Luke and Acts were written not just with Theophilus in mind, but specifically for you? Can you be called, as the name Theophilus translates, a true "lover of God"?