



THE COMPLICATED HEART

*Discussion Guide
For Individuals or Groups*

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Contents

Welcome to The Complicated Heart Discussion Guide

Questions for Personal Reflection

General Group Discussion Questions & Sample Outline for 8-Week Book Club

How to Start & Facilitate a Women's Small Group in Your Home

Welcome to The Complicated Heart discussion guide!

Here you will find group discussion questions, individual questions for further reflection, and tips on getting women together for a book club.

The Complicated Heart is a book that can help you and others process and relate to the hurt (and hope) you've personally experienced. If you're reading this book with a group, you'll find that interacting with these concepts out loud with trusted friends can provide yet another layer of healing.

We encourage you to keep a journal with you as you read and consider the questions, as they will likely inspire some deep heart-work.

With love,

SARAH MAE, AUTHOR OF *THE COMPLICATED HEART*

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Questions for Personal Reflection

SECTION 1: SHE BROKE ME

Sarah longed to hear her mother say she loved her. Is there something you long to hear from someone who has wounded you deeply? (Ch.1, p.4)

In the remembering, Sarah remembers the positive, fun times with her mother, and she longs to be with her. Because of these memories, she has expectations that will only lead to hurt and disappointment. Are there relationships where your expectations have led to hurt and disappointment? (Ch. 2, p.9)

'Her weapon is not her hands but her words.' There is power in words...have you received or inflicted this type of hurt with words? What situations usually bring this out? (Ch.3, p.14)

Even in the midst of hurt and dysfunction, we sometimes take on the blame and start believing the accusations, as Sarah did with her mother. Do you find yourself blaming yourself and believing the accusations? (Ch. 3, p.15)

Sarah realizes that 'no one is mothering her'. Have you been mothered? What is that relationship like? Are you currently in the role as a mother and what are your desires for that relationship? (Ch.3, p.17)

The desire to be loved and the fear of being alone are two strong desires we often experience. How have you seen these desires play out in your life? What have they led you to? (Ch.3, p.18)

Sarah finds that offering her heart through writing helps calm the 'fire' in her. What are some healthy habits that calm your fire? (Ch. 4, p.23)

Have you experienced a 'God is here' moment? A time when you saw Him surfacing in your soul? What was your response to that surfacing? (Ch.4, p.24)
What, if any, is the difference between believing in God versus knowing Him? (Ch.4, p.24)

Sarah says that 'light has stepped into the pit.' When have you experienced light entering into the darkness...into the pit? What led to that moment? What did the light bring about? (Ch.4, p.27)

We crave safety...comfort...refuge. When that is lacking, especially at home, we look for it. Sarah and Jason became each other's refuge. Where have you turned for refuge, to fill voids and ease hurt? (Ch. 5, p.32)

‘There’s a scar and a painful sensitivity in that thumb even today that reminds me that even healed wounds, when hit just right, still hurt.’ Do you have these wounds? What situations, words, people, etc. cause the pain to surface? (Ch.6, p.38)

When Sarah moves back to Pennsylvania, she is met with disapproval, others making decisions for her, and the feeling of being alone, unloved, sick and invisible. She desires comfort, love, a touch and finds it in her Grandmother. The desire to be ‘wanted’ leads her to say ‘yes’ to the abortion. Has there been a time where those desires led you to a place that you later regret? How has that regret played out in your life, your decisions, your relationships, your view of self? (Ch.6, p.41)

SECTION 2: HE BOUND UP MY WOUNDS

Sarah experiences withheld forgiveness from her stepmom because of the abortion. Is there a time when someone in your life has withheld forgiveness? What is your response when someone makes a decision you disapprove of...forgive or withhold forgiveness? (Ch. 7, p.47)

‘I will prove to her and myself and everyone else that I’m a good girl.’ Has there been a relationship or a situation where you felt like you had something to prove? What were you striving for? (Ch.7, p.48)

Sarah finds herself in a cycle of doing what she doesn’t want to do. ‘I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.’ (Romans 7:15) Is there a behavior or sin that you find yourself stuck in...you try to change but fail? (Ch.7, p.51)

Has there been a time in your life where you, like Sarah, ‘were desperate for control?’ Were there rules that you put in place to bring about the control? Are there still rules that you live by? (Ch.7, p.52)

While at a college retreat, Sarah is asked ‘What would you do if Jesus walked into the room right now?’ How would you respond? Do you relate more with Sarah, who would hide or with the others, who are ‘cool with meeting Jesus in person?’ (Ch.8, p.58)

At the retreat, Sarah realizes her life ‘is not what makes or breaks Jesus’ love’ for her. What is your response to that truth? (Ch.8, p.58)

Truth continues to take root and settle into Sarah’s heart. On page 59, Sarah shares the truths that she is choosing to believe and surrendering her broken places and wounded heart to Him. Is there truth that you need to cling to...to choose to believe? Is there a truth that you ‘know’ but live contrary to? (Ch.8, p.59)

Have you come to a place where, like Sarah, you ‘chose to believe, to trust in what I can’t see’? If so, what has led you there? If not, what is keeping you? (Ch.8, p.59)

The fear of loneliness caused Sarah to be a 'clingy girlfriend'. What does loneliness drive you to? (Ch.9, p.62)

Sarah hopes that things will be different this time she is with her mother, but the butting heads begins. 'Every time I think the fire has died down it flares.' What causes the fire to 'flare' for you? What do your flares look like...maybe it's anger like Sarah or some other behavior? (Ch.10, p.65)

Core lies are beliefs we hold true about ourselves. Pages 71-72 list some core lies and the demands that are attached to them. What from this list stand out to you or hits your heart? (Ch.11, p.71-73)

Are there lies that you are living out of? It is not enough to just recognize the lie...we must replace it and go to the 'gospel of good news'. Take some time and rehearse this good news to yourself. (Ch.11, p.74)

Through a guest lecturer at college, Sarah is told, 'Don't throw the ball back'. Is there a 'ball-throwing' situation in your life? What does it look like? What would it look like to stop throwing the ball? (Ch.12, p.79)

Sarah experiences a gaping whole where the love of a mother is supposed to be. She is not loved the way her heart desires. There is a crevice in her heart that isn't being filled and only 'grows bigger and deeper.' She realizes 'she has to mourn the loss of a mother.' Is there something in your life that leaves a gaping whole? Is there something you need to mourn the loss of? (Ch.13, p.84-85)

Mourning is the 'process of accepting reality'. First we acknowledge it. Second we must figure out what brings release and healing to our heart. What healthy patterns have you found to process feelings of grief that bring peace and joy? Is there something that you are drawn to help you process and bring peace? (Ch.13, p.86-87)

If you find yourself in a strained relationship, it is important to ask yourself, 'what should my expectations actually be and in what ways am I putting myself, relationship, or other person into a state of continual failure?' Are there faulty expectations you need to let go of? How does this help you? (Ch.13, p.87-88)

Unmet needs will hurt deeply. Are there unmet needs that you struggle with being content? (Ch.13, p.88)

What is your goal regarding loss? Is it to never be sad or is it to get to a place where the pain no longer consumes...no longer controls? What steps can you take right here...right now? (Ch.13, p.90)

Uncovering wounds often leads to feeling more wounded. We look for ways to try not to feel the pain. We are driven to find refuge...to escape the loneliness and confusing darkness. Where do you seek refuge during these times? Take some time to read and meditate Psalm 40:1-3. How can the Lord be a refuge? What is His character according to this Psalm? (Ch.14, p.98)

Healing is hard work and as Sarah says it is 'so much easier to avoid and deny.' Do you find yourself avoiding the hard work of healing? (Ch. 15, p.101)

Has there been a time in your life where you faced the pain...and walked through it? If not, what is hindering you? What truth would help you walk forward? (Ch.15, p.101-102)

Sarah knows 'God keeps calling her to stay in relationship' with her mother. Her mother is difficult, but she doesn't walk away because she knows she is called to keep loving her. Is there someone in your life, though difficult, is someone you feel called to love anyway? How can boundaries, releasing expectations, and seeing them as they are help you love? (Ch.16, p.104)

Psalm 139:23-24 is an invitation for God to search us...to see what is really in our heart... what is the root. Sarah realizes she often tries to hide the nakedness of her heart. Do you find yourself keeping parts of your heart hidden? What are ways that you hide... maybe pretending that everything is ok or performing to make yourself look better? (Ch.17, p.112-113)

Sarah talks about her mother-wound. It doesn't go entirely away but it is not nearly as tender? Is there a wound that has lessened...that you have experienced some healing? (Ch.19, p.125)

During the time Sarah's mom lives with them, they love each other as they are able. It is grace that makes living together work...not perfection or an absence of frustration. Is there a situation or relationship where grace has made a way...made the impossible seem possible? (Ch.21, p.137)

Sarah finally hears 'I'm sorry' from her mother. It is unexpected...a hope she had given up. Her only response is thankfulness...to her mother...to God. How have you seen the unexpected? How have you seen brokenness restored? What is your response? (Ch.22, p.143-144)

SECTION 3: SHE WAS BROKEN TOO

Sarah came to a place where she saw how broken her mother was. How can seeing others brokenness soften our hearts towards them? (Ch.25, p.166)

'We all get the same choice in life: to stay in the pain, stiff-armed toward God, or to surrender all to Him. He pursues every one of us, and all we have to do is turn to Him and say, Help. I surrender.' (p.167) Whatever the pain is/was...what has this choice looked like for you? Where are you currently...in the pain or in the surrender? What would surrender look like for you? (Ch.25, p.167)

After the death of her mother, Sarah wrestles with pain, vulnerability and grief. Her desire was to model healthy grief to her children. How has grief been modeled to you? What is your natural response to grief? What would it look like grow in 'healthy grief'? (Ch.26, p.173)

Have you, like Sarah, vowed that you would never be like _____? What would release and surrender look like...‘surrendering yourself to God, entrusting the good and the bad into His loving hands, the very hands that stretched out on a cross’ so you could come out of the dark and live in the light where there is victory?’ (Ch.27, p.178)

This story ends with a letter...a letter Sarah wrote to her mother...a letter that explains, empathizes, understands, grieves, forgives, apologizes...a letter that expresses freedom, love and healing. Is there a letter you would like to write...maybe it will never be sent... never be read...but it may be part of your process...your healing.

Group Discussion Questions

Below you’ll find a sample outline to use in an **8-week group context**.

We recommend having each person read the chapters ahead of time on their own.

You might want to consider assigning specific “further reflection” questions so that everyone has time to think through their answers.

We’ve also listed several “generic” questions facilitators can utilize to begin each small group time together. Ask a few of these broad questions to get the conversation rolling, then transition into more specific conversation as you feel led.

Group Study Outline

Week 1: Intro – Chapter 4

Week 2: Chapters 5-8

Week 3: Chapters 9-11

Week 4: Chapters 12-14

Week 5: Chapters 15-17

Week 6: Chapters 18-20

Week 7: Chapters 21-24

Week 8: Chapters 25-28

Questions to Generate a discussion:

In these chapters, what concept or story stuck out to you?

What could you relate to in this chapter?

Have you had a similar experience?

Is there something that was hard to think about?

What from this reading selection stands out to you?

What was challenging for you to hear?

Is there a truth that encouraged you?

Are there any action steps you desire to take at this time?

What, if anything, did you realize about yourself as you read these chapters?

Did you learn anything about God's character?

Was there a phrase or paragraph you highlighted or underlined in these chapters?
Please share it with us.

If you had to summarize this chapter into a sentence/concept, how would you do it?

How to Start & Facilitate a Book Club in Your Home

Choosing to “Facilitate”

Leading a book club can feel intimidating, but facilitating one is just making a space where conversation can happen; it's being willing to get the ball rolling. As a facilitator my goal is to bring women together with a plan and to help (not dominate) the flow of the discussion and the evening. I'm making room for discussion to flourish by offering a warm, safe, and comfortable environment for women have good, meaningful conversation.

Make a List of Women You'd Like to Invite

Think about the women around you that you think you would like to meet with over the course of several weeks. Do you just want some laid-back girl-time with your dear friends, where you can talk openly, vulnerably, and have discussions late into the night? Or maybe you'd like to invite some women from your neighborhood or work or children's school and get to know them. Figure out what kind of group you're looking for and then begin planning for it!

Prepare for the Group

Figure out if your book club will meet weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly. Set the dates and times and get your invitations out ahead a few weeks before you start. Think through if will provide snacks and drinks or if you want to have the women each bring something to each meeting, or you want to rotate.

Prepare the Environment

This is the fun part! Even if you don't like to clean (hello, me, Sarah), and you aren't any good at decorating (hello, me again), you can still create a warm and intimate atmosphere where women feel comfortable and loved. It's the little things, truly! Have a snack, some tea and/or coffee made, and have the living room picked up and comfy pillows around, and a candle or two lit. Let women know they can make themselves at home; let them know they can really settle in (naturally, this will take time).

Set Some Ground Rules

It's a really good idea to have some ground rules ready to share. Here are the ones I use:

- This is a safe, grace-filled place. Nothing said here gets shared with anyone else.
- If you are an extrovert and have lot's to say (that's good, God made you that way!), keep in mind the quieter women of the group and give them time and space to share (rule of thumb for me as a facilitator is to count to 30 before answering – you could always pull your talkers aside privately and ask them to try that little trick as well).
- If you disagree, do it kindly – we're all on a journey, figuring things out, and we're all in different places with different histories and wounds, so be easy with each other (Life is hard, be kind).
- Please try and be on time, and if you can't make it, just call and let me know!

Relax and Enjoy Learning/Discussing with Friends

Women like to talk, and if they feel safe, they'll talk even more. Relax and let the night unfold! Have fun, think deeply (if you're not sleep deprived with little ones), and enjoy the work that God is doing!

Want to go deeper into the themes of heartache and redemption?

Check out Sarah's Bible Study, *Psalms 40: Crying Out to the God Who Delights to Rescue Us*, at LifeWay.com/Psalms40.

My God, do not delay. - Psalm 40:17

Does God really see me? Does He really care? When life hits hard and you aren't sure what to do, it can be confusing, lonely, and seemingly hopeless. Psalm 40 is the good news that God hears our cries and delights to rescue us. In this 8-session study, examine Psalm 40, ask honest questions of yourself and the Bible, and learn how to stay faithful to God amidst painful and hard times. Trace the thread of joy and purpose that comes from delighting in the Lord and the healing that only He can bring to His children.

