

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.

© 2026 By Jeffrey Devoll

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means—including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods—without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

For permission requests, contact the author at:

EverythingYouKnowAboutJesusIsWrong.com

Edited by Darrik Kuykendall

Printed in the U.S.A.

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.

Sample Chapters

Introduction: Josh _____	13
Two: Oysters _____	21
Fourteen: Doubting my Doubts _____	28
Twenty-Four: Two Millennia Down _____	37

Scan or click
QR code
for audio,
podcast,
chapter
supplements
and more



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.*

Scan or click
QR code
for audio,
podcast,
chapter
supplements
and more



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.

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.

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

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 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.

Scan or click
QR code
for audio,
podcast,
chapter
supplements
and more



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.⁴

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

⁴ From Mark 9:17-27

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 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.

writing. The world doesn't need more spectators—it needs people who will engage with courage and compassion.

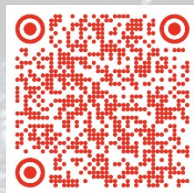
People like you.

People like me.

People who still go—and still proclaim the good news.

JESUS

Scan or click
QR code
for audio,
podcast,
chapter
supplements
and more



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