

the twilight gospel

Discussion Guide

Introduction

Stephanie Meyer's best-selling vampire saga needs proper scrutiny. These books are getting even more popular as the movies hit theaters and are quickly fascinating the minds of young adults all over the world. The spirituality and worldview they present, however, do not sit easily with orthodox Christianity. What values and ideas do Meyer's novels promote? What is good about them? And what deserves closer inspection?

This discussion guide walks you through Dave Roberts' analysis of the *Twilight* worldview as presented in his book *The Twilight Gospel*. This guide is organized into six sessions. Each session gives you a summary of a chapter in Roberts' book, an activity and follow-up questions to introduce the topic you will be discussing, and application questions that will help you and your students dig in and see what the Bible says about issues such as self-image, materialism, sexuality, and more.

The follow-up questions you'll find in this guide assume that your students are very familiar with the plot and characters of the *Twilight Saga*. While *The Twilight Gospel* will help you familiarize yourself with these plots, it's recommended that you take time to peruse the books and movies to get a better understanding of what you'll be discussing. If you have kids who aren't familiar with the details, consider reading a short excerpt from one of the books or showing a short clip from one of the movies between the activity and follow-up questions to get everyone on the same page.

As you prepare to jump into the questions, remind your kids that a healthy discussion means being respectful of other people's views. That includes being willing to listen and fighting the urge to interrupt. Encourage everyone to participate in the discussion. Know that there may be times of silence, especially when students really need to think through the issues. When possible, encourage students to dig deeper so they can form their own perspectives. If necessary, you can reword a question to help students respond to the issue in another way.

The central point of *The Twilight Gospel* and of this discussion guide is to help teens discern what is excellent from what is unhealthy, helping to create robust, shrewd, and literate young adults. These activities and discussion starters will give you a place to start, but there are many more ways to continue the conversation. For more inspiration, there are four books that are packaged with some others, have sold far more than 70 million, and can teach you and your students even more about the worldviews and themes presented in the *Twilight Saga*. Go to www.biblegateway.com and search for Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. You'll find epic tales of love, countercultural compassion, political defiance, simple living, and a humble spiritual power.

Good luck on your journey through the *Twilight Saga*!

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Session #1

Let's Talk About Vampires

A Discussion on Life and Death

Summary (Introduction through Chapter 2):

You may be using this discussion guide for a number of reasons. But whether you're a parent or youth worker (or both), you probably already know that there's a new culture growing in the hearts and minds of your kids and students—the **culture of enchantment**. Strong heroes and beautiful princesses are a thing of the past. Today, young adults are reading about (and relating to) wizards, warlocks, and vampires. And there's no sign this trend is going to let up anytime soon. The *Twilight* books have become a publishing phenomenon, with sales in excess of 70 million, solidifying its fan base alongside those of *Harry Potter* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Fiction obviously has power. But how much? And how do we help our kids see the line between fantasy and reality?

As we take a closer look at this vampire saga, we need to understand a few things: first, there is a long history that has set up the vampire myth; second, such history makes the myth more acceptable so the popular imagination does not revolt against new storylines that convey supernatural themes and moral exploration; third, this mythical world strongly overlaps our own and therefore requires us to look more searchingly at love and life, death and conflict, teen angst and identity, religion and spirituality. But perhaps the most important thing we need to understand is that any discussion of a supernatural element will always need to be accepted **through the lens of faith**.

Learning from stories is an ancient aspect of our culture. Two thousand years ago Jesus held large crowds spellbound as he painted rich word-pictures with his parables and proverbs, imparting truth through story. **Today, we lean on his example to examine popular culture through the eyes of Christian thought in order to help our kids understand, respond, and make good choices.**

Activity:

Give each of your students a sheet of white 8.5 x 11 paper and a marker. Ask them to write a description or draw a picture of how they perceive a vampire. Give them ten minutes to complete their image and then take turns to present, discuss, and interpret each other's drawings.

Follow-Up Questions:

1. Now that we've shared our ideas of vampires, let's discuss where those ideas came from. When is the first time you heard of vampires? How were they portrayed?
2. Does popular culture portray vampires any differently today?
3. How are vampires presented in the *Twilight Saga*? Are the Cullens typical vampires according to what culture and myth say vampires should be? How are they typical? Atypical?

4. Why do you think so many people are attracted to the idea of vampires?
5. One of the defining characteristics of vampires is the idea that they have cheated death. In *Twilight*, Edward was given **another chance at life** and then spends the majority of his time trying to figure out who he really is. Did Edward's brush with death change him? Why or why not?

Application Questions:

1. Read Psalm 18:4–6. Do you worry about dying? Why or why not? Why might people fear death?
2. Read Matthew 5:1–12 (the Beatitudes). Why do you think Jesus highlights the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek...? What does Jesus promise them?
3. What do the Beatitudes say about how Jesus intended life to be lived? Will it be easy? Will you always be happy?
4. Reread verses 3 and 10. What is the reward for living according to Jesus' teachings?
5. Read John 14:6. What does Jesus say he is? What is the reward for living in him?
6. **Living a Christian life isn't necessarily easy, but we believe Jesus is THE way to eternal life and eternal happiness with the Father.** What are some simple things we can do every day to demonstrate who we are and what we believe?

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Session #2

Looking in the Mirror

A Discussion on Self-image

Summary (Chapter 3):

Bella is clumsy and supremely awkward. Her clumsiness is a key aspect of her self-image as well as a key aspect to our understanding of her character throughout the story. But more importantly, **her insecurity is very identifiable for the teen reader**. Finding the solution in becoming a vampire, however, is deeply unsatisfactory and brings a real tension for the reader who identifies with Bella's wounded emotions. Moreover, because Bella is perceived as the innocent in the story, readers are less likely to react against her negative self-image or her judgmental attitude toward other "plain" outsiders.

Adolescent awkwardness is not uncommon or unnoticed. Society views beauty as the key to general success as well as establishing a dating relationship and that's exactly how it's portrayed in the *Twilight Saga*. If we are to applaud the series, as we should, for believing that **evil must be resisted and goodness should be rewarded**, we will also have to **ask some hard questions about its understanding of beauty, its slavish admiration of perfection, and the nature of social exclusion**.

Activity:

Give each of your students a 3 x 5 card and a marker. Ask everyone to write a statement about beauty and self-worth, either what they believe or what culture tells them to believe. Give the groups 10 minutes to brainstorm and then collect all the cards. You may give them some examples to get started and/or add your own to the collection:

- Everyone wants to be beautiful.
- Most people don't see themselves as beautiful.
- Guys act differently around their friends than they do around their girlfriends.
- Guys have body image issues too.
- Girls aspire to be the woman they see in their fashion magazines.
- Make-up makes you pretty.
- Guys are only attracted to pretty girls.

After you collect all the cards, put them in a bowl and draw them out one by one, reading the statement out loud. Take time to discuss whether or not the statement is true according to culture's definition of beauty and according to a Christian definition of beauty.

Follow-Up Questions:

1. Does Bella have a positive or negative **self-image**? What about Edward? What are some examples from the book/movie that show how they view themselves?

2. How do the characters views of self-worth affect their relationships with the other characters?
3. Does Bella's or Edward's self-image ever change? If so, when? Why?
4. Which character do you identify with the most? Why?
5. Do you think most kids your age show who they really are?

Application Questions:

1. Read Genesis 1:27. What do you think it means to be **created in God's image**? If God created us in his own image, why do we have feelings of negative self-worth? What factors affect how you feel about yourself? How much does peer pressure affect the way you think about yourself?
2. Read Mark 9:42–47. How do you think God views peer pressure? Read Proverbs 27:20. Do you agree? Do either of these verses change how you feel about peer pressure?
3. Read Proverbs 31:30. What does this verse say about beauty? Why do we try so hard to be beautiful?
4. Read 1 Peter 3:3–4. **Where should beauty come from?** Why is it so hard to achieve inner beauty?
5. What are some practical things we can do to see ourselves the way God sees us?
6. Think about how Jesus treated outsiders—the leper, the tax collector Zacchaeus, etc. **Think of a specific person in your life who is different, not accepted. What can you do to reach out to that person?**

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Session #3:

Stuff, Stuff, and More Stuff

A Discussion on Materialism

Summary (Chapter 4):

Alice is a key person in Bella's life. She's the first to accept Bella into the Cullen world and consistently appears with Bella at key points in the storyline. But there is a bump in the road when it comes to this likeable character—her view of stuff. She supports the family by cheating the stock market and then uses her ill-gotten gains to outfit her loved ones with only the best cars, clothes, and accessories . . . and then she discards them without a second glance. Her motto seems to be: *If you can have it, you should.*

Unfortunately *Twilight* reinforces Alice's choices by not delivering a strong character to object to her ostentatious lifestyle. **The problem arises when one's sense of worth and well-being is closely attuned to one's ability to possess things** that will signify that you are someone who "belongs" and hence worthy of admiration. Given the fact that *Twilight* readily references the Christian story, it is fair to **examine the biblical narrative** for its ideas on the issues *Twilight* raises, including a biblical picture of wealth. While there is certainly a celebration of beauty and wealth in the biblical narrative, there are also warnings of the snares involved with having wealth as well as exhortations to be just in the midst of acquiring wealth. Overall the Bible points to **having a balance** when dealing with money and wealth.

Activity:

Put out huge piles of trash paper balls (enough for each team of students) and place trash cans opposite each set of paper balls. Be sure that the teams aren't going in the same direction so they can't really see what the other teams are up to. Split up your students into small teams. Explain to the students that they need to "clean up" their designated areas by bringing the trash to the trash can and the first team to complete the project will win a prize. Tie the hands and feet of all the team members together. While you're tying hands quietly tell one of the teams to move their trash can right next to their pile so they can finish more quickly (make sure their trash can is small enough to move). Tell the teams to go. The team who moved the trash can should win . . . to the outcry of the rest of the students. When they do, explain that you instructed the one team to move the can. Reset the game and play it right (assuring the students that you won't cheat again). Be sure to give a prize to ALL the students for being good sports.

Follow-Up Questions:

1. How did you feel when the one team got extra help in the game?
2. How does Alice "earn" her money? How do you think her cheating of the system affects other people?
3. How does Alice view **money and wealth**? Do any of the other characters differ greatly in their view? How?

4. Even though Bella doesn't celebrate Alice's choices, does she say anything against them? What could she have done to help curb Alice's imbalanced view of money?
5. Does the Cullen wealth earn them a higher position in society? Is that okay?

Application Questions:

1. The Bible makes it clear that it's our job to be responsible in *how* we obtain wealth and stuff.
 - a. Read James 5:1–6 and Micah 6:10–13. Micah 6:10 in *The Message* says, “Do you expect me to overlook obscene wealth you've piled up by cheating and fraud?” How will God deal with those who have gained money unfairly? Why **do you think God punishes cheating?**
 - b. Read Proverbs 22:7. What is the Bible's view of borrowing money? What does that mean for credit cards or other forms of debt?
2. What we do with our money once we've earned it is also important. Read Psalm 37:21–22 and Luke 12:16–21. What will happen to those who hoard money? What do they have at the end of their lives?
3. Do you think there **is anything wrong with being rich?** Why or why not?
4. Read Luke 18:25. Why do you think it is difficult for a rich person to have strong faith? There are examples of wealthy people who do have strong faith—Abraham, Job, Solomon, Cornelius, and Lydia (from Acts).
 - a. How do these men and women of faith use their money differently than those God condemns? Read Deuteronomy 15:10, Ps. 112:5, and Acts 10:1–2.
 - b. Read 1 Chronicles 29:14 to discover why we should give generously.
 - c. What happens when we are generous? Read 2 Corinthians 9:6–7.
 - d. You may not have a lot of money to give away . . . so how can you be generous?
5. Should being wealthy and having the best things change how we view ourselves or how others view us? Read James 2:1–7 to find God's view on how people with and without money should be treated.
6. **Take a few minutes to think about how you handle money.** How do you earn your money? Are others affected negatively by it? How do you spend your money? Are you generous or do you hoard money and stuff, always going after the newest and greatest thing?

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Session #4:

"The" Talk

A Discussion on Sexuality

Summary (Chapter 5):

At first glance Bella and Edward seem to be the model of restraint and morality as a young couple. Edward especially shows that **his love for Bella is genuine**, not simple lust. However his choice to not have sex with Bella is simple pragmatics—he's afraid he'll physically hurt her with his super human strength—rather than moral conviction. As for Bella, though she does seem to genuinely love Edward, she is not afraid to toy with Jacob and later attempt to undermine Edward's self-control. She lives in the moment with little regard to the future.

Unfortunately, Stephanie Meyer (a practicing Mormon) misses an opportunity to show **a healthy, biblical view of sex**—namely, that it is good within the bounds of marriage. Instead she uses erotic passages that describe almost orgasmic states that will linger in the imagination of the reader for a long time. The underlying message of the series is: Go by your feelings, not by a wider, wiser value system.

Activity:

Divide your students into guys and girls. Give each group a stack of 3 x 5 cards and some markers. Ask them to imagine their ideal spouse (fun, happy, quiet, pretty, strong, etc.) and then have them write down those characteristics, one on each card. Collect all the cards, shuffle them, then form them into a deck. Form each group into a line and alternately have each student come and pick up one card from the top of the deck and return to their place in line, displaying the characteristic they chose. Know that since the cards have been shuffled, the characteristics are no longer separated by gender so guys may end up with cards the girls wrote and vice versa. When all the characteristics are displayed, go down the line of each group and read them aloud. Briefly discuss the difference between the cards each group wrote and the cards they each ended up with. If the cards in each line, put together, represented their spouse, how did that spouse change from the ideal spouse they created before? Is the new spouse more intriguing or less? What makes the perfect spouse?

Follow-Up Questions:

1. How does Edward show that he loves and cares for Bella? How does Bella show Edward?
2. How does Bella view sex? Bella sees beauty as the key to life. Does that view affect how she sees sex?
3. Describe Bella and Jacob's relationship. Why does she interact with him the way she does?
4. How do your friends at school view dating and sex?

Application Questions:

1. There are several **amazing love stories in the Bible**. Two of the most cited are Adam and Eve and Solomon and his beloved. So let's look at them to get an idea of how Scripture looks at **love and sex**.
 - a. Read Genesis 2:24–25. God made man and woman to be together. Are we to be embarrassed or shameful about it?
 - b. Check out Song of Solomon 1:2–4. How does the beloved view sex? There's a reason sex has appeal. **God made it that way!**
 - c. Read Song of Solomon 4:1–10. How does Solomon view his beloved? Read Song of Solomon 2:16 and 5:8–16. How does the beloved view Solomon?
2. But the Bible is clear that playing with sex outside of marriage is not wise.
 - a. What are **the boundaries God asks us to have** in regards to sex? Get a hint from First Thessalonians 4:3–4.
 - b. Read Genesis 2:24–25. What is the order of events before sex? Now look at Mark 10:6–9. What does “one flesh” mean? What happens emotionally and spiritually when we have sex? How does this view of sex affect those with multiple partners?
 - c. Sex is unequivocally tied to love. Read John 15:12–13 and 1 Corinthians 13:4–8. What is the Bible's definition of love? What does that mean for sex?
 - d. What does Matthew 5:28 suggest about our thoughts in regards to sex?
3. Think back to your list of **qualities for the perfect spouse**. Is there anything you'd like to add or change now? Research and psychology show that we tend to attract people similar to us. So if you want your perfect spouse, you need to ask if *you* show the characteristics you've listed. What steps can you take in your life right now that will put you **on the path to finding and becoming the ideal spouse you've described**? Setting guidelines today will help keep your dreams alive for tomorrow.

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Session #5:

Superman and Superwoman

A Discussion on Supernatural Powers

Summary (Chapter 6):

The vampires and werewolves of the *Twilight Saga* have **supernatural gifts**. From reading minds to causing intense pain to influencing emotions, the extra-ordinary, elite groups have awakened their latent, yet apparently natural human abilities and trained themselves to perform amazing feats. Far from just a fantasy plot line, **the idea of these types of gifts is quite prevalent in today's society**. The ideas presented by Stephanie Meyer, Dan Brown, and others like them suggest that you too can train your mind to activate the sleeping ability within you. From there, becoming a god—perhaps just like Jesus—is merely a small step away.

Mainstream Christianity does contain the idea of “special gifting”—**we know them as spiritual gifts. But the Bible is clear that these gifts are given solely in connection to a relationship with Jesus** (not a part of our forgotten human abilities) and also available to anyone (as seen in Jesus’ ministry to anyone). If an ability is exercised by a non-believer, the Bible infers that it is the work of demons or angels.

Activity:

Divide your students into groups of four or five. Ask the students which fictional hero (Edward, Superman, Wonder Woman, Batman, Claire Bennett, the Hulk, etc.) they would want to bring to life to save the real world.

Then have them act out a quick skit illustrating this hero saving someone in his or her classic style. After each group has acted out their hero, discuss which hero might do the most good . . . or the most harm. Then have your students think about their ideal superhero. Is the hero super strong, super fast, etc.? What are his or her weaknesses?

Follow-Up Questions:

1. Which, if any, of the **superpowers** represented in the books would you want to have? Why?
2. Are there any of the powers you would not want? Which ones? Why?
3. How does having a superpower affect each of the main characters? How does it change their relationships, their actions, and their lives in general?
4. **What temptations or problems do their powers bring** that they wouldn't struggle with otherwise?
5. What have these characters given up to “liberate” their superhuman abilities?

Application Questions:

1. Read Genesis 3:1–5. The desire to be a god (rather than to be *like* God) is a **strong temptation**. Why would someone want to be a god? Why would we not want them to be God? What is the difference between being like God and wanting to be a god?
2. According to Acts 16:16–19, can people have supernatural power? How? What does this say about those who do not have a relationship with Christ, but exhibit powers?
3. Read 1 Corinthians 12:4–11, 28 and Romans 12:6–7. What are some of the spiritual gifts suggested in Scripture? **Do you know what your spiritual gifts are?** If not, try taking a spiritual gifts inventory. If your church has one available, take that one. Otherwise you can use one of the many free inventories online. How do you or can you use your gifts?
4. Read Ephesians 4:7–13 and 1 Peter 4:10. Why are Christians given spiritual gifts? How are we to use them? How is that different than how the characters from the *Twilight Saga* use their gifts?

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Session #6:

Is There Hope for My Soul?

A Discussion on Right and Wrong

Summary (Chapters 7-8):

From discussions about creation to ideas on forgiveness and moral restraint, there is a considerable amount of **moral language** that is central to the story and characters found in the *Twilight Saga*. Carlisle is a deeply moral man, Bella appears to be amoral, and Edward struggles with where he fits in.

Since the Bible doesn't support the idea of werewolves, zombies, or vampires, there really can't be an intelligent discussion on the final destination of them for eternity. However **Stephanie Meyer does not shy away from discussing God in relation to her characters**. The one thing that rings sure is that their salvation seems to largely rely on their moral character—they seem to think they can earn it (Carlisle's commitment to dignity, tolerance, and forgiveness vs. Edward's rebellious stage where he murdered "evil" men). Meyer has made it clear in interviews that her characters (as well as us) have free will and that free will determines their ultimate destination. No matter what they are, they can always choose something else. But the characters—while they discuss free will—live as if fates, destiny, and the irresistible will of an unseen power are in charge. And thus, Meyer opens a welcome debate about **personal responsibility**.

Activity:

Prepare a set of statements, some that are "right" and some that are "wrong." These could be statements like, "school is spelled s-k-o-o-l," "murder is wrong," "it is not okay to copy your friend on the new song you downloaded," "my nose is green," or "it's okay to cheat on a test if the teacher is really hard."

Put two chairs (or mats) labeled "right" and "wrong" at the front. Divide the class into two groups. Read a statement out loud. One person from each group must race to the appropriate chair (or mat)—the "right" chair if the statement is right or the "wrong" chair if the statement is wrong. The person who makes it to the correct chair (or mat) first wins two points for his/her team. If the statement is false, the winning team can correct the statement for one point. If they cannot do this, then the other team can try to correct the statement for one point. The winning team is the team with the most points.

Follow-Up Questions:

1. What would Carlisle say it meant to lead a **moral life**? What would Edward say?
2. How does Carlisle's view of morality affect how he lives his life? And Edward's?
3. Where do Carlisle's ideas about morality come from?
4. What are **the differences between free will and fate**? How do Carlisle, Edward, and Bella view these concepts?

Application Questions:

1. What does our culture (your friends, television, popular books, etc.) say it means to be moral? **How do they determine right from wrong?** Why might they believe someone should be moral? Are there moral absolutes (things that are wrong or right no matter what)? What might some of those things be?
2. Read Mark 10:17–31. What does the Bible say about leading a good, moral life? Look at Matthew 22:36–39 for a concise summary of the commandments.
 - a. But does being good (obeying the commandments and giving away our money) earn anyone heaven? Read Ephesians 2:8–9 to see what the Bible says.
 - b. If you’ve become a Christian, are you done or does God expect more? Read James 2:14–18 and 26. Why do you suppose God leaves us on earth after we’ve decided to follow him?
 - c. Ephesians 2:10 gives a hint as to *why* Christians should still live good lives. Do you have any other thoughts as to why Christians should live moral lives?
 - d. Summarize what the Bible says about “being good” versus having faith. What does this mean for **how you live your life**?
 - e. So what does it mean to be **a follower of Jesus**? How do people know what you are?
3. On a scale of one to ten (one being no control and ten being total control), how much control do you think God maintains on the world versus giving each of us free will to do as we choose in every matter? Can we change our fate?