READING GROUP GUIDE

# BLESSED ARE THE OBEDIENT

A MEMOIR OF ABUSE IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND, AND THE LONG ROAD BACK

SAM HOLLOWAY

*Notes and discussion questions for book clubs, reading groups and anyone reading the book with others.*

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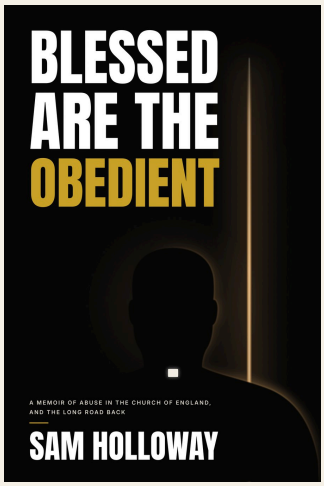
# ABOUT THE BOOK

In 1996, a quiet, polite boy moves with his family to a village in the north of England. On Christmas Eve they go to church. The next day, the vicar comes round for tea.

Father Hale is clever, kind and admired by everyone. He makes the boy an altar server, has a seat made just for him beside the altar, takes him on days out and weekends away, and teaches him the most important lesson of all: good boys do as they are told.

For four years, the boy says nothing. For twenty-seven years, the man he becomes says nothing either.

*Blessed Are the Obedient* is the true story of how a trusted priest groomed and abused a child in plain sight, of a Church that protected itself, and of the long silence that followed. It is also the story of what happened when that silence finally broke: an extraordinary therapist, a girlfriend who stayed, and a man learning, slowly, that he can trust people again.




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Kindle eBook, paperback and hardback

# BEFORE YOU BEGIN

> **A note on content.** This book describes the grooming and sexual abuse of a child, and its effects on mental health over many years. It never describes the abuse in graphic detail, but some passages are very hard to read. Some people in your group may have their own experience of abuse, and may not have told anyone.

### Looking after your group

- Agree at the start that nobody has to share anything personal, and that anything personal that is shared stays in the room.
- Let people know they can skip a question, take a break or leave at any time, without explaining why.
- Talk about the book, the characters and the ideas. Nobody should be asked about their own experiences.
- Have the support details at the end of this guide to hand, and mention them before you finish.

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The questions follow the book's six parts, so groups reading it over several meetings can use one section at a time. The final section looks at the book as a whole. You don't need to cover every question: choose the ones that suit your group, or let the conversation lead.

## PART ONE BEFORE

Prologue and chapters 1 to 5

1. The book opens in the present day, with the author awake before dawn and walking in the dark. Why do you think he chose to begin here, rather than in 1996? How did knowing that he survived change the way you read what followed?
2. The boy's story is told in the present tense, through the eyes of a ten-year-old, while the adult author looks back in the past tense. What did the child's voice let you see that the boy himself could not? How do the two voices work together?
3. "I want you to see what he took," the author says, before introducing Danny. Why do you think the chapters about Danny, football stickers and family Christmases matter so much to the book?
4. The family moves to the village wanting to belong. What did the church offer the boy's mum, his dad and the boy himself?

## PART TWO THE GROOMING

Chapters 6 to 11

5. Father Hale gives the boy robes made to measure, a seat of his own beside the altar, days out, pound coins and lessons in Latin, saints and Norman arches. Which of these felt most like kindness? When did you first sense that something was wrong?
6. Grooming is aimed at the adults around a child as much as at the child. How does Father Hale win the trust of the boy's parents and the village?
7. "Secrets start small," the author writes. How does Father Hale use small secrets to prepare for bigger ones? Why is secrecy so powerful for a child?
8. The title comes from a lesson the boy is taught: good boys do as they are told. Where do you see obedience treated as a virtue in the book, and how is it turned against him?

## PART THREE CONTROL

Chapters 12 to 22

9 The abuse is never described in graphic detail. It is shown through feeling, sound and what comes after. How did that choice affect you as a reader?

10 "There was one adult who nearly saw." What did Mrs Pickering notice, and what do you think stopped her, or anyone else, from acting? What makes it so hard for adults to act on a feeling that something is wrong?

11 In "Nine Weekends", the author describes how his memories of the retreats folded into one long night. What does the book show about how trauma affects memory?

12 By the time he is twelve, the boy says, his whole week has a shape, and the shape is Sunday. How does the book convey what it is like to live a double life as a child?

## PART FOUR SILENCE

Chapters 23 to 31

13 "There's no last time, not one I can point to." Why does the lack of a clear ending matter to the author? What did he carry with him into "the lost years"?

14 The author writes about Toby, a younger boy, whom he has thought about "almost every day for twenty-six years". Why do you think he chose to include Toby's story, and his own complicated feelings about it?

15 In "Mum and Dad", the author explains why he doesn't blame his parents. How did you feel about the adults in his life as you read? Did your view change?

16 In "What the Church Knew", Father Hale steps down after the bishop intervenes, and nobody is charged. How did you respond to the way the Church and the community reacted?

## PART FIVE SPEAKING

Chapters 32 to 34

17 The author says it out loud for the first time to a stranger, on a phone call, and then waits seven weeks for therapy. Why might it be easier to tell a stranger first? What does "The Waiting" show about what happens after someone speaks up?

18 He waits nearly a year before telling his girlfriend. What made it so hard, and what made it possible in the end?

## PART SIX RECOVERY

Chapters 35 to 46, epilogue and afterword

**19** Recovery in the book involves EMDR, homework, breathing exercises and slowly going back to places he had avoided. Which parts surprised you? What did you learn about therapy for trauma?

**20** "I'd like to end the recovery part of this book with 'and then I was fine', and a sunset. I'm not fine." Why do you think the author was so determined to be honest about setbacks?

**21** In "Small Hands", the author writes about the fear that survivors will be seen as dangerous to children, and says plainly that this isn't true. Why do you think he included this chapter?

**22** What did you make of "A Letter I Won't Send"? What does it give the author, and what does it tell us about the man the boy has become?

**23** The book ends with a letter to his ten-year-old self, and an afterword about what has changed and what still needs to. Which of the changes he calls for feel most important to you?

## THE WHOLE BOOK LOOKING BACK

**24** How does the book separate, or not separate, faith, the Church as an institution and the man who abused his position in it?

**25** The author writes under a pen name, and names and places have been changed. How did that affect your reading? Why might anonymity matter to survivors who tell their stories?

**26** One line in the book is "People can't help if they don't know." What could families, schools, churches and communities do to make it easier for children to tell someone?

**27** Has reading this book changed the way you think about trust, authority or obedience?

# IF YOU NEED SUPPORT

If anything in this book has affected you, you don't have to deal with it alone. These services are free and confidential, and it doesn't matter how long ago something happened.

### In the UK

**Emergency:** 999

**NAPAC** (adult survivors of childhood abuse): 0808 801 0331

**SurvivorsUK** (men and boys): 0808 801 0332

**NSPCC** (worried about a child): 0808 800 5000

**Samaritans** (any time): 116 123

### In the US

**Emergency:** 911

**988 Lifeline** (call or text, any time): 988

**RAINN** (sexual assault hotline): 800-656-4673

**Childhelp** (child abuse hotline): 800-422-4453

**SNAP** (survivors of clergy abuse): 877-762-7432

Support in other countries where the book is sold is listed at **sam-holloway.co.uk/help**, and **findahelpline.com** lists free helplines around the world. Numbers were checked in November 2026.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sam Holloway is the pen name of a British author. When he was ten, the much-loved vicar of his village in the north of England made him an altar server, then groomed and abused him for four years. He told no one for twenty-seven years.

*Blessed Are the Obedient* is his account of that childhood, of a Church that protected itself, and of what happened when the silence finally broke. He writes anonymously to protect his own privacy and that of others. Names, places and other identifying details in the book have been changed.

# USING THIS GUIDE

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