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As Kingfishers Catch Fire: A Conversation On The Ways Of God Formed By The Words Of God



Synopsis

Living Out the Word Made Flesh “Sixty years ago I found myself distracted,” Eugene Peterson writes. “A chasm had developed between the way I was preaching from the pulpit and my deepest convictions on what it meant to be a pastor. And so began Peterson’s journey to live and teach a life of congruence—congruence between preaching and living, between what we do and the way we do it, between what is written in Scripture and how we live out that truth. Nothing captures the biblical foundation for this journey better than Peterson’s teachings over his twenty-nine years as a pastor. As *Kingfishers Catch Fire* offers a never-before-published collection of these teachings to anyone longing for a richer, truer spirituality. Peterson’s strikingly beautiful prose and deeply grounded insights usher us into a new understanding of how to live out the good news of the Word made flesh. This is one man’s compelling quest to discover not only how to be a pastor but how to be a human being.

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Customer Reviews

“As *Kingfishers Catch Fire* covers it all, the A to Z of Christian spirituality. It is filled with the kind of wisdom that can only come from long obedience in the same direction! It’s more than a book; it’s a gift. Thank you, Eugene!” —Mark Batterson, New York Times best-selling author of *The Circle Maker* and lead pastor of National Community Church, Washington, DC “There is no one who has done more to shape my pastoral

imagination—than Eugene Peterson. Now, through this extraordinary collection, we see how words become pastoral work. An exegete and a poet, Peterson opens up to us not only the text but its world, welcoming us to walk with Moses, David, Isaiah, Solomon, Peter, Paul, and John. And as we do, we find ourselves keeping company with Jesus. Read it devotionally; read it as a study in sacred storytelling; read it to come alive along the Jesus Way.

—Glenn Packiam, associate senior pastor, New Life Church, Colorado Springs

“Eugene Peterson is brilliant and the gift he has given the church is huge. This is a man who has the mind of a scholar paired with the heart of a grace-filled pastor. The main thing is that he loves God’s word and that is so apparent in every word that he writes.”

—Liz Curtis Higgs, best-selling author of “The Women of Easter” and Bad Girls of the Bible series

“I can hear Eugene Peterson’s warm and gravelly voice in each well-crafted chapter of *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*. I wish I could have been in a pew listening to the Word spoken for a particular time, place, and people, but reading this collection is the next best thing. Peterson’s attention to biblical texts, theological concerns, and earthy applications for real people are the same threads we find in his many books. Reading just the introduction to each section is time well spent, but I promise you won’t stop there.”

—Dan Baumgartner, senior pastor, First Presbyterian Church of Hollywood

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The result is a master class in what Scripture says about the pastoral care of souls. Peterson eschews the notions that spirituality can be pursued apart from everyday life or that it can be sought without the company of others. Instead, as he writes in a characteristic passage: “It is somewhat common among people who get interested in religion or God to get proportionately disinterested in their jobs and families, their communities and their colleagues. The more of God, the less of the human. But that is not the way God intends it. Wisdom [literature] counters this tendency by giving witness to the precious nature of human experience in all its forms, whether or not it feels or appears spiritual.” (emphasis in original).

This isn’t to deny that spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Scripture reading, and corporate worship are vital. But, Peterson is saying, unless those disciplines make us better

workers, family members, neighbors and friends, we haven't yet achieved the congruence of life to which Scripture bears witness: persons who act in God's eye what in God's eye we are, that is, "Christ who lives in [us]" (Gal. 2:20). This is not a book I would recommend to some pastors. For example, if you're looking for a book that gives you a fool-proof three-step process to _____ (whatever it is that you're trying to do), skip this one. Or if you're looking on Saturday night for a three-point sermon you can preach the next morning, don't read this. Peterson's sermons are ongoing conversations, not plug-and-play outlines. However, if you're tossed about by the winds of the times or you're tired of slapping Bible verses on business principles or if your ministry lacks congruence between the means of discipleship and the ends of Christlikeness, please read this book. It will feed your soul, and through you, the souls of your congregation. Then read it again."

•George O. Wood, *Influence Magazine* "Unlike many sermons that barely make it out of the pulpit, Peterson's soar out and draw in throughout this fantastic book. His words, written for speaking, are sure, intimate, and trustworthy. Peterson (*The Message*) admits that preaching is a "corporate act" that requires a congregation in common worship. For 29 years, he preached at the church he founded, Christ Our King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Md., and this anthology of sermons welcomes readers to join that company. He intends these 49 sermons, undated but for one, to be used in conjunction with communion. Following his gracefully instructive introductions to each chapter, Peterson preaches "in the company" of Moses, David, Isaiah, Solomon, Peter, Paul, and John of Patmos. What he says about Paul applies to him, too: he's "totally at ease in this richly expansive narrative of God's Word." Peterson mixes storytelling with exegeses, the rare sermon (on Psalm 110) with the annual, history with geography, language lessons with a skosh of mathematics, and wisdom with wit—all in tuneful, God-fed language.

•Publishers Weekly "For nearly three decades, members of Christ Our King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Md., enjoyed a rare privilege. Week by week, they listened to wordsmith Eugene Peterson preach. Over his 29 years as the congregation's founding pastor, those worshippers undoubtedly heard some of the most skillfully crafted sermons delivered in the past generation. In the process, they learned what God had to say to them as a specific group of Christ-followers in their unique context. Peterson has described the sermons as a collaborative effort—an ongoing conversation between the pastor and his people, as they collectively listened for a word from God. Those of us who did not have the opportunity to hear the sermons delivered now have access to the next-best thing. As *Kingfishers Catch Fire* collects 49 sermons—seven each grouped under

the names of Moses, David, Isaiah, Solomon, Peter, Paul and John. By Peterson's reckoning, each biblical personality offers a distinctive approach, and sermons preached in their company together help to constitute "the whole counsel of God." The sermons span his three decades at the Maryland congregation, and glimmers of the congregation's personality appear. After all, Peterson consistently refused to accept God's self-revelation simply as a set of high-flown propositions. Rather, he insisted on the Mystery of Incarnation—God taking on flesh and blood and moving into the neighborhood. And that means the church, the Body of Christ, likewise must live out its faith in the common day-to-day routines of the workplace, the home and the streets. So, the sermons seem simultaneously directed to a specific congregation in Bel Air and universally applicable to all God's people, wherever they live. And they do it with poetic sensitivity. Peterson writes: "Poetry is not the language of objective explanation but the language of imagination. It makes an image of reality in such a way as to invite our participation in it." As any reader of *The Message*—a translation of Scripture knows, Peterson has a love affair with well-chosen words. Few use language with the grace and skill he exhibits. At the same time, the sermons collected here make it clear Peterson's preaching was not mere performance art. Instead, they grew out of a pastoral sensitivity to the people in the pews. The book takes its title from a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, which Peterson reads as a series of metaphors about congruence. The poem describes the rightness and wholeness found when what one is and what one does are seamless. This collection of sermons by pastor-poet Peterson has that sense of congruence. "The Baptist Standard

Eugene H. Peterson, translator of *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, is professor emeritus of spiritual theology at Regent College, British Columbia, and the author of more than thirty books. He earned his master's degree in Semitic languages from Johns Hopkins University. He also holds several honorary doctoral degrees. In 1962, Peterson was the founding pastor of Christ Our King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Maryland, where he served for twenty-nine years before retiring in 1991. He and his wife, Jan, live in Montana.

I waited for the release of *As Kingfishers Catch Fire: A Conversation on the Ways of God Formed by the Words of God* (Waterbrook, 2017) by Eugene Peterson for many months, yet when I received it, I was reluctant to begin. There is a certain desire to savor what may be one of the final books by a favorite author. Yet ultimately, it does no good to look at a meal with admiration; one must eat.

And Kingfishers is a satisfying meal. I knew little about the book when I pre-ordered it in November. When it arrived, I was pleasantly surprised at its length, 372 pages. In the opening letter to the reader, I was also surprised to discover that the book was a collection of 49 teachings from Peterson's 29 years as a pastor. The editorial team wrote, "Throughout this definitive collection of teachings, Peterson is intentional in keeping the main idea the main idea: that we, as Christians, live lives of congruence. Put another way, that the inside matches the outside. Or as we used to hear, that we indeed practice what we preach." Congruence is a good descriptor. The 49 sermons were broken into seven parts. Each part contained seven sermons centered around the writings of Moses, David, Isaiah, Solomon (save one about Job), Peter, Paul, and John. The sermons cover the ground between Genesis 1 and the end of John's Revelation. Through his books, Peterson has reinforced several themes for me: the importance of prayer, the sacredness of the ordinary, and the beauty of the Word, expressed through words. Each of these themes found their way into the pages of Kingfishers. Although I love words, I fail to capture meaning and beauty the way Peterson so consistently does. My hope is that sharing a few of his words whets your appetite for more.

^Regarding the Sabbath--"One day a week stop what you are doing and pay attention to what God has been and is doing" (page 13).

^"We are always drifting off into the impersonal. It is easier and less demanding. But it is also demeaning and estranging. Always and everywhere in Scripture our attention is brought back to the central fact: God is a person; God makes persons; God remakes persons. A person like me" (p. 25).

^"We live in a culture that knows little or nothing of a life that listens and waits, a life that attends and adores" (p. 77).

^From my favorite chapter, The Beauty of Holiness, "Beauty is the outside and holiness is the inside of what is essentially the same thing: life full and vibrant, life God created and God blessed, life here and now" (p. 78).

^"We read and live at different speeds" (p. 158).

^"A critical question every Christian has to deal with is 'How can I best assist others to a full, mature growth in the Christian way?'" (p. 189).

^"International diplomacy takes time and careful listening. Parenting takes time and careful listening. Friendship takes time and careful listening. And Scripture takes time and careful listening" (p. 236).

^"You think religion is a matter of knowing things and doing things. It is not. It is a matter of letting God do something for you: letting Him love you, letting Him save you, letting Him bless you, letting Him command you. Your part is to look and believe, to pray and obey" (p. 291).

^"I want to know that the nitty-gritty of my life is taken seriously by the gospel, not just the state of my soul. I don't want a religion of neat little slogans about sunsets and heartthrobs. I want something practical that gets into the working parts of my life" (p. 303).

^"If Jesus makes it into our daily behavior, observers will begin to think there might be something to this after all" (p. 307).

^"In Christ we see the putting to death of self, the killing

of self-centeredness, the crucifixion of the ego" (p. 310). Once again, Peterson has instructed me in the Jesus way, showing me with thoughtful prose the beauty of Jesus and of a life lived with him.

Near the beginning of his pastorate, Eugene H. Peterson found himself tossed about by "the winds of the times." The 1960s were a tumultuous decade, and many voices "Civil Rights! Vietnam! Flower Power!" clamored for his attention. On top of that, he felt "increasingly at odds with his denominational advisors, whose ideas of leadership came "almost entirely from business and consumer models." Then three things happened. First, he realized he didn't know how to preach. What he was doing on Sunday morning was "whipping up enthusiasm for the church's programs, not preaching for the "nurturing of souls." Second, he heard a lecture by Paul Tournier, a Swiss physician, who treated patients not from a "consulting room" but from his "living room," using "words in a setting of personal relationship." In his lecture, Tournier exhibited what Peterson calls a "life of congruence, with no slippage between what he was saying and the way he was living." Third, he came across a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins "As Kingfishers Catch Fire," whose last stanza reads: I say more: the just man justices; Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces; Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places, Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his To the Father through the features of men's faces. In Hopkins's poetic vision, it is Jesus Christ who "lives and acts in us in such ways that our lives express the congruence of inside and outside, this congruence of ends and means." These three things "pulpit, lecture, poem" came together and shaped Peterson's understanding and practice of ministry, first as a pastor, then as a writer and professor. *As Kingfishers Catch Fire* is a collection of 49 sermons Peterson first preached at Christ Our King Presbyterian Church during nearly thirty years of ministry there (1962-1991). The sermons are divided into seven groups, each grouped together with the formula, "Preaching in the Company of _____," where the fill-in-the-blank is Moses (the Law), David (Psalms), Isaiah (the Prophets), Solomon (Wisdom literature), Peter (the Gospels), Paul (the Epistles), and John (the

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As Kingfishers Catch Fire is a book of 49 sermons preached at a small Presbyterian Church in Maryland. The book is divided into seven sections: 1. He Spoke and It Came to Be—Preaching in the Company of Moses; 2. All My Springs Are in You—Preaching in the Company of David; 3. Prepare the Way of the Lord—Preaching in the Company of Isaiah; 4. On Earth as It is in Heaven—Preaching in the Company of Solomon; 5. Yes and Amen and Jesus—Preaching in the Company of Peter; 6. Christ in You The Hope of Glory—Preaching in the Company of Paul; 7. In the Beginning Was the Word—Preaching in the Company of John of Patmos. Each of these 49 sermons by Dr. Eugene

Peterson translator of the Message Bible and a veteran pastor, teacher, lecturer, storyteller and servant of God is a gem! As a Presbyterian pastor of over 40 years I stand in awe and deep respectful admiration for Peterson. All of the sermons in this book are beautifully written and sound in theology and a profound love of Jesus Christ our Lord. As the book cover proclaims the book is a conversation of the ways of God formed by the words of God. Regardless of whether you are a pastor, professor, layperson or a new Christian this book will help you grow in an understanding of God, the Lord Jesus Christ and yourself! Highly recommended!

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