



EVERYTHING YOU KNOW ABOUT JESUS IS WRONG

Reclaiming Jesus from Culture, Politics, and Religion

JEFFREY DEVOLL

"In a world of slogan theology and 'sleight-of-hand' church leadership, Jeff Devoll offers an end to the harm. Jeff is unique—he has a way of leaning into the punch without throwing one back. I have found Jeff to be as smart and trustworthy as they come. Not only will you enjoy his newest book, *Everything You Know About Jesus Is Wrong*, you'll want to get copies for your friends."

— Scott Hagan, PhD
Former President,
North Central University

IS EVERYTHING YOU KNOW ABOUT JESUS WRONG?

Maybe not. But you know something is wrong—you always have. The rituals, the rules, the requirements—they feel worlds apart from the Jesus you encounter in the Gospels.

Ancient historians, Renaissance painters, and self-interested preachers have shaped our image of Him. Progressives, conservatives, moderates, and anarchists have all tried to co-opt Him. The religious and the irreligious alike have wielded His name to legitimize their pursuit of power.

And you? You're left with the ache of distance—the emptiness that whispers:
There must be more.

Come. Discover the real Jesus.
He calls. He waits.



Jeff Devoll is an international speaker, strategist, and co-founder of The Reach Group, a network of nonprofits. Jeff has spoken to over one million people from 40 states and 40 countries, inspiring change and hope. Leading over 15,000 volunteers on global service trips and spending nearly a third of his time in the developing world, Jeff doesn't just talk about compassion—he lives it, walking alongside the people Jesus valued most.

jeffreydevoll.com



EVERYTHING YOU KNOW ABOUT JESUS IS WRONG

Visit the companion website for the free audiobook, resources,
author contact, speaking requests, and more.



www.EverythingYouKnowAboutJesusIsWrong.com

Note about QR codes: There are QR codes throughout the book that link to chapters for the accompanying podcasts, audio, and other supplemental resources.

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First Edition

A Word from the Author

These are my words.

Sure, I quoted a few others along the way. Those are noted. I don't endorse the person who is quoted or that the quote itself is the truth, the quotes are merely commentary on the subject matter.

I've tried to be funny—or at least mildly clever—in this book. That might seem a little out of place, given the subject matter, but I figure if my jokes don't make you laugh, maybe they'll at least make you grin—or squirm. Author and speaker, Tony Campolo, once said it's a sin to bore people with the message of Jesus. I think he said that. I haven't fact-checked it, but it sounds like something he'd say, and I'm rolling with it.

This isn't an apologetics book. Those books make factual or logical sense for the claims about Jesus and Christianity. There's a "further Reading" section in the back if you're starting from a more foundational place about the historic claims for the Christian faith. You should read those books. I have.

Many of the scripture passages have been carefully paraphrased (don't worry, I'm a professional). Where they are from a traditional translation, that is noted (always expressed in three-letters like *NLT* or *MSG*—you can google those).

The book is intended to be read a chapter at a time, perhaps over a month or so. Do as you will, but I designed it to be 10-15 minutes to read a chapter. The QR codes will take you to place where you can have the chapters read to you. The chapters are free there too. There's a YouTube channel (www.youtube.com/@jeffreydevoll) that has some visuals and captions. There's even a podcast by the same name that functions as a free audiobook.

I've really tried to hit you with everything I could think of from everywhere you might be.

I didn't outsource the writing to AI—the words are mine. I did run accuracy checks and such, but I wrote this book myself with much prayer, life experience, seeking wisdom from others and feedback from trusted advisors. You'll have to judge if you think it's *intelligent*,

but it's definitely not *artificial*. I hope it's better this way.

Thanks to my daughter Robyn for her sharp eye in proofing.

Thanks to my editor, Darrick, for helping with flow and polish—while keeping my voice intact.

Thanks to my 3rd grade teacher (and later high school teacher), Patty Martin, for her sharp eye in catching annoying things everyone else missed.

About the Author

This book is not an autobiography—but it is a journey through life with some of my touchstones along the way. The first chapters were started two decades ago, though they've been revised and rewritten many times. Some stories from my life are included to bring a relatable touch or to illustrate something in my own way. This is a book about Jesus: how he related to people, and how people—including me—relate to him.

I grew up in a small college town in far northern California. At 15, I became a committed follower of Jesus—and an instant irritant to many others who called themselves the same. Within a year, my friends and I had started a band, launched a disorganized outreach to local homeless teens and runaways, and I began speaking at events and to various groups.

At 18, just months after graduation, I joined the staff of a large church in a youth outreach role. I reached a lot of youth—but I didn't last long. Corporate church and I didn't get along very well. It was like trying to fit a square peg into a committee meeting.

I attended a Christian college, where I met my future wife, Tanya, and earned a bachelor's degree in theology with an emphasis in biblical studies. I'm forever indebted to the professors who taught me how to study and approach scripture with humility—Dr. Dan Albrecht, Dr. Charles Self, Dr. Truett Bobo, and Dr. Richard Israel were my intellectual heroes, and still are. If I've gotten anything right in this book, it's largely because of them. (If any of you heroes are reading this, be gracious—it's more devotional than scholastic and I didn't sleep much at Bethany except in class.)

After marrying my college sweetheart, I spent most of the 1990s working with teenagers in churches (barely navigating corporate church). I loved this role and was privileged to impact thousands of students in one way or another. I still keep in touch with many of my aging “youth kids.”

In the early 2000s, I worked with Christian students who wanted to reach their peers in public schools. We had an impact on over 3,000 schools, with more than 80,000 students involved in some way.

In the following decade, we focused primarily on school programs through our nonprofit work. We created a life-coaching program that has impacted over 3,000 mostly at-risk students (so far), and I traveled to more than 40 states and 45 countries, speaking to over a million students on critical topics like suicide, depression, sexual exploitation, and special needs.

Tanya had traveled extensively before I met her, and in 1996, she dragged me along on a trip to Romania. We worked with street people and local churches trying to help their nation recover from nearly five decades of communism. Since then, we've taken over 15,000 people on trips, primarily working in areas of extreme poverty on education, housing, and water projects. I've decided to spend the rest of my life working with people in extreme poverty. I can't imagine anything more exciting.

Since 2020, our international projects have taken most of my time and energy. As of this writing, we take over 800 international volunteers each year to work on more than 40 projects in Latin America and Africa.

I have three adult children and have been married to my life partner and most trusted advisor, Tanya, for over three decades (perhaps more by the time you read this). She is smart, tough, effective, compassionate—she is amazing—I have no idea how she does it all. She's the best person I know.

I've also had the formidable task of raising over \$20 million (and counting) for projects and staffing. I've even posed with giant checks—they don't let you keep those.

I'm a pilot (mostly flying old, donated planes before I sell them to fund programs). I love off-roading. I'm a committed Rotarian.

I've been the architect of my own house, our nonprofit offices, and some major projects in Mexico and Zambia. I have flipped many houses. I make sushi sometimes and love to make my own Texas BBQ in my smoker (it's pretty good). I've made mini movies seen by over a million people in person. I've been on the road roughly one out of every two days for a few decades, with more than a third of my time spent in the developing world—on a dirt road somewhere.

So, you may be asking: with my background, why did I write this book? It's a fair question.

I've been a lifelong student of the scriptures—especially the Gospels. In another life, I might have been a professor like my intellectual heroes. I've read, re-read, studied, and applied the Gospels in every way I could. I've been more genuinely motivated by the message of Jesus than anything else in my life. I've made poor career choices, walked away from what looked like advancement, and confronted truly horrifying situations—all out of a desire to follow the principles for life that Jesus laid out.

I've also spent more time speaking with and listening to real people than most clergy or scholars ever would. I've written this book for the agitators and those who need to be agitated, the church-hurt and those who've inflicted the hurt, the Pharisees and the prostitutes, the sinners and the so-called saints, the abused and the abusers—they all need to know there is hope and purpose in their stories.

Mostly, I've written this book for me. These are the stories I need to revisit, the truths I need to wrestle with, the code I've tried to live by. This message—this Jesus—continues to astonish me, no matter how many times I hear it. The pain has been deep, the adventure wild, the joy indescribable. And through it all, Jesus has been there—steady, present, and faithful.

Note: I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge a deep debt to:

- **C.S. Lewis**, whose *The Chronicles of Narnia* series captured me as a child and whose *Mere Christianity*, *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Problem of Pain* have become like muscle memory in my brain and informed faith in my life every day.
- **Mike Yaconelli**, whose book *Messy Spirituality* is an antibiotic to the infection of religious perfectionism.
- **Timothy Keller**, whose hundreds of talks have brought comfort when I needed it—and discomfort when I needed that, too.
- **R. C. Sproul**, whose deep conviction and sometimes “minority report” theology challenged me to think deeper than my own spiritual roots ever did.

I've never met any of these gentlemen. All 4 have passed (2 more recently). But they—and many others—have mentored me as both an author and a Jesus-follower.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my dad.

My Dad started life raised by abusive, alcoholic parents—biological, adoptive, and step—and ended life saved by the Navy, a good woman, and Jesus, in that chronological order, but in inverse importance.

Dad was destined to be an angry, abusive, divorced father who my three brothers and I would see every other weekend—until an encounter with Jesus changed him in a way that the discipline of the Navy during Vietnam and the love of a good woman had begun but could not fully complete.

More than 50 years after his conversion, when we were told there was no viable treatment for the cancer that was taking his life, Dad simply said, *"I've always known I had a date to meet Jesus. Now I know it's much closer."*

To anyone who learned about Kübler-Ross in Psych 101, it might have sounded like denial. But to anyone who knew Dad, it represented the culmination of a life of optimism—born of surviving child abuse and matured into something much deeper through unwavering faith.

Thanks, Dad. I'm still trying to live up to your example—as a father, a husband, and a follower of Christ...



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Introduction: Josh

"I am a historian, I am not a believer, but I must confess as a historian that this penniless preacher from Nazareth is irrevocably the very center of history."

—H.G. Wells

"The birth of Jesus marked the beginning of a movement that defied all historical expectations. That a crucified criminal from a backwater province of the Roman Empire would become the central figure of Western civilization is, from a purely historical standpoint, astonishing."

—Bart D. Ehrman, agnostic historian and professor

"There was nothing attractive or compelling about his physical appearance, nothing drawing us to him."

—The prophet Isaiah, from chapter 53, verse 2

Josh wasn't someone who would impress you when you saw him. He was probably short by today's standards—maybe 5'1" or 5'2", like most men around him (not that anyone was measuring for his driver's license). With his short, unstyled hair and the unremarkable clothing of a poor blue-collar worker, his country accent made him stand out when he went to the big city, but not among the other construction workers in the small town where he learned his trade from his dad.

He was religious, but so was everyone else where he grew up.

Apparently, he never found the right girl, because he was single way past the point that other men around him had four or five kids. He seemed to like kids and had lots of close relationships with women. He was very close with his mom, so maybe that was it—maybe he

was a “momma’s boy.”

When he traveled, he mostly camped wherever he was when he got tired. He wasn’t exactly homeless, but once remarked that a fox with a hole in the ground had a better place to stay than he usually did.

He didn’t really seem to care about making money, but he liked to help people. He certainly talked about money a lot, but he didn’t have much of it.

He didn’t seem to think much about politics or art or philosophy, but he did have a way with words. He wasn’t an author or anything like that.

Although he wasn’t particularly well-educated, he did seem to have an emotional intelligence that was exceptional—he just got people. And he was one of those people who seemed to speak the truth whenever he spoke. Sometimes that made people pretty uncomfortable.

Josh didn’t seem like the kind of guy who would change the world if you didn’t know him.

Josh didn’t seem like the kind of guy who would change the world if you didn’t know him. Most people who do go after fame or political power, or maybe try to get wealthy and influential through business and philanthropy. It wasn’t like he didn’t think about those things—he had lots of thoughts about them—but he was apparently disillusioned with them.

Josh just kind of talked wherever he went and people did listen. There was no big production or tour, but people listened. He had a code that he lived by and that he could explain in a way that most regular people could just get. But there were lots of people who didn’t understand his stories at all. He never seemed to care when people didn’t get what he was talking about.

He had a lot of friends—mostly blue-collar, salt-of-the-earth, regular people. Religious people called them “sinners.” His closest friends could be brash and ambitious in a way that he wasn’t, and they seemed consistently baffled by his actions and stories—even though they knew him best.

One thing that did make him different was that he seemed to be

some sort of homeopath or naturalistic medicine practitioner—maybe a spiritual healer of some sort. He would talk to people or sometimes perform a very brief spiritual ritual of some kind, and people seemed to get better—instantly, most of the time. It made him locally semi-famous in a folk-hero sort of way, but he didn't love the fame. He seemed to see it as a distraction. He asked people to keep their recovery private when possible. They seldom listened.

His growing fame, by the low standards of his time, was a blessing and a curse. The disenfranchised loved him, but the powerful dismissed him—until they felt threatened and decided to have him assassinated. The masses eventually turned on him too—if he wasn't going to use his influence for political change, then he was just part of the problem.

When he was killed, it was shocking. Most of his friends were despondent. Apparently, some people thought he was some sort of traitor, and he became the victim of a frenzy. They say he was tortured before he was murdered at the hands of the military, and that his execution was that of an innocent man who died alone—naked and humiliated. Apparently, he even cried out that God, who he claimed was his father, had abandoned him.

He was barely recognizable by the time he was pronounced dead. The swelling to his face and torso was almost as severe as the lacerations on his head and back. Although he had suffered a massive puncture wound by spear to his chest to ensure he was dead, it seemed clear from witnesses that he had already passed—maybe from a trauma-induced heart attack before that chest wound was inflicted.

A wealthy man who had somehow become enamored with Josh had him buried in his pre-purchased mausoleum. The loved and hated carpenter who, for a short time, became a celebrated and reviled traveling teacher was laid to rest in an unmarked grave. And that was the end of the story.

Or, at least, it should have been... It turns out it was just the beginning.

It turns out that Josh was to become the most influential person who ever lived, despite his short, three-year rise to local fame.

Another Look at the Story

This is, without embellishment, how an observer of Josh's day who was casually acquainted with his story would have described it. Everything in this short life summary is from the "gospels" in the Bible. Nothing is subversive at all.

If it sounds radical or even sacrilegious, it may be that you've been inoculated to the story.

Jesus is the Greek name for Joshua (Yeshua in Hebrew) or Isho (as it would have been said in Aramaic). All four "gospels" were written in Greek for distribution outside of Palestine so Jesus is the name we know.

Unlike the Renaissance paintings of a tall, long-haired, blonde northern European, Jesus was probably short (most Jewish men were), olive-skinned, and crop-haired (it was the custom of the time for men to have short hair and women long hair). He was unmarried well into his thirties (which would have been strange—like it still sort of is), and he did just tell stories that some people understood, and some didn't. The rumors that he healed people would have been suspect to anyone who didn't see it for themselves. He was tortured and executed, falsely framed as an insurrectionist—an unfitting end for a healer and teacher. The story should have ended there.

So why didn't it? *That's a good question.*

A better question might be why you haven't asked yourself this before.

Whether you believe in the Jesus of the Bible or not, his influence has been felt by more people than any other person in history. When you include both Christianity and Islam—and the cultures that surround them (Muslims recognize Jesus as a prophet)—almost half the world's population regards Jesus as a prophet, messiah, or at least an influential teacher.

So, why do we have such misguided impressions about Jesus?

Maybe Michelangelo is responsible. Maybe Da Vinci led you astray into thinking that Jesus walked around with that Renaissance glow halo behind his head.

Maybe it's the pastor of the church you attended who removed Jesus from his humble surroundings.

Maybe it's the stock "Christian" characters on TV shows and in

movies that are always portrayed as holier-than-thou hypocrites.

But much of how you see Jesus is just wrong.

An Overstated Premise

Is everything you know about Jesus wrong?

Maybe not—but you know *something* is wrong and you probably have for a long time.

But as you read on, you might find that more of what you believe about Jesus is misconstrued than you thought. Your misconceptions probably outnumber the accurate assumptions you hold. Don't worry, you're in good company. Even the disciples needed a few do-overs. Whenever I read the Gospels, I always feel like I've gotten it all wrong about something.

This book is about rethinking Jesus. It's about stripping away the evangelicals' marketing, the Catholics' romanticizing, the mainline denominations' rationalizing, the modern revisionism, the arrogant deconstructionism, and rejecting the political hijacking from liberals, moderates, conservatives, and everywhere in between.

It's about turning off the noise of who someone wants you to think Jesus was and seeing the person who changed the calendar—in his own words and actions.

Maybe we'll even barbecue a sacred cow or two. Jesus seemed to be building a fire to do so everywhere he went. Sacred cows make great brisket. We love the idea of killing a sacred cow—until it's our cow that's sacrificed.

We find comfort in our *a priori* confirmation biases about Jesus.¹ It's tougher to let them go than the favorite sweatshirt that moths used for Sunday brunch a long time ago, but you just keep wearing it. But what Jesus leaves in their place is always something better. You end up left with him—the real Jesus.

Is everything you
know about Jesus
wrong?

Maybe not—but
you know
something is
wrong.

¹ 'A priori' is Latin for "I've already decided, and no facts will be accepted at this time."

Not the one on bumper stickers, not the one in political ads, and definitely not the one who looks suspiciously like your favorite celebrity. (Note: it's weird if you picture Jim Caviezel when you pray.)

Albert Einstein once said,

*"No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life."*²

This book is about spending time with the real Jesus of the Gospels and history and seeing why he has influenced the world more than any other person—ever. There is a reason why a construction worker from a lakeside fishing village in a small, occupied territory changed the world forever.

There is a reason why
a construction worker
from a lakeside
fishing village in a
small, occupied
territory changed the
world forever.

Maybe it's time to take another look at why.

Perhaps you're an atheist—about 3% of the world's population is and has been since we started polling to find out. Welcome, reader—I'll try not to

insult your intelligence. I respect you, but this isn't a book about the proof you'll never find to your satisfaction. It's a book about faith and faith is found at the crossroads of truth and courage, not proof and skepticism.

Maybe you're an agnostic—this book is perfect for your exploration. Think of it as spiritual spelunking—minus the bats. I think you *can* know the things you think you *can't* know—perhaps not intellectually but really *knowing*. You might just be caught in a trap of being inquisitive. It's fashionable to be a searcher, but not really a finder.

Maybe you're just non-religious or skeptical of organized religion—you're in good company with Jesus. He was constantly side-eyeing organized religion. I'm an ordained minister who has spoken in hundreds of churches to hundreds of thousands of people—and I still consider myself non-religious.

² 1929 interview with Einstein by George Sylvester Viereck published in The Saturday Evening Post.

Maybe you're a believer on a quest for more—why else would you pick a book with such an audacious title?

Maybe you're thinking that a book about Jesus is a bit redundant. Aren't the twenty-six New Testament books about Jesus? Haven't there been tens of thousands of books written about Jesus?

Sure.

So, why write a book about Jesus and the misconceptions about him? Because thousands of conversations have left me with the distinct impression that much of what we think about Jesus is the product of being purposely misled, misleading ourselves, or misunderstanding the story presented.

Is everything you know about Jesus wrong? Maybe not.

But maybe the hyperbole of the title of this book is less exaggeration than a feeling we get when facing the real Jesus. And the reality is so much more than the mythology.

As the Austrian theoretical scientist quipped, *no myth is filled with such life*.

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Oysters

"But Christ could certainly not have established the Church. That is, the institution we now call by that name, for nothing resembling our present conception of the Church—with its sacraments, its hierarchy, and especially its claim to infallibility—is to be found in Christ's words"

—Leo Tolstoy

"Jesus was not crucified for saying we should love one another. He was crucified for saying that the religious authorities were corrupt, that the temple was compromised, and that the kingdom of God was breaking in to upend the whole system."

—Dominic Crossan, historian and former Catholic priest

"You might think I've come to bring peace to the earth, but I haven't. I've come to cut a dividing line with a sword. Because of me, sons will turn against their fathers, daughters will turn against their mothers, daughters-in-law will turn against their mothers-in-law. Enemies will come from people's own households."

—From Matthew 10:34-36

Abnormal.
Divergent.
Odd.
Peculiar.

Unnatural.
Actually, quite strange.

These terms might seem irreverent in describing Jesus, but he was not typical—not by any stretch of the imagination.

Maybe, in thinking we're so familiar with the story, we miss the details.

The fact is, Jesus proved to be more than a little different.

What else do you say about a guy who traveled from town to town with 12 men, several women, and a band of adoring acolytes, speaking to whoever would listen—in synagogues, marketplaces, out in the streets and open fields; just about anywhere there were people, Jesus would deliver his challenge to the status quo.

He had no formal job, he was just out talking to people. And, the stuff he said could be a little bit...odd:

- “I’ll tear down the temple and rebuild it in three days.” The original temple took about 100 years to build. Jesus basically said, “Give me a weekend and a hammer.”
- “Eat my flesh, drink my blood...” the disciples probably looked at each other like, “Is this metaphorical or should we be concerned?”
- “Hate your mother and father...” Disciples: “Cool, cool, cool... Should we tell our moms now or wait until after dinner?”
- “Sell everything you have and give away the money.” This isn’t the way prosperity preachers get you to invest a “faith seed gift” for their new jet.

All of this could be described:

- charitably as: (A) extreme
- less charitably: (B) *mentally unwell*.

The Trilemma

In the mid-nineteenth century, a Scottish preacher named John Duncan formulated what he called the “trilemma.” Jesus was either a fraud, deluded, or divine. Watchmen Nee and C.S. Lewis later expanded on the trilemma. Josh McDowell added alliteration to the trilemma. Jesus was either a lunatic, a liar, or he was Lord.

Based on the things Jesus did, his contemporaries could be forgiven for assigning some instances with description “A” and some with “B.” Even his own mother and brothers thought maybe he had lost it and came to bring him home on at least one occasion.

However, it is more than the crazy stuff he said. His actions seemed strange too.

How about drawing in the sand as a (probably) naked woman—

caught during an illegal sex act—is in front of you waiting to be sentenced to death? Odd behavior, yep.

How about spitting in the dirt and rubbing the mud in somebody's eyes to help them see again? "Over the top and sensationalistic" might be the description.

What about crafting a whip, screaming like a madman, and physically threatening the money exchangers in the temple because he didn't like their exchange rates? A pretty extreme reaction.

Strange behavior? *Of course.*

The same Jesus of the thoughtful, contemplative paintings of the renaissance art of 16th century Europe, is also the guy who cast demons into pigs, killed a fig tree to make a point, and claimed a dead girl was only sleeping.

Even his advance man was unconventional.

The people must have known Jesus to be a different kind of teacher from the lifestyle of his goodwill ambassador—John "the Baptist." John lived a strange lifestyle. He didn't speak in churches; his pulpit was a muddy river and his congregation consisted of those on the shore. He spent his time making some people mad and dunking the ones he won over underwater in a commitment ritual. He wore wild animal skins for clothes. His main diet consisted of bugs and honey (he apparently couldn't be bothered to take time for a proper meal). When he became so popular that the Jewish puppet king came out to see him, he accused the king in front of everyone of having an illegal sex life. (Herod would later have John executed at the request of a young dancer.)

This was Jesus' advance man. When this is the type of guy you send as your publicist, you know there's going to be trouble, and there was. To the established powers, Jesus was nothing short of an insurrectionist.

The Great Divider

Jesus became one of those public figures people either loved or hated. Some people were ready to die for him, others wanted him dead—in the end, there was no real middle ground.

It's amazing when people talk about Jesus as a great teacher. If you examine his teachings as a whole, they were disruptive and problematic. *Unless he was who he claimed to be.*

Both Christians and non-Christians alike try to sanitize Jesus. We clean up his image. People like to say Jesus was all about love and acceptance, but he made people mad enough to carry out his murder.

If you examine his teachings as a whole, they were disruptive and problematic. Unless he was who he claimed to be.

It wasn't just the establishment either. People today talk about Jesus as if he were some hippie songwriter from the 1960s, penning tomes about flower power and free love without consequence. Nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus was an agitator, a troublemaker, a divisive figure to most.

Those on the bottom rungs of society loved him, but those with power, prestige, or privilege hated him. Eventually, when he didn't meet the expectations of the proletariat, they called for his execution too. Jesus failed to conform to the expectations of the aristocracy and the revolutionaries. Both those who had power at the top, and those on the bottom who wanted it, shared a problem with Jesus.

Jesus never wanted to be popular; he wanted change.

Jesus didn't try to change how people saw him; he tried to change how people saw the world.

Jesus didn't try to make God more presentable; he presented a "take it or leave it" message about God.

He would say things which were hard to understand, or difficult to take if you did understand him, and say, "to the one who has ears, let him hear"—a favorite of his sayings. He didn't try to get the messaging right. He talked right and wrong. He didn't believe people held their own truth; he said he was the truth.

When political parties lose an election they always say they didn't get their message out. Jesus got his message out and they murdered him for it.

The truth is that Jesus stands as the great divider. He drew a line in the sand and dared people to cross it. With him there was no 'sort of' or 'maybe.' With Jesus it was, "say 'yes' when you mean 'yes' and 'no' when you mean 'no.'"¹ End of story.

He said, "You might think I've come to bring peace to the earth, but I haven't. I've come to cut a dividing line."²

We love to grind the edges off Jesus. We sand the edgy parts down and we smooth them out. We make him a little less scratchy. But Jesus remains edgy. *There is a reason why they killed him.*

Pearls of Wisdom

Oysters are amazing creatures. They have the ability to produce and grow their own shell from leftover minerals in their diet. Their shell is made of a pearlescent substance called nacre. When irritated by a piece of sand or other irritant, they begin secreting nacre, and, over time, an oyster turns a jagged, scratchy, foreign object into potential jewelry—this is where pearls come from. At the heart of every natural pearl is a piece of sand or other sharp object which caused injury to a mollusk. It takes time and commitment, but the oyster takes something that causes pain, irritation, or injury and turns it into an incredibly smooth, perfectly round little orb that it can live with.

Organized religion
does it's best to
smooth over the
uncomfortable parts
about the life and
message of Jesus.

Organized religion is a little like an oyster. Jesus said and did some things not measuring up to "respectable" society. If we're being honest, irreligious and nonreligious are not okay with the real message of Jesus either; they just enact the privilege of dismissing the parts they don't like as fable.

Jesus may not have been as polite as he could have, so we pretend otherwise. He told us to take a beating with pacifism and we rationalize it away. He didn't always explain himself to the spiritually dull, so we do the job for Him. He offered and demanded total forgiveness, but we qualify both because of the level of difficulty required. Organized religion does its best to smooth over the

¹ Matthew 5:37

² Matthew 10:34

uncomfortable parts about the life and message of Jesus.

For the rest of the world outside the church, they are even less knowledgeable about the authentic Jesus than Christians. In a time of plastic statues, crucifixion jewelry, and people thanking Jesus for everything from scoring a touchdown to winning a Grammy for best gangsta-rap album, the world also seems to have lost something about who Jesus was and is. He is not your homeboy. He is an irritant to everyone who likes things smooth.

But Jesus' edginess is not what makes him so compelling; it's the cause of the edginess which makes him captivating. It's his:

- Uncompromising commitment to love and comfort the unloved and the broken
- Unconditional acceptance of the unacceptable
- Disdain for pointless rules or ritual and undying dedication to meaningful action
- Lack of respect for formality and
- Uncool willingness to wear his heart on his sleeve.

It has been my privilege to speak in hundreds of churches over the last few decades, but when traveling and speaking at churches I often wonder to myself "Would Jesus make it as the pastor of this church?" I don't think Jesus would last long in the pulpits of most of the churches I've seen.

It's in his resume:

- An unmarried thirty-something who didn't care about buildings or facilities
- Someone who attended parties where people drank and ate too much and who was himself accused of being a drunk and glutton
- A teacher who seldom explained what he was talking about
- Someone who once told religious leaders that the town where she would become famous for the beautiful way in which she treated him³

It's hard to see how a preacher would be accepted by most Christian congregations if he acted like Christ did.

All this makes me wonder if we're missing something. I wonder if

3 Matthew 26:6-13

Christianity and Christ are incongruous mathematical sets. I wonder if the algebraic inequality of Christianity and Christ results from a lack of solving properly for X. I wonder if frustrated chalk boards of religion over 2000 years of trying to make the math work for the faithful have rounded down who Jesus really was—and is.

Maybe we're
more like oysters
than we think.

If we have lost something, there's a simple reason why. Maybe we're more like oysters than we think. It's the nature of being human. But I implore you, don't act like a mollusk. You aren't an oyster.

The real Jesus of the gospels is so much more compelling than the Jesus of the stained glass in the cathedrals. His words, his actions, and his ultimate sacrifice of love changed the world forever. A few billion people have found meaning in the real, jagged, challenging Jesus.

Live with the edginess. Let it hurt you. Let it wound you. Don't settle for pearls.

The treasure you find will be greater by far.

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Perfect Timing

"Temper zeal with patience. God accelerates, but he never rushes."

—Andrena Sawyer, author, speaker, and entrepreneur

"Timing isn't everything. It's the only thing."

—Miles Davis, American jazz trumpeter, bandleader, and composer

"But when the right time came, God sent his Son, who was born from a woman and lived under the law. God did this so he could buy the freedom of those who were under the law. God's purpose was to make us his children."

—From Paul's letter to the Galatians chapter 4, verse 4

Over the last few decades, I have taken over 15,000 people on trips to volunteer everywhere from the projects of New York City to deep into the most poverty-stricken areas of the world. From the Somali refugee ghettos of Nairobi, Kenya, to the rainforest coffee farms of Nicaragua, to the public schools of Quito, Ecuador, I have led bands of faith-motivated adventurers.

And things don't always go as planned.

About a decade ago, I led a group from Colorado and California to build homes for Oaxacan migrant workers in the poverty-stricken San Quintín Valley of Baja. Our crew was a mix of teens, a high-voltage electrician, a diesel mechanic named Josh—and "Crazy Rosie," an elderly Puerto Rican woman with a giant cartoon cross she called the "happy cross." She handed out mini versions to kids and preached joy in rapid-fire Spanish that even native Spanish speakers struggled to follow. But she made friends fast.

The week was transformative. Teens became semi-skilled carpenters while building homes for the working poor. Rosie held impromptu Sunday school with her props. No one fixed engines or wired buildings—but hearts were changed.

On the way back, I drove the lead van with Krista, the Colorado team leader. We were tight on time, hoping to make their flight—until the radio crackled: “We just blew a tire.” Smoke billowed behind us. I told Krista, “No problem.” Then came the update: “The tire shredded the AC hoses. Coolant’s pouring out. Our van is dead.”

Krista looked panicked. I said, “Don’t worry. It’ll be like Signs.”

She blinked. “What?”

“You know. It’s that Mel Gibson movie about crop circles by M. Night Shyamalan.” The look on her face told me I needed to connect the dots. I quickly reviewed the plot of the film.

“In the movie, Mel Gibson’s wife has died and the family is in trauma. His daughter leaves cups of water everywhere in the house compulsively. In the flashbacks to his wife’s death, the last thing she says to Mel Gibson is ‘Tell Merrill to swing away.’

“Her brother, Merrill, played by Joaquin Phoenix, had been a record-setting home run hitter in minor league baseball and the bat from when he hit a 507’ homerun was still hanging on the wall.”

I looked at Krista. Her face clearly expressed her thoughts. Something like: I can’t believe I brought a bunch of volunteers from Colorado to cross an international border to go to the middle of nowhere to work with a crazy person. Who could blame her?

I talked faster now. “When the aliens finally invade, it turns out they are like the wicked witch of the west—if you throw water on them, it hurts them. And Mel Gibson’s daughter has left the OCD cups of water everywhere and everyone starts throwing them at the alien. Then Mel realizes what his wife said and takes the baseball bat off the wall and tosses it to Joaquin Phoenix and tells him, ‘Swing away! Swing away!’

“In the alien’s weakened state, they beat him down with the bat. Don’t you see? They had everything they needed all along!”

Krista now looked at me as if she never really knew she travelled with a clinically insane person and reconsidered her ability to assess

someone's mental health.

Ten minutes later, we arrived. Fifty teens lined the hill. Josh cut and stretched hoses. The electrician made clamps from stripped wire. Rosie recruited locals for water, and teens relayed Coke bottles and cups to refill the radiator. It was a pit crew miracle.

As we pulled out and continued toward the US/Mexico border, I looked over at Krista and said, "See. Just like signs."

With a look of astonishment mixed with relief on her face, she asked, "How did you know?"

I smiled. "When you keep putting yourself in places where God must come through—or you're toast—you start seeing him do it. Over and over."

God performs perfect timing.

Writing History in VR

God exists outside of time. Theologians call him omniscient, but let's skip the deep dive. Imagine being able to remember the past and preview the future in perfect virtual reality. Time wouldn't touch you. It'd be like owning a VR DVR—rewind, fast-forward, jump to any moment on the timeline. No limits. No lag.

God transcends time. He is more powerful than the bounds of chronology. He is eternal and finds himself on no finite timeline.

But God decided to step into time for our sake and his timing is impeccable:

But when the right time came, God sent his Son.¹

Think about it. God sent his Son when the right time came.

The implication is clear; the time wasn't always right for God to send His Son.

Let me explain.

At exactly the right point in history, Jesus stepped in and split the calendar into B.C. and A.D. (before and after Christ). The

At exactly the right point in history, Jesus stepped in and split the calendar into B.C. and A.D.

¹ Galatians 4:4

historical impact has been cemented ever since.

But what made it the right time in history? It seems God waited for humans on a couple of points. What were those?

It might be more practical than you think. Language and travel were the factors making it possible, for the first time, for the gospel could spread like wildfire.

Jesus spoke Aramaic. So did most Jews in his day. It was the local language, familiar and earthy. But here's the twist: the gospel didn't spread in Aramaic—it spread in Greek.

Surprised? You're not alone.

The New Testament was written in Greek, even though Jesus taught in Aramaic. Why? Because Greek was the universal marketplace language of the Roman world. Thanks to Alexander the Great, Greek culture and language had gone viral centuries earlier—and it stuck. For the first time, the known world shared a common tongue, and the gospel had a highway to travel on.

Speaking of highways...

Travel was just as crucial. The Romans didn't just build roads—they built the first international highway system. Sure, roads existed before, but Roman roads came with something new: patrols. Safety. Before that, travel meant risking your life to bandits or relying on private security—if you could afford it.

But under Rome, soldiers moved regularly. Systems were in place. Non-citizens could be conscripted to carry gear for a mile (Jesus referenced this when he said to go the extra mile). Soldiers even policed the roads like ancient highway patrol.

Suddenly, the world was connected—by language and by road.

The same is true of urbanization, which played a major role—people were packed into cities, and ideas moved fast. The Pax Romana (Roman Peace) made it safer than ever to share new religious beliefs without immediately getting arrested or attacked. Meanwhile, synagogues had popped up all over the empire thanks to the Jewish diaspora, giving early Christians ready-made launchpads for the gospel.

And then there was the Roman postal system—yes, the ancient

version of FedEx. It allowed churches to circulate letters from apostles like Paul, spreading theology, encouragement, and instruction across continents.

All of it—language, roads, peace, cities, synagogues, mail—lined up like dominoes.

God didn't just send His Son at a good time. He sent Him at the perfect time. A moment when the message could move faster, farther, and deeper than ever before.

Personal Time

God doesn't just move through empires and calendars—He moves through hearts. In my years of encouraging people to become followers of Jesus, I've asked many how they made that decision. And without fail, their stories point to divine timing. A moment when everything aligned. A crisis, a conversation, a quiet whisper of hope.

At just the right time, the God of the universe stepped into their inner world—not with fanfare, but with surprise hope, piercing truth, and relentless love.

But God's perfect timing isn't only historical and personal—it's strategic.

In John's gospel, chapter 7, it tells us Jesus was traveling around Galilee. He wanted to stay out of Judea, where the Jewish leaders were plotting his death. But soon it was time for the Jewish Festival of Shelters, and Jesus' brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea, where your followers can see your miracles! You can't become famous if you hide like this! If you can do such wonderful things, show yourself to the world!" For even his brothers didn't believe in him.

Jesus replied, *"Now is not the right time for me to go, but you can go anytime. The world can't hate you, but it does hate me because I accuse it of doing evil. You go on. I'm not going to this festival, because my time has not yet come."* After saying these things, Jesus remained in Galilee.²

Jesus didn't just practice patience—he operated with strategic, divine timing. His life was marked by an acute awareness of when to

² John 7:1-9

act, not just how.

At the wedding in Cana, his mother nudged him to perform a miracle. He responded, "My time hasn't come yet." (Of course, Mary overruled him—because even Jesus' mom knew how to get things done.)

When Jesus healed people, he often told them not to spread the news. Why? Because it wasn't the right time. He wasn't chasing fame—he was following a mission.

He even delayed travel intentionally. The most dramatic example? Lazarus. Jesus waited four days—long enough for the body to begin decaying—so that when he raised Lazarus, no one could chalk it up to a parlor trick. It was unmistakable: life had conquered death.

Jesus didn't just
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purpose—he moved
with precision.

Every delay was
deliberate. Every
moment, measured.

Jesus didn't just move with purpose—he moved with precision.

Every delay was deliberate. Every moment, measured.

Because when you're on God's timeline, timing isn't just important—it's everything.

Learning to be Instinctual

Timing is a somewhat intangible force. As a musician and band leader, I played with many drummers. The worst drummers were sometimes the most practiced and technically correct. But they lacked the intrinsic internal clock. Some of the best guys I played with were sometimes undisciplined, seldom practiced, and a little flakey. But they carried a God-given internal sense of timing which cannot be taught—it's an instinct.

I've seen God's timing at work in my life over and over again. God provided financial miracles, family miracles, and redemptive divine appointments. And I've learned to wait. This is one of the few lessons God will teach you which will create great frustration to those in your life.

Jesus' brothers didn't get it. It's time to shine—strike while the iron is hot, they thought. But Jesus knew differently. He knew what God

wanted and understood strategic timing.

I've driven people crazy with my learned patience, but I've learned. And one of those things I've learned is that patience and prayer go together.

For fifty-two years my grandmother lived as a chain-smoking alcoholic. Two failed marriages, dozens of broken relationships, and a closed heart to religion marked her life. As a little boy, she would explain to me that my parents were too God-crazy. She actually said she would rather my dad be gay than a Christian (hard to unpack on so many levels, right?)

She led a hard life. At 5:00 am, she would start each day with a Bloody Mary and move to other drinks from there. I made it to my twenties before I ever saw her truly sober for the first time. I prayed for my grandmother before I really even followed Christ myself. Almost every day from eight years old until twenty-seven, I prayed for my grandmother. I feared for her soul. She played a major role in my life and I tried over the years to talk to her about eternity, but she shut it down pretty quickly every time. Eventually, I decided to pray... and wait.

And wait I did, until I was twenty-seven. On a plane somewhere over Haiti on another long flight, I put pen to paper and made my case for why my grandma should accept Christ. I couldn't explain why the time seemed right, but it did. She experienced some health problems, but nothing new—results of a chain-smoking alcoholic. As a career postmaster of a small post office, she often pestered us grandkids to write more letters, which we always avoided, but now with a legal pad, a pen and poor handwriting, I poured my heart out. I explained that I had waited nineteen years to write this letter.

In the next several months, my grandmother's health deteriorated, and she found herself in the hospital. She became dependent on three different machines. And, she came to faith in Christ. I remember the day she called me to tell me she decided to unhook the machines. She explained that she was unafraid to go be with God now. I said goodbye and she died that night—in peace.

God's perfect timing for me turned strategic. For her, his perfect timing became redemptive. For all of humanity, God's perfect timing is historic.

It's all about timing.

Mel Gibson finally saw the signs at the right time, but only God's timing is just right every time.

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Grand Canyons

Big things have small beginnings."

—Peter O'Toole as T.E. Lawrence in *Lawrence of Arabia*

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

—Lao Tzu, Chinese philosopher

There was a wedding in the small village of Cana and Jesus, his disciples and his mother, Mary, were all there as invited guests. During the festivities, the host ran out of wine. Mary went to Jesus and told him, "They are out of wine."

Knowing what she wanted him to do, he told her, "I love you, mom, but that's not our problem. It's too early for me to do what you want me to do."

But she didn't respond, she just told the servers, "Do whatever he tells you to do."

—From the Gospel according to John, chapter 2, verses 1-5

Flying used to seem fun.

Sometimes it still is—especially when I have enough points to score a bargain-basement first-class seat. It's magical, like Narnia, but with warm nuts and legroom.

Not today. I'm on a run-of-the-mill flight from Kansas City to LAX—the airport equivalent of purgatory. If Dante had flown Spirit Airlines, Terminal 4 would've been his tenth circle of hell.

I fly often and have a system: sit near the back (where seats recline a precious inch) and hope no one joins me. Today, I faked a coughing fit to ward off a middle-aged couple eyeing the seats beside me. It didn't work.

"Are these seats taken?"

"No," I said, coughing again, clinging to my personal space.

Now I'm wedged into a window seat like a human panini. The guy in front keeps jolting my laptop. The woman behind me is airsick and caring for a baby that isn't hers. The couple next to me has downed four beers each—which they haven't been charged for. Either they're charming or the flight attendant abandoned capitalism after her poly-sci degree at ASU.

Still, the woman in the middle seat is respectful of space, which is rare. She's from Tennessee, heading to New Zealand with her new husband.

Outside, the view is mostly flat farmland and cows pondering their existence—until something catches my eye. Somewhere over the middle of nowhere, I see it: the distinct beginning of the Grand Canyon.

A Small Start

It's obvious the Grand Canyon starts somewhere, but I didn't really know where. I've been to the Grand Canyon a few times and have studied satellite photos of it (I'm a nerd that way), but never thought about where it starts. You can't see all the Grand Canyon from one place—it's too grand. A mile deep in some spots, a mile wide in others, it's an amazing sight to behold—the awesome power of water, and the creativity of a God who crafted this third planet from the sun. Still, I've never even heard someone mention the small beginnings of the massive gorge.

There's a name for the place where the Grand Canyon starts. It's called Lee's Ferry. In 1857, John D. Lee retreated there to escape justice for his part in the Mountain Meadows Massacre which saw one-hundred-and-twenty people murdered in Mormon religious fervor. In this spot where Glen Canyon ends and the Grand Canyon begins, for a few hundred yards, the Colorado river has a shore on both sides. It's the only such place for hundreds of miles. Lee established a ferry there and was later arrested and executed.

Didn't know where the Grand Canyon begins? Now you do.

Some 2000 years and billions of followers later, it's easy to forget Jesus wasn't always a famous history-splitting miracle worker either. Sure, he was the long-awaited messiah, but no one knew it.

Even his parents had mixed feelings. When Jesus disappeared and was found in the temple teaching the rabbis a thing or two, his parents responded like any other parents would. They were worried and confused. Not about the all-powerful creator of the universe, but about their boy.

Some 2000 years
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easy to forget Jesus
wasn't always a
famous history-
splitting miracle
worker.

When Jesus reminded them of whom he was, they were speechless.

The angels who appeared at the birth of their son were a distant memory, more than a decade removed, and Mary did something mothers do. She tucked it away in her heart. Unable to wrap her brain around how different this maternal experience was going to be from her sisters and cousins, she decided to think about it. Those thoughts went into the emotional vault that all moms seem to have locked away somewhere waiting for further action at a later time.

It would be years before we see her considering the ramifications of being the mom of the messiah again. At a wedding for an unnamed couple in Cana, a small village near Nazareth, the crisis arose. The crisis had her finally testing the idea her son, long observed to be atypical by now, was more than merely "different."

An Ordinary Wedding Requires the Supernatural

Jesus and his disciples were invited guests to a wedding, and Jesus' mother was there too. We don't know who was getting married, but it must have been a big deal. Of course, weddings usually are.

Weddings might be the most momentous of all human rituals. Two people decide to become each other's life-long exclusive romantic interests, sexual partners, family co-creators, financial partners, travel buddies, social collaborators, friends, emergency managers, career coaches, health care advocates, roommates, and more. It really is something how people make this kind of decision so young and how so many make marriages last a lifetime.

If you've studied the Bible much, you already know Jewish that weddings were longer than what you are used to, even lasting multiple days. At some point, for some reason, the host of the wedding at Cana ran out of wine. Today it may not be a big deal, but in Jesus' culture, hospitality was a huge part of one's social standing.

Lots of cultures are still like this now. I have sat in a mud and manure hut with a teenage Maasai boy in Kenya who beamed with pride over serving me tea. I have had the most incredible food served by Oaxacan people who live in shacks constructed of pallets and plastic. Having and serving guests is at the heart of many cultures, and it was clearly crucial to social capital in Jesus' time.

Enter Jesus' mom. Like so many awesome moms, she is a problem solver. No one knew what to do, but then those memories pondered in her heart for so long hit her—*her son has divine power*, she remembered, and decided to act on that belief.

Mary went to Jesus and told him, "They are out of wine."

Knowing what she wanted him to do, he told her, "I love you, mom, but that's not our problem. It's too early for me to do what you want me to do."

But she didn't respond, she just told the servers, "Do whatever he tells you to do."

There were six large ritual cleansing jars made of stone that were there for ceremonial washing. Each one could hold 20-30 gallons. Jesus told the servers to fill them with water, and they did. He told them, "Take some out and bring it to the master of ceremonies", and they did.

When the Emcee tasted the water that had been transformed into wine, he wondered where it came from. The servers knew what happened, but they didn't say. He called the groom over to compliment him, a bit puzzled. "A host always serves the best wine first when people are still completely sober. After they've been drinking a while, he brings out the cheap stuff, when no one cares. But you have saved the best for last!"

This was the first time Jesus revealed what he could really do.

And his disciples believed in him.¹

She didn't ask him to help; she told him, "They are out of wine," and probably gave him the *mom* look.

When Jesus told her that he shouldn't do what she was asking him to do, Mary didn't argue. She had already made it clear what she expected him to do. He had made his plea, and it had fallen on deaf ears. She simply looked at the servers and told them, "Do whatever he tells you to do." (I like to imagine her giving them a *this-might-get-weird-but-do-it-anyway* look.)

Jesus, the savior of humanity, the second member of the triune Godhead, obeyed his mother. He was 30 years old, already had 12 men who left everything to follow him, and would, someday, have over 5 billion followers. He told his mother he did not want to make miraculous wine. She didn't listen. So, *he made wine*.

Then and there, something began. Jesus would perform around forty recorded miracles and presumably many more that are unrecorded. He would feed tens of thousands of people from a couple of sack lunches. He would heal terminal diseases, correct life-long disabilities, and bring back people from the dead. He would himself come back to life after three days in the grave to conquer death for all of humanity, but, it all started there, with a small display of what he was capable of.

Then and there,
something began.

It all started there,
with a small display
of what he was
capable of.

There were so many reasons not to do this miracle.

- Jesus was not a winemaker.
- The timing was wrong.
- People had already had a lot to drink.

There were also reasons to perform the miracle. Among them seems to be that *his mom asked him to*.

However, from there, a spark of faith ignited a small fire. John, who was relating to us the story, threw in this small statement easily

¹ From John 2:3b-11

missed—"And his disciples believed in him."

This matters—particularly because of what came next.

The next thing Jesus did was crazy. He went to the temple in Jerusalem, having made his own whip from rope. He acted like a madman and drove out the sheep and cattle from the temple court. He threw the money from the currency exchange merchants all over the floor and then flipped their tables over.

It's hard to say if the disciples, after seeing this crazy display, would have stuck with Jesus to see the incredible things they would come to experience if they hadn't first seen the miracle at Cana. They may have said, "Okay—this guy is a pretty good teacher, but he's nuts."

You couldn't blame them. He goes on to tell Nicodemus he must somehow be birthed a second time. He usurps John the Baptist's ministry. He meets alone with a Samaritan woman with flexible sexual morals. All of this happens over a period of months before he performs his next miracle. Had he not lost an argument with his mother, Jesus' disciples might have fled. Who could blame them?

Something had started. It had been small, but it had begun. Like the Grand Canyon, it had started slight. It was but a little flat spot on the river but would grow into a wonder.

Incomparable Significance

There is little question, for believers and unbelievers alike, that Jesus' life and teachings are the most influential in history. From that small beginning, and the movement that began there at a wedding, a global, history shaping movement began. What Jesus did, the significance of what he did, cannot be adequately put into words.

Although many have tried:

– Napoleon Bonaparte—Emperor of France:

I know men and I tell you that Jesus Christ is no mere man. Between Him and every other person in the world there is no possible term of comparison. Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have founded empires. But on what did we rest the creation of our genius? Upon force? Jesus Christ founded His empire upon love; and at this hour millions of men would die for Him.

– **Albert Einstein—Scientist:**

As a child I received instruction both in the Bible and in the Talmud. I am a Jew, but I am enthralled by the luminous figure of the Nazarene....No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life.

– **Mahatma Gandhi—non-violent colonial resistance activist:**

A man who was completely innocent offered himself as a sacrifice for the good of others, including his enemies, and became the ransom of the world. It was a perfect act.

– **Kenneth Latourette—former President of American Historic Society:**

As the centuries pass by, the evidence is accumulating that measured by its effect on history, Jesus is the most influential life ever lived on this planet. The influence appears to be mounting. No other life lived on this planet has so widely and deeply affected mankind.

– **Daniel Webster—politician:**

All that is best in the civilization of today is the fruit of Christ's appearance among men.

– **C.S. Lewis—author:**

Let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

– **Ernest Renan—historian, religious scholar and linguist:**

All history is incomprehensible without Christ.

Although there are some earlier writings of historical value, the narrative of history begins in about 2,000 B.C. That is, people began to purposely record what was happening for future generations about 4,000 years ago. Therefore, history is, in a quite literal sense, split down the middle with Jesus as the great divide.

The divine irony is that his birth, life, death and resurrection don't *split* the time before him and after him—he *joins* the B.C. and the A.D. What's more, he bridged the chasm between God and humans that our humanness had created.

Big things start small. The same Jesus who turned water into wine,

*turned death into life,
and fear into hope,
and poor into blessed,
and he turned Friday's grief into Sunday's elation.*

It all started with a mother and her son at a wedding in a little village called Cana, where Jesus reluctantly obeyed his mom's request.

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With the Wild Animals

Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come; 'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home."

—John Newton

"I am God's wheat, and I shall be ground by the teeth of wild animals, so that I may become the pure bread of Christ."

—Ignatius of Antioch, martyred by lions, torn apart as entertainment for thousands.

The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where he spent forty days with Satan, being tempted. He was among the wild animals, and angels took care of him.

—From Mark 1:12-13

Mark's telling of the savior narrative is the shortest of the four versions in the Bible. Consequently, some of the stories told at length in the other three gospels can be quite brief in Mark's account.

The story of the temptation of Christ is one such story. The other synoptic gospels (synoptic is kind of a complicated way of saying similar) tell the story with great poetry and depth.

Not Mark. Two sentences. Only two.

But therein lies the interesting part. One of those sentences isn't contained in the other versions of the story.

Almost all of what Mark writes in his gospel is found elsewhere. Matthew contains about ninety percent of the content of Mark.

The reason Mark is the shortest gospel is a subject for books Bible scholars write for other Bible scholars to read. It might be that Mark

never became well educated, or his source for the material isn't—it is thought that Peter served as his source, and professional fishermen aren't known for their eloquence. Perhaps it does remain the first reason—most scholars think Mark's education lacking—and he sought to produce something easily copied and read. Remember, no printing presses meant books were difficult to come by and expensive, so shorter would be much more practical for distribution purposes. Perhaps Mark understood “brevity is the soul of wit”¹ fifteen centuries before Bill Shakespeare wrote those words. We don't really know why Mark's gospel is so short, or precisely why its content is mostly contained elsewhere, but I can tell you why you should read it and why it's my favorite gospel...

Chapter one, verse thirteen. Not the whole verse, only the second sentence. It's phenomenal, and you won't find it anywhere else. Not in Matthew, Luke, or John. It's not even in the crazy so-called “other gospels” which you may have heard of.

Where the other three gospels of the New Testament give you the famous and memorable quotes like, “. . . man does not live by bread alone . . .”, “. . . tempt not the Lord your God . . .”, and discuss Jesus' hunger strike against his own humanity, Mark mentions none of it. Even though his gospel probably came first, he doesn't give you the details, he simply tells you God sent Jesus out to the desert where he remained for forty days, and Satan himself tempted him there. It's one sentence. The important facts of the story, given by Mark with the brevity to impress any fan of Shakespeare.

But then he adds something different from the other gospel writers. Two sentences you can read many times without noticing them.

“He was among the wild animals; and angels took care of him.”

A Keen Eye for the Obvious

To understand why Mark's detail about wild animals mattered, we need to look at what was happening in Rome.

Mark tells us, out in the wilderness, there were wild animals, and Angels were there to help Jesus.

At first you might think, *“well thanks, Mark, but wild animals are*

¹ Spoken by Lord Polonius to Queen Gertrude in Shakespeare's Hamlet

usually in the wilderness; wild animals, plants, and other wild things are what make it the wilderness."

But the point is significant. Jesus embraced danger. Not merely from giving into temptation, but from his surroundings. Wild animals eat people. They bite people. They can hurt people. They kill people. Jesus put himself at risk and trusted God not only to keep him strong despite temptation, but to keep him safe in an unsafe place while he grew weak, hungry, and defenseless.

It seems obvious, but then, maybe you never thought of it before. It's not a small point—especially to the people Mark wrote his gospel for.

God gave us this book, and you and I can take it for granted. People have read it for almost 2000 years. We've experienced Matthew, Mark, Luke and John for a long time. God speaks to us directly through the teachings of Jesus. We live by his example. We understand salvation because we know about his sacrifice. But Mark and the other gospel writers didn't write for posterity. They wrote to a specific group of people.

Mark and the other gospel writers didn't write for posterity. They wrote to a specific group of people.

You see this in Luke's gospel (and in his sequel, the book of Acts). He writes to a guy named Theopolis. You see it in Paul's writings. His books are letters named after the group or individual he wrote to.

But the Gospels (and a few other books) are named for their writer. It doesn't mean, however, that they weren't written to someone, or a group of people specifically. On the contrary, we know who the author of Mark wrote to, and for, from the historical setting. Tradition holds this gospel as written by John-Mark, but we don't really know because the Gospel doesn't tell us.

The Gospel of Mark could almost be called the Gospel of Peter—at least according to most scholars who study these things. The author never names themselves, but the voice behind the text seems to echo Peter's perspective. It's fast-paced, raw, and full of action—just like Peter himself.

Why didn't Peter write it? Maybe because he couldn't. By the time Mark was written—likely in the mid-60s AD—Peter had probably already been crucified in Rome, possibly upside-down at his own

request. Or maybe Peter didn't write it because he didn't speak Greek fluently. Greek was the common language of the Roman Empire, but most Jews spoke Aramaic unless they were highly educated, like Paul.

Whatever the reason, Mark wrote it for Peter—and to the church in Rome, Peter's church. That matters.

We don't know exactly how Peter got to Rome or why, but most scholars agree: that's where he ended up. And that's where Mark's Gospel was aimed—at a community of believers facing persecution, needing courage, and clinging to the story of Jesus as told by one of His closest friends.

Still with me? Good. Even if ancient history isn't your thing, this is where it gets interesting.

In AD 64, a fire tore through Rome, reducing seven of the city's fourteen districts to ash. The blaze raged for six days, and rumors swirled that Roman guards had blocked citizens from extinguishing it. All eyes turned to Emperor Nero, and honestly, it wasn't hard to believe he was behind it.

Nero was... unhinged. He had already flooded a neighborhood near Palatine Hill to build a private lake for his pleasure. Later, his successor, Vespasian, would drain that lake and erect the Colosseum—a monument for the people, not just the elite. It was a symbolic reversal of Nero's self-indulgence.

Unlike previous emperors who led armies and expanded the empire, Nero fancied himself an artist. He sang, acted, and toured the empire performing in competitions—always declared the winner, of course. To his face, he was praised as a genius. Behind his back, he was mocked as a clown.

But Nero wasn't just eccentric—he was maniacal. He murdered his own mother, his wife, and others close to him when he felt threatened. While the New Testament rarely names Roman emperors directly, many scholars believe the Antichrist figure in Revelation is a thinly veiled reference to Nero. Whether feared by Christians or ridiculed by Rome's elite, Nero was more than ridiculous—he was lethal.

So when Rome burned, many believed Nero wanted to rebuild it in his own image. And he did—constructing his lavish Golden

House atop the ruins of ordinary citizens' homes. But the public wasn't buying it. Nero needed a scapegoat.

He found one: the Christians.

As a religious minority, Christians were already viewed with suspicion. Their practices were strange—monotheism in a polytheistic world, secret gatherings, and a ritual that involved “eating flesh and drinking blood.” Rumors of cannibalism spread. Ironically, this was in a society where temple prostitution was normal and gods were appeased with animal sacrifice. But Christianity was different—and different is suspicious.

What made Christians truly unsettling was their unshakable devotion. Roman religion was cultural, social, transactional. You sacrificed to Mars for victory, to Ceres for crops. But Christians worshipped a crucified man and refused to honor the Roman gods. Worse, they were willing to die for it.

To many Romans, that kind of conviction looked less like faith and more like fanaticism. So when Nero pointed the finger, people were ready to believe. Maybe the Christians had started the fire. Or maybe, even if they hadn't, their refusal to appease the gods had angered the divine and brought disaster on the city.

And so began the first great persecution of Christians.

Worth Dying For

The Roman historian Tacitus, a young boy at the time when the persecution took place, wrote about it in his book, *Annals*. “In their very deaths they were made the subjects of sport: for they were covered with the hides of wild beasts, and torn to death by dogs, or nailed to crosses, or set fire to, and when the day waned, burned to serve for the evening lights.”

In ancient Rome, they considered beheading a privileged way to die. We think Paul was beheaded around this time of persecution too, but unlike Peter, not crucified. Paul remained a Roman citizen. Non-citizens were crucified, burned to death and killed by animals. Often, the condemned were thrown in the arena to fight for their lives against leopards, boars, lions and other animals as an opening act to gladiatorial combat. They always met a bloody and gruesome end. It is likely this kind of execution would be the most feared of all.

When the author of the gospel of Mark writes to the Romans about Jesus' temptation in the desert, he makes the point: although Jesus didn't take anyone with him, he didn't wander alone; wild animals surrounded him—lions, bears, crocodiles, and cheetahs were only some of the animals living in ancient Israel. Jesus stood very vulnerable. He walked defenseless.

He lived without food for days. It's easy to lose more than forty pounds in forty days without food, and if your body mass index drops below twelve and a half, you risk a heart attack or other organ failure leading to death. In other words, you are frail. Jesus was in no condition to fend off predators.

Once, when on an African safari, a lion walked right up to our open-sided Land Rover. The guide assured us the lion saw us as part of the vehicle, but we were mere feet away. The lion could've easily killed and gutted any one of us without a fight.

Like lions, cheetahs are killing machines, designed by the creator and honed by nature as apex predators without equal. Bears too. Crocodiles kill more people in Africa than any of these other animals. These seemingly prehistoric, reptilian monsters roll their prey under water to drown them. The most formidable human male is no match whatsoever.

Monsters do exist and Jesus dwelled among them in a weakened state for forty days. When the gospel of Mark makes this small mention you probably never noticed it as a point to the readers in ancient Rome: our Lord experienced the very thing you fear most; they may throw you to the wild animals, but Jesus went willingly.

And the second half of Mark's sentence is meant to bring some comfort.

Jesus, exposed
and unsafe,
experienced the
danger. But he
didn't do so alone.
God sent
messengers of
comfort to him.

"And Angels took care of him."

Jesus, exposed and unsafe, experienced the danger. But he didn't do so alone. God sent messengers of comfort to him—to keep him safe.

Some historians believe over ninety thousand Christians were martyred during the first three hundred years. This should have wiped out Christianity, but it didn't.

One hundred and thirty years after the Persecution of Nero, and having observed widespread persecution, lawyer and Christian apologist Tertullian marveled, "*Plures efficimur, quotiens metimur a vobis: semen est sanguis Christianorum*" - "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church."

You Guys keep Coming

A few years ago in Nicaragua, a local pastor asked to speak to our group. He stood quietly for a moment, then shared a story that still echoes in my heart.

As a young boy in Costa Rica, he and his brother were invited by a group of teenagers to a children's crusade. That night, they responded to the gospel. Over time, their entire family came to faith and eventually moved to Nicaragua. In just ten years, he planted seventeen churches.

But the journey wasn't easy.

His family faced persecution—not from atheists or outsiders, but from a corrupt faction of the Catholic Church, aligned with the communist government. He described the suffering, then paused and said something unforgettable:

"They say you can visit a hundred graves of American Protestant missionaries murdered by the Church and government in the last hundred years in Nicaragua. But they never stopped. If one was martyred, more came. And here you are, in a place people say is dangerous. You keep coming. Nothing stops you. You people just keep coming."

It was a moment of clarity. The militant religious powers in Nicaragua were like the Roman Empire before them—convinced they could crush the movement. But they didn't understand: you can't kill what God keeps resurrecting.

They thought they were burying bodies as a warning.
But they were planting seeds.

And those seeds grew into a movement they couldn't contain.

Anyone who's walked with Jesus for long knows this truth: to follow Him is to walk among wild beasts. Sometimes it's persecution. Sometimes it's isolation. But always, God sends His angels. In the arena or the wilderness, danger and comfort walk side by side.

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Sticks and Stones

"What labels me, negates me."

—Soren Kierkegaard

"Sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can break your heart."

—Robert Fulghum

As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind panhandler begged on the side of the road. When the beggar heard the noise of the crowd passing by, he asked people what went on. They told him Jesus, the Nazarene, walked by. Realizing this as his chance, he started yelling, "Jesus, King David's son, help me!"

"Shut up!" people in the crowd yelled at him, but he shouted even louder, "King David's son! I'm right here. Help me!"

Jesus stopped when he heard him and told someone to bring the man to him. When the man stood in front of him, Jesus asked him, "What do you want from me?"

"I want to see!"

"OK," Jesus told him, "See! Your faith is what has healed you!"

—From Luke 18:35-42

The power of words can be unbelievable.

Terminal. Ugly. Quadriplegic. Fat. Handicapped. Loser.

All incredibly powerful words which, when applied to your life, can be devastating.

The word with the most profound effect on my life is Autism.

In June of 2003, I prepared to take a team of sixty-two students and leaders to Lima, Peru, but unrest broke out in the country. For the previous ten years, the country had been struggling with communist rebels engaging in acts of terror. A car bomb here and there is enough to worry about, but when the government workers went on strike three weeks before our trip, it caused two problems.

One: we were traveling there to work in the schools and the teachers were on strike. Two: the police were on strike, and the army was brought in to keep the peace—but armies aren't built for policing. As someone once said, *"Armies are good at two things: killing people and breaking stuff."* If that's what needs doing, the military is the right tool. But soldiers acting as police officers? That's rarely a good idea (just watch the news). For the previous ten years, the country had been struggling with communist rebels.

Working with the NGO we were partnering with, we began to come up with plan B. We would fly into Peru in the dead of night, fly out the next morning and end up in Quito, Ecuador, a huge South American city in the Andes mountains right on the equator.

It turned into a great trip. Our team of nearly eighty people—including locals, staff, and another group whose trip we unintentionally joined—conducted school assemblies, distributed a harmony of the Gospels in magazine format to 260,000 public school students, and held outreaches for several thousand more. On the final night, I spoke to over ten thousand people in Quito's Parque La Carolina, referred to by locals as the Central Park of Ecuador.

The journey ended with equal parts reward and exhaustion—until the trip back to California. Then, exhaustion took over completely.

Due to false bomb threats, our plane departed late, causing us to miss a connection in Atlanta by just ten minutes. What followed was a travel saga involving twelve planes, fifteen pieces of lost luggage, and forty-one hours of transit. I arrived home late at night with one plan: sleep for the next few days straight.

My unborn son, Declan, enacted a different plan. With five weeks to go before his scheduled arrival date, he intended to join the world outside the womb. At five in the morning my wife woke me up to explain that her water broke. This began thirty-one hours of labor, and four days at the hospital. It's still a blur to this day. All I can really say for sure is we came home with a beautiful, healthy baby boy.

Dad Life

Being a dad has changed my life in a way few things could. But at this point, things were only beginning to change. By his second birthday, my son had travelled to fourteen states, a couple of countries, and flown over thirty times (including a helicopter ride).

He logged close to a hundred thousand miles in the car with me. He did a lot of things most people I know will never do.

We also started to notice something else different about him than most: he didn't talk much or make eye contact; he liked doing the same things over and over.

Three doctors, two psychologists, one psychiatrist, a couple of research analysts, several social workers, about ten therapists, and a few other miscellaneous professionals later—it finally began to sink in. At barely two years old, my son was diagnosed with autism.

Autism. It's a powerful word.

I learned everything I knew about autism from a movie with Tom Cruise and Dustin Hoffman. The truth is, not even the experts know much about it. They don't know what causes it, why it appears at different stages of child development, how to cure it, or why it takes so many different forms. All we know for sure is that it's a lifelong condition—profoundly life-altering—and a growing epidemic.

My wife, Tanya, and I either combined some set of genes, unknowingly exposed our son to some pathogen, or simply lost to the odds. We didn't know why it happened, but we knew our lives would be different—and our son had some pretty big challenges ahead.

Autism. I can still remember sitting in the pediatrician's office, hoping she wouldn't say it. For years, sometimes, I couldn't say it myself. The idea that my beautiful, happy, fun-loving, life-embracing son could be dismissed with a one-word label is still hard to swallow. I fight back tears as I write this word now. It feels like a curse word I should be slapped for even thinking at times.

At barely two
years old, my son
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It's a powerful
word.

Words Will Never Hurt Me?

I'm not alone. There are a lot of powerful words people carry.

Molestation—a word gripping the lives of so many I know.

Death—so powerful, most of us try not to think about it.

Addiction—so big, it often overshadows everything else about a person.

People in the time of Jesus dealt with some pretty heavy words too:

Blind. Shamed. Useless.

Those words described one man.

Presumably blind from birth, he took his place in society. He became a beggar. Considered useless for any other purpose, he was confined to a life of asking others for what he needed just to survive.

Before an overgrown welfare state ever flickered as a gleam in some lifetime bureaucrat's eye, the working class took care of the disabled by handing out loose change. Without constant begging, most of the disabled would have starved to death.

The real problem with this already humiliating system came from the prevailing theology of the day: the belief that the disabled deserved it. Much like the caste system found in some Hindu traditions, this idea suggested that suffering was earned. Whether it emerged to ease collective guilt or was preached by some first-century televangelist equivalent—whose rants made sense to people craving easy answers—the logic remained: anyone unfortunate must be on the receiving end of God's wrath.

And it might not even be their fault. Maybe it was their parents'.

"The sins of the fathers," someone might mumble as they walked away.

There's something in us that, in one way or another, finds comfort in seeing others struggle. "Urban traffic often backs up for miles just so people can glimpse the mangled steel of a car accident—and think, "Wow, I'm glad I'm not that guy."

But more interesting than that basic human instinct is the one that searches for reasons behind every tragedy, just to reassure ourselves it won't happen to us.

It never ceases to amaze me. During my travels through the Midwest, people would say they could never live in California because of earthquakes. Never heard of tornadoes, huh? In the East, they asked about fires and mudslides. Car accidents in snowy weather kill exponentially more people than mudslides. Don't even get me started on folks living in hurricane zones.

We all want to believe we're smarter, luckier, or somehow exempt from the misfortunes that visit others.

We all want to believe we're smarter, luckier, or somehow exempt from the misfortunes that visit others. "*Glad that's not me,*" is usually our first response to tragedy.

Even now, faced with the reality of autism, I catch myself doing it. I see families with children more profoundly affected by disability, and my first

instinct isn't empathy—it's, "*Whew, I guess we dodged that bullet.*"

I could smack myself for that reaction. But it's human.

And it's out of that instinct that the labels come.

I struggled with the idea that people saw my son as autistic at first. To me, he was the cutest, cuddliest, sweetest little boy I'd ever seen. Anyone who spent real time with him thought the same. But to those who didn't know him, they only saw an autistic child.

Comfort Categories

And this is where the labels really come from: our need to categorize the unknown into familiar boxes, expecting people to play their roles in life's grand drama like stock characters in a mindless sitcom.

Beggar. Bum. Transient. Homeless.

Powerful labels—no matter how political correctness tries to soften them—each one conjures the same mental image: a dirty, unkempt, pushy, annoying inconvenience of a person.

I'm still moderately traumatized by a three-toothed woman with a beer in her hand (and on her breath), a lawnmower haircut, and a stream of crazy talk who stole a kiss on the mouth from me during a lapse in security at a San Francisco block party outreach. Not my finest memory.

We expect the beggars of this world to sit quietly on the sidewalk, out of the way, half-inebriated, with a cup gently outstretched—like the human refuse we've decided they are. We tolerate them this way. It's a social contract of sorts. They need to know their place.

That's why the reaction to the beggar in Luke 18: 35–42 makes perfect sense. Unable to see his way to Jesus, the man—unnamed, only labeled—begins to scream out for him. His refusal to stay in his assigned place draws the expected response: *"BE QUIET!"*

But the labeled don't always see themselves through the brand that society assigns them. And this blind beggar didn't see himself as a blind beggar. He had hopes and dreams like anyone else. And beyond all hope, he believed he might be able to see.

He wasn't the only one who refused to accept the label. As he hoped against hope, the superstar rabbi—the miracle-worker passing by—didn't see him as a human tragedy turned societal drain either. He saw a person who needed help. And hope.

You can almost picture the bodyguards parting the way for the all-important celebrity teacher, when Jesus tells them to stop shouting the beggar down. At Jesus' request, the beggar is brought to him. And the conversation is unexpected . . .

"What do you want me to do for you?"

"Lord," he said, "I want to see!"

And Jesus said, "All right, receive your sight! Your faith has healed you."

I love Jesus' interaction with people. It's easy to miss it sometimes; this is a classic example of Jesus' brief interaction meant to challenge perspective.

Jesus knew what the beggar wanted. If not because he's omniscient, then simply because it was obvious: the man wanted to see. But Jesus asked anyway, *"What do you want?"*

It wasn't a question born of ignorance—it was an invitation. Jesus was empowering a man who had lived his entire life powerless. It would've been easy to let him beg his way into healing, but Jesus wanted him to participate. *"Prove you want it,"* Jesus seemed to say.

And then came the clincher:

"Your faith has healed you."

Those words gave life to the man—not just sight, but dignity, agency, and a future. "You had a part in this," Jesus made clear. Martin Luther might have bristled at the idea of earned grace, but this miracle is a complex blend of empowerment and unearned mercy.

Jesus wanted him to know that his hoping against hope, his refusal to quietly disappear, his tenacity to risk everything on a traveling Messiah—that is what opened his eyes.

Faith is a gift from God. And like all gifts, it requires an act of courage to receive it.

But even that faith is a gift from God. And like all gifts, it requires an act of courage to receive it.

But it wasn't just the beggar who began to see.

Jesus was illuminating parallel worlds, both equally paradigm-shattering. A man who had lived in darkness, unable to perceive

the colors and light of the world around him, could now see what he'd never seen before.

And the crowd—those watching, and those who would hear this story for thousands of years—could now see something they hadn't seen before either: that a person, carefully labeled and comfortably dismissed, could not be defined by that label at all.

Code Switching

Blind beggar? How about miracle man?

Powerless human refuse?

How about empowered man with a new lease on life?

Words are powerful.

Molested. Crippled. Divorced. Predator. Abused. Neglected. Poor. Dyslexic. Raped. Addicted. Convicted. Forgotten. Ignored. Obese.

Terminal.

Blind.

Autistic.

Don't live your label.

You aren't branded by Jesus. You never have been.

Learn from a blind man who didn't know how to play his part.

Learn from a boy named Declan who simply lives his life, not defined by autism.

He only knows he loves the outdoors, is loved by his parents and grandparents, carries mixed feelings about many things, wants to go anywhere at any time, and champions a passion for VeggieTales—but not real vegetables.

He's just him. And I love him.

And so does a man named Jesus who we call Savior.

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The Fortunate Poor

"Where you live should not determine whether you live."

—Bono

I worked my way up from nothing to a state of extreme poverty.

—Groucho Marx

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

—From Luke 6:20 and Matthew 5:3

I grew up poor.

Until I turned twelve, our family of six lived in an 800-square-foot house with one bathroom—and I do mean bathroom; we didn't have a shower. Making matters worse, it was a "Jack and Jill" configuration, where you were required to squeeze past the beds in the tiny bedrooms to get to the bathroom. Navigating the house at night felt like a stealth mission—I became a ninja who needed to pee.

We had no air conditioning (real fun for the 105° Northern California summer days), no central heat, no cable TV, and our neighborhood sat riddled with petty crime. As a kid, I needed to walk to school or the corner store in a specific way to avoid the scariest parts of my poverty-stricken neighborhood, in a time when parents still let their kids take on such imperious missions.

I still remember we bought a station wagon for \$200 (cheap even for the time) which spewed more blue smoke into the air than any car

I've ever seen since. It needed piston rings, but I joked that we got it from James Bond and the smoke screen button remained stuck.

We bought clothes at Kmart, went camping for vacation, and the local Mexican restaurant with \$0.95 super burritos became our only regular splurge. Compared to some friends, we were doing pretty well. Compared to normal people (like the people on TV), we were clearly dirt poor. I joked that we were "poo" because we couldn't afford the "r."

But, what little we did have, we shared with anyone—to an extreme measure. We always took in someone else to live with us. We left the door to our house unlocked in case someone needed our house, or our food for some reason. If someone needed to borrow a car, my dad would walk to work. One time, someone stole my bike (my only real possession), and when we caught the bandits, we built them a bike out of spare parts we acquired from other bikes. Our small house regularly filled with thirty people eating our food and crowding our home because everyone knew how welcoming we were.

It was like communism without all the Marxian droning on about the proletariat and the totalitarian mass murder. We weren't hippies, but we were hippie-adjacent, Jesus people minus the Volkswagen van.

Later, my dad got a promotion to journeyman electrician at the local utility company, and we went from "poo" to middle class practically overnight—with a new house, an in-ground pool, and cars starting almost every time you turned the key.

But we didn't lose the mindset of being poor. We chopped wood for our wood stove, continued our cheap vacations, bought used cars, and still took people in to live with us. We even removed a wall between the living and family rooms to accommodate meals for fifty people (seated around folding tables and chairs). If someone needed our car, we still loaned it to them. Local parks were our country club, state campgrounds by the ocean our luxury vacation spots, and church our high-society mingling circle. Everyone we knew lived poor, and our middle-class status made things more comfortable, but we weren't comfortable becoming middle class. We gave away money in what I reasoned as a constant need to revisit the lack we once knew.

We escaped poverty but remained poor in spirit.

Same Vibe, Different Tribe

Matthew 5:3 and Luke 6:20 say almost the same thing. Jesus started his most famous sermon—one he likely repeated many times as his seminal teaching—to say something extremely radical about what he attempted to accomplish.

It's not hard to spot the difference—Luke records Jesus speaking somewhere described as “a level place” to his disciples, and he gives the baffling statement, “You who are poor are blessed,” whereas the version of the sermon recounted by Matthew's gospel is from a time when Jesus used a hillside as a natural stage, speaking to a large crowd, and starting with “The poor in spirit are blessed.”

If you have always thought of this as semantics, or a different way of saying the same thing, everything you know about this set of parallels is wrong (see what I did there).

There are some really interesting differences. In Luke, Jesus stands in an area where he is on the same level with his listeners; in Matthew, Jesus is sitting down, teaching in the style of famous rabbis. Jesus is teaching in a different way in each instance, and the rest of the sermon reflects this in ways beyond the scope of this chapter.

Also, Jesus includes the words “in spirit” about the poor.

There is also something different about the audiences themselves. In both settings, Jesus is speaking to his disciples while a large crowd listens in, but this would be harder to do on the level plain than in the more formal setting on the side of a hill. But there is even something more interesting going on which you probably missed—as I did until recently.

In Luke, Jesus is speaking *to* the poor, and in Matthew, Jesus is speaking *about* the poor.

It's difficult to understand by the different regions Jesus spoke to if the demographics of the crowd explain this. Both crowds included people from the urban cultural region of Jerusalem. Both included rural people. Both included wealthy Roman regions.

For whatever reason, Jesus is clearly speaking to the poor in the second person among his disciples and the crowd in Luke, and about the poor in Matthew. This continues in the next statements about the hungry, those in emotional pain, and those who are persecuted: the “Blessed are you...” vs. the “Blessed are

those..." is repeated. Once you see it, you can't unsee it.

Woe is Me

In Luke, there are also "the woes," and those are in the second person too. Woe isn't a word we use much, so these statements ("Woe to the rich, the well-fed, the laughing, the well-regarded") can be misunderstood. Jesus isn't rebuking them for being those things. Obviously, we all want to eat enough food, be happy, hold a good reputation, and acquire enough money. The Bible even describes these things as the blessing of God, who gives all good things.

Jesus isn't delivering a rebuke; he's issuing a warning. He's admonishing them to be careful, and I think there are two reasons...

The first is the price paid to be rich, satisfy our appetites, live a life of pleasure, and become respected and renowned. To experience resources, fun, and be celebrated is fortunate. To focus on these things is perilous.

To experience
resources, fun,
and be
celebrated is
fortunate. To
focus on these
things is perilous.

But there is something more. These things are dangerous to your spiritual edge.

In the movie, Rocky III, Rocky Balboa, a tough kid from the mean streets of Philadelphia, holds the heavyweight boxing title for three years (an eternity in the sport), and a young fighter, "Clubber"

Lang, is wanting a title shot. Rocky wants to respond to the taunting of Lang, but Rocky's manager, Mickey, won't let it happen.

After an argument, Mickey explains he's been hand-picking opponents for a while so that Rocky can retain the title. He thinks the match will result in "Death inside three rounds!"

Rocky is insulted, but Mickey explains that the riches and fame brought by winning the title made Rocky soft. In exasperation, Mickey deals a death blow to Rocky's ego when he says, "The worst thing that happened to you, that could happen to any fighter: you got civilized."

Jesus is saying to his disciples: don't get civilized. Stay desperate. Stay vulnerable. Stay hungry.

Relatively Destitute

A few years ago, I brought a pastor from a very small church in the Napa Valley to the San Quintín Valley of Northern Baja California. He lived in a mobile home on the church property—poor. Not only poor because of his underpaid pastor position of a small church in one of the most expensive towns in the most expensive state in America; there stood a finer point to his low financial status.

He served, surrounded by wealthy people. The particular town where he lived stands as basically the wealthiest town in the wealthy Napa Valley. It's a place where even millionaires feel low-income, and \$100 bottles of wine are considered a bargain.

During the week, the pastor worked with us as part of a team building a home on a dirt road among people living in extreme poverty. He remained very quiet when I tried to debrief with him each day.

I told my wife, "Justin is hating this experience. I'm not sure what I was thinking talking him into this."

But, I misread the situation. Justin became overwhelmed by the crushing weight of poverty. When I tried one last debrief with him, he finally shared with me:

"I'm trying to process this. I knew there are poor people in the world, but being here and seeing this is different."

God also birthed a dream in his heart.

The next year, he brought seventy-five people from the Napa Valley—very few of them from his church—to share the journey he experienced. Many of those people would later explain to me that this trip, not their luxury vacations, unlocked the most enjoyable experience of their life.

After processing the difficult reality of absolute impoverishment, something else happened for the team as they built three homes for the working poor. The one-dimensional poor people they were sharing a week with became three-dimensional people with dreams, struggles, sorrows, and joys. These wealthy American people began to shed the weight of wealth as they realized their ultimate fear of losing everything could be survived.

They found themselves mentored by the poor.

Deeply Impoverished

I am not poor. If I gave everything I own away and continued to live my life with a healthy relationship with money, I wouldn't be penniless for long.

Even if I were penniless, many studies show government programs, financial assistance, health care, and educational subsidies make the poorest people in Western societies wealthier than the middle

The math simply doesn't lie—by global standards, we in the west are “rich.”

class in developing world countries. The math simply doesn't lie—by global standards, we in the west are “rich.”

Many people come to me and say, “Jeff, why are you helping people in other countries when we have so many poor to help here?” My response is that everything they know about poverty is wrong. In the

first world, most poverty isn't the kind money alone can solve.

Government transfers and benefits, even taking into account lower purchasing power and higher cost of living, still put first-world low-income people in the top 1% of the world financially.

Many homeless people experience addiction and mental health issues that money cannot solve. They need a holistic solution which can't be solely purchased but requires deep dedication and sacrifice.

The impoverishment of underserved first-world communities also requires something more than a handout.

Having taken more than 3,000 at-risk youth through a results-based coaching program that I co-created more than a decade ago, I've taken a deep look into the systems of oppression in our society, and I've learned something important. If throwing money at a problem could produce the results needed, then we would cherish a country of self-sustaining people. Over \$2.5 trillion dollars are spent on social programs, and the war on poverty hasn't been won.

Cost/Benefit Analysis of Deprivation

When Jesus spoke to the fortunate poor and about the fortunate poor in spirit, he made a point. The poverty mindset he referenced wasn't about money—it was about the effects of money. The Bible touches on the tragedy of poverty extensively:

- Unveils the lack of justice for the poor. Oppression and poverty are frequently mentioned together as almost synonymous.¹
- Expresses the cause of poverty resulting from external forces and poor decisions. Systemic poverty is sometime explained as a result of lack of aspiration or criminality, but those conditions also result from poverty.²

But the Bible also teaches on the advantages of being poor.

- The Bible states the poor are valued by God. God takes on the debt of the poor, shows them special mercy, and promises they will inherit the Kingdom of God.³
- The Bible shows God as a defender of the poor. He takes up their case and personally intervenes when the poor are mistreated.⁴
- The Bible declares the gospel is especially for the poor. Jesus started his ministry by quoting the prophet Isaiah, proclaiming good news to the poor.⁵

Monika Hellwig, Catholic theologian and author wrote about “God’s preferential option for the poor” in a 1995 Christianity Today article.⁶ She wrote that while poverty is painful and even deadly, it contains qualities aligning with the heart of God. She expounded on those qualities:

- The poor know they are in urgent need of redemption.

1 Isaiah 10:1–2 “Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights...” Amos 5:11–12 “You trample on the poor and force them to give you grain... There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts.”

2 Proverbs 13:23 “A poor man’s field may produce abundant food, but injustice sweeps it away.” Proverbs 6:10–11 “A little sleep, a little slumber... and poverty will come on you like a thief.” Exodus 22:22–23 “Do not take advantage of the widow or the fatherless...”

3 Psalm 140:12 “I know that the Lord secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy.” Proverbs 19:17 “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and He will reward them.” James 2:5 “Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom?”

4 Psalm 140:12 “I know that the Lord secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy.” Proverbs 22:22–23 “Do not exploit the poor because they are poor... for the Lord will take up their case.”

5 Luke 4:18 “He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor...”

6 Christianity Today, November 13, 1995, p. 52

- The poor know not only their dependence on God and on powerful people but also their interdependence with one another.
- The poor rest their security not on things but on people.
- The poor have no exaggerated sense of their own importance, and no exaggerated need of privacy.
- The poor expect little from competition and much from cooperation.
- The poor can distinguish between necessities and luxuries.
- The poor can wait, because they have acquired a kind of dogged patience born of acknowledged dependence.
- The fears of the poor are more realistic and less exaggerated, because they already know that one can survive great suffering and want.
- The poor can respond to the call of the Gospel with a certain abandonment and uncomplicated totality because they have so little to lose and are ready for anything.
- When the poor have the Gospel preached to them, it sounds like good news and not like a threat or a scolding.

When Jesus speaks to the poor, he's letting them know that the upside-down Kingdom of God is theirs.

When Jesus mentions being poor in spirit, he's telling the rest of us that we can have a poverty mentality, opening the doors to the Kingdom of Heaven.

In other words, even if you buy a new house with an in-ground pool and cars which don't pollute the neighborhood, you don't have to become middle class in spirit.

Stay open to the gospel, even when it sounds like a threat to your middle-class existence.

Stay hungry for God. Stay desperate for grace. Stay humble in your circumstances. Stay ready to respond to God. Stay open to the gospel, even when it sounds like a threat to your middle-class existence.

Then, keep inviting the poverty you come from into your life, your schedule, and your budget. You'll need mentors.

The Ewes and the Billys (think about it)

Jonathan Edwards, the 18th-century theologian and revivalist preacher of the “Great Awakening,” best known for his sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, wrote in a treatise, with the weighty title *Christian Charity, or, The Duty of Charity to the Poor, Explained and Enforced*, about the responsibility followers of Christ have to the poor. He wrote:

“Where have we any command in the Bible laid down in stronger terms, and in a more peremptory urgent manner, than the command of giving to the poor?”

What he is saying is of all the commands of Scripture—and in the words of Jesus himself—none is more clear than the command to give whatever is needed to assist the poor.

After rising through the ranks of a career in professional ministry, being offered the keys to the executive suite in ways I would be too self-conscious to detail, I have dedicated my life to the poor. This climb down the career ladder has been the best strategic demotion I could have ever planned if I had had such foresight.

I couldn't relate to being in the in-crowd and trying to emulate the priorities of Jesus at the same time. But something unexpected has happened. I have found more excitement, more opportunity and more fulfillment in serving the poor than speaking to any crowd of thousands or rubbing shoulders with the in-crowd of the religiously successful.

In Matthew 25, Jesus delivers a warning/reward scenario that could almost lead the reader to believe that salvation is earned through acts of service to the misfits—the sick, the imprisoned, the poor, *et al.* But he is clearly telling us not how to be saved but how to know if we have been saved:

Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.

Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.⁷

In that warning, perhaps producing feelings of guilt within you as you

7 Matthew 25:40, 45

read the words, you might be missing something.

There is an opportunity to draw close to Jesus by serving the poor. He is asking us to come visit him, to feed him, to give him shelter, to serve him through serving the poor.

And, as thousands who have traveled with me have discovered, the reward of doing so is greater than they ever could have imagined... they found the Jesus of the gospels in the eyes of the fortunate poor.

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Leaving the Ninety-Nine

"You would not have called to me unless I had been calling to you."

—Aslan to Jill Pole in C.S. Lewis' *The Silver Chair*

*"Amazing grace! how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found"*

—John Newton

Tax collectors and "sinners" crowded in to listen to Jesus. The teachers of law started saying, "This man keeps company with some questionable people—he even shares meals with these people."

Jesus heard them and told them a story:

"If any of you owns a hundred sheep and one of them is missing, what do you do? Won't you leave the other ninety-nine sheep unattended and go looking for the lost one? When you find it, you are so happy. You hoist it up on your shoulder and carry it home. You call everyone you can think of and tell them, 'Let's celebrate! I found my lost sheep!'"

—From Luke 15:1-6, CEV

That fence cost \$100 per section—we just paid \$400 to get it fixed!"

"I'm truly sorry about that, but you can't arrest high schoolers for hanging out at the church," I replied to the deacon who was understandably upset. At the time, I worked as an 18-year-old youth leader in a small California community congregation. I had a lot to learn about how things worked in the business of church. Basically, I was a spiritual entrepreneur with acne, an unreliable car and

nachos.

The church stood in a retirement community which meant two things: a lot of senior citizens and teenagers were bored out of their collective minds. It made for a great place to reach students, except for one problem—the congregation of over 400 people didn't come stocked with many students, and the youth ministry arose from these “unchurched” victims of boredom.

Not necessarily the greatest mix.

The senior members of the church weren't opposed to what we were doing, but...they liked it from a distance. This arrangement would have worked out fine—except we were right next door to the high school. A great ministry opportunity to me, and a too-close-for-comfort dilemma for the elderly members of the congregation. A lone fence separated the chosen from the “delinquents,” trouble always brewing. It was less of a barrier and more of a theological metaphor waiting to happen.

As a young, idealistic, youth worker, who graduated from high school only three months before taking my position as “Youth music and outreach pastor,” I received a monthly salary of \$300 and I felt sure everyone would agree with my “take no prisoners” approach to reaching the world of the acne-infested population of young, disinterested students. I immediately unearthed picnic, pool, and foosball tables, declaring the church property the new hangout—complete with a burrito and nacho bar! I stood tall, a genius of bridge building.

Except, to the congregation of mostly tolerant senior citizens. The sight of mohawked, combat-booted, tattooed teens gracing the church compound eating burritos and “making out” did not cultivate comfort. Then the vandalism began.

Not much... four sections of chain-link fence were inexplicably torn down. I still have no idea why, or who did it. No one else knew the answers to those questions then either, but the cause remained clear—I single-handedly made the residence of the Almighty into a haven for riff raff.

“\$400 dollars is not much,” I argued with the deacon. He already informed the police that the teenage “loiterers” were no longer welcome guests of the church.

"Maybe not, but it's going to stop. They can't just come here and vandalize the Lord's house!"

"We don't know that the teenagers did this, and it's *just* a fence," I told him with my best dismissive tone. "See the girl out there with the shaved head and the black eye makeup?" (I was pretty sure he actually couldn't see this far at his age) "She accepted Christ last Wednesday."

"Oh, *I get it*. If one person accepts Christ in your youth group, then who cares if the building gets burned to the ground!"

I thought for a second before I calmly replied, "I don't think it comes down to those kinds of choices, but if it did, if the flames of this building would prevent someone from spending eternity in the flames of hell, then I'd buy the gasoline and light the match." There was a fine line between evangelism and arson in my morally uncomplicated mind.

"Nevertheless," he replied, "If I see teenagers hanging out here without you, they will be arrested by the police for trespassing."

I held out my hands as if I was being "cuffed."

"Tell the police to bring an extra set of handcuffs because they won't arrest anyone without arresting me first!" I announced. *It was my best youth pastor meets action movie moment. I was basically the burrito-fueled MLK of youth outreach.*

I'm not sure I won the argument, but the police were informed not to arrest teenagers on the holy grounds.

Then came the gate . . .

Narrow is the Gate

Sometime before taking the youth position, some other youth worker (we never did find out who) arranged the installation of a gate in the chain link fence separating the church property from the high school. I couldn't believe how cool and creative it was. The gate only saved a couple of hundred feet of walking from the high school, but it made a symbolic gesture—a church opening its arms to the students of the only high school in town. If high school is a great portal to adulthood through which all must pass, then the gate would be a metaphoric passageway to spiritual enlightenment. Thoughts of the "narrow gate" of which Jesus spoke danced in my

newly adult mind.

Only one problem—the gate stayed shut and a gigantic lock screamed, “NO STUDENTS ALLOWED,” to every young scholar who passed.

Easily solved, I thought. We would unlock the gate with a grand ceremony. I would simply ask the school if we could unlock their gate, effectively jumping through all hoops and accompanying any procedure involving the bureaucratic public education system required of us. *On second thought, maybe it wouldn't be so easy.*

Properly prayed up and with my ugliest tie around my neck (I thought I would dress like a school principal—you know, *all things to all men*), I approached the school about, “the Lock.” I thought of taking this to the highest level, standing before the city council like Jimmy Stewart taking on the congress in *Mister Smith Goes to Washington* (which I've never actually seen), but I settled on the lower level and the principal.

The response I received shocked me a bit.

“Great,” he said. “Let's unlock it! I can't imagine why it would be locked. But I'm glad you came by, because the gate could send a real message to students and inform them that they are welcome at your church.” He let me know he would find the guy, who could find the guy, who could find the key. It was exciting! My prayers were answered. I took on the system and prevailed through spiritual warfare. Wow! Was God on my side or what?

Then the strangest thing happened. Word came from the school that they couldn't unlock the gate after all. Why?

The lock belonged to *the church!*

OK, I thought, *sad, but easily solvable*. I requested the key to the lock from the church secretary. I would right this wrong done by generations past. This would make good sermon material. Then, she informed me of no more key; the lock had been there so long, no one knew who put it there or why. I decided I would hire a lock smith to ceremoniously cut the lock from the gate.

However, my request to hire a locksmith, strangely, I thought, would need to be brought to the church board for a decision. I patiently waited for the next monthly board meeting, but I didn't mind. For

me, the drama of the unlocking grew and grew—this would be awesome!

When the board meeting came, the board expressed their decision simple and clear—No.

I'd love to tell you I won this battle eventually, but I never did. The gate remained locked for as long as I knew about it and maybe it still is. I left the church 6 months later.

For a short time, I became a giant slayer who reached the masses of unkempt teens. But like David, I quickly became a young man running for his life from the spears of those in charge. The three hundred teenagers who came to my outreaches went from "lost souls in need Christ" to "vandals who aren't getting the message."

Since this time, I learned the important lesson from Jesus' teaching about 100 sheep.

Being the 99

I don't know much about shepherding. To my knowledge I've never even met a shepherd, and I don't believe they're like secret agents, ready to pull their concealed staff out of its shoulder holster from underneath their robe.

Not relating to shepherds, I have always thought about Jesus' story of the shepherd leaving the 99 to find the one lost sheep from the perspective of the sheep. And I've always pictured myself as the "one."

I grew up in church. I attended a small mainline denominational church where I went to Sunday school each week (my aunt taught the class). I attended Sunday morning service, sometimes by choice (depending on what the current pastors' daughter looked like, only being honest), and to Sunday night service (never by choice). I later went to Christian youth camp every summer. I even directed several. I went to a youth group and actually led music for three different youth groups at the same time. I know the system and how the saints in the pews think, I grew up with it. But I have, alas, always felt like an outsider.

Through Christian college and being a professional minister for most

*I've always
pictured myself
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...I have, alas,
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of my adult life, I'm not sure I have always fit in with the 99. Maybe it's me—they seem to be really accepting of me, but I have always felt like maybe it's because they see me as one of the 99—perhaps number 42, I don't know for sure.

I have worn the uniform (I actually only own two suits and a couple of ties). I know the songs by heart, hundreds of them, I've even written some. I know the jargon. Although I try to never use it, it slips through sometimes. I get the gossip—I have an inside track—but for whatever reason, I've never related to the 99. I've more often felt like the “one” impersonating number 72 and getting away with it.

I don't have any big secrets; I suppose I have some small ones, but they aren't too interesting. I love Jesus and always try to live by what's right. I pray. I study my Bible frequently and have read it all the way through many times. I've memorized hundreds of verses in multiple translations and can quote scripture at will. I know I'm going to heaven and know Jesus loves me very deeply.

I guess it all comes down to knowing I'm only one step of his grace away from getting lost. I know I've been found, but the sense of “one-ness” has never left me, probably because I've left the flock so many times, and the temptation to wander off is still real to me. I guess I feel like I'm the “one” who's back after being retrieved by the shepherd, but not really part of the 99. Consequently, I think I know where to find other “ones.” I think like them; I know where they wander off to, and I know it's tough for them to be willing to be found.

The thing I've learned from being part of this thing we call “church” is that the 99 don't like being left behind. They like the pasture they are in with the shepherd. They like being safe and protected. And they wish he wouldn't leave to find the “one.” It makes them uncomfortable.

The interesting thing about Jesus' story is the context in which he tells it. He's in trouble, again, for hanging out with the lost and socially unacceptable—all “1s.” The 99 of which he speaks aren't the found—he regularly blasts the Pharisees and religious scholars for their hypocrisy.

The 99 he tells the story about are those who don't realize they're lost. He's telling the story from *their perspective*.

They see themselves as found even though Jesus does not. Jesus is essentially saying, *"Look, you think you have it all together and you don't need me. So why bother getting all bent out of shape because I'm spending my time with the people you think are lost. You might not get what I'm saying to you about your lives, but you must agree these that people need some spiritual help."*

The same Jesus who says he'll never leave us or forsake us says that he'll leave behind 99 good people who don't think they need to repent to find one who does. And, he says God treasures the lost ones more.

"Jesus said, 'In the same way, there is more happiness in heaven because of one sinner who turns to God than over ninety-nine good people who don't need to.'"

But the ninety-nine aren't "good" people who don't need to repent. In speaking to the legalists, Jesus is employing irony in his words. Those "good" people believe they have no need for him anyway, at least not the real Jesus. It's the whole point. There are no "good" people who don't need Jesus; there are only people who think they are good and people who know they are lost.

We are all lost.

Jesus doesn't leave the true believers for the lost ones who aren't part of the flock... the point is, *we are all "ones."*

Some of us are grateful to be *found* and carried by the shepherd. Some of us tend to believe we can look after ourselves and don't need finding.

The problem with having a ninety-nine attitude is that you'll always need fences and gates to protect you, because the shepherd is out there looking *for the "ones."*

1 From Luke 15:7 CEV

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Taking a Punch

"Everyone has a plan 'till they get punched in the mouth."

—Mike Tyson

"The best revenge is to be unlike him who performed the injury."

—Marcus Aurelius

"You probably know the law says, 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,' but I'm telling you, you can do better. Don't even defend yourself against an evil person. If someone hits you on the right side of your face, offer the left side too. If someone sues you for your shirt, give them your jacket as well. If someone forces you to carry their load one mile, carry it another."

—From Mathew 5:38-41

You know what I admire about you the most? Your ability to take a punch."

I sat with a friend, enjoying a coffee and regaling him with stories of defeat and perceived injustice. I found myself going through a particularly difficult one. I became stuck in the middle of an incredibly trying situation and a very contentious lawsuit to boot. Thankfully, although I have not escaped being sued over the years, I remained neither plaintiff nor defendant in this particular suit—but somehow this seemed to make it worse.

My reputation suffered. Instead of one side trying to discredit me, there were three warring camps, and two of the three combatants were trying to impeach my character. I explained to my friend the best I could do, that as my reputation bled, this meant silence. I

would answer people who asked me for the truth, but I never publicly raised the issue or went to the powers that be without being summoned.

One side claimed that I was being vindictive because of the crimes that were victimizing some friends of mine, and the primary antagonist of another camp contacted anyone who would listen to assert that I was lying for any number of ever-changing reasons. I didn't bring the subject up unless asked to account for actions, but I became painted as a crazed and misguided militant at best, and a deceptive usurper at worst.

A third camp thought I needed to air my perspective on social media. I remained unconvinced that the internet was the best forum to deal with the situation. Not publicly responding seemed to be my best option—to not play into the picture being painted of me. It also seemed to be the example of Jesus. *Though I admit, flipping tables was tempting.*

But taking a punch didn't feel admirable. It felt more like... *taking a punch*, and I already knew no rhetorical flourish would solve it anyway. Most people taking sides won't listen. It would have been like standing in the Roman coliseum and trying to reason with the roaring crowds who want to see your blood spilled. In that kind of arena, truth isn't the goal—total victory is.

Slapped on Both Sides of the Face

Jesus was not a pacifist, at least not by the classical definition. If so, he didn't tell us. He seemed to say nothing about whether wars were acceptable under certain circumstances. He did talk about war a lot, but if as a pacifist, he failed to mention it.

A reading of the Old Testament wouldn't lead someone to think of God as abhorring all war or violence. God seems to hate unjust violence, but if Jesus opposed all violence, he would probably need to make it clear when refuting the Torah and the prophets.

Yet, this seems to be exactly what Jesus taught, and when he said, "You have heard that the law says, 'An eye for an eye...'" he didn't quote one passage in the Torah, he quoted three—Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:21. This was the heart of punishment in Mosaic law, sort of a karma in real life, *play stupid games, win stupid prizes* kind of reasoning. For us it seems clear he is refuting the law and saying there needs to be justice reform, but not

to Jesus' audience.

They knew the kind of law Jesus talked about included the Roman legal system, one without much of a prison system, so the punishment needed to be immediate and complete. Punishment needed to be enacted, to be indebted to the injured party or put to death. Justice came swift, and judges were trained to know the law.

But in his famous turn-the-other-cheek speech, Jesus isn't talking to judges. He's talking to ordinary people—ordinary people who, like us, are tempted to take the law into their own hands. He's not transforming a judicial system; he's trying to transform hearts, and this is way more than a tirade against vigilantism. He's not telling people that they should take a punch. He's telling them *how* to take a punch. Because taking a punch is inevitable.

Jesus is not telling people they *should* take a punch. He's telling them *how* to take a punch.

Spoiler Alert

My all-time favorite movie is Big Jake. I've probably seen it 20 times. It's a John Wayne movie which isn't really a John Wayne movie (I've never been a big fan) but at the same time is the most John Wayne that a movie can be.

It's the story of a crusty, old, cattle rancher, Jacob "Big Jake" McCandles, who long ago left his family after discovering that domestication didn't suit him once his Texas ranch became successful. When a gang abducts his grandson (whom he's never met), murders several ranch hands, critically wounds one of his sons, and demands \$1,000,000 in early 1900s dollars, his estranged wife calls him in to handle the unpleasant job of getting the boy back.

He trades verbal jabs with his resentful adult sons along the journey and ultimately confronts the kidnappers' gang leader, John Fain. Fain lets him know he holds the upper hand and will kill the boy if anything goes wrong. He makes Jake acknowledge the situation, but what he doesn't know is that Jake and his stubborn wife Martha have decided together that they will not pay the kidnappers for the violence they have brought on their family. Martha tells Jake something only making sense after finding out that no money ever made it into the box that Jake transports during the whole movie: "We don't have any choice but to give them what they've asked

for." She means justice.

When the villain, Fain, opens the money box, he finds newspaper clippings and quickly realizes Jake holds the upper hand now. Jake leans in and whispers, "And now you understand. Anything goes wrong, anything at all... your fault, my fault, nobody's fault... it won't matter—I'm gonna blow your head off. No matter what else happens, no matter who gets killed, I'm gonna blow your head off."

All the kidnappers are killed, and Jake, wounded but alive, rides off into the sunset with his two sons—and his grandson. It's a great story. The kidnappers get what they had coming... Justice...

I could stop writing and go watch it right now...

But life doesn't work like this. Justice, in this world, is elusive. Revenge is a dish rarely served at all. We take punches. You don't get to avoid the fight or block every strike. You will take a punch. Jesus doesn't tell us we'll never take a punch; he tells us *how* to take a punch.

And he calls for defiance.

Jesus says you don't show what you're made of by punching back, but by taking a punch, resetting yourself and showing you can't be broken. The situation assumes there is no way out...injustice cannot be avoided.

Jesus lived in a time when the brutal Roman empire stood not merely unchallenged, but unchallengeable. The Roman war machine stood as the most dominant fighting force in history. When they punched, you felt it.

The Roman Empire was brutality personified. In Jesus' day, its rise was still recent history—marked by the ruthless suppression of resistance. During the Gallic Wars, fought in the generation before Jesus, Julius Caesar led a campaign that devastated what is now France and Switzerland. Ancient sources like Plutarch and Appian claim that one million Celts were killed and another million enslaved, out of an estimated population of six million. Some modern historians view this as exaggerated, but even conservative estimates acknowledge mass slaughter and cultural destruction.

And then there was Spartacus. During the Third Servile War (73–71 BCE), an army of escaped slaves—led by about seventy gladiators,

most famously Spartacus—grew to over 100,000 strong. After their final defeat, 6,000 surviving rebels were crucified along the Appian Way, stretching from Rome to Capua. The message was unmistakable: resistance would be met with terror. Resistance is futile.

The ruthlessness didn't stay confined to foreigners and slaves either. When Roman soldiers were found guilty of an offense, from insubordination to dereliction, the guilty were rounded up to draw straws as part of a punishment called "The decimation." One in ten drew the short straw, ordered clubbed to death by the rest of the guilty who avoided death but not the traumatic memory of executing their own brother-in-arms. Justice remained immediate, severe and decisive.

When the Roman empire punched you in the face, there could be no defense, no escape, no fighting back.

The social justice system of Jewish society under Roman rule didn't offer a sharp contrast to the Romans either: Power ruled everything; slavery was commonplace; women subjugated to whatever roles men gave them; the poor lived oppressed; and the ethnically impure rendered outcasts. Those on the bottom rung of society took a lot of punches.

What Jesus said in his famously confusing directive made far more sense to his hearers than it does to us. They knew what he meant.

Misunderstanding the Peace

People have misunderstood Jesus' statements throughout history. Maya Angelou said, "If somebody is really trying to take your head off with a baseball bat - I don't know how long you're supposed to stand there and turn the other cheek, so he or she can get a better angle at taking your head off."¹

Leo Tolstoy took the statement to such an extreme he became a proponent of Christian anarchism—the idea that no government anywhere can ever be legitimate, since they use force to enforce justice: "Christ says, 'Do not resist evil.' The sole object of courts of law is – to resist evil. Christ enjoins us to return good for evil. Courts of law return evil for evil... So, the true sense of the doctrine is that Christ

¹ commonly attributed to Maya Angelou, but unverified.

forbids all courts of law."²

Jesus neither evaluated the justice system nor suggested choosing a life without protections. He, in fact, addressed certain injustices. When Jesus specifically said the right cheek, it's for a reason.

In *Jesus and Non-Violence - A Third way*, Walter Wink explains, for a world where most people are right-handed, the only way one strikes your right cheek is with a backhand. It's an act meant to inflict insult as much as pain. Striking a peer carried a huge fine, but you could strike a subordinate.

Wink writes, *"A backhand slap was the normal way of admonishing inferiors. Masters backhanded slaves; husbands, wives; parents, children; men, women; Romans, Jews. We have here a set of unequal relations, in each of which retaliation would be suicidal. The only normal response would be cowering submission."*³

But Jesus talked about another way. When he said, "don't resist an evil person," he is saying resistance is too weak a response. Defiance is the proper response.

Don't resist. Defy.

Offering your left cheek to a right-hander who already backhanded you gives them reason to pause... they could backhand you left-handed, but it's weaker.

Also, there's another layer to this. In Jesus' time, the left hand was considered unclean. You ate with your right hand, greeted with your right hand, conducted business with your right hand. The left hand? Reserved for bathroom duties.

So if someone backhanded you across the right cheek, they were asserting dominance—treating you as beneath them. But if, after you turned the other cheek, they struck you with their left hand, it crossed a line.

It wasn't discipline anymore—it was disgrace. It wasn't just putting a subordinate in their place; it was losing composure, revealing something ugly about the one doing the hitting. The slap said more about the slapper than the slapped. It turned a calculated insult into

² Leo Tolstoy, *What I Believe*

³ *Jesus and Non-Violence - A Third way*, p. 15

a public unraveling.

When Jesus spoke about giving your coat to someone who had already sued you for your shirt, his audience knew exactly what he meant. Crushing debt was one of the biggest social issues of the time. The poor were drowning under loans they couldn't repay—mostly due to outrageous interest rates and a court system rigged in favor of the wealthy. The rich, burdened by Roman taxes, found a loophole: land wasn't taxed like money. So they targeted the inherited land of the poor, forcing families to surrender property that had been in their lineage for generations.

In Jewish law, suing someone for their shirt might've been the last legal straw. You couldn't take someone's coat—it was their blanket, their shelter, their dignity. To take it would leave them exposed, literally and symbolically. So when Jesus said, "Give them your coat too," he wasn't just talking about generosity. He was calling for protest. He was saying, *"Let the world see what's being done to you. Strip naked if you must—expose the injustice."*

And he didn't stop there. The same spirit pulses through his teaching about going the extra mile. Roman law allowed soldiers to force civilians to carry their gear for one mile. Jews hated this rule. They hated the occupation. God had promised this land to Abraham and Moses, and now Roman boots trampled it.

**"Show them they
don't own you—
show them what
you're made of."**

Jesus didn't tell them to fight back. He told them to flip the script. "You can burn with rage for thirty minutes, or you can carry that pack a second mile—do what they *can't* force you to do. Show them they don't own you—*show them what you're made of.*"

Dog Bites Which Changed a Country

In the early 1960's, Jim Crow laws in the south and general racism throughout the country led African American people to protest for equal civil rights. Things weren't going well for the protesters led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Public opinion didn't stand with them, and the protests were seen mostly by people who ignored the movement or saw it as an irritant.

By 1963, Dr. King and his leaders were said to have been demoralized by the general lack of public approval and the vicious

attacks on the protestors who were often met with fire hoses, police batons and attack dogs.

The upcoming protest in Birmingham, Alabama, on May 3rd, seemed like it would be more of the same. Warnings were already being issued stating attack dogs would be part of the suppression plan. King and his co-leaders wondered what would happen if, instead of taking measures to protect against the attack dogs, the youngest of the young protesters would be put out in front to be bitten by them.

Enter Walter Lee Fowlkes, a college student at Miles College, who volunteered to be made vulnerable to the dogs on May 3rd, 1963. As he felt the bite pierce his abdomen, the cameras captured the now famous photo, and it went as viral as 1963 allowed. A photograph of officer Dick Middleton setting a dog upon 15-year-old Walter Gadsden appeared on the front page of the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and the Washington Post on May 4. The tide of public opinion changed. Two months later, on July 2nd, a powerful Democrat and a powerful Republican struck a deal on what would become the Civil Rights Act.

Let Injustice Reign

All of us will face injustice. The scales will not always be tipped in our favor. There isn't always a way out. When you face oppression and mistreatment, you can try to resist, but your outward resistance can never equal the power of your inner defiance. That kind of power is rooted in the deep conviction that justice is coming—if not in this life, then in the next. The balance of power will eventually be rectified by the one who holds the scales.

Turning the other cheek isn't weakness. It's restraint forged in fortitude. The greatest form of defiance.

And, the same traveling Rabbi messiah who made these radical statements we still stumble through today would practice what he taught and live out his own words. He would be betrayed, whipped, viciously beaten, put on trial, and crucified.

He contained the power to stop it all at any time. And stopping it would've been a stunning display of strength. But instead, he chose a greater power: the strength to carry the injustice of the world.

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Damage

"One must not let oneself be misled: they say 'Judge not!' but they send to Hell everything that stands in their way."

—Friedrich Nietzsche (from The Anti-Christ)

"Trauma is not the bad things that happen to you, but what happens inside you as a result of what happens to you."

—Gabor Maté, Hungarian-Canadian physician and author

One of the religious leaders invited Jesus to be the guest of honor at a dinner. But when Jesus sat down, a woman whose lack of morals was well known broke into the dinner, uninvited, and knelt behind Jesus at his feet. She was weeping and her tears fell on his feet washing the dust off. She then cleaned his feet with her long hair. Then she started kissing his feet and poured very expensive perfume on them.

When the host saw all of this, he thought, 'This guy is supposed to be a prophet? If he was really a prophet, he wouldn't let this sinful woman anywhere near him, let alone touch him!'

But Jesus made it abundantly clear he was a prophet when he read the man's thoughts. He directly addressed what the man was thinking. "Simon, pay attention to what I'm about to ask you."

—From Luke 7:36-40

I used to believe that the world was made up of two kinds of people—those who were healthy, and those who weren't. Life has its way of letting you know when you're wrong; I was wrong.

I grew up in a healthy family. My parents weren't exactly standing on the shoulders of parenting giants—more like tiptoeing on the toes of

well-meaning amateurs. But they stood tall anyway. More importantly, they kept learning. Mistakes they made when my brothers and I were kids were erased (at least in my mind) as they continued to grow as parents of adult children.

My mom and dad were still in love after 55+ years of marriage when my dad died of cancer, and they would do anything for their kids and grandkids.

Our family remained intact, loving, and generally healthy in many ways, but I did take some hits along the way. I was severely bullied as a child, and the ultra-religious environment we grew up in could often be less than positive. Our church, Christian school, and overall atmosphere of conferences and other church affiliations was a mixed bag—like trail mix, but with more judging and fewer M&Ms. Many strange—sometimes mean—people directed things and stayed very authoritarian as a rule.

Adults yelled at you, berated you, and demanded conformity to the unhealthy culture which made them feel safe. It was like being raised by a committee of boot camp instructors who moonlighted as theology majors.

For the most part, I took the good and rebelled against the bad. I was a rebel with a cause, like James Dean with a leather-bound Thompson-chain reference bible instead of a leather jacket¹. I pushed every limit and challenged every authoritarian act, doing it from an innate sense of the unhealthy. Most of these people were good people but often didn't create a good environment. After overcoming the vicious bullying I experienced, I gained a strong sense of self-determination as a teenager. I forgave, moved on, and decided not to take any crap from people who were acting out of their own insecurity. I emerged resolute, eager, and ready to lead.

By my late teens, I developed the idea that some people chose to do what it took to be healthy, and some didn't. They could choose. You could live life damaged or renewed—it all came down to the choices you made.

Although I experienced some indications of being wrong, I wouldn't

¹ A Thompson-Chain was a very nerd-cool study bible that showed you were serious about your faith. Highlights in pages were also a sign of intense scriptural reflection.

let the evidence of complexity challenge my resolute belief of forgiveness, moral conviction, and surrender to God making up a spiritual formula which would fix things. The Pythagorean theorem had its $a^2+b^2=c^2$, and I formulated a theological theorem that I learned from great leaders. It worked for me, so it must, I concluded, work for everyone.

I wouldn't let complexity challenge my formula. I was like a spiritual Will Hunting leaving my solution on chalkboards—confident in my equation, even when life kept throwing in irrational numbers.

If You aren't Damaged yet...

A few years ago, I found myself listening to the groundbreaking NPR podcast, *This American Life (TAL)*, where each week, iconic host Ira Glass would bring the listeners three stories around a theme. *TAL* could be whimsical, profound, or heart-breaking, and often eye-opening in some way. One week, one of the stories told (an episode with a theme and title I can't remember) centered around the audio, blog-like narrative of a young female reporter who battled cancer for years. As she described the endless doctor appointments, hospital visits, and treatment sessions, she said something profound.

"I used to see the world as two kinds of people—the healthy and the sick—and felt sorry for my bad luck that I was one of *the sick*. Years of battling cancer has led me to see the world as two kinds of people, but they aren't the healthy and the sick, they are the sick and those *who will soon get sick*." (I'm paraphrasing the way I heard it from memory.)

As a young man, I was comforted by the two categories I placed people in—the healthy and the sick. Those who were damaged and those who were fixed. However, as I learned about the sexual abuse of my closest friends, I experienced some emotional derailing of my

Life is made up of two kinds of people: the damaged and the soon-to-be-damaged.

own, and noticed that the great leaders who taught me the formula could be profoundly flawed themselves, I began to realize that life is made up of two kinds of people, but those two categories weren't the *healthy* and the *sick*, but the *damaged* and the *soon-to-be-damaged*.

From a physical standpoint, life itself is a

harsh environment slowly poisoning everyone until death takes hold. From the moment you are born, your life has an expiration date. Life is a fatal disease.

Of course, we all know this, but the emotional damage done by life is less obvious to some of us than others.

Crashing the Party

All four gospels tell the story of Jesus being at a dinner where a woman pours expensive perfume on his feet and dries them with her hair. The details in these stories are different and it's hard to tell if this happened a few times or only once, but the reactions of the people watching are never positive. When the gospel of Luke relays the story, the contrast between the woman and the host of the party is the most pronounced.

The recollection of this instance is of a religious leader, one of the most respected classes in first-century Israel, being the host who invited Jesus. The woman is described as immoral. The clear indication is that she is the town whore. She probably was a prostitute. However, she may have been forced into prostitution to repay a debt, or perhaps found it the easiest way to use her beauty to make money.

Whatever the reason for her sexual activity, it wouldn't be a secret who she was. When she burst in to crash the dinner, it would be a shock to everyone, but what she did next would be even more shocking. Luke tells us she wept so hard there were enough tears to wash Jesus' feet. She then dried them with her hair and poured perfume on them.

I know if this happened now, it would engender a strong reaction, but in Jesus' day, it'd be way out of the ordinary—scandalous. The crying and theatrics were one thing but using her hair to dry his feet, wet from her tears, is an implication of something very intense.

Jewish women were all but required to have long hair. Paul would later state it to be self-evident females with short hair were disgraceful in his time. Women were supposed to have long hair, but they would seldom let their hair down unless covered. It would be considered too attractive—too much of a flaunting of beauty—like wearing lingerie in public. Prostitutes were famous for their hair. Long, luxurious, and elaborate hairstyles were part of the craft to lure men into paying them for sex.

When the woman in this story let her hair down, people may have gasped at the act, but instead of using it to try to attract Jesus, she used it to wipe his feet clean of the dirt her tears washed away. She used one of her most beautiful assets as a rag. She made it clear that her tears weren't theatrics. She sacrificed the beauty she used to attract men to display her repentance, and what she did next solidified her extraordinary display.

Perfumes are still used as an olfactory symbol of beauty in our time. How a woman smells is important today, but it's a lot easier to smell good now. In Jesus' time, lack of daily bathing made it hard to smell nice. People learned to live with the natural odors of the human body, but prostitutes needed to be the paragon of beauty and sexual desire if they wanted to make a living, so perfume became another tool of the trade. When the woman poured out her supply of perfume, described as a year's wages, she wanted to show her desire to burn the bridge to her past. This much perfume surely held the entirety of her stock.

Her actions, while risking rejection and humiliation, were to send a message. She meant to beg for forgiveness and had no intention of ever going back. She wanted to not only make it clear to Jesus, but to everyone watching. Jesus' message of repentance and forgiveness hit her so hard that she decided to walk away from everything she knew to become something new.

A Tale of Two People

The religious leader hosting the dinner remained less shocked at this well-known woman acting in an unbecoming way than how Jesus allowed it. Luke portrays it as the leader thinking to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him. She's a sinner!"²

Jesus simply answered him in a way which both refuted these accusations and got to the real crux of the matter.

Like so many other times, he used a story to make his point. He tells the story of two men who were both forgiven a debt; one is forgiven a few months wages, say \$10,000, while the other is forgiven a few years wages, maybe \$100,000. He asked the religious leaders who they thought would love the forgiver more.

² Luke 7:39 NLT

The leader gave the obvious answer: the one who was forgiven more would love more.

It may have seemed to everyone there that Jesus was saying, although both the religious leader and the prostitute are offered forgiveness—the woman needed it more, and therefore she would love more.

This is *not* what Jesus is saying in this story. Both men needed forgiveness. Both could be punished with prison time for the debt they couldn't repay. The amount of the debt didn't matter. Neither could pay.

Jesus looked at the woman but kept talking to the religious leader. He explained that what she had done, she did because she knew she couldn't buy her forgiveness. She gave everything and knew it wasn't enough. She was merely expressing her gratitude and making a grand gesture to show she would never go back.

She didn't do what she did to earn Jesus' forgiveness. She already knew she was forgiven—she heard his teaching.

The host knew he made some mistakes here and there, but he thought the rituals he performed and the position he held were enough to erase his small sins. He wasn't grateful that Jesus offered him a new life, a new start, and unconditional grace—he didn't want a new life. He was enjoying the one he had.

He didn't understand that his debt couldn't be repaid without what Jesus offered him. As far as he knew, he was doing fine. But, no doubt, a time would soon come when the corruption on the inside would become visible damage unable to be ignored. He would then need forgiveness and be willing to throw himself at the feet of the one who could offer it.

It happens to all of us. It's a question of when the crushing weight of the debt which cannot be repaid becomes too much to carry.

It happens to all of us. It's a question of when the crushing weight of the debt which cannot be repaid becomes too much to carry.

Equation=False

I used to think some people refused to get healthy and some were

doing okay, but two things have chipped away at my once-held commitment to the theorem.

The first is spending time with people in crisis. Working at a church makes you something of a parish priest, and even though protestants don't practice the sacrament of confession, they do find themselves in crisis. It's then those who work in the professional ministry are expected to step into people's worst versions of their own lives and help sort things out. It is never pretty. There aren't some people who are broken and some who are doing okay. At their worst, everyone is broken—and it's only a matter of time until everyone finds themselves there.

The second is life. Recently, my daughter was sitting with me and asking me about various scars on my face, hands, and arms. Having lived life as an amateur daredevil growing up and constantly building something in my adult years, I have many, many scars. Some of them have a story and some are not connected to anything I can recall, but all of them were damage done to my body at some point.

Some of my physical injuries are unseen. I nearly broke my back while cliff diving in college, and x-rays still show the damage to my lower back. Many of my teeth have been repaired to hide the damage time has done. You can't tell by looking at me, but I now need glasses to read small print in the morning or at night.

Some of my damage is self-inflicted. Some was done to me. Some is from the undefeated march of time. But the damage is done.

When I was younger, I healed quickly from both physical and emotional damage, but now I heal slower from both. I understand the emotional damage better, and it makes it both easier to work through and more difficult to absorb because I carry more negative memories now. They don't always hurt but they add weight to carry.

I have been damaged in ways I cannot fix, and I have done damage to others I cannot undo.

As a young man, I thought that with the right tools of my faith, I could fix both the damage I sustained and the damage I inflicted, but now I know I can do neither.

I need a spiritual physician to perform psychological surgery.

The Upside of Sin

Jesus finishes by telling both the observers and the woman that her sins are forgiven. When he does, he makes a point to say what everyone already knows: her sins are “many.”

She has made the grand display to everyone in her community that she is never going back. She has used her beautiful hair as a rag and exhausted her perfume supply. She has made it clear—*she’s not going back to that life.*

But she might. She might make the same mistake again and be forgiven again. It happens. Forgiveness isn’t a license to sin, but it is available to the repentant.

Even if it doesn’t, she’ll make other mistakes. It’s unavoidable. Even the Apostle Peter acts like a hypocrite years after the day of Pentecost and establishing the church. Paul tells the story in Galatians. We humans get better, but we never completely leave behind the damage done to us and to ourselves and others by us.

The only upside of being a sinner is it gives us the ability to continue to recognize we can’t repay the debt. This requires us to throw ourselves at the feet of a savior who we believe can forgive us in a grand display of repentance, leading us to hear him say, yet again, “Your faith has saved you—go in peace.”³

The only upside of being a sinner is it gives us the ability to continue to recognize we can’t repay the debt.

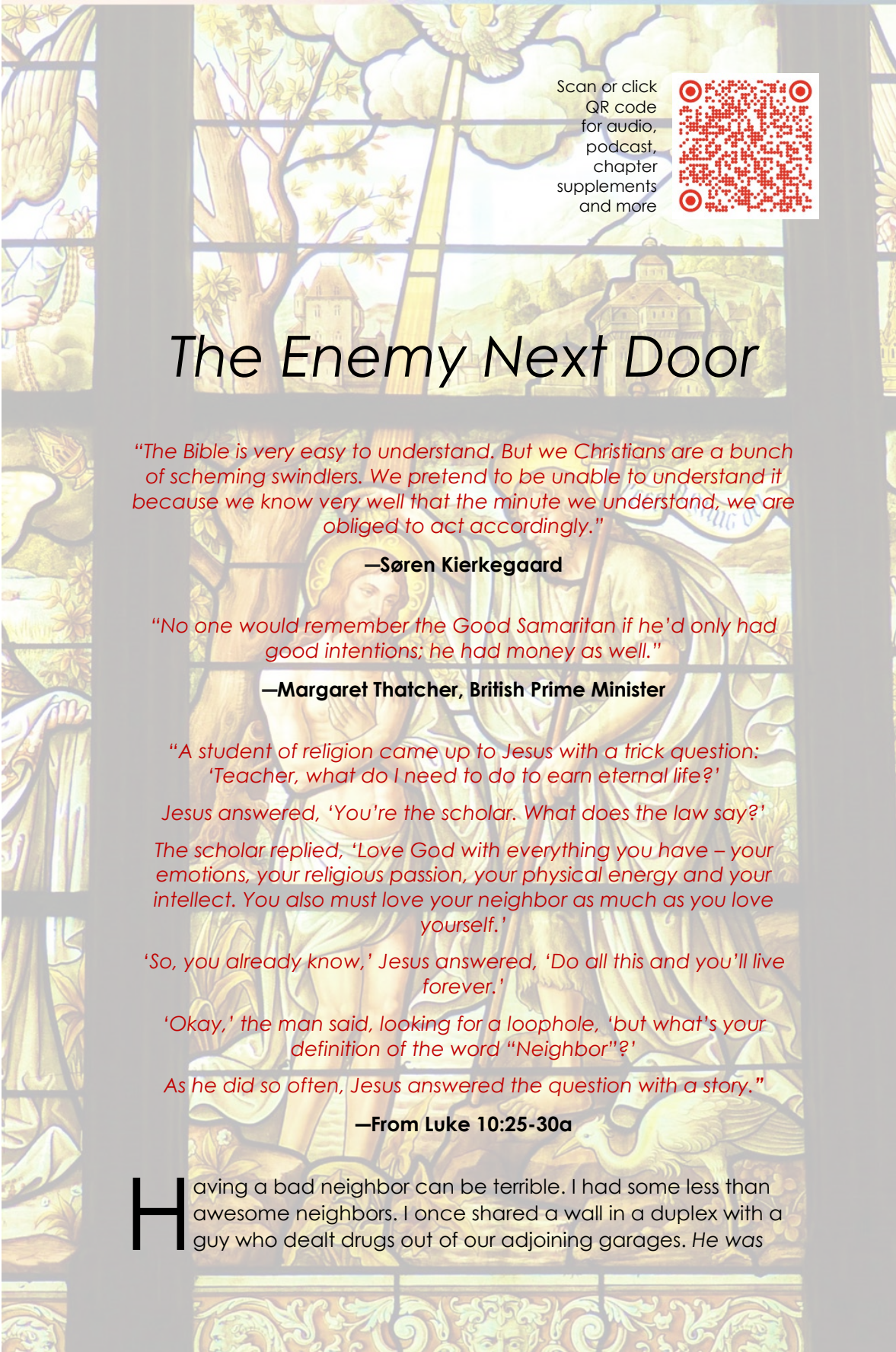
Like the old man I will become in the decades before me, we will all need constant spiritual care to fix the damage that ourselves, others, and time will bring.

Damage has been done to us and by us, and more is coming.

When time brings our inevitable collapse under the crushing weight of this existence, we will all gladly turn our hair to rags and throw our greatest treasures at the feet of the only one who can turn wounds we can’t live with into scars we can bear.

And like a broken bone which heals more strongly than before the damage was done, with the right physician we sometimes become stronger than before.

³ Luke 7:50 NLT



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The Enemy Next Door

"The Bible is very easy to understand. But we Christians are a bunch of scheming swindlers. We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obliged to act accordingly."

—Søren Kierkegaard

"No one would remember the Good Samaritan if he'd only had good intentions; he had money as well."

—Margaret Thatcher, British Prime Minister

"A student of religion came up to Jesus with a trick question: 'Teacher, what do I need to do to earn eternal life?'

Jesus answered, 'You're the scholar. What does the law say?'

The scholar replied, 'Love God with everything you have – your emotions, your religious passion, your physical energy and your intellect. You also must love your neighbor as much as you love yourself.'

'So, you already know,' Jesus answered, 'Do all this and you'll live forever.'

'Okay,' the man said, looking for a loophole, 'but what's your definition of the word "Neighbor"?''

As he did so often, Jesus answered the question with a story."

—From Luke 10:25-30a

Having a bad neighbor can be terrible. I had some less than awesome neighbors. I once shared a wall in a duplex with a guy who dealt drugs out of our adjoining garages. He was

*also a Raiders fan.*¹

I'm not saying those two things are connected—but I'm not saying it either.

I had neighbors who probably believed I enjoyed the mariachi music they constantly played loud enough for the entire neighborhood to hear. As skilled as those tuba and accordion players can be, I did, in fact, not enjoy it. I didn't mind at first—until I started involuntarily Mexican Hat Dancing every time I took out the trash.

I had neighbors who used a lawyer to send me a \$10,000 demand letter for—dirt...dirt I supposedly stole. Needless to say, as much as I love dirt, I did not pilfer any soil from them. To this day, I'm not sure why they thought I wanted to loot their loam—as if I were trying to steal their land one cubic yard at a time.

However, I'm also not sure I have always been the best neighbor. Between the extensive remodeling, the extra cars from people we've taken in over the years, and having way too many visits from friends, I suspect our departure was celebrated with champagne and a Next Door post titled 'Peace at Last.'

Being neighbors can be tough because you rarely *pick* your neighbors. You usually pick the place where you live based on lack of crime, low cost, or because you fall in love with the pink kitchen countertop tile no one ever updated and now has come back into style with a certain in-the-know set of people. It's only after you move in (or after you get *new* neighbors) you find out if the next-door residents' kids are like Beaver and Wally Cleaver, or like Sid from *Toy Story*. And he's got fireworks.

This is why, when Jesus was confronted with the issue of who the bible commands you to love, it was a thorny issue. Before he was ever even asked, he addressed the subject in his most famous talk — the Sermon on the Mount.

You Do Have Enemies

He said, "You have heard people say, 'Love your neighbors and hate your enemies.' But I tell you to love your enemies and pray for

¹ My Apologies to the fans of the National Football League team, the Oakland/Los Angeles/Oakland/Las Vegas Raiders. You have suffered enough.

anyone who mistreats you.”²

Jesus frequently took on the accepted wisdom of the day (and throughout the now—famous sermon), but this was potentially deadly advice.

He is quoting Leviticus 19:18. *Sort of.*

As brutal as the Torah could be in its punishments for “small crimes,” the Jewish laws given by God were filled with compassion too. This is one of those examples. *Love your neighbor as yourself* barely seems to fit with the execution sentences handed down for idolatry, taking God's name in vain, violating the Sabbath, or rebelling against your parents (it was tough being a moody teenager in those days). As strict as the laws were in how people were to behave and live as part of the community, the same seriousness applied to helping the people around you.

“Love your neighbor” is one of those phrases we nearly skip over. It seems so trite and lofty. It's like we simultaneously count “love your neighbor” as *aspirational* and *unattainable*. It's a wonderful idea that we should really think about incorporating—but maybe later.

And where does the “hate your enemies” part come from?

It's not in the Mosaic law to hate your enemies. It's more of a commentary on the former to make it more *doable*. The Israelites were commanded to love their neighbors but were sometimes also instructed to use violence against their enemies. Clearly, God had forgotten to explain himself fully in Leviticus 19:18.

Enter the commentators.

In a law-driven society, things needed to be explained better. Jesus lived in a time when Israel was surrounded by enemies from within and without. The Roman occupiers would crucify anyone who preached Jewish independence, and the Jewish “puppet kings,”

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² Matthew 5:43-44 (CEV)

who did the empire's bidding, employed spies everywhere. When your enemies seek to destroy your way of life, your ethnic identity, and your faith, pacifism amounts to self-inflicted genocide.

Like much of the Sermon on the Mount, it might seem like the only way to embrace this “love your enemies” stuff is to think of it as unrealistic poetry.

When a teenager listens to a love song, it sounds like the truth.

When a spouse who is a veteran of bills, sickness, arguments, and parenting hears a love song—they appreciate the melody, the poetry, and the aspirational thoughts about love, but they don't regard the co-dependent lyrics as a guide to a healthy relationship.

It's with such measured optimism that we read these passages from the Sermon on the Mount. Simply stated, most Christians decide that we don't really have enemies.

An act of terrorism may bring feelings of hatred toward Muslims, and an affront to our religious freedom focuses our hostility on a liberal judiciary, but those feelings go away—mostly—in a short amount of time.

However, this message must have been much harder to swallow for an audience who was surrounded by proven enemies, and the enemies *among* the Jews were very vicious. A quick survey of the religious sects of the day paints a picture of how much conflict there truly was: the *Zealots*, who wanted violent revolt; the *Pharisees*, who believed strict adherence to the law was everything; the *Essenes*, who were the separatist monks of the day; and the *Sadducees*, who thought the rest of these people all needed to calm down a bit. These people all hated each other and would sometimes even kill each other. Designating someone as your enemy gave you the right to deny their humanity *and their neighbor-ness*.

So, with most of his listeners having dismissed the “love your enemy” teaching, Jesus was asked to define the term neighbor, and he did it in the most provocative way possible. He told a story, and not any story, but an offensive story including an enemy portrayed not only as a sympathetic character, but as the hero too.

The Anti-hero

“A man was once traveling on the road from Jerusalem to

Jericho when he was attacked. His attackers nearly beat him to death and took everything he had. They left him for dead in the road, naked and bleeding. In a stroke of luck, there was a priest travelling to Jericho who came upon him, but when he saw him, he stayed clear and got out of there as quickly as possible. Another deeply religious man came upon the scene and did the same exact thing—leaving him to bleed to death.

But then, a Samaritan came by. Ignoring the danger and the fact most Samaritans hate Jews, he rendered first aid on the scene. He cleaned and bandaged the injured man's wounds and then transported him to a boarding house and tended to him all night. In the morning, the Samaritan had to leave, but he paid the manager to take care of the man while he healed. 'Don't worry, if it takes longer than I've paid for, I'll take care of the cost when I come back by,' he told the manager.

Then Jesus asked the scholar, 'Well, what do you think? Which of the three men was a true neighbor to the injured man?'

'The one who helped him,' the scholar replied.

Jesus simply looked at him and said, 'That's your answer. Do this.'" —From Luke 10:30–37

It is well known that Jews and Samaritans were enemies, but most of us don't know why.

The grudge went way back—almost 750 years. When the Assyrian empire conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C., most of the people were carried off as slaves, but Jewish farmers were left behind to work the land and provide food. These people began to inter-marry with the Assyrians, which was not only a betrayal to their people who were murdered and enslaved, but it watered down their ethnicity.

Making matters worse, they mixed the Jewish religion with idolatry of horrific kinds, including religious prostitution and child sacrifice. When they eventually tried to reunite with the exiled Jews, they were rejected as traitors. One hundred years before the time of Christ, the Jews attacked the Samaritans and decimated their country and destroyed their temple. Around the time of Jesus' birth, a band of Samaritan terrorists attacked the temple in Jerusalem and defiled it by spreading human bones throughout the sanctuary.

There was some bad blood between the Jews and Samaritans. Literally. The Jews made racist claims that the Samaritans were of impure blood, practiced a half-breed religion, and were violent people.

The thing is, they were in fact geographically Israel's neighbors—the fastest way to travel from where Jesus grew up in the Galilean countryside to Jerusalem was through Samaria.

Although it has become a popular thought that the Jews went around Samaria because they hated the Samaritans, there is no real evidence for this idea. Historical records show Jews did travel through Samaria. Even though they hated the Samaritans, it was a long walk around and through some very tough country, including the Jordanian desert. It really wasn't feasible. Plus, the Roman empire of Jesus' day made traveling throughout the territory a politically simple thing to do—like traveling between states in the U.S.

The Jews and Samaritans were neighbors who interacted regularly. They didn't hate each other out of xenophobia. They knew each other well and thought they had good reasons for their hatred.

Rational Negligence

The story of the Samaritan who comes to the rescue of the Jewish assault victim is an interesting one. It happens squarely in Jewish territory. Samaria wasn't between Jerusalem and Jericho. The Samaritan man was far from home and he was among people who hated him.

This is important. The Priest and the Levite aren't evil for quickly moving on. What they did was smart. The man was still *alive*. With the extent of his injuries, he probably hadn't been there long. It was very likely his attackers were still nearby. Maybe they had even set a trap for would-be do-gooders.

A typical terrorist tactic we have all learned about is the 2-bomb method. During the occupation of Iraq, militants would set a car bomb off in a busy area and wait for law enforcement, medical aid, and helpful civilians to gather. This is when the second bomb would be detonated, killing even more people.

On the road to Jericho, it was plausible that this man's attackers, having robbed the man of everything he possessed, left him alive as bait for some compassionate soul who might come by and fall prey

to the same fate.

If this was dangerous for Jewish men in Jewish territory, how much so was it for a Samaritan if he encountered these torturous criminals?

We like to identify with the Samaritan, but most of us are more like the priest and Levite who quickly move along, knowing the commitment to fix the situations in our neighbors' lives is potentially dangerous and more complex than we are ready to take on.

As someone who has spent his life sometimes walking by the injured and sometimes picking them up to bandage their wounds, I can tell you it is no small task to be the Samaritan. It is easier to keep walking.

I grew up in a family of six and have always had extra people living with me. Since my wife and I got married, we have had over twenty-five people live with us. For many of those people, their wounds have been deep. The healing has been slow. The cost has been high. You've probably learned the same thing from trying to help people.

Like you, I have walked by the wounded too. It's easier. I've been both the Jew and the Samaritan in this story, but there's something more going on here.

There are no two ways about it. The Samaritans were the enemies of the Jews. Only the newly established *Pax Romana* (the Roman Empire imposed peace between territories) kept violence at bay. These people were self-proclaimed enemies who hated each other.

Jesus is making another point: many times, *our neighbors and our enemies are the same people*.

Whether someone is our neighbor or enemy does not matter when we are called to love *both*.

Being the Enemy

I have worked with people who needed to learn to love their enemies. I have sat with those whose lives have been destroyed by a relative who sexually abused them. Most of those relatives were still around.

I have cried with people so deeply hurt by a parent, who put their addiction before their own child, because they never felt truly loved by anyone. The struggle on the road to forgiveness is how to love without getting devastated again.

Jesus understood this dilemma better than anyone in history. He came to save humanity with love and vulnerability, but the world would become his enemy. The neighbors he loved and cared for would call for his torture and murder. In his last minutes, some of his final words would be those of forgiveness for the world which became his tormentor.

If you look hard enough into the story of the Samaritan, you'll find something even deeper than the idea of our neighbors and enemies as the same people. There's one more character to identify with—the *injured man*.

Naked, Beaten and Bloody

The human condition is one in which we make ourselves enemies with God and we choose the opposing side.³ We are part of the humanity who murdered him, making ourselves his enemy. He has reason to be wary of helping us. More like us might be around the corner wanting to do harm. We don't deserve help and we can't be trusted to be thankful.

But Jesus, seeing us broken, naked, and bleeding to death, bandages our wounds. He takes us to safety and pays the price for our healing.

He tells us his example is the one to follow in a world of dangerous neighbors and enemies. It's not hard to understand, so like the philosopher says, *"We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obliged to act accordingly."*⁴

³ "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." James 4:4 (NIV)

⁴ Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*

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Hope, Arkansas

"Even in the inevitable moments when all seems hopeless, men know that without hope they cannot really live, and in agonizing desperation they cry for the bread of hope."

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Phillip found Nathaniel and he told him, "We have found the exact person that Moses and the other prophets predicted! His name is Jesus, Son of Joseph, He is from Nazareth."

"Nazareth?" scoffed Nathaniel, "The messiah is from Nazareth? You can't be serious."

But Phillip was resolute, "Come, see for yourself."

—From John 1:45-46

And his name will be the hope of all the world.

—From Mathew 12:21

Little places I have never heard of. That's the way I used to think of small towns.

I grew up in one of these, "little places," not too small, but small enough, adding to my child-like desire to move to the city. When people think of California, they think of L.A. and San Francisco—they don't think of places like Chico. It literally means "little" in Spanish.

My childhood town was a college town, and anyone from a "college town" knows what I'm talking about. There are lots of universities across the country in all kinds of places, but a large one in a small place is what makes for a "college town." A college town is where you can get a PhD and a breakfast burrito at 3 AM—and both

might come with extra guac. And summer is a time when your *small town* becomes a *ghost town*.

The other thing about a small town is that people don't generally leave. I have over thirty close relatives and dozens of friends that still live in this small town. Some of them haven't left since Reagan was president. *Others haven't left since Reagan was governor.*¹

Most of the people I know there have never gone to college, even though the town is dominated by one. Most have gone "tubbing," so it kind of balances out. Of nearly twenty first-cousins, I was the first to graduate from college. There are only two of us who have a four-year degree.

However, you don't need a degree in a small town—you just get a job.

I've been to a lot of small towns in my life. Once in Colorado, I was speaking at three churches in one weekend—all "right on the highway." In California, I once drove 4 hours to a church in a town of five hundred, where the main industry was sea urchin harvesting, which sounds glamorous until you realize it mostly involves poking spiky blobs with sticks and smelling like low tide.²

Fifteen people came to the morning service. That evening, at another church five hours further into the middle of nowhere, the pastor said, "Well, you and I are here. We'll see if anyone else shows up."

California has its share of small towns, but the South is their heartland—the kind of places where the local diner doubles as city hall, the high school football team is basically a religion and there's always something going down at the Waffle house. Folks there tend to eye big cities with the same suspicion they reserve for tofu. Famous people rarely come from small towns—unless they do, and then the town renames a street, paints their face on the water tower, and adds a commemorative plaque to the Dairy Queen.

City folk often dismiss small towns as unimportant. But sometimes, even they are surprised.

¹ Yes, Ronald Reagan was the governor of California.

² I have no idea what sea urchin harvesting actually involves

Enter Nazareth

Having the regular opportunity to train students in the art of communicating the message of Jesus using the methods of Jesus, I have often begun with a question: *What does Jesus use as an illustration more often than any other subject?* Blank stares usually result, and minds churn trying to find a complex answer to a simple question.

"Farming," I finally say, as looks of, "Oh, I knew that! I thought you were looking for something more spiritual," spread across the room.

Jesus talked a lot about farming. Have you ever thought about why? The answer is simple.

Jesus was from Nazareth.

Nazareth. Hick town. Funny accents. Middle of nowhere. The industries were limited—farming and fishing.

Nazareth. A little farming community near a lake in the middle of nowhere, in a small, problematic province within the vast Roman Empire.

Nazareth. Hick town.
Funny accents. A little
farming community
near a lake in the
middle of nowhere.

Hail to the Chief of Nowhere

I was driving through Arkansas one time on interstate 30 when the biggest road sign I'd ever seen came into view. It said, "HOPE, Arkansas – birthplace of President Clinton." I wasn't sure at first why the sign struck me like it did. It seemed so ironic. Then it hit me. The fact that the former "most powerful man in the world" came from this little blip on the map—this place to "stop and pee" on a long trip—was amazing indeed.

Hope, Arkansas. "A small, insignificant town in a small, insignificant state." It's what people must have thought when they heard the story of a presidential candidate's place of birth. When, during a debate, Bill Clinton was asked what his qualifications to be president were, his response was that he was the Governor of Arkansas. Another candidate quipped, "Just because someone runs the corner store doesn't mean you put them in charge of Walmart." Pretty funny—unless you're from Arkansas, then not so much. Especially because Walmart is, ironically, based in Bentonville,

Arkansas.

Hope. Not A bad name for a place. I don't know how *Hope* became *Hope*, but it's a good name for a place.

Sometimes people name places for specific reasons. *Boulder, Colorado*, where I lived for two years after college, was named for the incredibly huge rock formations on the mountainside. *City of Industry* in southern California, a concrete jungle of warehouses and railroad tracks in the heart of the Los Angeles metro area, was named for obvious reasons. *Truth or Consequences, New Mexico* re-named its city after a TV game show.

I don't know why someone named *Hope* "Hope," but it must've been a very optimistic person. For a small town in Arkansas to symbolize *hope* is a long shot, but the leader of the free world for a time, did come from there. Regardless of your feelings about any particular president, that's not too bad.

Don't think the teachers of every class, of every grade, of every school in *Hope* aren't telling their students any one of them could grow up to be president. Teachers tell their students that they can be anything. Regardless of how poor they are, regardless of their distinct Arkansan accent, and regardless of the fact that their town is a "corner store in a world of Walmarts," they can be President. It already happened once.

The Black Sheep

The Roman Empire of Jesus' day was actually quite civilized and cosmopolitan. Education was commonplace; Literature, law, and philosophy were prevalent. The Roman Empire was the birth of western civilization as we know it; running water, democracy, and paved highways were made popular by the Romans. There were famous military heroes, but socialites, actors, musicians, and philosophers were also the celebrities of Greco-Roman society.

Most of the small countries conquered by Rome were thriving. The culture of the day changed little from place to place in your average Roman province.

Unless you were Jewish. In a culture where society and religion were deeply infused, having the wrong religion made it difficult to fit in. Most parties, business transactions, and other staples of social life revolved around religion. If you were Jewish, you couldn't

participate in the most important parts of Roman society.

The pagan religion of Rome was sort of a catch-all. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of gods were worshiped (not so much worshiped but appeased) in an effort to avoid natural disasters, overcome infertility, bring wealth and just about anything else you could think of. Name a situation and there was a God for it. Making matters worse, many of the religious rites involved prostitution, wild orgies, alcohol abuse, and other lewd behavior.

All of this made the little Roman province of Israel, where the religious rituals weren't practiced, stick out quite substantially.

Israel didn't fit into the Roman Empire well, and it was obvious to everyone. The Jews frequently revolted—they didn't *want* to fit in—and the rest of the known world looked down on them.

It was bad enough to be Jewish, but Jesus was from the Galilean countryside. Most of his ministry was traveling from small town to small town—usually on foot, sometimes in a boat. We know of only a few times that he traveled to Jerusalem, and when He did, they knew he was from the sticks by his accent.³

Apparently, even those who lived in the Galilean area weren't too impressed with the small village of Nazareth.

One of Jesus' own future disciples, Nathaniel, thought it must be a joke when he heard about this possible Messiah being a Nazarene. When Philip attempted to get his friend to come meet Jesus, he identified Him as "the son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathaniel's response was a sarcastic one: "Nazareth? You've got to be kidding."⁴

From a lowly little farming town in a backwards little part of an out-of-touch Roman province comes the Messiah. It's about as likely as the leader of the free world coming from a little town, in a little southern state, where even other southerners make fun of their accent (believe me, they do).

Maybe they should have named Nazareth, "Hope, Israel."

Because it really is amazing that the Messiah, the hope of humanity,

³ The Galileans had a distinct accent as demonstrated when bystanders correctly identify Peter as Galilean in Matthew 26.73 because of his accent.

⁴ John 1:46 MSG

came from such a place.

No Hometown Hero

It's no wonder Jesus wasn't impressed with the rich and powerful. Country folk seldom are. Small town people don't tend to care much about what's in and what's out. They don't usually revere the rich and powerful. They aren't normally too concerned with the comings and goings of celebrities.

They seem to be more interested in the normal people—the people who cut their hair and fix their cars. Jesus always walked right past the important people to find the people who didn't matter to anyone else.

I think it's why he spent so little time in Jerusalem. He didn't care about the politicians. He wasn't interested in what the religious people thought of him. It's probably why they didn't trust him. It might be why the important people had him killed.

The Messiah was supposed to be like them, not a hick from the sticks. It didn't make sense. It was the cosmopolitan citizens of Jerusalem who called out for his crucifixion.

Jesus didn't fare much better in his own hometown either:

Jesus left that part of the country and returned with his disciples to Nazareth, his hometown. The next Sabbath, he began teaching in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished. They asked, "Where did he get all his wisdom and the power to perform miracles? He's just a carpenter, the son of Mary and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon. And his sisters live right here among us." They were deeply offended and refused to believe in him.

Then Jesus told them, "A prophet is honored everywhere except in his own hometown and among his relatives and his own family."

And because of their unbelief, he couldn't do any mighty miracles among them except to place his hands on a few sick people and heal them.

He was amazed at their unbelief. ⁵

One of the blind spots of people who aren't impressed by what other people seem to think is important is that sometimes they miss that which is truly "important" when it really is.

Jerusalemites may not have been impressed with Jesus' pedigree, but Nazarenes weren't impressed that so many people were so impressed with Jesus.

Nazarenes weren't
impressed that so
many people
were so impressed
with Jesus.

Jesus' family and former peers couldn't handle Jesus' new status, and they thought that maybe it was time to knock him down a few notches. *He was a construction worker after all.* The crowds might have been in awe of Jesus, but not his hometown. There would be no hero's return.

Jesus, they reasoned, was a normal guy from a small town in the Judean countryside. It was the same thing the rest of the Roman Empire thought.

But the political strategists were wrong. The President of the United States can come from Hope, Arkansas—and the Savior of the world can come from a little town in Galilee called Nazareth. From the most unlikely places, hope springs eternal.

Like you, I want my life to count. I'm the middle son of an electrician, from a small college town in the middle of nowhere; no one ever expected too much from me. Maybe they never even noticed me enough to expect anything. I don't know.

Every time I think of Jesus' humble beginnings as a Nazarene, I think maybe I could be something. Maybe I can leave a mark and change the world for the better. It *can* happen.

Just ask any fourth grader from a little town off interstate 30—at Hope Elementary School, they teach it all the time.

⁵ Mark 6:1-6 NLT

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Hate Speech

"Love God? Sometimes I hate him."

—Martin Luther, protestant reformer

"Hate is not the opposite of love. Indifference is."

—Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor, author, and Nobel Peace Prize laureate

"You will be hated by everyone because of me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved."

—Matthew 10:22

Hate may be the most overused word in the English lexicon. It's nearly lost its meaning.

It's been stretched so thin that it's nearly lost its meaning. Disagree with someone in a way they find uncomfortable? That's hate. Disapprove of someone's choices? Hate.

We've labeled so many things as hate that it's easy to forget what the word actually means.

We used to reserve *hate* for serious stuff. War. Injustice. Crocs with socks.

Now? You hate cilantro. You hate slow Wi-Fi. You hate when your sock slides down in your shoe.

I saw a guy say he hated pineapple on pizza. I wanted to agree, but it's just too strong a word. I definitely side-eye anyone who likes pineapple on pizza. Hey, when someone tells you who they are—

believe them.

But we've turned 'hate' into a catch-all word—like duct tape for emotions. Slap it on anything you don't like and call it a day.

There are things I intensely don't prefer.

Like traffic. Or group texts.

Or when Netflix asks, "Are you still watching?" Yes, Netflix—I'm still watching.

I might actually *hate* that.

Hatred has been defined in countless ways, but it's generally considered the strongest negative emotion a person can feel. Synonyms include loathing, abhorrence, detesting, and passionate dislike. Personally, I think *contempt* comes closest.

David Hume, the Renaissance philosopher, believed hatred was so strong and complex it defied definition. Some have described it as a dislike so intense that you'd destroy the object of your hatred if you could. At the very least, it's a desire to see harm come to it—or to feel satisfaction when it does.

Whatever definition you choose, hatred is a powerful force.

You might assume Jesus spent his time denouncing hate—he actually spent more time warning about the hate he would provoke.

So is love. And when we think of Jesus, we think of love—unyielding, radical, uncompromising love. That's why it's so surprising to realize how much Jesus talked about hate.

You might assume Jesus spent his time denouncing hate. But he spent more time warning about the hate that *he* would provoke.

- "You will be arrested, mistreated and murdered because of the hatred all over the world that results from following me." – Matthew 24:9
- "Consider yourself to be blessed when people hate you, ostracize you, deride you or claims you are nefarious be you choose to follow me." –Luke 6:22
- "Do good to people that hate you." –Luke 6:22

- “If you are hated by the whole world, don't forget the world always hated me too. –John 15:18
- “If you belonged to this world, it would love you, but you aren't part of it anymore. I picked you to be different, so you are hated.” –John 15:19
- “They have seen everything that I did, yet they still hate me and my father.” –John 15:24
- “The Jewish scriptures predicted it and it happened: ‘They hated me without cause.’” –John 15:25
- “The world hates them because they don't belong here.” (Jesus talking about his followers in –John 17:14

How could one man cause such world-wide hatred? How could people be driven to murder and extermination by Jesus? How could good inspire such evil?

“All men will hate you because of me.” He doesn't say it once, twice, or a few times. Almost a dozen times, Jesus says the world hates the whole Jesus thing—him, his apostles, his other followers—*the whole thing*.

But why?

Why did everyone hate Jesus so much? Why would Jesus' fellow Jews and the Romans conspire and cooperate to have him executed?

Hating the Hierarchy

People have suggested that Jesus was hated because of his love and tolerance. It is true Jesus committed himself to uncompromising acceptance of the misfits, pariahs, and undesirables who lived outside the acceptable boundaries of Jesus' world. It wasn't only the poor and disabled who Jesus dignified with his affection; he also spent time with “sinners” and traitors. And Roman soldiers. And Foreigners. And he accepted them all.

And he seemed to enjoy their company. He valued these people. He was more interested in them than networking with the wealthy and influential.

There it is. It wasn't his love for those who weren't part of the power structure but his hatred for the power structure itself and his loathing for the people in charge.

Over the years of navigating this life I've chosen, I've realized something: every group—no matter how small or random—has a power structure. If there are two second-grade boys playing alone on the playground, one of them is the boss. He might not know how to tie his shoes, but he knows who's in charge. Even two dogs in a yard have a pecking order. One eats first. The other just hopes for leftovers.

Educational institutions, small churches, Fortune 500 companies, remote tribes—it doesn't matter. There's always a hierarchy. Like wolves in the wild, someone leads, someone follows, and someone's just trying not to get eaten.

People think power is all about money. Sure, money helps—it's a pretty shiny wrench in the power toolkit. But it's not the only one. Influence, charisma, access to the copier—these things matter too.

And here's the funny part: the less power there is to go around, the more people fight for it. It's like musical chairs with fewer chairs and more elbows. There's an old saying about politics in academia: *"They fight so viciously because so little is on the line."*

Jesus hated the power structure...He railed against the powerful and comforted the oppressed.

Which is hilarious... and also painfully accurate.

Jesus hated the power structure which kept the powerful firmly ensconced on their thrones of influence, keeping the outcasts at the mercy of their overlords. He railed against the powerful and comforted the oppressed.

He warned the *haves* that things would be upside-down in the next kingdom and reassured the *have-nots* with the same words.

Jesus understood that the power structures would always be in place on planet earth. He knew there would always be people who would be poorer than others. On one instance, when someone was criticized for accepting a lavish and expensive display of affection from a woman known to be immoral, he acknowledged it with, "You will always have the poor among you."¹ There would always be

¹ Mark 14:7 NLT

people with more and those with less.

He didn't try to score political points by fueling envy. He didn't claim he would eradicate poverty in this world. His words to the poor were that God saw their plight and valued them—even if the world didn't. His words to the rich were warnings about using their wealth to oppress the poor—a wrong that God would set right; their riches were spiritually dangerous to them.

When in Rome...

If Jesus seemed unconcerned by the injustice of income inequality, he appeared even less focused by the political oppression of his day.

It's easy to miss the context in which Jesus paid taxes and commanded others to do so, but the Roman empire was one of the most oppressive and brutal regimes in history. The Romans, like other imperial forces before them, built their kingdom on the crushed bones and the spilled blood of everyone they conquered.

Jesus, who would be executed under the premise of being a revolutionary with his own intended insurrection, never once decried the Roman Empire. When his disciples spoke of earthly revolutions, Jesus seemed to tell them that they were thinking too small and too temporary. Overthrowing the brutality of the evil empire wasn't enough for Jesus.

Even slavery, an evil institution existing in Jesus' time (although in a very different form²), wasn't a topic of discussion for him. This has led some people to criticize Jesus as not opposed to slavery, aiding proponents of slavery to claim slavery couldn't be a moral disgrace if Jesus didn't seem to care.

This completely misses the point of the message of Jesus. Instead of spending time strategizing with people about overthrowing earthly institutions of evil, he reassured them, stating things were in the hands of a God who is just and would bring justice in ultimate ways far beyond the temporary structures of the world.

² "slavery" was usually in the form of an irrevocable, but temporary, contract entered into by each party to solve a problem. The Bible recognizes, but does not endorse indentured servitude.
<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-wrong-say-bible-pro-slavery/>

If this seems unsatisfactory to people who are oppressed, discriminated against, and treated unjustly today, then it's even easier to understand the perspective of the oppressed people of Jesus' day. Of the tens of thousands who followed him, only a few followed him to the cross—the masses were disillusioned in his lack of ambition for political overthrow.

If Jesus seemed indifferent about ethnic independence for the Jewish people and the violent overthrow of worldly imperial power structures, why was Jesus seen as such a threat to the power structures of his day?

The Sons of Vipers

In great contrast to his disinterest in worldly authority, he turned intensely resolute about religious injustice and oppression. His attitude toward the corrupt religious power structure—used to keep the influential *influential* and the oppressed *oppressed*—remained less than congenial. He displayed no patience and little kindness for the religiously powerful. Let's look at a few of his interactions with them.

All four Gospels record the Pharisees asking Jesus to prove himself by performing miracles. Jesus' response is not a gentle correction. "Only an evil, adulterous generation would demand a miraculous sign" (Mathew 12:39 NLT).

When called out for not following the tradition of ritual cleansing at the temple, Jesus fires back, not with a humble explanation, but with vitriol. He points out that they might get the tradition right, but on the "inside, [they] are filthy—full of greed and wickedness!" (Luke 11:39 NLT).

Jesus saves his best work for Matthew 23. This is a takedown. Jesus destroys the Pharisees (and religious leaders in general), for an entire chapter. If we define hate speech by its current definition, this is hatred.

He calls them hypocrites, children of hell, blind fools, blind guides, whitewashed tombs, snakes, and sons of vipers (this last one makes logical sense—if they are snakes they would also be sons of snakes but adds insult to injury, as well). These are only the *names*.

He gets even more descriptive about their actions and motivations. He says:

- they crush people with religion.
- everything they do is for show.
- they slam the door of God's Kingdom in people's faces.
- they lead their own converts to hell.
- they ignore justice, mercy, and faith.
- they have filthy insides.
- they are greedy.
- they have hearts filled with lawlessness.
- and they are guilty of the murder of all past prophets and future evangelists.

He plays the lawyer for the prosecution by laying out this last part.

Jesus doesn't try to reason with them. He knows they already know what they need to know and are choosing a different path. He is warning them that God sees who they really are and the judgment they hand down to others is coming for them.

He held no interest in diplomacy, compromise, concession, or conciliation. He didn't try to smooth things over, bring change from the inside, or slowly gain consensus.

If he attempted to lead for change, he failed according to every leadership book I've ever read.

Spiritual and physical violence was/is coming for the kingdom of God and the kingdom would suffer violence.

The Promise of Hate

Jesus shared harsh words for those who would use religion to oppress people for their own gain. Those people would go so far as to have Jesus executed because he challenged their hold on power. But, even then, by any reasonable definition, Jesus did not profess hate for the religious leaders. He warned others that their example of hypocrisy was not to be followed—the power they claimed in the name of God was being abused. He warned them they would be held accountable.

He did not, however, call for the violent overthrow or targeting of the pharisees in any way. He, surprisingly, even claimed that they did have a position of authority given by God and they should be obeyed.

This is the crux of what Jesus' message about hate proclaims. In the face of hate, you must not return hate.

This is the crux of what Jesus' message about hate proclaims. You will receive hate. In the face of hate, you must not return hate. Ever.

True followers of Christ will be *threatening* to the power structures imperiled by the upside-down kingdom, but they themselves never *threaten* the structures. Their mere

existence is the threat engendering hatred. In doing the good which builds the upside-down kingdom, those who stand to lose their place at the top and find themselves looking up from the bottom will hate you.

They will want harm to come to you. In his first letter, Peter addresses the obvious question.

What do you do when people hate you and want harm to come to you when you're only trying to do good? Realize God will reward you when you're hurt for doing good. Shake off the threats and keep following the example of Jesus. When someone is surprised by this and asks you about it, then take your opportunity to explain it, but make sure you're humble and respectful. Keep your attitude right and action right, then, when people try to malign you, everyone will see the truth you're following Jesus. (from 1 Peter 3:13-16)

When Jesus says, "everyone will hate you because of me," he issues a warning that hatred is the inevitable response to be his authentic followers. He warns us so that we won't be caught off guard or think if we can get the messaging right, we'll convince everyone. It's our actions which change minds.

They hated him. *He loved them.*

They murdered him. *He saved their lives.*

He was a threat. We are a threat. He was hated. We will be hated. *How we respond to the hate says more about us than anything else we do.*

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Doubting my Doubts

*"Our doubts are traitors and make us lose the good we oft might win,
by fearing to attempt."*

—William Shakespeare, Measure for Measure

"Doubt is a pain too lonely to know that faith is his twin brother."

—Khalil Gibran, Lebanese-American poet, philosopher, and writer

*"Why do you say, 'If I can?'" Jesus asked pointedly, "Everything is
possible if someone believes it is."*

*The father exclaimed in desperation, "I do believe, but I need your
help with my doubts!"*

—From Mark 9:17-27

It had been a long time since I doubted. I mean, really doubted.

I had doubts about all kinds of things, spiritual and non-spiritual, but it'd been a while since I doubted my beliefs in Jesus. I had no doubt God existed. I had no doubt Jesus walked the earth, did great miracles, and died at the hands of the Roman Empire. It was my simple beliefs that I started to question: whether God really intervened in our lives when we asked him to; if simple faith in Jesus truly decided eternal direction for individuals; or if God actually heard our prayers and answered back.

I had been so steadfast in my faith over the years I probably created a hostile environment toward doubters. I certainly encouraged doubt as one of the ingredients of true faith, but I had few periods of

the kind of doubt people really struggle with—the kind which causes moments of fear in possibly being wrong.

I survived many fallen heroes—people who had such influence on me that I would not be a believer without them. I've survived vicious attacks on my own character and ministry, something every person in ministry has experienced. My faith in humanity has been decimated many times over, but not my faith in God—like the shadows are further proof the sun is shining; the more imperfect a human showed themselves to be, the more the concept of a perfect divinity was comforting.

My faith withstood a lot of hits.

But the diagnosis of my son's autism in 2005 wounded me so deeply that I felt lost, like I misplaced my spiritual GPS.

For so long I showed some level of compassion for those who struggled to keep the faith, but I admit I always saw it as a sign of weakness. I believed the under-educated were easily swayed by attacks on the veracity of the Christian belief system—prisoners of their own emotions who experience a crisis of faith when the tough times come. Not me. I'd been broken, betrayed, trampled on, and more, yet came out nearly unscathed.

The exoskeleton
protecting my
convictions from all
external attacks was
providing no
defense...

This time was different. The exoskeleton protecting my convictions from all external attacks was providing no defense from the internal onslaught of my own distrust. My son had an incurable condition and despite my prayer and fasting, the remedy was impossibly elusive. I let myself reason, 'Maybe it's because the concept of an interventionist God is merely a

comforting creation of desperate people who need hope." My son's diagnosis was my open wound which wouldn't heal.

Perhaps, I thought, my faith was broken beyond repair.

Beauty and Belief

In 2009, as I reflected on my doubts of four years in writing parts of this chapter, I found myself on a small, twin-prop plane over the Caribbean after a week of speaking to almost every student on the

small Island of Exuma, Bahamas. The plane was a little scary—I had never been in one that small at the time—but the view was the most unbelievable sight I'd ever seen. I pondered on believing that this countless chain of islands 15,000 feet below my window, with the most amazing turquoise blue water the eye had ever beheld, came about without a designer. A leap of faith I could not make. It was as if the sand below the shallow water was a white canvas, painted with watercolors. If it were a photo, I would have sworn it was photoshopped. The idea that this art came about without an artist was unacceptable. Period.

However, my doubts persisted. If I was God's child—if the father/son equation was the same dynamic I shared with my son—then why wouldn't he heal my boy? All things being equal, I would step in front of a bus if I thought it would better Declan's chances at a normal life.

So why? It's the question I never allowed myself to ask no matter how painful life became. I was hurt and angry and racked with guilt for feeling hurt and angry. Most of all, I was numbed by the ever-present throbbing of my doubt.

I was hardly unique among fathers; I met many fathers who were facing far worse. I even caught myself feeling better about my challenges when observing others, but the fact that others were going through what I was experiencing didn't keep me from asking where Jesus was in my time of need.

I wondered what he would say to me if he were walking the earth today, but it was not a rhetorical question. Some two-thousand years ago (give or take a few years for errors in the Gregorian calendar), he had a chance to answer the tough questions.

A Tough Day for a Dad

A man came to Jesus and said, "Teacher, I brought my son to you so you could heal him. An evil spirit has complete control over him and it won't even let him talk. When it takes over, it brutally throws him to the ground and he becomes completely stiff, foams at the mouth and locks his jaw. I asked your disciples to free him of the evil spirit's control, but they couldn't."

Jesus was frustrated. "You all lack faith! I have had it with you! How much do you need to see to build your faith? Bring the boy to me." When they brought the boy to Jesus, the spirit saw Jesus and caused

a seizure and the boy fell on to ground, thrashing and frothing from his mouth.

"How long has he been like this?" Jesus asked the dad.

"Since he was little. The spirit that controls him even throws him into fires to kill him or into water to drown him. If you can help us, please have compassion and do whatever you can."

"Why do you say, 'If I can?'" Jesus asked pointedly, "Everything is possible if someone believes it is."

The father exclaimed in desperation, "I do believe, but I need your help with my doubts!"

Jesus noticed the growing crowd of spectators and spoke directly to the evil spirit, "I'm talking to you, the spirit that has made this boy deaf and mute. Leave his body and never come back."

The spirit shrieked and the boy reacted violently as the evil spirit left him. The crowd thought he was dead but were astonished when Jesus took him by the hand and he stood up.¹

Whenever I read this story, it's like I'm standing there watching people speak uncomfortably about my son. I have never blamed people who stare or whisper to each other, I might even do the same if I were them. Declan makes weird noises and does strange things. When people don't know he has special needs and get annoyed, irritated, or upset by something he does, I'm never sure if I should explain that he's autistic, knowing they will feel guilty, or keep it to myself, knowing they'll continue to feel annoyed, irritated or upset.

The boy in this story was infamous in his community. He was a source of fear, blame, and derision. Having a profoundly altered boy living in your neighborhood was scary, and having one in your family was not only scary but it made you an outcast. Believe me, even today, I know.

Depending on your faith tradition, you may see this young man in one of two ways. Either this boy is literally possessed by a demonic entity, or the story is told from the perspective of the people of Jesus' day. In the latter case, the author is telling the story of a boy who has

¹ From Mark 9:17-27

epilepsy and/or some other profound medical condition. The people of the first century had no context for mental illness, epilepsy, autism, or any other such condition. With this in mind, the truth of the story is in how people see this boy.

I choose to take the story at face value—spiritual forces were at work. No matter how you read this story, the key figure is not the son; it's the father.

I'm sure the father once had dreams for his son, but from the time his boy was a child, he had a terrifying condition. The son was unable to speak and experienced terrible seizures. He almost drowned, became burned because of his condition, and was probably covered with horrific scars. It is hard to imagine anything more terrifying for his parents.

Consider that the entire community probably had the same attitude as the villagers during the end of *Frankenstein*, and you begin to understand the father's situation. His son was a "real-life monster" living among them.

Believe me, parents of kids with special needs feel this all the time. The sense of rejection, fear, and anger compete for prominence, appearing in your worst of moments.

When you live with little hope, you learn to cope. Coping and hoping are not mutually exclusive, but the energy for one often arises from the other. They coexist and often draw from the same emotional reservoir.

When you live
with little hope,
you learn to
cope.

This father learned to cope, but when he heard that Jesus was coming, he redirected some of his energy to hope.

If you don't have a child with profound special needs, it's hard to understand what it can mean to take them out in public. In the case of this boy, the effort was probably monumental. The risk of what could happen was huge. I know. Making sure our son is safe has been an unbelievable effort for my wife and me: four years of diarrhea; frequent complete lack of personal safety awareness; unwillingness to eat most things, combined with the willingness to eat dangerous things; it all gives me a small picture of what it took to try to get this boy to Jesus. Unless you've been there, it's hard to

understand what an undertaking it was to brave the crowds to find Jesus.

His father decided to channel some of his coping energy into hoping. Hoping Jesus could change the tragedy of his son into something resembling normalcy.

Even so, hope doesn't eradicate doubt. When Jesus tells the father that believing is the key to change, he is speaking directly to the heart of doubters. He knows the father may have brought his son to him hoping something could happen, but the father has far from an absolute belief in Jesus' ability to help.

Overtaken by Doubt

In 2004, I read a story entitled "Upon this Rock" by John Sullivan, a young freelance writer for GQ Magazine. He became a Christian in his teens after what he described as the inevitable experience of anyone who becomes friends with an evangelical Christian—the invite to church. In his case, it was a youth oriented small group, and he was amazed at how cool and smart the pastor of the church was. The small group met in the pastor's house and included apologetics and hanging out afterwards. The church became the intellectual and spiritual home that he had been looking for, and he was being trained to become a leader.

But during his junior year, "unsanctioned" books and a few bad experiences caused him to fall away from his relatively new faith. The crass commercialism and inartful performance of a well-known Christian Rock band at a concert where he volunteered, because it was framed as a ministry opportunity, was the final straw. After packing up the gear from the show, he gathered his friends to announce that he was no longer a Christian. "My doubts have overtaken me," he explained.

However, for the GQ story, he found himself "embedded" in an RV with a group of young evangelicals from West Virginia, heading toward Pennsylvania where the largest Christian music festival in the US, Creation, takes place. Along the way, he remembered what it was like to be around these kinds of people: devout but real; resolute but non-judgmental; believing but honest—these guys were merely trying to get it right as flawed humans, and they loved each other and were brought together by their common beliefs.

His condescension toward his former faith was slowly replaced with

longing. His defensiveness gave way to brotherhood. He knew intellectually that he could no longer believe what they believed. He knew this time in his life had been a stage of adolescent spiritual confidence and had been useful, but he also knew it was one to which he could no longer acquiesce.

Still, something stirred. Through these guys, he was experiencing Jesus again.

He felt betrayed by his own longing. Emotionally, he was still captivated by Jesus, but intellectually, he knew he couldn't go back. He didn't believe in Christianity anymore. He knew Jesus only as an extraordinary man, but the internal conflict of spiritual longing was profound:

"Once you've known Him as God, it's hard to find comfort in the man. The sheer sensation of life that comes with a total, all-pervading notion of being—the pulse of consequence one projects onto even the humblest things—the pull of that won't slacken. And one has doubts about one's doubts."

Belief Wrapped in Unbelief

Jesus said faith and mustard resemble each other. It seems to me if the end of faith is a 30-foot-tall mustard bush, with a 20-foot wingspan, then the mustard seed stage might possibly be doubting one's doubts. Here's the thing though: this mustard-seed, doubt-doubting faith is the kind of faith Jesus said can relocate mountains.

Mustard-seed,
doubt-doubting
faith is the kind of
faith Jesus said
can relocate
mountains.

Hebrews 11:1 states that faith is the reality of hope and the evidence of the unseen. It was inferred to me as a young man that this is the closest thing to a Webster's dictionary definition of the word faith.

However, I have always thought most concepts are best understood through narrative, and this story of the man with the belief-unbelief juxtaposition is the narrative which explains it to me.

A father who seriously doubts Jesus can help his son makes the effort anyway, because it could be possible. He has serious doubts that Jesus can help, but he doubts his doubts enough to try. "I believe but

help me overcome my unbelief" is the definition of faith stuck in my brain like an itch I'm unable to scratch. Whenever I'm not certain, it causes me to doubt my doubts.

Sullivan makes this statement about Christian indoctrination: "Belief and nonbelief are two giant planets, the orbits of which don't touch." He argues if you look outside the belief system of Christian dogma, you will lose your faith. It's one or the other. However, most of us find faith to be found in the overlap of belief and unbelief—*faith isn't necessary if you have unchallenged beliefs.*

There's no need to go looking for challenges to your belief either. Why would a loving God allow a beautiful little baby boy named Declan to have his brain wired wrong by a condition called autism? A condition with no known cause but a profound effect. Why? It isn't a demon throwing him into the fire, though he has endangered his own life so many times it may as well be a murderous evil spirit.

The painful irony is that I hadn't felt the presence of God in four years. I preached almost every week somewhere. I prayed. I did what I knew I needed to do. Behaviorally and intellectually, I remained a thoroughly, devout, orthodox Christian, but emotionally, I felt agnostic.

Life itself caused me to doubt absolutely everything, but still, I moved toward Jesus. I doubted my doubts, and my doubts about my doubts were very formidable.

Epilogue

I wrote deeply about my doubt in 2009 in a series of journal entries, four years after my son had been diagnosed with autism, and it's rather uncomfortable for me to read now.

At the time, I never talked about it publicly. I felt nearly hopeless, and I still believed the doctors were wrong.

They weren't. I was.

My son is still very autistic, but he's also very awesome. God has shown me more things through my son than through any other person. Ever. He is handicapped, disabled, challenged or however else you want to label him, but he is also loved beyond measure. I look out for him and love him, including his weaknesses and oddities. I want to help him, but I no longer want to change him. He is a better

person than almost anyone else I know. He has received a faith that most of us can't achieve.

During the most profound time in my struggle to come to grips with my son's condition, someone suggested Declan made us all better people. I cynically shrugged it off at the time, but now I know it's true. More than anything, I now understand how God the father feels about me.

I am profoundly
disabled.

Doubt has
confirmed my
faith.

I am profoundly disabled. I have secret fears and sins only God knows. I might even look unlovable to others. Certainly, there must be some who feel sympathy for God to have such a flawed son and to have to take such time and energy to protect and care for me. But, through all this, I now understand why he does what he does for me in a way you might not be able to. I now know things

I couldn't have known without having Declan in my life. Doubt has confirmed my faith.

I hope you allow the things which challenge your faith to teach you what you can't learn by unchallenged belief. I hope you are overcome by doubts.

Then,

I hope you find yourself doubting your doubts.

For me, those doubts define my faith.

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Contrast

"An idol is usually a good thing that we make ultimate. We say, 'Unless I have that, I am nothing.'"

—Timothy Keller, pastor and author from his Twitter feed

"When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German pastor, author, and anti-Nazi dissident

Huge numbers of people were following Jesus, so he turned around and warned them, "If you want to be a devoted follower of mine, you have to, by comparison, hate everyone else. If you don't hate your parents, your wife and kids, your brothers and sisters—even despising your own life—you can't really be devoted to me. If you can't carry your own cross as you follow me, it's impossible to be a fully committed follower of mine. Don't even start following me if you don't understand what it costs."

—From Luke 14:25-28a

I do a lot of video editing. Mostly I make videos to enhance my public speaking.

Since I was first asked to start speaking to people as a teenager, I have spoken to well over a million people, spanning forty countries and forty states, thousands of times. I have spoken in school gymnasiums, at huge conferences and business conventions, in giant churches, and even to my former university professors (I was scared to death).

I have come to believe that speakers aren't great at getting ideas to stick.

I'm probably better than most, even in the top percentiles, but the truth is that *no one is great at being memorable*. I've heard famous, high-paid speakers and ingenious strategists, but few are very effective. If they were, we wouldn't get bored, and we do get bored, at least I do.

Most of us who speak to people on a regular basis realize we “zone out” when we are listening to other speakers, but we speakers like to imagine the people listening to us, hanging onto every word. I know they don't. It's why I do a lot of video editing.

After years of studying what sticks with people and how ideas can be communicated most effectively, I have come to believe the obvious. People learn better when they can see and hear what you're talking about; they love stories, and visuals help tell them the story.

I almost never speak without a video playing simultaneously. It's like giving your audience a visual snack so that they don't wander off mentally and start wondering if they left the oven on.

I have set up 30-foot video screens in tiny schools in Africa and used 3D video in communities near an hour from the closest paved road; I have filmed video myself, created animations, and downloaded video from YouTube; I have edited, shortened, and enhanced a video to make it work better; but there's one trick which improves nearly every video—increasing the *contrast*. Making the dark stuff darker and the bright stuff brighter makes everything clearer, and it drives focus onto the subject. At the other end of the spectrum, with the contrast turned down to zero, everything is the same shade and there is nothing left to see at all. Boring.

Contrast makes everything more distinct and sharper.

Harsh Words

Jesus used strong language to make his message clear. Like many effective communicators, his ability to use hyperbole to communicate the emphatic nature of his message helped him bring the point home. His strong language is one of the reasons he is the most effective speaker of all time. People were *not* bored when he spoke; they would listen to Jesus for hours without eating.

The problem we have in understanding the revolutionary message of Jesus is that we have sanitized his strong language. We glance over

it and take it for granted. When he says, “Don’t imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth! I came not to bring peace, but a sword,¹” we dismiss it without thinking about it too much. Sure, it’s shocking for a moment, but it doesn’t fit the picture of the Prince of Peace we have painted in our mind—so we move on, quickly. Jesus looks more like Gandhi than Genghis Khan in our brain’s portrait gallery. We don’t hang the picture of a sword-wielding Jesus next to the lamb-tending Good Shepherd.

When Jesus says many people who think they are followers of his (those doing great miracles and helping others) will go to hell, we worry for a moment but try not to examine ourselves too closely.

Jesus isn’t using strong language only for the sake of rhetorical flourish. He is increasing the *contrast*. He wants to be clearer, more focused. He is letting us know the road to the kingdom is a road narrower than you think, and the highway to hell is, well, a highway.

“If you don’t hate your parents, your wife and kids, your brothers and sisters—even despising your own life—you can’t really be devoted to me.”²

Jesus isn’t using strong language only for the sake of rhetorical flourish. He is increasing the *contrast*.

It would be easy to say that Jesus doesn’t want us to hate our family, because, of course, it’s true, but dismissing it so easily diminishes the reason why Jesus uses these harsh words in the first place.

He wants to draw a sharp contrast between *good* and *ultimate*.

Good things are good, but they aren’t eternal. Good things are beneficial, but they can’t last. By contrast, ultimate things have eternal value. They are immutable, infinite, and transcendent.

We are commanded to honor our father and mother, so why would Jesus use such severe statements to express the contrast between our love for them and our love for him? Because it’s of how sharp the contrast is.

¹ Matthew 10:34

² Luke 14:26

Here are a few more times that he draws on this contrast.

"Don't be afraid of those who can kill you. They can't kill your soul. Only be afraid of God. He can kill both your body and send your soul to hell."³

"You can't serve both God and money. You will always hate one and love the other."⁴

"So if your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away."⁵

Even good things
become toxic
when we find our
identity in them—
when we say,
"Unless I have it, I
am nothing."

Are we really supposed to ignore the danger from people who want to kill us? Should we really hate money? Are we to engage in self-mutilation to keep from sinning?

Don't fear people who can kill you? It's a good idea to stay safe, but serving God isn't safe. Safety is good, but it isn't *ultimate*.

Hate money? Money is useful for taking care of your family and it can do a lot of good, but it isn't *ultimate*.

Cut off your hand? Your body is a good thing, and you should take care of it, but it isn't *ultimate*.

Hate your mother, father, brothers, sisters, wife, kids? Being a respectful son/daughter and sibling is good, but it's not *ultimate*. Being a decent spouse and parent is good—even essential, still not *ultimate*.

Why can't it be both though? Why is the *contrast* so sharp? Is Jesus so insecure that he gets as jealous as a teenage boyfriend when his best girl glances at another guy? Surely the creator of the universe is secure enough in his own identity to handle a little competition.

This contrast isn't about *his* identity; it's about *ours*.

Real ID

Jesus is telling us *our* identity must be in him or nothing else will work.

³ Mathew 10:28

⁴ Matthew 6:24

⁵ Matthew 18:8

The good things become better when we get our priorities right. Even good things become toxic when we find our identity in them. When we say, "Unless I have it, I am nothing," we have defined our personhood with a dangerous definition.

Why? Because good things can be lost—*ultimate* things cannot.

This idea is central to the message of Christ. When he says, "Don't let life's necessities—what you eat and drink and what you wear—dominate your thoughts. Go after the Kingdom of God, and he'll give you everything you need,"⁶ he's making the same point. When he says, "Don't build your treasure here on earth where moths and rust destroy things and thieves steal them, but build up your treasure in heaven,"⁷ he's laying out the same priorities.

Why? Because, again, good things can be lost—*ultimate* things cannot.

Many of us want to add God to our lives in some sort of *God-is-my-co-pilot* accessory to our already-awesome lives. But consider this:

- If you could unravel all the DNA in your body, it would span 34 billion miles. Enough to reach the planet Pluto, and back, six times.
- Our sun is so large you could fit the earth inside of it 1.3 million times.
- After the sun, the closet star⁸ is 25 trillion miles away. It would take well over 100 years to get there with modern space travel.
- There are 300,000,000,000,000,000,000 (300 Sextillion) stars like our sun in the universe, more than all the grains of sand on Earth.
- Matter makes up only 5% of the universe. The rest is held together by unknown forces. The unknown forces are probably unknowable.

The God who created the universe wants to have a relationship with you. Don't put a God like him in the co-pilot seat. He wants to fly the plane, and you *want* him to fly the plane.

St. Augustine of Hippo said, "*Christ is not valued at all unless He is valued above all.*" God isn't a plug-in; he's the program. Nothing

⁶ Matthew 6:31-33

⁷ Matthew 6:19-20

⁸ Alpha Centauri C is 4.24 light-years from our sun

else works.

The apostle Paul writes, "*In Christ, there's no gender, there's no economic status, there's no ethnicity.*"⁹

Ethnic heritage is interesting, even important, but not ultimate. It is not an ultimate identity. It is merely good.

There are so many good things. Being wealthy might make you comfortable, but it won't do anything for the ultimate issues in your life. Being fit and healthy can extend your life but not forever. You will become frail and die. Safety consciousness can't protect you from everything. We will all face God in the end. Time is an undefeated foe in this world. Wisdom is valuable and can lead to ultimate things, but in and of itself, is not *ultimate*.

Our ultimate identity must come from him. If you find your identity in being a parent, a son, a daughter, a husband, a wife, a brother, or a sister—an identity crisis is on the way. You will not—cannot—always be those things. Your parents will probably die before you. Your kids may move away and have their own kids. God forbid - they could die before you too.

Unless tragedy hits and takes both husband and wife at the same time, one spouse will leave the other behind. The "*until-death-do-we-part*" part will happen, and that's *if* you have a good marriage. Bad ones end sooner—and often more tragically.

You will, someday, no longer have the career you may have now. Who will you be then? The great recession revealed to a whole new generation how savings can be wiped out and how a home can become a negative asset. You could even lose it—along with your good credit score. At some point your good health will, almost certainly, be lost to disease, injury, or age.

When everything else is gone, the only thing you will have left is the only thing you need—an identity found in Christ. It cannot be lost—even in death.

When everything else is gone, the only thing you will have left is the only thing you need—an identity found in Christ.

⁹ Galatians 3:28

Saved Alone

Horatio Spafford was a prominent and wealthy lawyer in Chicago in the second half of the 19th century. He was also an elder in the Presbyterian church and a friend and financial supporter of famed evangelist, D.L. Moody. By the time he was in his forties, Spafford had five children, a boy and four girls, with his wife Anna. He had amassed enough wealth and needed to diversify his savings portfolio. In the spring of 1871, he invested heavily in real estate holdings north of Chicago. In October of 1871, the Great Chicago fire reduced the city to ashes, destroying almost all of Spafford's life savings. His son had recently and tragically died of scarlet fever.

Two years later, Spafford was still in financial ruin but felt compelled to accompany and support his friend, D.L. Moody, in England. He decided his wife and four daughters would also travel with him, but business demands delayed Spafford's trip. Spafford and his wife decided she and the girls would travel ahead of him and he would join them after what would hopefully be a short delay.

On November 22, 1873, while crossing the Atlantic, the recently renamed SS Ville du Havre, the steamship carrying Anna and her four daughters, was struck by an iron clipper in the middle of the night and was nearly broken in half. The vessel was carrying three hundred and thirteen souls. It sank in twelve minutes. In the collision, some of the lifeboats were destroyed and most of the life jackets were stuck to the recently painted deck. Only eighty-six people survived.

In the chaos following the collision, Anna Spafford rallied her daughters, carrying the youngest, Tanetta in her arms. As the ship sank, debris knocked Tanetta from her mother's arms, and she drowned. The other three girls dog paddled as long as they could but soon succumbed to hypothermia from the near freezing water. Anna was found unconscious, floating on a wooden plank.

The news traveled the world, and back in Chicago, Horatio Spafford awaited news of his family's fate. Nine excruciating days later, Horatio received a telegram. It was sent by Anna and began, "Saved alone."

A few days later, as Horatio Spafford traveled the same route his wife and daughters had taken, he passed near the watery grave of his four girls and wrote the now famous lyrics to the hymn, *It is Well with My Soul*:

When peace like a river, attendeth my way,

When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to know,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

My sin, oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

For me, be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live:
If Jordan above me shall roll,
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life,
Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul.

But Lord, 'tis for Thee, for Thy coming we wait,
The sky, not the grave, is our goal;
Oh, trump of the angel! Oh, voice of the Lord!
Blessed hope, blessed rest of my soul.

And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
A song in the night, oh my soul!

It is well with my soul,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.

Ultimate Value

A beautiful family is an amazing gift. It is good, but not ultimate.

An excellent reputation is valuable and good, but not ultimate.

Financial security is a source of great comfort. It is good, but it is not ultimate.

Good health is a blessing from God. It is good, but still not ultimate.

A fulfilling career is satisfying. It can be good, but it cannot be ultimate.

Being created and loved by the creator of the universe is ultimate. Living the purpose the savior of humanity calls you to is ultimate.

Like diamonds displayed on a background of black velvet, the contrast proves the shimmering beauty. Velvet is a valuable material, but you would never gift it to someone who you were asking to spend the rest of their life with you. Velvet is good, but the diamond has become the *ultimate* symbol of undying love.

Hopefully the day never comes when you must choose between your family and your faith. It does happen, but choosing between your family and Jesus isn't why he says you must hate your family.

The issue is *your* identity. If you find *your* value in anything in this world, you will have nothing left when those things are lost.

In *contrast* to your love for the ultimate, your valuation for good things must look like hatred.

Then, and only then, can you love the good things in the way God, who gives all good things, intended.

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Misfits

"Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead and He shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him."

—The Misfit, from *A Good Man is Hard to Find* by Flannery O'Connor

"If Jesus were walking the streets today, there's a good chance he'd be found in places most people avoid."

—From KnowJesusChrist.net

"When you put on a luncheon or a banquet," Jesus said, "don't invite your friends, brothers, relatives, and rich neighbors. For they will invite you back, and this will be your only reward. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then at the resurrection of the righteous, God will reward you for inviting those who could not repay you."

Hearing this, a man sitting at the table with Jesus exclaimed, "What a blessing it will be to attend a banquet in the Kingdom of God!"

—From Luke 14:12-15

I'm a networker.

I have learned that most of the great opportunities you get in life are from who you know more than what you know. Sure, you must be good enough to do well at the opportunity to be offered the chance, but unless someone knows who you are and what you can do, you simply won't get the chance to do much of anything.

Networking can take a lot of forms: middle-aged men play golf. I assume it's because business deals sound more convincing when you're wearing plaid and arguing over a mulligan.

Young professionals network at indie coffee shops, where the espresso is strong and the Wi-Fi is weak—forcing actual conversation.

Country clubs, business networking groups, service organizations, and churches are pretty good spots to build business contacts. And studies show, all things being relatively even, that people will do business with people they like and feel comfortable with. Which explains why the guy who brings donuts to meetings always gets promoted. This is also why it can be so hard for minorities or women to break into businesses and associations traditionally led by white men.

Relationships rule the day.

Dinner Time

Personally, I haven't found anything as effective as dinner parties. My wife (an excellent cook) and I designed and built our home largely around making it an inviting and comfortable setting for entertaining others. We have regularly hosted all kinds of different people and built lasting and significant relationships around those dinners.

The same stood true in Jesus' time. But even more than now, strategic relationships were everything. While money remained a significant measurement of status, favors and relationships were far more significant than now.

This is still true in huge sections of the world. Latin and African cultures place more value on the exchange of relationship and favors than western cultures, and people who've worked and traveled in those parts of the world can understand what is happening in two specific stories about Jesus and his dinner parties.

One of the stories depicts him at a dinner party; the other story he tells while at the same party.

He essentially tells a story about a feast while sitting at a feast with some very important people...

A local religious leader invited Jesus to dinner—not a small deal. The man who prepared this feast didn't just plan a meal for some friends;

he meant to forge strategic bonds mattering to everyone involved—not about food but about *status*. Connecting people requires skill—a valuable one—and helping make those connections meant those involved would owe you a favor.

The man who invited Jesus lived the life of a Pharisee, and although we might not think of religious leaders as people with status in our secular society, in first century Israel, religion contained the heart of the culture, and Pharisees rested at the top of the social ladder. Of all the religious groups, the Pharisees were the most popular. They ran the temple, considered the center of Jewish identity, and claimed God's authority for their interpretation of the law. They were more than faith leaders too—they were politically connected. They maintained approval of the people and a direct connection to the Jewish and Roman politicians.

In Jesus' day, this kind of banquet he attended held a very specific purpose, an opportunity to create a place of connection. The host invited the most important people they knew and then got others they didn't know to come, based on the guest list they already compiled. The people who made new connections owed them and would invite their indebted to other events. Connected people owing a favor assured things got done or tough spots went avoided. No one could victimize the connected.

This is why no one without status received invitations. How could a person without social standing and connections help improve someone's place in life? They couldn't offer what they didn't have. It's simple math.

Jesus probably found himself invited based on his growing stature as a religious figure, and he started the dinner by talking about status. He saw people trying to get the best seats. Sitting closer to the host implied one's social juice remained intact and gave a better chance to be around the most important people. Jesus warned them that they risked embarrassment. He cautioned that it's better to wait until someone invited you to the better seats than to be asked to move when someone more important showed up.

Makes sense.

But then Jesus showed himself as no etiquette expert. He told them, "When you put on a luncheon or a banquet, don't invite your friends, brothers, relatives or rich neighbors."

What? Clearly Jesus knew nothing about dinner parties. Those are the connections paying off in the world of strategic networking. But then Jesus acknowledged what he said – “those people will invite you back.”

“Yes, Jesus,” they must’ve thought, “that’s the point.” But then Jesus said that when you invite the poor and disabled, something else happens. The debt they can’t repay is placed in God’s *accounts payable*. When the poor and disabled owe a favor they can’t repay, God considers it his debt.

The Fraternity of the Disabled

In speaking to more than a million students about subjects such as civility, suicide, and human trafficking, because I father a son with autism, I frequently seek to bring dignity to the lives of those who are different.

The gig of speaking in schools is a difficult one. It’s not easy walking into a gymnasium, theatre, or cafeteria full of students who are pretty sure the assembly they are mandated to attend is going to be terrible. Some students hope it will be terrible so they can get laughs as they make fun of everything happening. You’d think that they’d be more than happy to get out of class, but teenagers are at interesting stages of development where even they don’t know what they want. It’s a tough crowd.

Those few of us who find it worthwhile to speak to gymnasiums full of surly (and sometimes smelly) teenagers embrace the duty of slowly winning over the crowd with humor, personal stories, and emotional turning points to get them to listen to the real message you need them to hear.

I’ve told funny and surprising stories about my son and shared about the heroes around him who invested in who he is, but the most interesting thing I’ve discovered is merely mentioning that I have an autistic son brings a comradery that a typical person wouldn’t expect. After every assembly, students who have special needs come up to talk to me. Teachers come to tell me about their nephews who are autistic. Students with an autistic sibling come to give me the knowing look of someone who shares a life with a family member living with special needs—a look saying, “*yeah, I love my special family member, but I experience some hard days.*” We are connected by our otherness.

When Jesus said to go and invite the “crippled, the lame, and the blind,” they aren’t three distinctions to specifically look for but a group of people who are marginalized by the normies. They are misfits who don’t naturally belong among the typical, let alone the influential. The typical have no more need of what the disabled have to offer than the rich have need to rub shoulders with the poor.

The poor and the disabled share something in common—nothing of “value” to offer. I have spent much of my life working with people living in absolute poverty and can tell you most people are poor because they have no skills of high worth. Time is only money if the time provides the value of useful skills for producing said money. Working *hard* isn’t what makes a person financially successful; producing *value* through a valuable skill set brings financial gain. I’ve held jobs digging ditches (this is not a metaphor) and jobs sitting at a computer. I can tell you digging ditches doesn’t pay much even though it’s hard; white collar work is easier, and it pays a lot more. The poor not only lack valuable skills but are at the whim of someone else to offer them an opportunity.

When Jesus says to invite the disabled, he’s going one step further than inviting the poor. The poor offer very little of value to the world, but the disabled often become a financial drain on the world around them—especially in Jesus’ time. When my wife and I faced an autism diagnosis, we knew what it meant. Our plan to have more children changed. We realized our son would always need to be cared for in some way. I realized, even if I must never retire, I needed to provide for my son after I passed on. If he lived as long as I did, I essentially needed a 30-year retirement plan for *after I dropped dead*. In short, I would need, somehow, to save millions of dollars while leading non-profits which helped the poor. Not exactly a light load to carry.

In Jesus’ time, when most people worked as farmers, fishermen, and ranchers, labor proved even more important than now. A disabled individual not only couldn’t contribute to the family’s well-being but were a drain on what little resources the family owned as well.

Even worse, these people were considered cursed by God. (see chapter: Stick and Stones), but Jesus tries to explain God’s power is displayed in being needy. Like diamonds against a black velvet backdrop, human weakness is where God’s power shines the brightest.

It's doubtful that the disciples understood.

The Burden of Being a Burden

None of this burden is lost to the misfits themselves. Make no mistake, the misfits know they are mis-fitted.

My son isn't always aware of the stares and discomfort he provokes, but his family members always know we are, by extension, misfits. We experienced friends pull away after our son began displaying the symptoms of disability. We've been yelled at for our son's behavior by unknowing strangers and ignorant acquaintances. We've felt the glares of the "normals" in church, restaurants, and movie theatres.

We don't let him be a continual disturbance or run wild. We deal with his disruptive behavior as quickly as possible and exclude ourselves from many settings where he won't fit in, but we also try to be as normal as possible, and we try to teach him to conform to the world of the typical. Try as we might to help them, people with autism don't always fit in a society with finely tuned rules of social interaction. They are mis-fitted.

Perhaps harder (for my wife especially), our son isn't invited to the parties of other boys his age—even those who come to *his* birthday parties. They don't mean to exclude him; they just don't think of inviting someone who wouldn't fit in. People don't hate the misfits; they just know the misfits don't fit.

Code Switch

But Jesus, the hero of the misfits, threw everything off balance.

Jesus switched the code. *Poor* is code for *worthless*. *Disabled* is code for less than worthless—those holding a *negative* societal and familial net worth.

You wouldn't want the unwanted at your dinner party—the worthless offered no worth. Jesus acknowledged the code and changed the definitions of the words. He threw everything off balance.

In God's kingdom,
the poor, the
crippled, the lame,
and the blind are
not misfits—they
are the *influencers*.

Jesus said the misfits find their place at the parties God throws. He told his host that he practiced the strategy for advancement all wrong if he desired to

advance himself in the Kingdom of God.

In God's kingdom, the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind are not misfits—they are the *influencers*. They possess God's ear and getting close to them decides who gets favors—and favor. The rich and famous are outsiders in the upside-down Kingdom of God.

In the kingdom of God, the misfits are not only at the table - they are the honored guests. Everyone wishes to sit near them. Everyone wants to do them favors. Everyone hopes to fit in with *them*.

In the Kingdom of God:

The last are first.

The lowly rule the earth.

The persecuted are powerful.

Two coins of a widow are worth more than the great riches of a prominent man.

The poor are favored.

The disabled display God's power.

If those statements seem difficult to fully understand, thank the impairment of belonging in *this* world. Misfits don't carry this disability.

They read those statements not as a warning *but as a promise*.

And so should you. Deep inside, you've always known you don't really fit in; you don't really belong. But there's a parallel world where you and all the other misfits truly do belong. Jesus is inviting you to join him, to find the belonging you've always longed for, and to become a beloved misfit in the Kingdom of God.

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The Question Mark

"The greatest question in all of human life is summed up when we ask, 'What would Jesus do?' if, as we ask it, we also try to answer it from a growth in knowledge of Jesus himself. We must know Jesus before we can imitate Him."

—Charles M. Sheldon, In His Steps

"WWJD wasn't a branding stunt. It was low-tech accountability—a tiny surveillance device stitched in yarn, reminding you to maybe not make out in the church van or flip off the kid who stole your seat during worship."

—Ellen Hayes, writer for RELEVANT Magazine

"I have modeled for you how to live and serve. Here's the truth – a follower isn't above the leader: no messenger is greater than the message. You know what to do and it is to your benefit to do it."

—Jesus, from John 13:15-17

A friend of mine came to my house one day wearing a shirt with the words "What wouldn't Jesus do?" silk-screened across the front. It displayed a picture of a traditional Jesus-like figure hang-gliding. His shirt clearly poked fun at the WWJD phenomenon of a few years earlier, and when he accidentally ripped a huge hole in it, I told him God clearly punished him for being sacrilegious. Hang-gliding Jesus may not be canon, but I'd still watch that movie. Especially if he lands on water and just keeps walking.

The WWJD movement (mostly a fashion statement in some cases) didn't start in the 1990's but in the 1980's when a group of Christian

youth pastors in Holland, Michigan started putting WWJD on bracelets and buttons. This then caught the eye of some local merchandisers who saw an opportunity—boom, a trend began.

The inscription has appeared on mugs, rings, bumper stickers, bookmarks, key rings, etc. with some variants featuring the letters in the shape of the Christian fish. There's no doubt the movement might be traced back to its supposed roots: Charles Sheldon's 1896 book, *In His Steps*.

Sheldon lived as a Congregationalist pastor in Topeka, Kansas who wrote his fictional novel about a number of stock characters doing what their stereotypes would do in certain setups proposed by the author. Forced to read it as a child in private Christian school, I didn't know it wasn't a true story. I also didn't know Sheldon was a Socialist who saw Jesus as more of a moral example than a savior and would later inspire Christian missionaries in the 20th century to support communist revolutions around the world.

I doubt too many of the people wearing rainbow WWJD bracelets knew much of this either. I should have known Sheldon was a socialist. I just thought he was a guy who liked asking rhetorical questions and writing about people who always made the right choice—which, as a kid, felt suspiciously unrealistic.

Sampling the O.T.

But the WWJD movement goes back much further than a late 19th century novel from a small mid-western preacher.

Paul may originate the idea in 1 Corinthians 11:1 when he writes: "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ."

But Paul is, of course, not the originator of the idea either—he is channeling the Old Testament idea spoken by God himself in Leviticus 19:2: "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.'"

I realize, technically speaking, the J in WWJD stands for Jesus and making the argument the WWJD movement began 1250 years before Jesus was born is a stretch. However, Christian theology is built around the idea of completion (the concept that the New Testament scriptures build on, reform and "complete" the Jewish scriptures).

The ministry of Jesus completes the Old Testament concepts left impossible to attain without Jesus' sacrifice providing power over human nature. Thus, I'm on semi-solid ground here when suggesting the WWJD movement is from the third book of the Bible.

The interesting thing about the most recent WWJD phenomenon is the level of popularity it reached. Pop stars, sports stars, and the guy who made my latte at Peet's coffee were all a part of the movement. The revolution not only became televised but parodied on television, along with various media: "What Would Yoda Do?" became a popular twist—which I assume involves cryptic advice and lifting your car with the Force."

A book entitled *What Would Buddha Do?* espoused Zen Buddhist philosophy to answer everyday problems; one popular cartoon depicted Jesus driving a car with the personalized vanity plate reading "WWJD?"; and T-shirts have been seen with the phrase "what would Jesus do for a klondike bar?" taking shots at Christian culture and ice cream bars at the same time.

And while "What Would Scooby Doo?" seems somewhat harmless, one shock rocker who proclaimed "We Want Jesus Dead" used the WWJD in a much more aggressive way—and, of course, isn't really a question. I simultaneously find this a little clever and roll my eyes about another celebrity using "blasphemy" to gain attention. It's like spiritual trolling—provocative, edgy, and usually followed by a merch drop. I do appreciate the irony here where normally Christians make the things they don't like more popular by speaking out against them, but now this is one case which works in reverse.

Some criticisms are a little more pointed. "What Would Jesus Drive?" was used as part of an environmental campaign. It seems with 12 disciples, he may have preferred a 15-passenger van—not exactly glamorous, but it beats the camel pool. A 15-passenger van would be an ecologically sound choice of car-pooling unlike the parade of black SUVs most celebrity environmental activists usually use.

"Who would Jesus Bomb?" was a direct shot at the self-proclaimed evangelical George W. Bush's foreign policy of "strike first" preemption.

Ironically, "shock and awe" seemed to follow Jesus everywhere.

But, for Real...

The real question of what Jesus would do in every situation is more complicated than we make it out to be. Jesus seemed to surprise people with his actions everywhere he went.

He turned away the rich man who seemed to have it all together. Not too many churches make it hard for potential big givers to join the club.

He told another man who had family obligations that it was all or nothing. Most of us now preach balance.

He embraced a prostitute as an example of gratitude. Sounds good as a story but imagine this actually happening at a private dinner.

He was truly hurt over his close friends being despondent when their brother (also Jesus' close friend) died. He intentionally delayed knowing the pain Lazarus' death would cause.

He constantly broke the rules. He broke the rules of society, family, religion, patriotism and more. I write about it elsewhere, but I say it here to point out that it isn't always easy to figure out what Jesus would do.

It isn't always
easy to figure
out what Jesus
would do.

My friend's shirt reading "What wouldn't Jesus do?" is also a pretty interesting question as well. I don't think anyone believes Jesus would hang-glide when he could have some

angels fly him safely anywhere, but shirts are shirts.

It does seem Jesus did some crazy stuff, and some things surprising to the 21st century American evangelical.

- He turned water into wine when people were apparently already drunk.
- He spat in the dirt and rubbed mud in a blind guy's eyes.
- He told a group of people mourning a teenage girl who had died and said that she was only sleeping.
- He cast some demons into pigs at the request of the demons!
- He turned away his own mother and brothers and claimed his real family were the people he was speaking to.
- He told a group of followers that they needed to eat his body and drink his blood to be true followers.

What wouldn't Jesus do? What were his actual limits on his behavior? You and I have a pretty uncomplicated system of moral precepts and often have a spoken and unspoken set of rules which tell us what's acceptable and what's not. Step out of line and there will be people looking at you with the "that's not cool" look.

This is usually a good thing. I've seen some pretty out-there stuff brought into line with an understanding of the chosen peer pressure.

What isn't a good thing is when people stop questioning the understood.

Or when the understanding becomes the because-I-said-so, the-discussion-ends-here standard which is the price of admission for anyone wanting admission to the collective.

Don't misunderstand. Jesus is extremely clear on many moral issues.

Sex. Lust. Greed. Honesty. Idolatry. Theft. Pride. Envy. He didn't hedge his position on any of these subjects and even went further than people expected.

The picture of Jesus as some sort of *anything-goes it's-all-good hippie* is only painted by picking and choosing from the gospels. Many Christo-illiterate people use this paint brush to show the masses of the bible-believing the error of their ways.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The fact is that Jesus provides a very strict code of conduct. The problem is that we struggle fitting it into a systematic morality at times because it doesn't fit what we already think. We need Jesus to get into line with our predetermined list of rights and wrongs. The right, the left, the religious, irreligious, the socialists and the libertarian alike all want to seize the WWJD narrative for their own purposes. It's not a question; it's a period. What would Jesus do? He'd confirm what I already think.

To engage in a *set-the-record-straight-about-what-Jesus-really-thought diatribe* here, would go against everything I'm saying. I won't attempt to correct the widely held assumptions of the devout or anyone else. This whole book is about challenging those assumptions.

The real disruption here is to keep the question mark at the end of the W-W-J-D. If we keep asking the question and cut back on

assuming we already know the answer, we might surprise some people.

I know Jesus did.

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Fearless Fatherhood

"I cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father's protection."

—Sigmund Freud, Austrian neurologist, founder of psychoanalysis

"A father carries pictures where his money used to be."

—Steve Martin, American actor

Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!

—Luke 15:1-2 (NLT)

I have three children. I am a questionable father in so many ways. When my children were younger, you could regularly hear me asking them who loved them more, their mom or me. I trained them to say, "Daddy!" as my wife rolled her eyes. On cue, when I asked my son, *Does Mommy love you?* he would (and still will) reply, "Yes, but not like Daddy!"

When my youngest daughter, Dakota, asked me once when her older brother, Declan, got to do something she didn't, I explained:

"Declan was here first. He had 100% of our love. It wouldn't be fair to split our love 50/50; he was here first. We've carved off some of our love for you, but not evenly."

"That's not true," she protested, "When mommies and daddies have more children, God expands their love so that it's like they all get 100% of their parents' love."

I looked at her and smiled at her cuteness. "That's a lie others parents tell. I'll have no part of it," I responded.

She only rolled her eyes (a skill she learned at a young age).

"God's love is unconditional and unlimited. There's nothing you can do to make him love you more or less. It's a gift you can't earn," I explained.

She smiled, waiting for the rest.

"Daddy is not God," I told her, "You must earn, earn, earn!" She rolled her eyes again.

"You ever wish you had a normal dad?" I asked.

"Nope," she said quickly and confidently, "Extraordinary dad equals extraordinary life!"

Smart, I thought, *especially for an eight-year-old*. I nodded at her. "Who's earning now?!" We both laughed.

All three of my children are really quite different. My first born, Declan, is autistic, as I've addressed in this book. Robyn, my oldest child, however, isn't my first born; she is adopted...as in, at the urging of my youngest, we adopted her at *twenty-seven years old* after she lived with us for four years. And, yes, I know that's unusual.

My Youngest, Dakota, dawns an ever-changing color of hair (green, blue, red), a nose ring, an eyebrow piercing, and whatever else is cool (one of her friends described her as the coolest girl at her high school of 1,800 students). I hoped she would be the normal one, but she turned out like me—questions everything, doesn't buy the hype, and is fiercely independent. I now understand how often my parents held their tongue. This is a pretty unconventional family situation.

Adopting a twenty-seven-year-old is atypical, but when you've been stared at your whole parenting experience because of your autistic son, the raised eyebrows are barely noticeable. The pics of my green-haired, youngest daughter might raise some eyebrows too if said eyebrows weren't already raised at full mast.

But becoming a dad changed me in ways I can't explain. I wasn't sure if I wanted or should have kids, but the minute my son breathed life, everything changed. I wanted to be an epic dad. I've wanted dad-jokes, dad-bod, and a cool-dad vibe—and *two out of three*

ain't bad.

But my trepidation didn't rely on needless concern. Indeed, being a dad turned out even harder than I thought it would be. I knew you needed to be wise, patient and loving. *No one told me how much courage I would need.*

No one told me how much courage I would need to be a father.

Courage for the Lost

Jesus talked about the courage needed to be a father in one of his most famous stories.

Jesus began to become heavily criticized for hanging out with tax collectors and "notorious sinners." For the Jewish culture in which Jesus lived, these were two very specific categories of people.

The "tax collectors" were conspirators with the Roman Empire who started to brutalize them through colonization and violent suppressors of opposition of any kind. The Jews who helped extract money from the colonized to the colonizers (and took a little for themselves) were not only siding with the enemy; they became the enemies of God.

On the other hand, the "sinners" Jesus hung out with were more than misguided, they were notorious for their depravity. Jesus, who became famous for healing people and for delivering mesmerizing teachings about goodness, hung out with people who were infamous for their badness.

When criticized, he responded with three stories about lost things. He tells a well-known story about a lost sheep and lesser-known story about a lost coin, but his third story is the one we know best. It's the story of a lost son. Over the millennia it's become known as the story of the Prodigal Son.

Prodigious Prodigalism

If you know the word "*prodigal*," it's probably only because of this story. If you're like me, you probably think it means wayward or something like that. It actually means *wasteful*—but that just shows how influential this story really is. It creates a context so powerful that it redefines terms.

The story is about a father whose younger of two sons comes to him

and asks for his inheritance immediately—rather than waiting until his father dies—so he can leave and make his own way in the world. In other words, he doesn't want to wait any longer for his father to die, and he wants no part of his family.

Not an easy thing for a father to hear: his son would prefer he were dead. But he acquiesces to the request. Even though it's a fictional story, we know from historical context that the father likely would've had to sell much of his estate, since wealth back then was stored in land and livestock—not banks.

The father makes a publicly humiliating choice. Everyone in the community would know the son had disrespected him, and they'd all be wondering why the father gave in to such a degrading and dishonorable demand.

Upon receiving his inheritance, the son left for a distant country, quickly squandering his inheritance through “wild living” (the term used in the New Living Translation). We assume he drank, slept with prostitutes, and debased himself in other ways. He wasted his inheritance, intended to last a lifetime, in a short time; in self-harming ways.

Making matters worse, an economic devastation suddenly hit and, without any money, forced him into a menial farm labor job not even paying enough to eat. Hunger set in and he found himself considering eating pig slop—no one would help him as a foreigner without family or long-term friends.

Then, the story goes...

He finally came to his senses, and said to himself, “Even my father's servants have enough food to eat while I am starving to death.” He reasoned he could throw himself at his dad's mercy, admit he wronged both his dad and God, and be welcomed back as a housekeeper, gardener, or livestock helper.

So, he headed for home. At the end of the long journey, on the outskirts of his childhood home, his father spotted him.

And this is where the story took a twist for the people to who Jesus spoke it...

The father does not turn his son away or even tell him “I told you so.” The father doesn't wait for his son to come crawling home, but he

runs, full speed, to meet his wayward son.

When they reunite, the son throws himself at his father's mercy, admits how stupid and hurtful his actions became, and abandons all claims to the rights of being a son.

But his father is having none of it. He hugs and kisses his son. But he doesn't stop there...he sends the servants to get his finest clothes for his son—and new shoes, and even a family ring. Next, he announces a coming-home party. The public humiliation that his son inflicted upon him will be repaid with a public repatriation to the family.

The son protests in shame. "Dad, I've wronged you in every possible way. I've don't even deserve to be called your son." But his dad doesn't even respond to such nonsense. "We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. *He was lost, but now he is found.*"

So the party began.

But this father loves *two* sons. And the older son cannot believe what is happening. He refuses to come to the party even after his father begged him.

"All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!" ¹

The father explained to his angry eldest son that the loyalty he showed would be rewarded, and everything the father owned would be his someday; however, his brother's return must be celebrated.

The father, who cried, and prayed and spent sleepless nights in anguish (of which all parents of young adults experience) received the answer to his prayers. His son died and came back to life. *He once was lost but now was found* (a line borrowed for a hymn written much, much later).

The story is God's explanation of fatherhood in the bible. Of course, we label it *The Prodigal Son*, but really, it's the heartfelt story of *two*

¹ Luke 15:29-30

sons and their loving *father*.

A Tale of Two Sons

There are two sons. The older brother is dutiful and finds his place through responsibility and faithfulness, while the younger son finds his place through individuality and self-expression.

Their father is rich, but the older son works dutifully in the family business, while the younger son enjoys his privileged life—maybe a bit too much. He's spoiled. What few chores he's expected to do are resented. Not as training for a future of maintaining a legacy of generational wealth, but as obstacles to his idyllic would-be bohemian existence. When the son hatches a plan to insult his father by letting him know his death can't come soon enough, even he can't believe the father's reaction. He is given enough rope to hang himself, while his father hopes against hope maybe someday when his son is encapsulated by self-imposed darkness, the rope he gave will lead him home.

At the brink of starvation, with no more friends he could afford to buy, he accepts the consequences of his actions. He realizes his whole existence as a lie. The end result of his life's philosophy is humiliation, starvation, and abandonment by the people he partied with. All the life lessons his dad tried to teach him were true. Every last one. He lost his birth right, his dignity, and the love of everyone he ever knew. No chance his father would ever take him back.

He's right about everything—except *his dad*.

His dad left some hope through an act of unbelievable courage. When he realized that the way he raised his son went awry somehow, he did the most courageous thing any father can do.

He let go.

He let his son go freely so *he might know a way home*.

His son doesn't believe forgiveness is available, but something, just *something* might be available, and over time, maybe he could earn a place back into his father's life with enough groveling and manual labor.

But his father runs to his son without pride, gives him his own best robe, basically a tux, and kills a fattened calf—the kind of meal saved in case a dignitary came to a rich person's estate.

He left with two middle fingers raised high and returned as royalty.

When the father let his son go, it took incredible courage. The most courageous act of paternal courage. He knew his son might die. He knew his son, if he lived, would do great damage. Everything the father did for his son his whole life meant nothing. One last choice remained. Control or courage.

He chooses the most courageous act a father can choose. He let go.

Courage Transplant

The movie *John Q* tells the story of John Quincy Archibald, played with superlative intensity by Denzel Washington. John is a desperate father who takes a hospital emergency room hostage after his final appeal to his health insurance provider for his son's heart transplant is denied. If you haven't seen it, maybe it's because the trailers made it look like a movie about the American healthcare system. And, to be fair, it starts that way.

Scenes unfold with a father at the end of his rope, trying to make a point about how unjust the insurance system can be. But then, one scene flips the script—you realize you've been suckered into a ruse. This movie isn't just about healthcare. It's about something deeper.

Even as John shuts down a hospital, holds ER doctors, nurses, and patients hostage, and causes the FBI to surround the building, the insurance company still says no to the transplant. Then John does something desperate. He loads a bullet into his pistol (which had been empty the whole time) and announces he'll take his own life so the doctor can transplant his heart into his son's body.

John Q isn't a movie about the mess we've made of healthcare. It's about how far a father is willing to go to save his son.

A father will go to any length for his children. I've told my kids hundreds of times, "You know, I'd take a bullet for you or jump in front of a bus to save your life—no hesitation." They don't really understand. How could they? They've never been a parent. But giving up your life to save a child is the second most courageous thing a parent can do.

In the movie, the doctor agrees to perform the transplant if John takes his own life. But then, a pimp—yes, a literal pimp—who's in the

ER getting one of his girls patched up, talks him out of it. He draws on some deep beliefs he learned in church as a boy, even though those beliefs no longer guide his personal morality. And yet, even as someone who sells women for sex, he speaks words of wisdom to John:

"John, you can't do this. Sometimes you just gotta let go and let God."

The father decides to put his son's life in God's hands.

As a father, the times requiring the most courage, aren't times requiring action, but the ones requiring inaction.

As a father, the times requiring the most courage aren't times requiring action but the ones requiring inaction. Letting go isn't for the faint of heart. I would rather give my life for my children than feel like I'm giving up on them.

Control is easy; realizing loss of control and acting accordingly while the tough stuff imposing fear requires you to choose bravery and act counterintuitively to the DNA of every parenting cell screaming out to *do something* is not.

The "something courageous" parents' choice is to let God do something instead. Our daring inaction moves the hand of God.

Fearlessness of Letting Go—and Taking Back

When the prodigal son's father decided to let go and let God, he realized his control over the situation was already gone. He had lost his son long before—but only now did he grasp just how far gone he really was. It took courage to make the bold choice to send a message: money, status, and hurt wouldn't come between them. The door home would always stay open.

But the more courageous act of love came when he opened his heart again. He didn't just receive his son back—he accepted the loss of respect from his community, the scorn of his other son, and the very real possibility of being hurt again.

He made the choice with abandon.

This is the picture of God that Jesus paints: a Father who lets us make our own choices, no matter how painful, and always leaves the door

open to come home. But He doesn't just wait for us to arrive—He runs to us the moment we turn in His direction.

As someone once pointed out, this is the only time in all of Scripture where we see God run.

He runs to His son.

And He runs to us—over and over and over again—no matter how many times we leave.

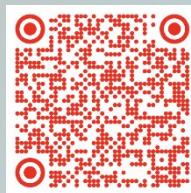
And He let go of His only Son, Jesus, so we could be reconciled to the Father. It's the most fearless act of fatherhood in history.

Even though we squander our inheritance as sons and daughters, and our choices required the sacrifice of His Son, He runs to us while we're still stumbling our way home.

Then He clothes us in His own robes, throws a party, and announces to the naysayers: *"My son was lost, but now he is found."*

It's a story of amazing grace—and how sweet the sound of being found really is.

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Kingdom Come

"There can be no Kingdom of God in the world without the Kingdom of God in our hearts."

—Albert Schweitzer, medical missionary, author, Nobel Peace Prize winner

"If we only had eyes to see and ears to hear and wits to understand, we would know that the Kingdom of God... is as close as breathing... It is home, and whether we realize it or not, I think we are all of us homesick for it."

—Frederick Buechner

"As Jesus exited the temple courts, his closest followers pointed out various buildings within the temple complex. Jesus asked them, "Do you see all these amazing buildings? Believe me when I say they will all be destroyed. Not a single stone will be left on top of another."

When they got to the Mount of Olives, Jesus sat down and the disciples asked him in private what he meant earlier. "When will the temple be destroyed? What will signal your return and the end of the world?"

—From the Gospel According to Matthew, chapter 24, verses 1 through 8.

I grew up in an evangelical home in the 1970's and 80's. As comedian Nate Bargatze says in a standup routine, it was "peak Christian." We listened to Christian music, went to Christian concerts, laughed at Christian comedians and attended Christian school. Even Bob Dylan turned born again and released two gospel albums. The evangelical culture seeped into the dominant culture.

But the Christian movies were a little extra. Practically every evangelical movie followed a thriller about the end times. These were independent, low-budget films few people had heard of, starring unknown actors, but experienced world-wide distribution to hundreds of millions of people through church viewing and small theatres usually showing French language art films. If these films were any indication, the future stood written—and it looked horrifying.

What a Dispensation!

In the late 1800's, dispensationalism became a prominent way of understanding the bible. Dispensationalism divided human history into seven different periods or "dispensations" of how God dealt with humans. Out of fear I'll lose you during a lengthy explanation, the idea is that we are living in the sixth dispensation of God's grace and the final dispensation would be the "great tribulation"—a seven-year period where God will send world-wide judgments, increasing in severity, in a last attempt to bring humanity to repentance.

The biblical book of Revelation, with all its flying locusts, flying beasts, valleys filled with blood and lake of fire would start to read less like a fantasy novel and more like the daily newspaper at some terrible point in future history. And it would be soon... very soon.

Most evangelicals believed (and believe) Jesus would return to "rapture" true believers and then things would get worse and worse for the next seven years until the "second coming" of Jesus. The idea that we were living in the "last days" sat at the core identity of the evangelical movement. From Billy Graham to Keith Green (a truly amazing and original Christian music evangelist who named his ministry "Last Days Ministries"), the idea that Jesus would come back at any minute went beyond being pervasive—it became the omnipresent through-line of everything. In the wake of World War II, the reemergence of the nation of Israel in 1948, the looming cloud of geo-thermonuclear war and Islamic terrorism, it's easy to see why the world teetered on the "Eve of Destruction" (the title of future Christian Music artist, Barry McGuire's famous war protest song).

The attack on traditional religious ethos ("free-love," drug culture, new age religion, *et al*) spread apocalyptic icing on the doomsday cake.

Christians didn't stand alone either—the whole culture was infused with the Armageddon disposition. For the first time in history,

humanity held the means to destroy itself and it was hard to see how it wouldn't happen.¹

The End is Near

Enter the Christian end-times movies.

I don't remember them all, but the 1973 film, *A Thief in the Night* (a title alluding to 1 Thessalonians 5:2), is a standout. By some estimates, it's the most widely seen film of the 1970s with over 300 million estimated viewers.

Most of the end-time's movies started with the rapture and then followed unbelievers and backslidden Christians who were left behind and repented as they went underground while the antichrist hunted them down. "666" tattoos on foreheads and hands were standard for the genre, as well as a scene depicting a French-revolution-style beheading by guillotine—*A Thief in the Night* sequels are good examples: at least the repentant went to glory, even if gruesomely depicted. The mark-of-the-beast crowd would have a forehead tattoo and eternal damnation to look forward to. Not awesome.

I'm pretty sure the intended effect of subjecting us kids to these movies meant to straighten us up and fly right, but the actual effect on my tweener psyche produced pure terror. Like most kids raised in an evangelical family, I'd lie in bed at night in fear I didn't meet rapture material requirements. If I got up early to an empty living room, I'd check my parents' room to make sure they were still there—I needed assurance that I wouldn't find myself "left behind" (a title of a much later series of books and awesomely cheesy Nicolas Cage movie adaptations—which *you must make time to watch*).

Every kid I knew lived in constant fear that we'd be left to face the guillotine because of some seemingly mundane, but ultimately capital-offense level sin.

Before you get too offended if I'm

Every kid I knew
lived in constant
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guillotine.

¹ It's interesting to note apocalyptic scenarios aren't only for the religious. Climate change, over population, and global pandemics are secular versions of doomsday predictions, and nuclear weapons are still a real threat of annihilation.

describing your eschatological belief system, I'm not mocking your theology. I'm only poking fun at the over the top, sensationalistic way the evangelical culture got the message out about the imminent end (If you've made it this far in the book, you probably aren't easily offended anyway).

The Eve of Destruction

When Jesus is asked about his second coming and the end of the world, he makes some pretty interesting statements.

Scholars call it *The Olivet Discourse*—which, simply stated, refers to the time Jesus conversed with his disciples on the Mount of Olives and explained all this end times talk.

Jesus begins by describing something most Christians don't realize when they read it—the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the nation of Israel forty years after this explanation.

In case you've never heard of this, we know he describes this event because of two things: he tells his followers some of them will be alive to witness it², and from the historical fact it happened in AD 68-70 exactly like he said it would. He describes the banners of the Roman Army, in a genius turn of phrase ("where Eagles gather³"), and then the desecration of the temple by the Roman general Titus ("the abomination that causes desolation"). This, and more, indisputably happened in A.D 70.

Jesus' instruction to run to hills instead of the city (normally besieged people would try to survive a siege inside the city walls) is even thought to be responsible for the survival of Christianity since his followers escaped instead of being among the one million Jews slaughtered during the fall of Jerusalem.

Even if you've never heard this before, and most Christians haven't, it's not in dispute that the first part of Matthew 24 describes these events. If you visit the Coliseum in Rome, the nearby Arch of Titus contains stone reliefs showing the conquest of Israel and the hundreds of thousands of slaves carried off and sold to pay for the construction of the world-famous Roman arena. It's a historical fact

² In Mark 9:1 and its parallels (Matt. 16:28; Luke 9:27)

³ The Greek word is translated "Vultures" in some translations due to context, but it is literally "Eagles"

that this happened.

The question is what Jesus talks about in the latter parts of his conversation. Most scholars, and pretty much all evangelicals, believe that Jesus transitions to the other part of the question—his second coming and the end of the world. The idea of the rapture even comes from this⁴, a two-stage return synthesizes everything—the surprise “rapture” followed by the seven-year tribulation described in the Book of Revelation ending with the physical return of Christ.

But it's not this simple. A third of early church fathers believed this is all one event, and Jesus' one and only return did not manifest physically but is displayed through the judgment of Jerusalem on unrepentant Jews. Allusions to the first fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and the symbolic language used, bolster this claim.⁵ This view even carries a name—*preterism* (*coming from the Latin word for past*). I can't explain it all here, but it's a fascinating minority report on eschatological exegesis (I'm really just using these big words for fun now.)

Others simply dismiss the more fantastic imagery and seemingly incongruous portions of this conversation as symbolic and metaphorical. Of course, secular scholars and the non-religious point to all of this as a fever dream of fantastic proportions written much later and challenge the truth of any of it.

A Different Kind of King

But there is something deeper happening here in the hearts of Jesus' disciples. They are asking about this for a reason, or for a couple of reasons.

They left everything to follow Jesus. They all must've wondered why Jesus had chosen them. They were ordinary people.

But every one of Jesus' disciples knew why they answered the call to follow Jesus. They believed he was the promised Messiah. While the why of being chosen lingered, the why of following remained crystal clear—the Messiah would build up his kingdom on earth, set everything right, and rule in power. To the collection of twelve

⁴ Synthesized with 1 Thessalonians 4

⁵ R.C. Sproul's Book *The Last Days According to Jesus* provides an excellent synopsis of this view of eschatology if you're interested

nobodies came a massive opportunity—to become *somebodies*. They even had arguments about who would be his right-hand (or even left-hand) man. Sure, Jesus didn't seem to aspire to earthly power, but this would surely change. *It had to.*

So, when Jesus walked through the temple court and described the destruction of this symbol of national identity, they wanted to understand what he meant, and if he literally meant what he said—they wanted to know *what the plan would be.*

By this time, they began to realize Jesus might not be the kind of Messiah they thought he would be. His love for the outcast, his compassion for the diseased, his rage for the powerful—none of this is what they expected. Reality unveiled *so much more than they expected*; they fell in love with this unpredictable version of the long-awaited Messiah.

When Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God coming (which he did constantly), he seemed to be talking about a different kind of Kingdom than they knew how to comprehend. The last were first, the poor were blessed, and the disabled weren't cursed by God but were in a place of honor. Power dynamics, theological economics, and even math itself turned upside down and twisted in mind-bending ways.

The followers of Jesus began to understand the upside-down Kingdom, but they desperately needed a plan for how all of it would unfold.

Jesus' response in Mathew 24 and the parallel passages included the following:

- “You will be arrested, persecuted, and killed. You will be hated all over the world because you are my followers.”
- “There will be greater anguish than at any time since the world began.”
- “The sun will be darkened, the moon will give no light, the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.”

If Jesus' followers were looking for comfort, these aren't exactly

The followers of Jesus began to understand the upside-down Kingdom, but they desperately needed a plan for how all of it would unfold.

statements of encouragement. His only words of reassurance were “God’s in control”.

Since those days, people try to formulate what all of this means. Like the disciples, the consolation that God has a plan for his coming kingdom isn’t as comforting as if we could decipher the cypher Jesus offers us and know the plan ourselves.

A Different Kind of Kingdom

We aren’t really good at the idea of Kingdoms in the 21st century western world. People have shed blood to throw off the domination of kings. Bloodline governance, with all its incest and intrigue, seems archaic at best and evil at worst. The closest idea we have to a king is a coach—someone who takes over as a benevolent dictator, changes the culture of the team, and snatches victory from the jaws of defeat.

The Kingdom of God is like this.

You choose. You get to decide that you want to be a part of it. But the King of your choosing is still *the* King—he is unchallenged, and you submit to his goodness. While not subjugation, this is still submission in every way.

The disciples wanted a plan, a time traveler’s view into the future. We want it, too.

But Kings don’t answer to their followers. The followers get information on a need-to-know basis so we don’t get ahead of ourselves, lest we jump the gun in our own human hubris.

Jesus did tell his followers what they needed to know.

- Hard times are coming. Prepare yourself.
- Don’t be taken in by religious con men.
- Run for the hills when you see the Romans coming.
- God holds the plan, so don’t worry no matter how bad things seem.

Not enough info for you? *Welcome to the human condition.* If you decide to trust anyway, welcome to the kingdom.

Insurrectionist Eschatology

I believe one of the most powerful examples of how we might posture ourselves toward the coming Kingdom is found in the

attitude of one of the revolutionaries crucified beside Jesus. As he watched this man slowly die beneath a sign that mockingly read, “The King of the Jews,” he saw something deeper—he saw a true King. But it was a different kind of Kingdom.

One of the condemned men hurled insults: “You’re a savior? Then save yourself—and us too!”

But the other, also executed for treason against Rome, responded with humility: “Remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

This is the eschatology of surrender—modeled by a political revolutionary transformed into a spiritual insurgent during six hours beside Jesus at his most vulnerable and most powerful. In just a few words, he embodies the posture we’re invited to adopt in the face of mystery and uncertainty:

I don't know what the future holds. I don't know why or how everything in my life will happen. I'm still trying to wrap my head around the upside-down kingdom and learning to trust you.

But I know you're the King—and whatever your kingdom looks like, I want to be part of it if you'll have me.

Your Kingdom come. Your will be done.

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The Scandalous Cross

"I have always considered Christ to be one of the greatest revolutionaries in the history of humanity."

—Fidel Castro

"People stumble over the simplicity of the gospel because it asks them to surrender, not to solve."

—A.W. Tozer, Christian author and pastor

God always knew the word would never find him through the accepted wisdom and logic of humanity; He decided to use our irrational preaching to save those who come by faith. God's way seems absurd to the religious Jews because they want miraculous proof and it seems preposterous to the intellectual Greeks because it doesn't fit their system of logic.

So, when we preach Christ was crucified, the religious find it offensive and the intellectual find it nonsensical. But, to those God calls to salvation, both religious and non-religious, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

—Paul the Apostle, from 1 Corinthians 1:21-24

What made Jesus different? Have you ever asked that question?
I have.

The answer, in light of history, is surprisingly simple.

Jesus is, without dispute, the most historically important person ever. Hands down. No contest. The fact that he came to earth as an immensely popular teacher and died a brutal death at the hands of

the Roman Empire isn't debated. Whether Jesus existed and changed the world isn't the argument. *Why* he changed the world—that's where the conversation gets spicy.

He remains an incredible teacher—no doubt about it. But history is full of incredible teachers and philosophers: Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Marx, Lao Tzu—these guys were intellectual giants. My first-grade teacher, Mrs. Warwick, taught me penmanship and the Hokey-Pokey, neither of which really stuck. I still write like a caffeinated squirrel and dance like a malfunctioning Roomba. Mrs. Warwick didn't change the course of human history.

Many thinkers have offered teachings equal to Jesus' in terms of logic (Descartes will bend your brain) or literary beauty (Bill Shakespeare, anyone?).

But nobody restarted the calendar for those guys.

Jesus didn't just teach—he claimed to be the message. And that message? It's so simple it's scandalous. Grace. Forgiveness. Love. No secret handshake. No philosophical gymnastics. Just come.

And that's the twist: the simplicity of the gospel is what makes it so hard to accept. We want complexity. We want to earn it. We want to deserve it. But Jesus says, "It's finished."

That's not just revolutionary. That's world-altering.

Jesus walked as a great miracle worker—but he wasn't the first, and he definitely wasn't the last. Honestly, he may not even be the GOAT of miracle-working. You'd have to make a pretty strong case for Moses on that one. I mean, turning a sea into a walking path for two million people? That's not just a miracle—that's crowd control on a divine level. Still, billions of people around the world don't pray to Moses. So... something's different.

Now, miracles come in all shapes and sizes. It's a miracle to me that you can sit in a Starbucks in Lima, Peru and sip a Café Mocha that tastes exactly like the one at one of the eight Starbucks in Times Square. That's not just consistency—that's caffeinated sorcery.

Or take chemotherapy: they pump your body full of poisonous radiation to kill off the fastest-growing cells—and somehow, that saves lives. It saved my mom's. Twice. That's a miracle of medical science, even if the process sounds like something out of a Marvel

villain's origin story.

A smart phone—someone figured out how to transfer computer animation to a tiny wireless device, readable by microprocessors the size of a grain of rice, so my son can watch *Finding Nemo* on a flight to Denver instead of driving the entire cabin to the brink of madness. That's not just technology—it's salvation at 30,000 feet.

I often hear in church that the resurrection is what makes Jesus different. It's true - Aristotle and Nietzsche are still dead, while Jesus beat permanent expiry, but is this really it? What if he merely died from a cold and came back after three days? Would it have had the same impact? Several others in the Bible did just this, and Jesus raised some of them from the dead himself, but people don't read the scriptures of Lazarus—or any of the others who cheated death—everyday.

So what is it?

In a word: the cross.

No, the way Jesus died isn't distinct either. The Romans frequently used crucifixion as a means of execution, designed to be humiliating. Its victims were helpless, in excruciating pain, naked—a public spectacle. It also sent a message: "if you cause too much trouble, this is what happens . . ." The brutality created an intentional deterrent. To be tortured to death for up to twelve hours without anything resembling dignity offered a very effective way of discouraging the worst crimes.

So, what is it about Jesus' death on the cross which makes it special—special enough to change history?

It turned special when he became the first person in history who deserved no punishment whatsoever but then took the most brutal punishment on himself so that the wrongs of the entire human race could be erased. A God putting himself at the mercy of humans and their sins and doing it willingly?

It's too much for words.

The teachings of Jesus are life changing,

A God putting
himself at the
mercy of humans
and their sins and
doing it willingly?

*It's too much for
words.*

no doubt. The proofs of the resurrection—amazing. The miracles? Impressive, to say the least.

But the cross and what it means separates Jesus from other Bible figures, from other religious leaders, from political leaders, from everyone else before or after him. Plain and simple.

And this is the beauty of God's plan; it's simplicity at its finest. But it's also the problem. *It is so simple... maybe too simple.*

Offensive and Nonsensical

So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended, and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense. But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the mighty power of God and the wonderful wisdom of God.

—1 Corinthians 1:23-24 (NLT)

Paul basically divides the people he preaches to into two columns, the religious (the Jews) and the nonreligious (the Gentiles). In Paul's thinking there were Jewish people who were trying to find God through their religious traditions and ceremonies, and then there stood the rest of the Roman Empire.

The rest of the Roman Empire could be described as “religious,” but not in the way we think of religion today. Their system was more like cosmic customer service: you had a problem, you found the right god, and you paid the fee. Paganism was essentially the ancient version of trying to get tech support—except instead of waiting on hold, you sacrificed a goat.

It was simple in some ways and wildly complicated in others. Want kids? Sacrifice to the fertility gods. In some cases, that meant visiting a fertility temple prostitute—because nothing says “family planning” like a religiously sanctioned hookup. Want to avoid being wiped out by a natural disaster? Better pay tribute to the god of fire, earthquakes, or plague.

Paganism might be a sort of religion, but the people engaged in it were hardly seeking a relationship with God. It satisfied a way to figure out how not to be punished, or to gain approval of certain gods, not to seek a meaningful relationship with the Creator. It stood the wisdom of the day.

So, Paul puts everyone into these two categories: Jews—religious,

traditional, seeking God through religion; Gentiles—trying to appease God by figuring out the system through the day's best thinking.

When it comes to the Jews, one thing someone familiar with the story of Jesus (like a 21st century American) must understand is that they didn't expect the Messiah to come as a spiritual savior, but as a political one. He would help them fight the war with the Roman Empire and take over the world. He wouldn't change their way of relating to God.

The idea that Jesus would come as a sacrifice to bridge the gap created by their shortcomings didn't jive in their way of thinking. Relationship with God came based on what you did and how you observed the ceremonies and rites taking place; it's part of what made you *Jewish*.

The idea that the Messiah would come to fix their spiritual problems without doing anything about the political problems seemed, well, offensive. The Greek word used is *scandalon*. Yep. Exactly like it sounds. Nothing but *scandalous* to suggest the cross as the purpose of Jesus' life and ministry. They believed anyone crucified was cursed by God. The Messiah would be a winner, leading the armies of Israel to victory.

The idea that this Jesus, defeated by the Romans, dying the death of a cursed man¹, tortured to death, could be the Messiah—couldn't be possible. For any Jew who knew anything, the fact that Jesus' ministry ended in crucifixion proved he couldn't be the Messiah.

To suggest otherwise would be *offensive* and still is to many Jews this very day.

The Gentiles held another take: *whatever*.

To Roman citizens, to the everyman of the Roman empire, even to a slave, the thought that this Jew from the backwoods could be the answer to anything in their lives seemed pretty foolish.

¹ Galatians 3:13

The Jews hated the idea of this suffering messiah and the Gentiles dismissed it.

Jesus, the Savior of the world? Sure. The mere suggestion oozed stupidity, irrelevance at best. With hundreds of gods to appease, making things right with only one god—kind of a big “who cares.”

So, the Jews hated the idea of this suffering Messiah, and the Gentiles dismissed it. It's hard to know which is worse. But there's still a third group: the ones called by God.

Power in the Silly Scandal

While some in the crowds Paul preached to tried to kill him and some ignored him, others listened.

One of the things I've done a lot of is to present the gospel to non-Christians. Around the world, in churches, parks, dumps, projects, amphitheatres, schools, airports—you name it, I've probably preached there. I've been ignored, spat at, screamed at, cheered, applauded, threatened, and more.

In the Ukraine in 1999, a group of Satanists cursed me in hatred. They were offended. In England, at an outreach on the beach, as I introduced the next part of our short program, a woman walked up and screamed as loudly as she could, one inch from my ear, “You're ruining my Saturday!” She thought we were doing nonsense.

But I've watched thousands hear the message and respond. They recognized salvation in the ridiculous offensive story. There's power in the simple message of the cross.

Ee-Taow – It is True

My wife, Tanya, already traveled around the world sharing the gospel before I met her as a freshman in college. She spent time in the Amazon (the rain forest, not the web site of the online retailer). She shared really cool pictures of people with red teeth from chewing something called “beetle nuts.” She navigated the Paris underground rail—without speaking any French (of course, the French are very helpful).

Before her sophomore year, she spent six weeks in Papua, New Guinea. She ministered to tribes who were former cannibals in previous generations. She slept on sticks, ate live grub worms, and

took a picture with a 12-inch Preying Mantis on her shoulder. When she returned, she regaled me with stories of luau-style cooked pork, amazingly strong young tribal girls carrying her pack up hills and even pictures of a beautiful little Papuan infant that they named after her (Tanya's Norwegian, nearly white hair and fair skin provided a striking contrast to the dark tribal skin of her name sake).

And she brought back the most amazing video; the video documented the process of sharing the gospel with a new tribe. Here's how the process worked.

Once there were missionaries available to share with the Mouk tribe (there were over one hundred tribes who requested a missionary to bring them the gospel), they began to learn the language so that they could clearly understand the life of Christ. When the dialect felt adequately learned, the process turned to morning sessions explaining the gospel chronologically: Starting with the Garden of Eden and moving through the ten commandments and the life of Christ; God's plan and the tragic failings of the human race were explained in vivid detail, dramatically played out in front of the entire tribe over a period of weeks. The people saw themselves in the story—not as outsiders, but as participants in the shared brokenness of mankind.

When the Messiah entered the story, the Mouk felt the same hope that stirred hearts in Jesus' day. They connected deeply with the ordinary people who followed him, and they began to fall in love with the radical message of grace and the miracles that confirmed his divine identity.

On the video, I watched as the tribe cheered the character of Christ as he healed the blind. They jeered the Pharisees and traditional bad guys from the gospel story. Even as the story approached the crucifixion, the tribe—like Jesus' own followers—held out hope that he would somehow escape death. The apex of the outreach occurred, to the great surprise of the tribe, when they saw the depiction of Jesus brutally crucified on the evening before the last programmed day. And an interesting process for me to watch became heart-breaking.

It's a deeply emotional moment to witness. When Jesus is crucified in the story, the Mouk people are visibly shaken—grief washes over them.

The jeers and cheers of the gospel drama turned to wails and weeping. The cameras of the video crew followed the tribe's people through their day after the morning presentation ended. They couldn't function. The normal stuff of the day gave way to deep discussions about how this happened. How could the hero of the story die? I felt like I observed how the disciples of Christ must have felt. Distraught barely described it.

When the tribe gathered again, the atmosphere was somber. Then something extraordinary happened. As the story—so familiar to us—unfolded, and the truth that Christ had risen in victory over death was revealed, everything changed. Suddenly, it all made sense: the cross wasn't defeat; it was the way that humanity's brokenness could be made right. In that moment, they came *unglued*.

The normally reserved Mouk people erupt with joy, shouting "Ee-Taow!" —"*It's true!*"—over and over. The entire tribe breaks into celebration: dancing, cheering, even crowd surfing in pure, unrestrained exuberance. The rejoicing continues for two and a half hours without pause.

The denial that couldn't protect them from grief is swept away by a joy too powerful to contain.

The power of the cross didn't appear as a white man's theory—it expressed the power of God for salvation.

What's the Difference?

I've seen lives changed because of the cross. People who couldn't change—changed. Messy people who admitted the mess and let God make a masterpiece out of what they offered Him. I've seen the gratitude of the lost, broken, helpless—people who were lost, broken, and helpless enough to admit it. There's no denying the power of this when you see it.

I've seen lives
changed because
of the cross. People
who couldn't
change—changed.

The thing I can't figure out is why people react so differently to the message. We're all broken. We're all lost. We're all helpless. We all need a Savior. We all need the power of the cross and the salvation it brings.

Why are there always the offended and the dismissive? I don't really

know. My best guess? Lost, broken, and helpless people are sometimes too lost, broken, and helpless to respond the right way. Maybe the paradox is this: we're so messed up that we need a Savior—and sometimes too messed up to realize it.

Maybe you're reading this as a non-believer and find it dismissive. Maybe you're one of the people who think the very idea of humbling yourself at the foot of the cross is offensive. You're in good company. If it seems too easy—undeserved grace and unconditional forgiveness just for asking? If you're scoffing in your mind right now, you're part of a long tradition.

What kind of Savior dies like a criminal?
What kind of King lets himself be mocked, stripped, and executed?
What kind of God chooses scandal over safety?

The answer is simple.

Too simple, maybe.

That's the scandal—and the foolishness.

I don't think this will change anytime soon. I think there will always be people who find themselves in these camps.

I've seen what the message of the cross can do. I've seen the miracle of change, redemption, and salvation. I believe the message of the cross is God's wisdom.

But it sure seems foolish and offensive sometimes.

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Sweating Blood

"Some people feel guilty about their anxieties and regard them as a defect of faith. I don't agree at all. They are afflictions, not sins. Like all afflictions, they are, if we can so take them, our share in the Passion of Christ"

—C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer*

"Our anxiety does not come from thinking about the future, but from wanting to control it."

—Khalil Gibran, Lebanese-American poet, writer, and philosopher

Jesus went with his disciples to his usual place to pray on the Mount of Olives. When they got there, he warned his disciples, "Pray so that you won't give in to temptation."

He went a little further, to be alone, and got on his knees to pray. "Father, if it's possible for you to not have me endure what's coming, please help me avoid it. But if it's what you have for me, I want to do it your way, not mine." God sent an angel to encourage him and give him strength, but he was in incredible anguish, and he prayed even more intensely. His sweat turned red like blood as it dripped from him.

—From Luke 22:39-44

The narrative about Jesus sweating blood is, like so many others, a bit understated and overlooked.

"Sure," we tell ourselves, "Jesus sweated blood or something because he was carrying the weight of the world," but this is scientifically accurate. It happens to people today.

Hematidrosis is an extremely rare condition usually experienced under very strenuous conditions. Other than this, the causes aren't

fully understood. It happens when the capillaries, tiny blood vessels transferring blood from arteries to tissues and back again, rupture. The blood mixes with sweat, and the diluted blood-sweat mixture is excreted from pores in the skin. It's pretty gross. You can look up pictures on the internet, but I don't suggest it.

Soldiers sometimes experience it before battle. People around the bombing raids in London during "The Blitz" of World War II reported the condition to doctors. While the condition itself isn't life-threatening, it typically occurs in life-threatening situations, when the "fight or flight" response is triggered.

Jesus knew what was coming. The Son of God was going to allow himself to be tortured to death and would die from catastrophic pain, merciless brutality, and full body trauma. The strain to his physical and emotional systems would be so severe that complete systemic shutdown would occur. Neither the mind nor the body could sustain the damage.

He knew what lay ahead. He would be flogged with a "cat o' nine tails" with chunks of bone and pottery attached to the ends. During this process, the flesh would be ripped from his body, exposing his ribs and leaving skin hanging like ribbons. The blood loss would be severe. When the soldiers would place a robe on him in mockery, the blood would clot, and the material would almost fuse with his flesh. When they ripped it off again—well, one can only dare to imagine the pain. They would repeatedly punch him in the face with closed fists, most likely resulting in a serious concussion as he struggled to remain conscious. They would follow this with a ring of long thorns shaped like a crown to be beaten into his head, using a staff as a club.

After a sleepless night in agony and anticipation, he would be dragged from his cell and forced to carry his own cross, usually made of something like a large tree branch or milled wood resembling a railroad tie, up a steep hill outside the city.

Under normal circumstances this would be extremely difficult, but he would be so physically traumatized from the night before that he would fall repeatedly until he couldn't go any further under the load. When he did finally reach the site of his execution, the soldiers would pound huge nails through his wrists and feet before raising his cross into the air. This would leave him to slowly suffocate from the shallow breaths due to a compressed rib cage brought about by the

process of hanging from one's outstretched arms.

Those condemned to die this way by the Roman Empire were stripped naked to add humiliation to the torturous death.

Crucifixion was the way the Romans warned would-be criminals, an expression of how agonizing they could make their death become. There are stories of people choosing to be burned alive as an alternative to crucifixion—this is how excruciating it truly was.

However, the torture Jesus went through before his crucifixion was a special treatment. The physical trauma would push his human body beyond what could be endured without complete system failure. The shock to his system would cause his body to give up and his heart to burst.

Most of those condemned to die by crucifixion would still be alive until the executioners would break their legs, making it impossible to push themselves up and inhale deeply enough to sustain life. They would slowly die from the lack of oxygen.

This would be unnecessary for Jesus. He would die from trauma before this forced suffocation would be induced. To make sure, they would stab him with a spear and bloody fluids would be emptied from his abdomen. Having more than likely experienced a massive heart attack, the structure of his heart would be overwhelmed, and the outer cardiac walls would fail, resulting in complete rupture.

Going Through Hell

This is what Jesus knew was coming. As he prayed the night before, the anticipation caused deep anxiety, but it didn't stop here.

There was more. His closest friends would betray him. The people he came to save would become a blood-thirsty mob. His mother would have to watch as he was tortured to death. He would be mocked without mercy.

And, worst of all, he would experience hell.

When we think of hell, we think of fire and smoke and the various layers of Dante's *Inferno* and all its imaginations of cruelty. Dante's

This is what Jesus knew was coming. As he prayed the night before, the anticipation caused deep anxiety.

account is more political satire than anything else, but he does get something very right when he explains the posted sign above the door of hell which reads in Latin, *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate*—"abandon hope, all ye that enter here."

Hell is best described as the complete lack of God's presence. His ever-present, all-encompassing perfect love is our constant companion, even when we don't realize it. Hell is the end of this. It is the end of hope that we will ever experience it again. God is perfect love, and eternity without love is the definition of absolute hopelessness.

David explained the omnipresent nature of God when he wrote the portion of lyrics found in the song of Psalm 139:7-11,

*"Is there any place I can go to avoid your Spirit,
to be out of your sight?
If I climb to the sky, you're there!
If I go underground, you're there!
If I flew on morning's wings to the far western horizon,
you'd find me in a minute—you're already there waiting!"*

On the cross, Jesus would experience utter hopelessness as the first living person to experience an absolute lack of God's presence. It would be hell on earth. His cries would sound like the screams of the damned.

In the garden, as he prayed, Jesus understood what would happen to him as he carried all the evil of every person who ever lived or would live. He understood that God would turn his back on him and he would become utterly hopeless. He knew he would experience the hell of being abandoned and forgotten by God.

The pain of knowing what was to come was almost too much to take.

In what looked like a moment of weakness, Jesus begged for mercy from his father. The anxiety was so intense that his capillaries ruptured; blood flowed from his pores and dropped to the ground of the garden.

This is the true power of anxiety. A force so strong it has physical effects.

Traumatic Betrayal

In my work with people who have experienced great trauma, I have studied the effects of emotional distress. Studies of Adverse Childhood Experiences (known as “ACEs”) are among the initiated, and they have proven that long-term effects of unresolved childhood trauma are a major risk factor for heart disease, stroke, cancer, COPD, diabetes, Alzheimer's, and suicide. The way we humans deal with experiences which happen to us as children can affect our physical health for our entire lives and even contribute to an untimely death. Chronic stress and anxiety aren't mere mental health issues—they cross over into flesh and blood. We carry them in our tissues.

I have chosen a life of great stress. Samuel Chand stated it as this in his incredible book, *Leadership Pain: The Classroom for Growth*, “Pain. If you're not hurting, you're not leading. Your vision for the future has to be big enough to propel you to face the heartaches and struggles you'll find along the way.”

I have chosen to lead, and I have decided to embrace, sometimes willingly and sometimes unwillingly, deep pain.

I often explain to people that there are no-nonsense kinds of people, but I am not one of those. I am a *nonsense* kind of person. Like most leaders, I constantly deal with nonsense. Small squabbles, intense disagreements, loss of relationships, and sleep are all part of leading.

I wish it weren't true, *but it is*.

Betrayal is a constant companion. Being misunderstood and having actions attributed to the worst possible intentions are par for the course of leaders. Harsh criticism and disparagement are perpetual partners. Envy and resentment are more common among your peers than admiration.

Making matters worse, the people who you have helped the most are the most likely to hurt you. Those who you mentor and rescue feel the need to separate themselves from you as they grow, like a teenager finding their own identity. It's natural. It's also *painful*.

Like all other leaders, I have experienced all of this in excess. I also have had to be a truth-teller and have literally been hated for it. I have experienced lies and attacks which would surprise the uninitiated.

I have experienced the stress of having a family, dealing with loved ones with mental illness, raising a child with special needs and the loss of loved ones. We all carry some heavy weight, but recently, for the first time in my life, I felt like it was more than I could take.

It felt like the hits were coming so fast and furious that I couldn't keep track. In a twelve-month span, I had a sister-in-law with deadly cancer, and another with hemorrhaging so great that the doctors told us she wouldn't make it through the night. One of my parents had life-altering cancer, the other had terminal cancer, and my brother was hit by a car, breaking the windshield with his face—likely sustaining serious brain damage. My immediate family experienced a serious health crisis which had us in and out of doctors' offices and deeply entrenched in anxiety.

In this same period of time, many of my closest friends were struggling with profound anxiety and one of the most important influences in my early spiritual development succumbed to depression and took his own life.

For the first time in my life, I had a prolonged period of dealing with anxiety. I had three enormous building projects riding on my shoulders and more than fifteen staff members counting on me to raise hundreds of thousands of extra dollars. Students in our mentoring programs were in life-or-death situations. We had recently started a community of homes for single moms who came out of violent or trafficking situations. *Quitting was not an option.*

Sleep was hard to come by, and anything resembling sustained peace of mind was far from me. Going to bed at night was like facing a gauntlet. I couldn't sleep and when I did, I would wake up in a cold sweat with my heart racing. I could feel my pulse as it sped to new heights. I was having nightmares about my former influencer's suicide when I did sleep. I had spent my adult life as an extremely emotionally disciplined person and always able to talk myself through any depression or mania, but I was failing to work my way out of anything.

When I would explain to my therapist (which I was seeing for the first time in my life) what I was doing to battle my crushing anxiety, he would tell me I was already doing the cognitive behavioral therapy techniques he would prescribe for me. Rest, over time, he explained, was the only solution. But rest seemed impossible, and time was not a luxury I had.

I wasn't suicidal, but I felt hopeless. It seemed like things would always be this way. Or maybe, things would get worse. I had always prided myself on being mentally tough. Now, I, like Elijah, wanted to sit down under a tree and embrace depression.

If not being okay is okay, I was in good company.

- *Moses suffered the effects of leadership.* His anger and depression caused him to lose control multiple times.
- *Job's grief caused him to lose all peace.* He said, "I have no peace, no quietness, I have no rest, but only turmoil."¹
- *Jonah was so depressed he had helped the enemies of Jews repent, he wanted to die.* "Now O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."²
- *Jeremiah suffered from rejection, loneliness, and poverty.* At his lowest moments, he said, "Cursed be the day I was born...why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?"³
- *David lived a life of near constant threat of death at the hands of Saul, the enemies of Israel, and his own son.* He wrote some of the saddest songs in history.

*"Save me, O God, for the floodwaters are up to my neck. Deeper and deeper I sink into the mire; I can't find a foothold. I am in deep water and the floods overwhelm me."*⁴

*"O God my rock, I cry, 'Why have you forgotten me? Why must I wander around in grief, oppressed by my enemies?' Their taunts break my bones. They scoff, 'Where is this God of yours?' Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad?"*⁵

In his darkest hour, Jesus would even quote the song he learned as a young Jewish boy, when, from the cross, he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"⁶

Jesus himself even struggled with anxiety so profoundly he wrestled with thoughts of death. He told Peter, James, and John, "My soul is

¹ Job 3:26 (NIV)

² Jonah 4:3 (NIV)

³ Jeremiah 20:14,18 (NIV)

⁴ Psalm 69:1-2

⁵ Psalm 42:9-11

⁶ Psalm 22:1

overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."⁷

Jesus, the abundant life giver, felt the crushing weight of grief so heavy it felt like it would *kill* him.

Jesus, the abundant life giver, felt the crushing weight of grief so heavy it felt like it would *kill* him. The same Jesus who encouraged us not to worry about tomorrow because God has our future in his hands was distraught about what his tomorrow would bring; he felt like he couldn't take it anymore. The God of the universe didn't want to be alone.

He *needed* to pray to find the strength to face the coming anguish. The anticipation was almost as painful as the reality would be.

In the depth of anxiety, prayer can be a struggle.

At one of the lowest points in *my* life, a friend asked me, "Do you still pray?"

"I listen," I said, "I'm afraid of what I might say if I say too much. I don't want to do lasting damage to my relationship with God." I was being facetious about the last part, but not the first part. *I wasn't talking much to God.*

I didn't know what to say so I didn't say much. I felt abandoned, betrayed, and hopeless. I didn't want to say *this* to God. I tried to be Zen-Christian and not ask questions.

I was wrong.

Elijah, Job, Moses, David, Jeremiah, Jonah, and Jesus had honest conversations with God.

It's okay not to be okay. Certainly, I'm not better than those guys. God never smote any of them when they complained. Chances are I'm not important enough to be the first to be smote for airing a grievance.

When You Can Talk About It

A few years ago, a friend called me to tell me she wasn't going to make it. She wasn't sure if she should say goodbye or ask for help. We talked about healthy habits, medical help, and counseling. I

⁷ Matthew 26:38 (NIV)

texted her every day until she was doing better. I knew the trauma she had experienced as a child and knew it had never really been dealt with.

Almost a year later, we took a walk and she told me, "I'm doing much better. I'm not that person anymore." She paused, turned, and asked me a question. "How do I know when I'm okay?"

I looked at her and said, "Hey, I don't know the answer to that, but I do know one thing: when you can talk about it, it doesn't own you anymore. When it's just part of your story, even a once very painful part, it becomes something that happened, but not a huge secret that no one can ever know about. Then you're not a victim anymore—you're an overcomer."

The difference between these incredible leaders in the bible and myself is that they talked it out with God. *I didn't.*

I wanted to be *strong*.

I wasn't strong. Jesus was strong. As he anticipated pain in the garden, he begged for mercy, and God heard him. It wasn't weakness. It was reality. He was hurting.

Even when our Father doesn't answer the *why* questions—and he never did with any of the biblical greats—he never punishes the one who dares to ask. Instead, he engages. He enters the conversation.

Sometimes he sets us straight (see: Job). Sometimes he sends a raven with lunch (Elijah). Sometimes he sends an angel to strengthen us, like he did for Jesus in the garden. But he never ignores us, even when it feels like he might.

Life is a fight. Birth is a bloody, traumatic event—for both mother and child. Death is often painful—for both the dying and those left behind. And everything in between? It's either a fight or the buildup to the next one.

God understands our trauma. He knows the anxiety that it brings. And He doesn't ask us to carry it alone. Anxiety, in a strange way, can be a signal—a reminder that He's inviting us to share the load. To come back to Him. To let Him shoulder what we were never meant to carry alone.

If Jesus could be honest about His anguish, so can we. Let's stop pretending that strength means silence.

Let's talk.

Let's pray.

Let's heal.

Jesus doesn't look down on us when we're grieved to the point of death.

Or anxious to the point of sweating blood.

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Plot Twist

"The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live."

—Wolfhart Pannenberg - German Lutheran theologian

"The birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus means that one day everything sad will come untrue."

—J. R. R. Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings*

"The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching but whether or not he rose from the dead."

—Timothy Keller, from *The Reason for God*

"I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die."

—From John 11:25,26

Spoiler alerts ahead.

The Sixth Sense is a boring movie on the third watch. The first time you see it, you're not sure what's going on. The second time, you catch all the clues that M. Night Shyamalan scattered like breadcrumbs—Bruce Willis is dead all along. The third time? You realize this is a boring movie with three minutes that blew your mind and 97 minutes of quiet whispering and sad lighting.

Once you know that Bruce Willis is one of the people Haley Joel Osment sees when he says, "I see dead people," it's like watching a magician explain the trick before the show. If they'd told you upfront, it wouldn't be much of a movie. It'd be a very slow ghost tour with a twist you saw coming from the parking lot.

We love a great plot twist. It's not just one of the greatest cinematic devices in history—it's one of the greatest storytelling devices, period. It's the narrative version of yelling "Surprise!" at a birthday party and actually meaning it.

Even without reading the story, most people know that Oedipus ends up marrying his own mother. But we forget how shocking that must have been to the original audience. Imagine reading that scroll and thinking, "Wait... what?" The prophecy from the Oracle at Delphi wasn't just fulfilled—it was fulfilled with a jaw-drop and a therapy bill.

If you're of a certain age, then you already know:

The Planet of the Apes was always Earth (and yes, Charlton Heston was very upset about it).

Soylent Green was always people (which really ruined snack time).

Kevin Spacey was always Kaiser Soze (and somehow also the guy you didn't suspect because he limped).

And of course, Darth Vader was always Luke's father (which made family reunions in the galaxy far, far away extremely awkward).

And... Jesus has always been resurrected after three days.

The Greatest Story Ever Spoiled

You can't unknow the world's best-known plot points in a 2,000-year-old story. But what we rarely feel—is the shock of the impossible.

The pain.

The anguish.

The utter disillusionment.

For the disciples, the one thing that absolutely couldn't happen—did. The Messiah died. And in their world, that meant game over.

They had burned the ships. Walked away from everything—jobs, homes, reputations—betting their lives on one unshakable truth: He wouldn't fail.

The math didn't math. Jesus had truly shown himself to be the anointed one. The prophecies all lined up. The crowds were huge. The words cut through the noise like a saber. The miracles? Well, those were just icing on the cake. The Messiah didn't need to raise people from the dead; it was just more proof.

When Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" they respond with a mix of ancient celebrity guesses: "John the Baptist," "Elijah," "Jeremiah," or "one of the prophets."

Basically, the spiritual version of "You kind of remind me of someone famous."

Then Jesus flips the question: "But what about you? Who do you say I am?"

Peter, who never knows what to say but always says it anyway, blurts out: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus responds like a proud teacher. Peter finally got it perfect: "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! This wasn't revealed to you by flesh and blood but by my Father in heaven."

Then he gives Peter a new name and a big job: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

This is a moment so monumental that none of them can know what it means. Michaelangelo took it pretty seriously 1500 years later and built Peter a church so huge in size and scale that you feel tiny when you walk in—by design. The Italian master and (future Ninja Turtle namesake) tried to capture the superlative transcendence of what Jesus called Peter to do by building the world's largest piece of art. That's what artists do.

It's a big deal. Peter recognizes that the impossible has finally happened. The Messiah has arrived. And he has no idea what that really means.

Peter, as a self-appointed spokesman for the twelve, proclaims that Jesus is the new king of Israel who will throw off Roman occupation, bring justice to Israel's enemies, be the invulnerable protector of his people and set up a Kingdom that would never be challenged.

But he was thinking way too small. Jesus wouldn't conquer the death, destruction and oppression of the Romans. He would conquer the oppression of guilt, the self-destruction of rebellion

against God and death itself.

It's hard to put ourselves in their mindset. They couldn't understand what he was telling them.

I've been married for over thirty years, and I'm still trying to crack the code that is my wife. It's not that she's unclear—she's crystal clear... in her own dialect. The problem is, I'm a man. And men, as a species, are notoriously bad at interpreting the language of Femalefolk.

I've always said that men don't understand women, and women don't understand men. The twist? Women *think* they understand men—despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Meanwhile, men are fully aware that we're lost. We're not even pretending. We're just wandering around the emotional IKEA without a map, hoping we'll stumble upon the exit.

My wife sometimes drops hints like breadcrumbs, expecting me to follow them to the magical land of "What She Actually Wants." After three decades, you'd think she'd know that I'm more of a bulldozer than a bloodhound. But she persists, believing that one day I'll become fluent in the "*Hintish*" dialect, the native tongue of married women everywhere.

I'm trying, truly. But my ability to decode subtlety is about as advanced as my Spanish language skills after years of half-hearted Duolingo sessions—I can order tacos and ask where the bathroom is, but don't expect me to understand a telenovela.

The thing about Jesus predicting his death and resurrection is how straightforward he really was.

Yes, he used metaphor.

- John 2:19 "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."
- Matthew 12:40 "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth".
- John 10:11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

But Jesus uses these vivid word pictures not to obscure but to underscore his clear and unmistakable prediction of his death and

resurrection.

- Matthew 20:18–19 “We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered... They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles... On the third day he will be raised to life!”
- Mark 8:31 “He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things... be killed, and after three days rise again.”
- Luke 9:22 “The Son of Man must suffer many things... and be killed and on the third day be raised to life.”

And, lest you think, based on my previous quips about clueless men, that's its these oblivious males that don't get it—remember, it wasn't just the guys. Jesus' female disciples showed up at the tomb on the third day, spices in hand, fully expecting to find a corpse. Like a wife reminding her husband of something she's said a dozen times, the angel hits them with, “Remember how he told you...”¹ The most jaw-dropping plot twist in history... wasn't a twist at all.

The most jaw-dropping plot twist in history... wasn't a twist at all.

It's like M. Night Shyamalan opening *The Sixth Sense* with a title card that reads:

“FYI: Dr. Malcolm Crowe, played by Bruce Willis, dies in the first scene. He's one of the dead people who Cole Sear, played by Haley Joel Osment, sees. Just so you're not confused.”

Jesus isn't dropping hints for later viewing, he's just laying the plot out there—over and over.

And still—they didn't get it.

Maybe they couldn't. Maybe they wouldn't. Maybe denial was easier than facing the death of everything they believed. They never made it past stage one of the Kübler-Ross grief cycle.

Or maybe, like us, they clung to the promises they liked and filed the hard stuff under “symbolic.”

¹ Luke 24

Some Came Back, Some Did Better

The first few verses of Hebrews chapter 12 explains why Jesus did what he did and encourages us to follow in his path of faith:

"Because we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of the faithful who already finished their race and are now watching our lives, we should get rid of absolutely everything that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run the race God has charted out for us with enduring faith. We focus our vision on Jesus, the champion who founded and completes our faith. Because of the gratification he knew awaited him, he braved the cross, dismissing its shame. And now he sits in his rightful place next to God."

These verses are pretty well-known—but it's the setup right before them that delivers the real plot twist.

Hebrews 11 is often called the "Faith Hall of Fame." It's a roll call of spiritual giants—men and women who lived lives marked by obedience, purpose, sacrifice, and wild, holy adventure. For over 2,000 years, Christians—and 1,200 years of Jews before that—have trusted that the biblical writers were inspired by God to deliver his actual words and truth. What we don't believe is that the chapter and verse numbers are inspired. Those came much later, mostly as reference tools. So when Hebrews 12 opens with "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses....," we know it's not a new thought—it's a continuation of chapter 11.

And here's where it gets fascinating. After listing all the famous names—Abraham, Moses, Rahab, David—the writer (whose identity we don't actually know) drops in a powerful aside: there were *too many heroes to name*. Some saw wild victories. The text says they "shut the mouths of lions, quenched flames, escaped the sword, turned weakness into strength, became mighty in battle, and put foreign armies to flight." Women even received loved ones back from the dead.

Faith, it seems, was strong enough to reverse death itself.

'They were protected from lions, fires, and sword thrusts, turned disadvantage to advantage, won battles, routed alien armies.'

Women received their loved ones back from the dead.”²

Some of these acts of faith even brought people back from the dead. Wait—what? That’s wild. We have those stories, and they’re incredible. Faith was so fierce, even death had to back down.

But then comes a stunning contrast:

“But others were tortured, refusing to turn from God in order to be set free. They placed their hope in a better life after the resurrection. Some were jeered at, and their backs were cut open with whips. Others were chained in prisons. Some died by stoning, some were sawed in half, and others were killed with the sword. Some went about wearing skins of sheep and goats, destitute and oppressed and mistreated.”³

Here’s the juxtaposition: for some, faith showed up in stunning underdog victories. They won battles they had no business winning. They stared down death—and death blinked.

But others found faith in the fire. They were tortured and mocked. Stoned, dismembered, stabbed. They lived in poverty, wandered without homes, endured oppression, injustice, and hunger.

And yet—they *still* won. That second group held on because they believed the resurrection would bring something better than anything this world could offer. They saw beyond the suffering to a future so good that it defied imagination.

Two kinds of heroes. One group saw miracles—battles won, lions silenced, the dead raised. The other group saw pain—chains, whips, stones, swords, and suffering.

But both saw victory.

Because both believed in something bigger than this life. Something stronger than death. Something eternal.

The resurrection was their upgrade. And now, they’re watching us—cheering us on from eternity. Like Jesus, they’ve received the reward

Two kinds of
heroes.

But both saw
victory.

² Hebrew 11:34-35 MSG

³ Hebrews 11:35-37 NLT

of the faithful.

So let's run like they did. Eyes fixed. Faith fierce. Nothing held back.

Death Embraced and Defeated

There was a bigger twist than the empty tomb—the *why*.

In John 12:24, Jesus explains it: "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much fruit."

The story of Jesus isn't powerful *in spite of* his brutal execution — it's powerful *because of it*. Translation: No death, no harvest. No sacrifice, no story.

Yes, the words of Jesus are life-changing. That's kind of the point of this book. But would we even have those words if it weren't for his sacrifice?

The power of Jesus' story isn't that he *survived* the cross—it's that he *walked into it* knowing full well what it meant. That's not martyrdom. That's mission.

Sure, history has its share of inspiring deaths—MLK, Joan of Arc, Lincoln. But Jesus wasn't trying to be a motivational poster. He wasn't here to end hunger, cure disease, or win a Nobel Peace Prize. He came to flip the script on death itself. But there's something more going on here.

Jesus didn't come to earth to be merely inspirational. He didn't come to end hunger or eradicate disease. He came to point to a different kind of resurrection—one that goes beyond physical healing or social reform.

The real plot twist was still ahead. He didn't come to make life easier. *He came to make death irrelevant.*

Resurrection Upgrade

In John 11, the story of Lazarus unfolds. Jesus waits four days to show up after hearing his close friend is dying. Why? We won't speculate. But when he finally arrives, Mary and Martha are deep in grief. And even though Jesus knows what's about to happen, he weeps with them.

Both sisters ask the same question: *Why didn't you come sooner?*

And then—Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.

But before the miracle, he drops a truth bomb on one of the sisters. There's more than one kind of resurrection.

"I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die."

Here's the twist: Lazarus died, came back to life, and eventually died again. He needed a *different* kind of resurrection—the kind that only comes through faith in the One who chose death over escape, torture over comfort, and resurrection over revenge.

And here's the ultimate plot twist in history:
Some who lived lives of success won't experience the resurrection.
Some who lived on the cruel edges of the world—and died cruel deaths—*will*.

It's not about status. It's about surrender.
It's not about what you've done. It's about who you trust.

The choice is ours.
Anyone who believes in him will live—even in death.

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Worth Dying For

"Everyone wants their last words to be memorable. But most people just whisper goodbye."

—Stephen King

"Go, send, or disobey."

—John Piper, Pastor

*Jesus came and told his disciples, "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth.
Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you.
And be sure of this: I am with you always, even to the end of the age."*

—From Matthew 28:18-20 NLT

As a kid, I wanted to be a hero. Of course, all kids want to be a hero, but it seemed less likely for me than most. I was the middle child in a family living below the poverty line. My older brother sucked the oxygen out of every room he entered, thanks to his super coolness—part natural charisma, part carefully cultivated image. My younger brothers were adorable twins. Family pictures looked like someone had dropped an awkward misfit between a Shawn Cassidy lookalike (you either know that reference or you don't) and twins so cute that they could've modeled for the cheesiest Hallmark card imaginable. I was the human version of the background music

in a family photo—present, but not exactly featured.

I started out wanting to be an X-wing fighter pilot, then an Air Force fighter pilot, then just a regular pilot. But by the time I was 15, I had settled on becoming a corporate lawyer. I wasn't even one score old, and I had already sold out. I hadn't even finished puberty, and I was already dreaming of billable hours and ergonomic desk chairs.

I traded dreams of lightsabers for visions of leather briefcases and exchanged saving the galaxy for board meetings and status symbols.

But then something happened.

Despite going to church my whole life, I became a disciple of Jesus. My life was radically changed—in the kind of way that made battle worn adult Christians roll their eyes. I read the red letters like they were the script to a spiritual action epic—and I was the underdog cast to play the lead, despite having zero special effects budget.

I schemed to bring change like a teenager planning a revolution with a backpack full of Bible verses and righteous indignation. Top Gun started to feel like a recruitment video for mediocrity compared to my dreams of flipping the world upside down. I decided to become the biblical version of a Jedi—wielding the light saber of the Spirit, hearing voices from beyond, and throwing off the oppression of the evil empire.

Just a few years later, I found out that some of my heroes were, in fact, deeply flawed. I learned that corporate church could sometimes be more about balance sheets than reaching people. And my girlfriend's dad made it clear that she could never marry a naive dreamer like me.

But despite the deterrents, I remained undeterred—and somehow, I still am.

Most days, I wake up dreaming of new ways to strike back against the evil empire, wield my lightsaber, and fly my X-wing toward the Death Star to bring a new hope to the republic.

Famous Last Words

That kind of hero-worship might be why Jesus' followers couldn't see the plot twist coming, despite the direct foretelling that Jesus would die and rise again. Their hero might have struggles, but being

tortured to death isn't a tribulation; it's the end of the story. At least, it should have been.

But Jesus was a different kind of hero. He had always planned to leave and then act as a guide to his followers. He even told them it would be better when he physically left earth, because he would be with them in spiritual form, leading them as he prepared the way.

But to what end? Kings set up their kingdoms to rule over them. Kingdoms have palaces, armies, laws, and heroes—they take and hold real estate, conquer other kingdoms and defend the realm.

This different kind of hero was calling a different kind of heroes to set a different kind of Kingdom.

His kingdom would not be based on nobility, ethnicity, geography, religiosity, gender or culture. It would supersede and overlap in ways that no one had ever seen or could even yet understand.

This different kind of hero was calling a different kind of heroes to set a different kind of Kingdom.

- It would be the most powerful Kingdom in history but would be at its weakest when it had political power.
- It would span the globe like no other empire had ever dreamed, but it would hold no land or subjugate any peoples.
- It would include more women, people living in poverty and lower classes of society than it would the powerful or influential.
- It would be a kingdom forged in faith that would frequently reject human religious traditions.
- It would be a kingdom without Kings, knights or armies.

The kind of kingdom Jesus was establishing wouldn't conquer people by force but invite them to become subjects by free choice.

Indeed, the men and women he called had a simple commission for kingdom-building:

- "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation." — Mark 16:15
- "Repentance for forgiveness of sins (will) be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And look, I am sending you what my

Father promised."—Luke 24:47–49

- "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I also send you."—John 20:21
- "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."—Acts 1:8

We call these passages, mostly the passage in Mark's gospel, the Great Commission. It's Jesus' challenge to his followers about what they're supposed to do, having witnessed all of these things. The resurrection of Jesus proved that he was the promised Messiah, even though it didn't look like what they expected. And now Jesus tells them that their response to that is to go.

Go. Preach the gospel.

These are Jesus' famous last words. If the most influential person in all of human history, really without competition or comparison, who said, in the words of Luke, so many things that all the books in all the world cannot contain them, then obviously some of those words would carry the most weight, just by definition.

Preach the gospel.

In case you aren't dialed in to the inside baseball language this sounds like or have taken for granted what *the gospel* means, it simply means the good news. It comes from the word εὐαγγέλιον (evangelion) where we get the words *evangelism* and *evangelical*. Jesus is saying that his followers would proclaim the good news.

But what is this good news?

One of the most famous things Jesus ever said shows up behind home plate at baseball games and in the stands at football stadiums—a verse so well-known it's practically the MVP of the Bible: John 3:16. It sums up the gospel in a single sentence:

"For God loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him will never really die but will have eternal life."

That's the good news—that eternal life is available through faith in Jesus.

Proclaim the good news to the entire world.

The last words of Jesus carry weight, not in and of themselves, but because that statement was found to be true in the hearts of his believers, especially after witnessing the resurrection.

In the perfect timing chapter, we examined all the reasons why this really was, for the first time in human history, time for the gospel to spread in the way in which it would spread in the coming centuries.

And while everything had come together to change the very arc of history, the task that Jesus was laying before them was, in reality, a suicide mission. Perhaps, more accurately, it was a *sacrifice mission*.

The proof of Jesus' ability to be a substitutional sacrifice for the iniquities of humanity, individually and collectively, was that he was more than a martyr—he was victorious over sin and death.

If Jesus had spoken many revolutionary words and died a respected old man, those words would have been riddled with lunacy. He had claimed to be God incarnate.

But his followers knew better. They had experienced the life that Jesus had uniquely promised.

And that he was calling them to be heroes of the faith.

If Jesus had spoken many revolutionary words and died a respected old man, those words would have been riddled with lunacy.

A Hero's Journey

In 1949, Joseph Campbell wrote *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* where he describes the "monomyth." From ancient times, the same story is told over and over. In the monomyth,

- an ordinary person
- encounters a problem and
- meets a guide who calls them to
- a *fantastic journey*. Along the way,
- they are tested,
- discover allies, and
- ultimately succeed.

Transformed by the experience, the hero returns home to share the benefits of their transformation with their ordinary world.

From Odysseus in *The Odyssey* to Neo in *The Matrix*, from King Arthur to Simba in *The Lion King*, from Perseus's call to slay Medusa to Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games*—we tell this story over and over again. Bilbo and Frodo Baggins, Moana, Harry Potter, and heroes from Norse, Hindu, and Chinese mythology all answer the call to adventure and are transformed. (I could keep going, but that would only prove I know how to use Google.)

Once you see it, you can't unsee it.

George Lucas openly admitted to borrowing heavily from Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* when creating the *Star Wars* universe. But Lucas had also read Joseph Campbell's work on the *monomyth* and realized there was a time-tested blueprint for epic storytelling. He didn't just use the hero's journey—he followed it like a recipe, and *Star Wars* became the soufflé that didn't collapse.

Once you recognize the pattern, you also can't unsee the stories of the heroes in the Jewish scriptures.

- **Noah** is minding his own business when God calls him to build a boat and save humanity—talk about an unexpected side quest.
- **Abraham** is living comfortably in Ur when God tells him to leave everything and go... somewhere. No map, no GPS, just a promise.
- **Moses** is hiding out as a shepherd when a burning bush recruits him to confront the most powerful empire on earth.
- **David** is delivering snacks to his brothers when he ends up slaying a giant and getting fast-tracked to kingship.
- **Esther** is just trying to survive in the palace when she's called to risk everything to save her people.
- **Joseph** goes from dreamer to prisoner to prime minister—his journey has more plot twists than a binge-worthy Netflix adventure-drama.
- **Ruth** leaves her homeland and ends up in the lineage of the Messiah.
- **Jeremiah, Elijah, Daniel**—all ordinary people who get swept into extraordinary missions.

These aren't just stories—they're ancient echoes of the same pattern: the call, the trials, the transformation, and the return with something to offer the world.

Before you accuse me of suggesting that the biblical writers just copied ancient myths—I'm not. What I'm saying is that there's a way of telling a story, even true stories, that hits straight at the heart of the would-be hero who's listening.

It's important to understand: long before the Old Testament stories were written down, they were passed along through oral tradition. And oral tradition isn't just about facts—it's about *feeling*. It's about telling the story in a way that people remember, connect with, and carry forward.

The details you include, the mundane bits you leave out, the rhythm and pattern—it all helps the story stick. And I firmly believe that God hardwired every human heart with a desire to matter. We all want to be a hero. We all want to change the world. We all want to live a life that means something.

A Different Kind of Hero

The heroes Jesus was calling to a fantastic journey of faith would be as sheep among wolves¹—destitute, oppressed and mistreated.²

It's hard to know if they understand the price they would pay for their obedience. Like he had promised his own death, he promised them they would be persecuted. He says it directly in Matthew 24:9 (NIV):

"Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me."

He was calling his followers to a different kind of heroic journey. They would see resurrections, healings, and miracles of all kinds, but none of it would move them beyond the promise of hatred, persecution and death.

Indeed, every one of Jesus' apostles (and some early followers) met a gruesome fate:

- **James (son of Zebedee)** - Beheaded in Jerusalem by order of

The heroes Jesus was calling to a fantastic journey of faith would be as sheep among wolves—destitute, oppressed and mistreated.

¹ Matthew 10:16

² Hebrews 11:37 NLT

King Herod Agrippa I—the first apostle to be martyred.

- **Mark** - Dragged through the streets by horses until he died in Alexandria, Egypt.
- **Peter** - Crucified upside down in Rome under Emperor Nero. He requested the upside-down position, feeling unworthy to die like Jesus.
- **Andrew** - Crucified on an X-shaped cross in Greece. He preached to his executioners as he hung for two days.
- **Philip** - Crucified or possibly stoned in Hierapolis (modern-day Turkey), after converting the wife of a Roman official.
- **Bartholomew (Nathanael)** - Tradition says he was flayed alive and then beheaded in Armenia for preaching the gospel.
- **Matthew (Levi)** - Killed by stabbing.
- **Thomas (Didymus)** - Speared to death in India while preaching the gospel.
- **James (son of Alphaeus)** - clubbed to death in Jerusalem.
- Thaddeus (Jude, son of James) - Martyred in Persia by arrows
- **Simon the Zealot** - Traditions say he was sawn in half in Syria.
- **Matthias** - Chosen to replace Judas Iscariot. Believed to have been stoned and then beheaded in Jerusalem.
- **Paul (apostle to the Gentiles)** - Beheaded in Rome under Nero, as he was a Roman citizen and thus spared crucifixion.
- **John (son of Zebedee)** - The only apostle believed to have died a natural death. He was exiled to Patmos and later returned to Ephesus.

Any good book on Christian Apologetics (evidence for the truth of Christianity) will point out that the most obvious claim of proof for the gospels is the death of these men.

Gerd Lüdemann the atheist historian, said:

"It may be taken as historically certain that Peter and the disciples had experiences after Jesus's death in which Jesus appeared to them as the risen Christ."

He believed they were fooling themselves—but for what? Illusions don't last long when faced with the reality of a sword to your throat.

These men lived the rest of their lives as penniless, nomadic, persecuted outcasts. They never gained power, cultural influence, or even basic safety. And when given the choice between refuting the

resurrection of Jesus or being tortured to death, they chose the latter—being sawed in two, crucified, boiled in oil, and dragged to death by horses.

They claimed that Jesus died and rose again. And they died for that claim. People don't die for something that they know is a lie.

History tells us that rather than stamp out the movement, the brutal death of the early followers of Christ accelerated the growth of Christianity. As referenced earlier in *With the Wild Animals*, Tertullian's famous line rang true then as it has since: "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." And watered by that sacrifice, the growth exponential.

In essence, the people of the Roman Empire and beyond saw a faith that was worth dying for and reasoned that it might be worth living for, as well.

By some estimates, over 300,000 men, women and children died at the hands of the Roman Empire and other power forces. But, like the story that my friend Pablo told in Nicaragua, they just kept coming. They brought more than courage—they brought hope, compassion, and a message that couldn't be silenced.

The people of the Roman Empire and beyond saw a faith that was worth dying for and reasoned that it might be worth living for as well.

A dozen men, a few women, and the 120 from Acts chapter two—who became 3,000 in a single day—traveled the world and sparked a movement. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity, that movement has grown to include over 8 billion people throughout history as of 2025.

From a handful of ordinary people willing to live—and die—for something bigger than themselves, the message of Jesus spread across the globe. Not through power, privilege, politics, or wealth but through sacrifice and relentless love. Their blood became the seed of a movement that now spans continents and cultures. And their legacy isn't just history—it's a challenge.

If they could face lions and swords, maybe we can face our own fears, our own comfort zones, and step into the story that God is still

writing. The world doesn't need more spectators—it needs people who will engage with courage and compassion.

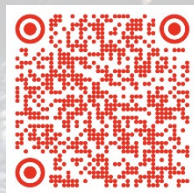
People like you.

People like me.

People who still go—and still proclaim the good news.

JESUS

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Two Millennia Down

"How did a tiny and obscure messianic movement from the edge of the Roman Empire dislodge classical paganism and become the dominant faith of Western civilization?"

—Rodney Stark, Baylor University Professor, from *The Rise of Christianity*

"The godless Galileans [Christians] care not only for their own poor but for ours as well."

—Roman Emperor Julian (4th century, a critic of Christianity)

"But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." "Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back." "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another."

—Matthew 5:44, Luke 6:30, Matthew 5:16, John 13:34

As usual, I was late getting to the airport (a tradition I honor religiously, though I've never actually missed a flight). By the time I boarded, my row was already populated—three strangers locked into their assigned seats like modern monks of the sky.

If air travel is elevated incarceration, then these were my unvetted cellmates, sentenced to three hours of recycled air and elbow negotiations.

Unlike the evangelists in every novel where someone finds Jesus between peanuts and turbulence, I don't corner people with my faith. But sometimes, it just comes up.

This time, the woman next to me—dignified, silver-haired, probably in her sixties—had a book tucked into the seatback pocket. I could read the title: *The Rise of Christianity* by Rodney Stark. I asked about it, and suddenly she lit up like a Swiftie at a surprise album drop. She talked about the book with the kind of enthusiasm usually reserved for Taylor's latest diss track. I just nodded, smiled, and thought, *Well, maybe this flight won't be so penitential after all.*

"My husband and I are board members at our church," she said, naming a well-known denomination, "but we're not Christians."

I paused, trying to decide if I'd just heard the theological equivalent of "I'm on the swim team, but I don't like water."

She continued.

"But I picked up this book, and I'm thinking about becoming a Christian."

I nodded, curious. This was either going to be a spiritual awakening or the beginning of a very unexpected book club.

"You always hear about the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition," she said, "but did you know that Christianity is probably the greatest force for social good in the last 2,000 years?"

She could tell I was listening, so she leaned in a little.

"Stay with me—I know that might not sound right—but did you know, for instance, during the plagues of Europe, nursing mothers would sit in churches all day and nurse the orphans of women who had died? They would literally sit there and nurse until they ran out of milk and then wait until they had more—keeping babies alive."

I imagined a quiet church filled with crying babies and heroic women using one of their feminine superpowers to save lives. That's not just compassion—that's endurance.

"I could go on," she said. "To this day, Christians have done more than any other force, including governments and non-religious charities."

"Are you a Christian?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Did you know about all of this?"

"Well, some of it—but not the nursing mothers thing." I said trying to keep up with where the conversation was headed.

"Oh yeah—and when people fled during various calamities or natural disasters in the cities of Europe throughout history, the Christians stayed and provide medical care and food to people, knowing that some of them would die. And they did. They didn't care, because they had hope in the next life."

I pictured a group of people walking into danger with nothing but faith and a first-aid kit. That's not just bravery—it's conviction.

"My husband is pretty skeptical, because he's heard all the bad stuff. But I think I'm going to become a Christian whether he does or not."

We talked for a while longer, and I began to share with her about some of the things I've been involved in—speaking in schools about depression and suicide, water projects in rural communities that you can barely find on the map, housing and education projects that I was helping to coordinate.

"Oh," she said, "you really do know."

Yeah, I really did and I really do.

The Greatest Story Rarely Told

In a world often captivated by headlines of conflict and corruption, one of the most powerful forces for good remains largely overlooked: the global impact of Christianity on humanitarian aid.

In 2024 alone, the 50 largest Christian NGOs¹ provided nearly \$10 billion in humanitarian assistance. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. This figure doesn't include the millions of smaller Christian organizations and local churches quietly funding clean water projects, disaster relief, refugee support, and medical missions around the world. When you add it all up, the total likely far exceeds the \$25 billion given by governments for similar efforts—often with lower efficiency and less personal engagement.

Even more striking: many of the largest NGO's (Non-Governmental Organization) in the world are overtly Christian, despite serving

¹ Non-Governmental organizations are non-profit organizations that address social, humanitarian, environmental, or development issues, independent of direct government control

communities of any faith. Christianity doesn't just participate in humanitarian work—it leads it.

And that's only counting direct aid. It doesn't include the billions more spent on faith-based support, such as church planting, missionary work, and spiritual care—efforts that often go hand-in-hand with physical relief.

Critics sometimes point to wars waged under the banner of Christianity. But a closer look at history reveals that these were often political or imperial campaigns, not reflections of the teachings of Jesus—whose message of peace, humility, and sacrificial love stands in stark contrast to the ambitions of empires.

Meanwhile, the 20th century saw the rise of explicitly atheist regimes—from Stalin's Soviet Union to Mao's China and Pol Pot's Cambodia. These governments, which actively suppressed religion and promoted state atheism, were responsible for over 100 million deaths through purges, forced labor camps, executions, and engineered famines. These numbers dwarf the casualties of any so-called “Christian war.”

While it's fair to debate the role of religion in history, it's hard to ignore the dehumanizing consequences of ideologies that reject any holistic moral framework. And it's equally hard to deny that Christianity—at its best—has inspired extraordinary compassion, sacrificial service, and global transformation.

Let My People Go

Let's be honest: Christianity didn't just play a role in ending slavery—it was the engine behind the movement.

Sure, some Christians got it wrong. But the ones who got it right changed the world. They believed every human being carries the image of God. That's not just theology—that's a revolution in human value.

Abolitionists didn't just argue politics. They preached Scripture. The Golden Rule. Paul's letter to Philemon. They saw slaves not as property, but as brothers.

It's hard to deny that Christianity—at its best—has inspired extraordinary compassion, sacrificial service, and global transformation.

In the UK, Wilberforce and his crew fought slavery with relentless faith. In the U.S., Quakers, Baptists, and others led the charge. Sermons, petitions, protests—it was faith in action.

And it didn't stop there. Christianity's message of justice and compassion sparked abolitionist movements across the globe. Historian Thomas Clarkson said it best: *"only Christianity had the moral firepower to dismantle slavery at scale."*

This isn't just history—it's a reminder. When faith is lived out, it doesn't just change hearts. It changes nations.

During my travels speaking to hundreds of thousands of students in schools about how to protect themselves and their peers from sexual exploitation and sex trafficking, we often assisted the FBI, the HSA and other law enforcement in their efforts. Christian organizations lead the way in shining a light on modern day slavery and provided recovery care to victims, nearly completely funded by Christian people and churches. In gatherings of anti-trafficking organizations, there were rarely any organizations that weren't Christian.

This is just an example. The same could be said of education, clean water and health initiatives as well.

The Balance of Power

Historians have long noted that Christianity's rise was fueled not by conquest or wealth, but by its radical elevation of the marginalized—women, the poor, and the "others."

Galatians 3:28 says *There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

That's not a platitude. *That's a revolution.*

In conversations I've had with people who lived in India—where Hinduism shapes the culture and 80% of the population (over 1.1 billion people) identify as Hindu—Christianity is often described as a source of freedom for those trapped in the caste system. Some have even told me that Christians are referred to as social terrorists—not for violence, but for disrupting the social order.

Movements like Dalit Christianity have directly challenged caste norms. Dalits, historically labeled "untouchables," are believed to be reincarnated to suffer for past-life sins. This belief has justified horrific mistreatment—violence, sexual assault, homelessness, and systemic

exclusion from employment and education.

Jesus, by contrast, broke religious laws to touch the untouchable. He risked disease and scandal to restore dignity. He treated women, non-Jews, Samaritans, Roman officials, tax collectors, criminals, and prostitutes with respect and equality. What might seem noble or obvious today was scandalous and anarchic in his time.

Christianity is the only major faith tradition with more women than men. It has flourished among the poor and marginalized. And because of this, Christianity is the only global faith that transcends ethnicity and geography.

- **Islam:** Predominant in the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of South and Southeast Asia.
- **Hinduism:** Primarily concentrated in India and Nepal.
- **Buddhism:** Found mainly in East and Southeast Asia.
- **Judaism:** Small global population, with major centers in Israel and the United States.

But Christianity?

- **200 million Christians** live in predominantly Muslim regions.
- **30 million** live in Hindu-majority countries.
- **300 million** live where Buddhism is dominant.
- And people of European descent make up **only about one-third** of Christians worldwide.

There is no other major faith tradition this diverse.

And none like it has ever existed.

Purpose in the Pain

Unlike other worldviews that may minimize or spiritualize suffering, Christianity confronts it head-on. God doesn't merely observe suffering—he enters into it through Jesus. The cross stands as the ultimate symbol of divine solidarity with human pain. As Tim Keller writes in *The Reason for God*, “God takes our misery and sufferings so seriously that he was willing to take it on himself.”

God doesn't merely observe suffering—he enters into it through Jesus.

Jesus doesn't just offer comfort—he invites us to long for another

world, one where every tear is wiped away. Yet he also speaks peace into this one, a world riddled with violence, abuse, and pain. His words echo through 2 millennia, *"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart—I have overcome the world."*²

Karl Marx dismissed religion as *"the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions... the opium of the people."*³ But Jesus didn't come to dull pain—he came to face it, with both mindfulness and courage.

More than that, Jesus shows that pain has purpose. C.S. Lewis, who wrote deeply on suffering, famously said: "Pain is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Lewis believed suffering awakens us to spiritual realities that we might otherwise ignore. It's not that God delights in pain but that he uses it to shape us—like a sculptor chiseling stone.

He also challenges the idea that divine love should always feel pleasant:

"The problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of a God who loves is only insoluble so long as we attach a trivial meaning to the word 'love.'"⁴

Still, all of this can feel abstract—until you realize that Christianity offers not just a philosophy of suffering, but a *God who suffers*, a God who feels pain for his children, a God who came to endure torture, humiliation, and death—not to escape pain, but to redeem it. He did it all to reconcile us.

Life in the Afterglow

So what's my closing argument for why Jesus is the focus of history—and the through-line in your personal history?

It's not that Christianity has a spotless record. Forget the wrongs done in Jesus' name throughout history—I've done wrong in his name. Every Christian leader has. *Every Christian has.*

My case for Jesus as our spiritual, moral, and relational north star isn't

² John 16:33

³ Karl Marx famously referred to religion as the "opiate of the masses" in his 1843 work Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right

⁴ Lewis, The Problem of Pain, 1940

that your good will outweigh your wrongs and God will find you, on balance, to be worthy. Yes, immeasurable good has been done in Jesus' name and continues to be done. But no real follower of Christ does good to earn grace or favor. We know we can't earn grace. We know we can't do anything to make God love us more—his love is already maxed out.

I don't have an airtight argument to convince you to follow Jesus. If he's calling you, you already hear him. You can respond—or ignore him. But the invitation is there.

The truth is, the bad stuff has to be forgiven. And the good stuff? It's a response to that forgiveness, not a way to earn it. Every true follower of Jesus knows that.

So no, I don't have an airtight argument to convince you to follow Jesus. If he's calling you, you already hear him. You can respond—or ignore him. But the invitation is there. And it's not based on your record. It's based on his.

Lessons from a Wet Kitten

In 1999, my wife and I bought our first home. It was 751 square feet of post-war optimism and pre-millennial chaos. Built in 1941 as temporary housing for men returning from World War II to work in the nearby shipyards and steel plant, it had aged... *enthusiastically*.

After filling cracks and repainting, the walls cracked again. So I painted again. And again. Eventually, I realized I wasn't dealing with bad craftsmanship—I was dealing with bad drainage. The ground around the foundation was holding too much moisture. So I dug a French drain around the house, graded the crawlspace, and installed a sump pump. It worked. The walls stopped cracking. I stopped repainting. Life was good.

Until it rained. In September. In California.

If you're not from here—or haven't heard the Albert Hammond song—*it never rains in California*. At least not from May to October. So I had the pump unplugged during the dry season. But this year, while I was in Peru working with schools, the weather decided to go rogue.

After a rainy ride home from San Francisco International Airport, I

rushed into the garage, pulled off the crawlspace cover, and plugged in the pump. It gurgled to life. The water was already 10–12 inches deep.

As I walked away, I heard it: a tiny, panicked *MEEEW!* I froze. Flashlight in hand, I dropped to one knee and peered into the dark, wet underbelly of my house. The cries continued: *MEEEW! MEEEW! MEEEW!*

And then I saw it—swimming toward me with a mix of desperation and determination. A kitten. Eyes wide, soaked, and clearly not built for aquatic life. I shut off the pump and prepared to rescue the teeny feline.

I scooped up the soggy little creature and placed it on dry ground. It shivered and tried to shake water from each paw, clearly offended by the entire experience. I reached down with a dry hand towel to dry it off and this little ungrateful animal turned on me.

I've walked with lions in Africa, so when the kitten summoned its last ounce of energy to hiss at me—teeth bared, one soggy paw swiping the air—I wasn't exactly shaken. I'm not a tough-guy type, but if you've ever seen a wet kitten, they aren't exactly the stuff of nightmares. I just started to laugh to myself.

As it tried to recover and intimidate me at the same time, I started piecing together the story of its near-disaster.

There had been a foundation vent I'd aggressively procrastinated fixing. Kittens aren't amphibians—they hate water. So, when the rain started, the little guy probably thought he'd found paradise: a dry, warm crawlspace all to himself. Until he realized that the vent only worked one way and he was stuck. As the dirt turned to mud, he likely climbed to the highest spot he could find. But eventually, there was nowhere left to go—the only last-ditch survival option left was treading water.

I have no idea how long a kitten can tread water. The world record for humans is an astonishing 132 hours.⁵ I looked it up. I doubt a kitten can last an hour.

I imagined this kitten swimming in the darkness, hoping against hope

⁵ The Guinness record is held by Albert Rizzo, treading water in the sea near Gżira, Malta, in 1984.

for rescue, when, all of a sudden, noise came from the house above and then got louder as a way of escape was opened by some unknown source. Then, for the first time in hours, there was light coming in and the little guy swam with his last bit of strength towards the light. All of a sudden, not fully able to comprehend what was happening due to the exhaustion and eyes adjusting to the light, a hand reached out and pulled him out of the muck, cold, and darkness onto solid ground.

Then, having been rescued, he turned towards his savior and hissed.

If you've made it to this point in the book, you're way ahead of me.

But I'll write it anyway.

Jesus came to earth to show us a new way.

It meant stepping into this brutal existence we call life—poverty, humiliation, danger, and persecution. He endured it all. And then, he gave his life to reconcile us to God. It was shocking but also unmistakably clear: this had been the plan all along. Scandalous. Foolish. And somehow, the only thing that made sense to fix what was broken between us and God. At just the right time, the Savior came.

A Call to the Misfits

You've always known you were a misfit.

You've always felt like you were treading water.

You've always longed for unconditional love.

And you've discovered that this world just doesn't offer what your soul has always needed.

Like C.S. Lewis wrote: *"If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world."*⁶

Then a savior comes along and fishes us out of the darkness. There is warmth, light, safety—but as our eyes adjust, it's a little scary. It's all just too big, too hard to believe, too good to be true.

But, still, he waits.

And he calls:

⁶ *Mere Christianity*, 1952

*"Are you tired? Worn out?
Burned out on religion?"*

*Come to me and you'll recover your life. I'll refresh your soul.
I'll show you how to rest.*

*I have a consequential purpose for you, but it won't crush you. I'll
carry the weight and you'll feel the satisfaction of living with
meaning and mission.*

*Even though the work I have for you is essential and the
commitments you'll make to me are sacred, they won't feel like a
burden—because I'll show you how to live."⁷*

⁷ Paraphrase of Matthew 11:28–30

Response

Jesus didn't come to earth to start a religion.

He came to rescue us—to show us a new way to live, and to make a way back to God.

He stepped into our broken world, endured suffering, rejection, and death—not because we deserved it but because we needed it.

And at just the right time, He gave His life to reconcile us to the Father.

So how do you respond to that kind of love?

Understand that Following Jesus Isn't About Cleaning Yourself Up

It's about surrender. It's about trust. It's about saying yes to the invitation that Jesus has already extended.

You Have to Admit Your Need

You were made for more than this world can offer.

You've felt the ache, the misfit-ness, the longing to live for what you were created for.

That's not a flaw—it's a signal. You were made for relationship with God.

Change How You Think About Jesus

Believe that He is who He said He is—the Son of God.

That He lived, died, and rose again to bring you back to God.

That His sacrifice covers your sin and opens the door to new life.

Turn Toward Him

This is what the Bible calls repentance—turning away from trying to do life on your own terms and turning toward Jesus as Lord.

It's not about perfection. It's about direction.

Accept the Gift

Salvation is a gift—not something you earn but something you receive.

Say yes to Jesus. Invite Him in. Trust Him with your life.

You can do that right now. You don't need fancy words—just an honest heart. Pray something like:

*"Jesus, I need you. I believe you died for me and rose again.
I want to follow you. Forgive me, change me, and lead me.
I'm yours."*

And just like that—you're not alone anymore.
You're forgiven. You're loved. You're part of the family.
And the journey begins.

Further Reading



In the *Acts of the Apostles*, chapter 26, Paul is on trial for his life. When he explains how Jesus met him personally, and how it became clear that the Jewish Scriptures had always been pointing to Jesus, the Roman governor Festus accuses him of insanity. Paul replies,

"I'm not insane. What I am saying is true and reasonable."

This book has tried to get at the *truth* of the person and message of Jesus. But my case for this truth has been built on a foundation of *reason*.

If you want to explore that reason further, here are some incredible books on the subject:

- ***The Case for Christ – Lee Strobel*** - A journalist investigates the historical and evidential claims about Jesus. Reads like a detective story; excellent for seekers.
- ***Mere Christianity – C.S. Lewis*** - A classic that explores the rational basis for Christian belief, written in a conversational style by a former atheist. Great for skeptics and believers alike.
- ***The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism – Tim Keller*** - Addresses common objections to Christianity with grace and intellectual depth. Ideal for thoughtful skeptics and urban audiences.

You can also reach out to me at:

[EverythingYouKnowAboutJesusIsWrong.Com/Contact-us/
Jeffreydevoll.com](http://EverythingYouKnowAboutJesusIsWrong.Com/Contact-us/Jeffreydevoll.com)
[Instagram.com/jeffdevoll](https://www.instagram.com/jeffdevoll)
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