

REALITY FAITH



RISKING IT ALL TO SERVE GOD

In the fall 2006 issue of *Seek*, author Jeff Quick explores the phenomena of reality TV and its impact on North American culture. As he noted, reality programming encourages people to do extreme things and take risks they would never consider off-camera. What if we lived our faith that way—in an extreme manner for everyone to see? This study guide explores what it really means to risk and to live dangerously and transparently for God.

by Brian McCann

pastor-in-residence, Grantham BIC Church

Keeping it real

What we can learn from reality TV

by JEFF QUICK

➔ THE WORLDWIDE POPULARITY OF REALITY TV MAY BE ONLY A FEW YEARS OLD, BUT THE GENRE HAS BEEN AROUND as long as TV itself in the form of game shows and “gotcha” programs like Allen Funt’s “Candid Camera.”

It’s no surprise that reality TV satisfies a voyeuristic urge, but it might surprise you to know that reality TV appeals to a basic human need.

One reason we like watching people struggle (according to the ancient

safe. Nothing’s at stake. When you know you’ll cry at a movie and watch anyway, that’s catharsis. Reality TV? Chock full of catharsis.

Except reality TV is (arguably) nonfiction, so the catharsis is even sharper. You can’t turn off the squirm by rationalizing that it’s done by actors. If you see someone eating cow lips on “Fear Factor,” then *someone is eating cow lips.*

Thank the intimacy of TV. Early television performers liked to suggest that viewers invited them into their homes and formed relationships. We’re more media-savvy these days; we don’t imagine these people are our friends. Still, we see these “real” people on TV every week and want to have relationships with them.

The trouble is that TV relationships are shallow, one-sided, and, like catharsis, very safe. It’s easy to get mixed up.

Richard Hatch betrayed his tribe members on “Survivor,” but he’ll never have a chance to betray you. So it’s safe to think of him as a “villain” getting his comeuppance after he was nabbed for tax evasion last year on his million-dollar prize, right? Hooray for justice!



CBS’s “Survivor.” AP.



CBS’s “Amazing Race.” COURTESY www.realitytvmagazine.com

But wait, turn off the TV for a second. If someone you know got caught for tax

evasion, would that be fun? Reality TV participants live after we stop watching. This isn’t “safe.” Unlike fiction, there’s a lot at stake. When we treat people as characters, watching for our own purposes, it makes us users, not lovers. Bizarrely, reality TV often leads us away from reality.

But the desire to know people and really care about who they are and what they do . . . that’s real. And with good reason. Jesus—perhaps the only legitimate real-world source of catharsis, and the original reality programmer—called “loving your neighbor” our number two priority. Just as long as we keep reality real.

➔ **seeking more?** *People risk just about everything for the camera. What would you risk for your faith? Download the study guide, “Reality faith,” at www.bic-church.org/seek.*



FOX’s “American Idol.” AP

Greeks) is catharsis—a release of emotional tension brought out by tragedy. It’s



JEFF QUICK plays games for a living. If you call that living. Find him at Circle of Hope in Philadelphia, Pa.



SESSION ONE



Fear factor

DANIEL

There are two ways to risk—big and small. We often see examples of big-time risk-takers, overlooking the many examples of how to risk meaningfully in the small, ordinary tasks of life.

READ Daniel 1:1–7

Daniel and his three friends were transplants, bright kids from the Israelite upper class whom the king of Babylon chose to graft in as apprentices of empire leadership. They were given new names, new homes, and new food to eat.

1. When has someone taken you out of your comfort zone to give you an unexpected opportunity?

2. In what ways might you repay that person?

READ Daniel 1:8–16 Daniel has no objection to being trained in Administration 101, but he does have a problem with the dietary requirements.

3. What risk did Daniel take?

That's right. Daniel's risk—his extreme action—was being vegetarian. Eating only vegetables sounds normal in modern America, and it was fairly normal in the Ancient Near East, too, because it was a predominantly agricultural culture. The choice is risky because Daniel is refusing part of the king's hospitality. That's a no-no. Remember when the official says in verse 10 that he could lose his head? He's not using a metaphor. The king would be justified to cut off the official's head as punishment for not following royal orders.

4. How does Daniel take the edge off the risk, make it more tame (see verses 12–13)?

5. What are some daily tasks or habits you have that were a risk when you started them?

6. Name a few activities that you attempted for a trial period. (Maybe you tried going to a gym for a month, doing devotions at mealtime, or praying for a certain thing. You get the idea.)

Daniel doesn't just spend the entire book as a rebellious vegetable eater. Let's see what else he does.

READ Daniel 6:1–13

7. What is Daniel’s risky behavior in this passage?

“Every actual state is corrupt. Good men must not obey laws too well.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Right again. Daniel consistently prayed, and that landed him in trouble.

8. Why is Daniel’s prayer forbidden?

“I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not so desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right.”

—Henry David Thoreau

9. What has been your own prayer against the law (or at least against social rules)?

10. How did you face that situation?

READ Daniel 6:14–23

The price for Daniel’s civil disobedience was to be placed overnight in a pit full of lions. And we think the IRS and CRA are bad. There’s another risk in this passage that’s hidden between the lines. Do you see it?

“A man sits as many risks as he runs.”

—Henry David Thoreau

Daniel doesn’t run. He doesn’t hide. Daniel makes no attempt to defend himself, to get himself off the hook and spared from what looks to be an awful, grizzly death. The king tried to acquit Daniel, but Daniel did nothing. Daniel’s third big risk was to do nothing. Some people call this submission. Daniel knew he had broken the law, and he knew that he could rightly be found guilty and rightly punished.

“Ordinarily, a person leaving a courtroom with a conviction behind him would wear a somber face. But I left with a smile. I knew that I was a convicted criminal, but I was proud of my crime.”
—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Daniel trusted in God to act in more than just legal ways. God did not change the law that Daniel willingly broke; God did not prevent him from being thrown to the lions, but God did make sure that the lions didn’t harm Daniel.

11. When have you taken the risk of doing nothing? When have you taken the risk of submission?

12. When do you have to work hardest at submission instead of acting out?

Daniel embodies the risks of standing still, of standing firm. Living dangerously does not always mean taking outrageous and dire action. Sometimes, living dangerously is a matter of keeping to your daily devotions, putting in 100 percent at work, and doing what your superiors tell you. Karl Barth said that every time we pray we push back the forces of evil in the world. That’s a risk worth taking.

13. How can you take some Daniel-style risks this week? This month?

SESSION TWO



PAUL

There are two ways to risk—big and small. When we look for an example of someone who was a risk-it-big kind of person, we usually find no bigger than Paul. Paul, previously known as Saul, was an extremely vigilant Jew who played it safe at first. Our earliest record shows Paul at the edge of the Jewish mob that stoned Stephen to death, the first Christian martyr. Paul was not on Stephen's side then. Paul held the coats for the real rock-throwers, nodding his approval with every well-aimed fastball. Seeking career advancement, Paul was promoted to a persecutor of the first generation of Christians: "Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison" (Acts 8:3).

Then everything changed.

Paul saw a light, hit the ground, heard a voice, and turned his life a complete 180 degrees around. In less than a week, he went from being the Church's number one enemy to the Church's number one advocate, but that change wasn't easy. Paul had to abandon a lot of beliefs and practices that he used to think were crucial to living a real faith.

*"The important thing is this: to be able at any moment to sacrifice what we are for what we could become."
—Charles DuBois*

READ Acts 9:1–22

1. List 5–10 things that you would never want to change about your current life and faith.

*“If we listened to our intellect,
we’d never have a love affair. We’d
never have a friendship. We’d never
go into business, because we’d be
too cynical. Well, that’s nonsense.
You’ve got to jump off cliffs all
the time and build your
wings on the way down.”*
—Annie Dillard

2. Now, imagine that God told you in an unmistakable vision to cross off half of the beliefs and practices you listed. Which ones would they be? Could you do it? How would it feel to have to change so drastically and suddenly?

Paul risked big by being willing to give up his deepest-held convictions.

READ Philippians 3:4–9

3. What are some changes you had to make when you started following Christ?

4. What used to be crucial to you but now is unimportant?

5. What is now crucial to you that used to be unimportant?

The tone for Paul’s new life as a Christian was set quickly.

READ Acts 9:23–25

In this passage we see only the first of the many, many times Paul’s life would be in danger. The risk Paul took every time he spoke about Jesus was that people would kill him, but we need to remember the two sides of risk, as Paul did. When we risk, we put ourselves into a position where we might lose something, in Paul’s case, his life. However, taking a risk also creates the opportunity to gain something, in Paul’s case, new believers and the spreading of the gospel.

6. Talking about Jesus is rarely life-threatening in our country, but there are still dangers. What are some of the dangers of talking about Jesus?

7. What are some recent risks you have taken or are thinking of taking? What are the potential losses and gains from these risks?

“It is easy to follow, but it is uninteresting to do easy things. We find out about ourselves only when we take risks, when we challenge and question.”
—Magdalena Abakanowicz

Paul considered his risks to be very worthwhile. When we read about his missionary journeys in the second half of Acts, we find what sounds like a first-century action movie. Paul gets caught in a storm and shipwrecked. He’s bitten by a poisonous snake. He’s put in prison and released. He’s put in custody for his protection from people who want to kill him. He gets beaten. He is chased out of various towns. All for talking about Jesus.

READ 2 Cor. 11:23–28

Some people think that this passage should be read to people who are considering following Christ just to make sure they know what they are getting themselves into. Following Jesus is a huge risk. Paul risked bodily harm and death. He risked everything he believed. We stand to lose a lot. But we also stand to gain a lot.

8. What is the most painful thing you have had to endure as a follower of Jesus?

9. What is the richest blessing you have experienced as a follower of Jesus?

Paul endured suffering, but he also enjoyed success. He healed people from sickness. He raised the dead. He freed people from demonic possession. He brought unity to groups that had been fighting. And over all of these, Paul shared Jesus with people who did not know him, enabling them to choose life over death.

10. Name 5–10 people you know who do not believe that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of the world.

11. Commit to pray regularly for at least 3 of these people to start following Jesus. Pray for one of them now.

12. This week, call someone you know and love who does not worship Jesus and just ask what they think about him. Just ask.

Sometimes, our faith requires us to stand firm, like Daniel, and other times our faith requires us to stand out on a limb, like Paul. Jesus is with us in both of these dangers.

SESSION THREE



ESTHER

There are two ways to risk—big and small—but how do we tell the difference? How are we supposed to know when God wants us to take big chances or to risk just a little or to risk nothing at all? Esther the Bachelorette (along with her Uncle Mordecai) will help us find the answer.

Esther was one of the transplants like Daniel and Company from session one. Israel was conquered, and lots of the people were shipped over to live in Babylon. It so happened after a number of years that the Babylonian king needed a new wife, choosing the beautiful Esther over all of the women in Babylon, though he didn't know at the time that she was a Jew. Regrettably, some of the native administrators, Haman in particular, couldn't stand the presence of these Jews all over the empire, so Haman made up a law to kill all of them on the same day and got the king's approval. No conspiracies. No hidden agendas. Just, "Hey, let's kill all the Jews."

READ Esther 4:1–8

Chapter four in the Book of Esther tells how Esther discerned what her role in all of this was to be, what she needed to risk. From the start, Mordecai encourages Esther to take a leading role on behalf of her people. She is the queen, after all.

1. When have you been encouraged to spearhead an effort that you were less than enthusiastic about?

“I’m not afraid of storms, for I’m learning how to sail my ship.”
—Louisa May Alcott

2. Name an issue in your current life where you could make a huge difference if you acted decisively.

When is risk needed?

For Esther and Mordecai, it was decisively clear that they needed to do something. They were facing genocide. Even Esther, who appears hesitant, was certain that action was needed; she was merely unsure about the particular course of action to take. Their red flag appeared in the form of a royal decree posted in multiple languages in cities throughout the Babylonian Empire.

For us, red flags may be harder to see. Your job is draining the life out of you. You are a less joyful person than were a year ago. You or others are in physical danger. You or others are in spiritual danger.

3. What are some other red flags (prompts to risk-taking) that you have encountered?
4. What are some other red flags (prompts to risk-taking) that you may yet encounter?

What is the risk worth?

Depending on the risk you face, your course of action will differ, but you will need to decide early on if God wants you to take a big risk or a small one. Esther initially balks at the idea of risking her life. She agrees that something must be done, but she’s not sure the situation calls for her to lay down her ultimate trump card since there is no more extreme an action than giving up your life. Mordecai convinces Esther that she will definitely die if she refuses to see the king.

“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”
—Jesus (John 15:13)

5. Name 5–10 things that you could risk, that are less extreme than giving up your life. Put them in order from smallest to greatest.
6. List 10 things you would be willing to die for.
7. List 10 things that you are not willing to die for.

The action you will take generally takes form as you decide what the risk is worth. Mordecai realized from the start that Esther’s high position in the empire must be a unique blessing and that God may have allowed her this position for exactly the situation they were facing. Remember to keep track of your unique abilities and positions when assessing what possible actions God would want you to take.

8. What are some other possible actions Esther and Mordecai could have taken besides speaking to the king?

What does the community say?

*“There can be no vulnerability
without risk; there can be no
community without vulnerability;
there can be no peace, and
ultimately no life,
without community.”
—M. Scott Peck*

The entire risk-response system takes place in community. Community is the failsafe that makes sure we don’t take reckless risks. As Esther and Mordecai dialogue back and forth in chapter four, they each have the opportunity to persuade the other to their viewpoint. Later, when Esther organizes all the Jews to fast, she allows three days for the community to give feedback. Remember that fasting is one of the more receptive spiritual activities; that is, it helps us to hear from God more than it helps us voice our concerns to God. All the Jewish people in Babylon were fasting and listening for three days, allowing three days for God to say to any one of them, “Stop everything. Don’t see the king. Do this other thing instead.”

9. Name 5–10 people or groups you could ask to pray for you or even fast for you.

10. If you can’t name 5–10 people, seek out additional people to add to your spiritual support team. You may want to include family members, deacons, pastors, old friends, etc.

11. Whose spiritual support network are you a part of?

Risks are inherent to any meaningful life. Esther helps us to see how we can find out when we need to risk and what risks we need to make.



SESSION FOUR

LIFE: THE ULTIMATE REALITY

JESUS

When people ask me, as they occasionally do, why Jesus came to earth, I usually answer that He came to set us free in every way that people can be set free. That's the answer that makes the most sense to me from what I've seen in the world and in my own life, but sometimes I think of a different answer. Sometimes, I want to answer that Jesus came to earth to live. To live fully, dangerously, transparently. He lived fully, showing us how we can fully live.

Most reality shows focus on one part of life—work environments, owning a home, parenting, what to do when stranded in the wild and you want to be the only one who survives—but reality is not like that. Reality is not dissected or compartmentalized into neat topics and 60-minute segments. Jesus shows us what it is to be real with our entire lives.

READ Mark 1

Jesus interacted with every scope and area of human life. He spent time with the poor and the rich. He went to weddings, funerals, religious activities, and friends' homes for dinner. He visited the city, the country, the mountains, the desert, the plains, and the sea. He encountered men, women, children, natives, foreigners, sick people, healthy people, government officials, religious officials, prostitutes, farmers, and local businessmen.

1. List the various places and people Jesus interacts with in Mark 1.

2. What areas of life and variety of people have you encountered in the last month?

READ John 11:17–44
& Mark 11:12–19

When Jesus was sad, He wept. When he was angry, He shouted. When He saw wrongdoing, He righted it. Jesus lived His life fully. There was no aspect of His emotions or sense of fairness or religious life that was out-of-bounds. He refused to hold back. He took risks.

3. What areas of your life are fully alive?

4. In what areas of your life are you holding back, not living to the fullest potential?

*“I came so that they might have life, and have it to the full.” —Jesus
(John 10:10)*

One of the things I love about Jesus is His regard for people who disagreed with Him. We all know that Jesus spent time hanging out with sinners and tax collectors, people having the social status of drug dealers and bookies, but we usually overlook the fact that He never sent his attackers away. He never told those pesky Pharisees and Sadducees and Herodians to hit the road. He saw them coming through the crowd. He didn't back down, and He didn't chase them away.

READ Mark 12:13–27

Jesus answered the questions His opponents posed, and He was often stern with them, but He refused to chase away his naysayers for two main reasons. First, he loved them. He was hoping all the while they interrogated Him that they would have their questions truly answered, that they would come to see the truth. Jesus wanted them to join Him. Second, the real world includes critics. Jesus was never trying to set up some temporary utopia. He knew that critics and skeptics play an important part in life, a real part. To hide from scoffers would be to live in an unreal world, and Jesus refused to do that.

“To fly, we have to have resistance.”
—Maya Lin

5. Who often criticizes you? How can you treat them more as Jesus treated his critics?

6. Who do you criticize? How can you critique them more as Jesus critiqued his opponents?

Jesus knew who his enemies were, but he also knew who his allies were.

READ Mark 3:13–35

Jesus had an inner circle to live life with. He had disciples who traveled with Him and ate with him, friends who He talked with and taught and fed. Jesus had a close family around Him. His definition for the family was different than the one we often use today. He considered anyone who followed God’s will to be His family member, which was then a far stronger bond than it is in modern-day North America.

7. Who is in your family? Who do you truly share life with?

8. Who could be in your family? Who could you reach out to and offer a place in your circle? (Remember that it takes risks to make friends and to be in a family.)

9. What risks can you take on behalf of your family (maybe committing to spend time with them, fast for them, sacrifice for them)?

10. Name 5–10 things you could do to increase the vitality—the liveliness—of your life with your real family.

There are two ways to risk—big and small. We need to know when and how to take those risks, and we need to acknowledge that risks are an important and unquestionable part of any meaningful life. Most of us like safety. We try to find homes that are well-situated. We put lightning rods on the chimney. We buy flood and fire insurance. We try to make things as secure as possible.

Unfortunately, safety is an illusion. Anytime you're in a position where you might lose something, you're at risk. Given the condition of the world, this means that we are at risk every moment of our lives. That's not scary. That's a fact. Since we don't want to lose anything, we generally take as few risks as possible; we play it safe. We don't extend anything that might result in a loss to us. So, we play it safe, we stay in our shell. We don't extend anything, so we don't lose anything, but we don't gain anything either. When we live this way, we rob ourselves and others.

Risk also always involves the potential for gain. Yes, we may lose something, but we might gain something instead. Jesus shows us that life without risk or danger is barely worth living. He actively participated in life with every part of his being, showing us the full potential that we too can have when we trust him and take risks. Jesus lived fully, dangerously, transparently. And we can, too.

“Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing”.
—Helen Keller

11. Write a prayer to Jesus asking him to be with you and guide into the risks that will make your life truly meaningful to yourself, to him, and to the world around you.



Produced by the Brethren in Christ Church
Office of Communications
431 Grantham Road
PO Box A
Grantham, PA 17027
www.bic-church.org
biccomm@messiah.edu

