

STUDY
QUESTIONS
FOR...

CALVARY CASINO



by Mark S. Haskett

1 Since gambling is considered sinful by many religious traditions, how does Reverend Jimmy justify his Christian-themed casino? Do you think his reasons are sound, religiously or otherwise?

2 Levi Talbot, Rev. Jimmy's older step-brother, is a detective for Las Vegas Metro's Homicide Bureau. In what ways are the brother's jobs similar? How are they different?

3 Though we never learn the exact circumstances, it's clear Rev. Jimmy's previous ministry was brought down by a scandal involving financial (and possibly sexual) improprieties. Why do you think some people in powerful positions – most often men, and in some cases respected religious leaders – are ensnared by such scandals? How willing would you be to forgive those involved, and on what basis?

4 Gambling is only one reason Las Vegas has earned the moniker, "Sin City." The availability of so-called "escort services" is another. Is Levi justified in fearing that religious fervor is responsible for the latest string of murders targeting escorts/prostitutes? In a larger context, how does religion sometimes incite or excuse violence against "sinners"?

5 Bret Luchessi appears early in our story to be part of a conspiracy to rid the gambling community of its most recent – and most unwelcome – member, Calvary Casino. How does his character unfold in the course of the novel, and is it possible to feel any sympathy for him?

6 Beginning with the novel's first chapter, it's clear the Talbot brothers are estranged from one another. Which brother seems to be most responsible? What are the circumstances that bring them together after decades of separation, and does this constitute a reconciliation? What preconditions must be present for the Talbots, or any two parties, to be reconciled?

7 Rev. Jimmy's office manager/secretary, Meredith, becomes a new cause for conflict between the brothers. Why? What role does Meredith play in their renewed, if still rocky, relationship? Do you think her admiration for Rev. Jimmy blinds her to his personal flaws? Does she see any flaws in Levi's character?

8 Both Rev. Jimmy and Levi are devoted to their respective "missions," to the point of being unwilling or unable to step back from them. How is this point made in the novel? How do either of them manage to "blow off steam"? Is there a psychological or practical basis for taking time off to rest, and how is this characterized in religious terminology?

9 Nadine, the ex-cop owner of "Billie's Club," provides some relief – and not only the "comic" variety – for Levi's stressful lifestyle. In what ways does she help Levi, both in his investigation and personally?

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10 What do we know of Levi’s wife Brenda and daughter Molly, both of whom are also in some sense “estranged”? What are the reasons for their separation from Levi? Are there any special challenges to raising children in Las Vegas that don’t exist in towns and cities elsewhere?

11 What does Calvary Casino symbolize about the direction religion has taken in recent decades? How does Rev. Jimmy characterize the problems religion faces in American society? His own solution offers one way of highlighting the Christian message; but at what point does the medium begin to erode or even contradict that message?

12 How does reporter Frank Mathis figure into the evolving storylines related to both the bomb threat and prostitute murders? What are the challenges his newspaper faces – and today’s news media face – that may be at least as revolutionary as those confronting religion?

13 How does Rev. Jimmy use the same newspaper headlines that threaten to bring down Calvary Casino as a means to increase his “business” beyond the level he enjoyed *before* the news broke... twice?

14 Describe the horrific event that drove the young Talbot brothers apart decades ago. Did Jimmy’s and Levi’s religious backgrounds even then play a role in their estrangement? How might that event have affected their career choices?

15 How does Meredith’s description of the pivotal crisis in her own life contribute to Levi’s understanding of his brother – and to Levi’s revelation about who is behind the murders? How could Meredith’s decision to carry a child conceived through rape, as Rev. Jimmy counseled her to do, be the best way for her to move forward in life?

16 A scene in the casino’s “Upper Room” restaurant brings up a religious tract well known in evangelical circles: *The Four Spiritual Laws*. Find out what they are by searching online, then discuss why they’re still central to some Christians and a roadblock for others, not to mention for *non*-Christian religions.

17 Police investigations are complex enterprises involving interviews, surveillance, educated guesses and luck... along with the kind of grueling research of the sort done by Jillian in Metro’s Records Department. Why do you think readers find stories with these elements so fascinating? In what ways do they mirror our own lives... and our spiritual journeys?

18 A possible suspect in the murder investigation claims to be responsible, even though it soon becomes clear he was not. What motivation or psychological disposition might lead someone to admit guilt, despite being innocent of a specific crime?

19 Levi accuses his brother of giving his followers the “illusion” of being saved, without really helping them. What larger process is Levi contrasting with Rev. Jimmy’s brand of salvation? Is his indictment accurate? Why or why not?

20 Levi refers to a second “bomb” Calvary’s adversaries are using to bring down the casino. What is it, and how was it designed to “go off”?

21 Describe Jimmy’s solution to the financial crisis that ultimately leads to the novel’s climax. How is it related to the New Testament passage about “casting your bread upon the waters,” and to the Old Testament line about “manna from heaven”?

22 What is the context in which Levi finally forgives Jimmy? Was the event that drove the brothers apart decades ago still relevant? In general, what are the factors that facilitate forgiveness?

23 There are several indications throughout the story that Levi is “religious” in his own way – which is further confirmed when Meredith scans the bookshelves in Levi’s living room. How would you characterize Levi’s religion, or faith, or spirituality? Are there important differences between these three words?

24 The simmering attraction between Levi and Meredith finally culminates in what both acknowledge, in so many words, is an act during which they “made love.” In what sense is this true?

25 Levi quits the Bureau one last time after the investigation is declared “over,” and one last time he is drawn back in when he finally identifies the person responsible for the threats to both Calvary and the Talbot brothers. Do you think vengeance is a powerful enough motive to explain this person’s actions? Can you think of other horrific events motivated by such extreme vengeance, whether in today’s news, down through history, or in our sacred texts?

26 As the story builds toward its climax, Levi uses a ploy to distract the murderer. Why does it (almost) work? How are we all mesmerized by “the spotlight,” or at least by the attention of others?

27 The official police report Detective Krukow relates to Levi – and which he ponders in the aftermath of the dramatic events at Calvary – leaves Levi (and us!) with a new mystery. Why does Levi ultimately decide not to pass on the report to his brother? How might this lingering mystery relate to a deeper theme in the novel... or to the book’s title?

28 (Optional) Is the conclusion of *Calvary Casino* satisfying, or does it leave you wanting more... or both? Please tell the publisher if you’d like to be notified if/when a sequel comes out. You may also share your thoughts with the author, or send a brief review of the book, by going to: www.IFMedia.com/CalvaryCasino/Comments.

The author welcomes readers’ suggestions for alternate questions relating to issues raised in *Calvary Casino*, both to fuel discussion in book clubs and other group settings, and to inspire personal reflection. If you have any such suggestions, or would like to submit comments or a formal review of this novel, please visit: www.IFMedia.org/CalvaryCasino/Comments.