

# Always Better News

Why the Gospel is Better News Than You Think

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## DEDICATION

To the saints at Cross of Grace Church who helped me see why  
the gospel is such good news.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Why You Won't Want to Read This Book

The world around us constantly claims to offer good news that will change our lives. Telemarketers call saying that we've won a very special vacation offer. Internet ads on our favorite websites know what we want and tell us we can get 50% off today only. Spammers email us with get-rich schemes.

But we're too savvy for that. We know the vacation offer comes with a catch. We know that the thing on sale is *always* 50% off. We know the get-rich schemes in our email inbox are only going to take our money instead. We move through life accustomed to ignoring all the over-hyped promises that never come true in every area of life. We hear politicians promise that their election will fix what's wrong with the world around us. We hear technology companies offering solutions to connect the world and solve the world's problems. Maybe they do, a little. But they never deliver fully on what they promise.

All this is why it's hard for you to believe what I'm about to say: I believe that we long to hear truly life-changing news.

We're waiting for something that will finally deliver on its promises. We know there's more out there—there must be. We long for true joy and true happiness. We long for something solid and secure that can't be taken away.

We long for better news.

I believe that this better news exists. I believe it can give hope to the hopeless and rest to the weary. I believe it can bring true joy that no darkness or cancer or accident can take away. I believe it because I've seen it. I believe it because it's happened in my own life.

The problem is that it's right in front of us.

## **CHAPTER 1: RELIGION**

The highlight of my summer was built around a fake volcano.

We lived in the desert, with the kind of summer heat that could make your skin crawl if you stood outside for too long, the kind of heat you could see shimmer in the air when you looked down the highway.

That's why I loved the fake volcano.

My parents would drive me across town to the other side of the mountain—a long drive even in our small city. From there I'd take another long drive with my friend's family. A bunch of boys packed into a car that smelled like sunscreen and too many Cheetos. Then after a long while we'd see it: the black craggy volcano rock with blue water slides coming out of it. We'd start screaming and would run to the gates of the water park. For the rest of the day, we'd float in the lazy river, haul our water-soaked mats around the water park, and climb the volcano to take "The Screamer" all the way down. Hours later we'd drive back to their house, sun dazed and happy, and making plans for the rest of our sleepover.

It was only later I learned the truth: The water park was even closer to our house than to my friend's house.

It was maybe 15 minutes away from where I lived. As a kid, I never had a good sense of geography, or at least I didn't care to pay attention, so I was always fuzzy on where exactly the water park was. And we didn't drive there often from my house because my parents didn't like going to the water park. (Perhaps they didn't like joy or happiness, I can't be sure, but that's what I'm assuming.) I spent my childhood living a short drive away from the water park I loved more than anything else in my city.

Some days when I drive by it today, I still can't believe that it was there all along.

And I think this is exactly what happens in our lives. We look all over in life, searching for something that can fulfill us and satisfy us, something we can't lose. We hope we'll find it in more stuff, better stuff, newer stuff. We hope we'll find it in the perfect relationship (or the next one after that). But the thing we really want has been right around the corner all along.

I'm convinced that in a world that promises good news but never delivers, the better news we long for is found in the story of Jesus.

### **Is it Really Good News?**

I grew up in and around church stuff with people talking about the "gospel" of Jesus, but it wasn't until later that I learned it literally meant "good news." The "gospel of Jesus" means literally "the

good news about Jesus.” There’s a claim there. The claim is that “This news is so incredibly good you’re going to want to stop what you’re doing and hear it.”

The term “gospel” comes from the ancient Greek world and it had a deeper meaning than we often grasp today. Imagine an ancient army is plowing its way toward your village. The people back home are anxiously waiting to hear if they’ll be enslaved or saved. Mothers and children and old men would be scanning the horizon. Finally, they’d see someone in the distance—a single runner coming straight from the front lines. He’d run into the town square, breathless, people would gather around. Finally, he’d get the word out: “Victory.” And the town would cheer.

That’s “good news” or “gospel” – it’s the same term in the language of the New Testament. It’s the kind of news that means everything changes.

We live at a time when many people know something about Jesus, something about the Bible, something about religion, but most people don’t think it sounds like great news.

Here are a few reasons we don’t see what’s right in front of us.

#### *“It’s Irrelevant”*

For many, Jesus just seems irrelevant to the day to day details of their lives. We’re good at sectioning off our lives into little boxes like “fitness”, “job”, “friends”, and may or may not even have one for “spirituality.” People will think, “I should get around to being more spiritual” almost the way people think they should get around to eating healthier. But I believe the gospel is as relevant as the air we breathe and the heart that beats within us. The Bible shows us that who God is and who we are affects every single “box” we have in our lives.

#### *“It’s Hateful”*

Some want nothing to do with Jesus or the Bible because they see Christian religion as too hateful, or backward, or wrongheaded to even consider. I was at a punk rock flea market in my city (yes, we have those where I live) when I struck up a conversation with a vendor. He told me, “I don’t believe in any of that Jesus stuff – it’s all a lie and I hate all that stuff.” As we kept talking it turned out he thought so many Christian beliefs were harmful to everyone. But it also turned out he didn’t know as much as he thought about what Christians actually believed. So, if you think the same thing then stick with us and see what the Bible says for yourself.

#### *“It’s Burdensome”*

For other people, anything about Jesus or church just seems like a burden they don’t need. They can see it as religious people giving everyone else a long list of “don’t do this” guilt trips. It can feel like that one overbearing relative who always wants to know your life details at Thanksgiving then criticizes all your decisions. And I’ll admit up front that the Bible does tell you how to live your life

and sometimes you won't like it. But if that's the main idea you have about the Bible, I think you're dead wrong. As I'll try to explain, the gospel of Jesus gives you true freedom and life.

## **A Counterfeit Gospel**

Part of the problem with those objections to hearing the gospel is that many people think they already know it or know enough. But the Bible says that not everything that calls itself "gospel" is actually gospel at all.

Maybe you saw hypocrisy from a distance or were hurt up close and personal. Maybe you see the effects of evil things done in the name of "religion" in your life or in the pages of history. Maybe you grew up without a scrap of religious upbringing but some of what you see in "religious people" seems mean-spirited, angry, and distasteful. For many people who have been burned by religion and want nothing to do with it, the solution is to run away from all religion and never look back.

Some religious activities look a lot like the Bible, but they're the opposite of what the Bible is teaching. Before throwing the Bible out let's give it the chance to explain the difference between the religion found in its pages and the religion outside it.

Colossians 3:23 refers to "self-made religion" that has nothing to do with the religion laid out in the Bible. This is the common denominator with religion that is the opposite of the Bible's religion—it is all about confidence in yourself. Whether it involves lots of vague spiritual levels and periods of silence, or constant religious rituals, or a materialistic pursuit of more and better stuff, it's all about self. The Bible says that all of this isn't at all what true religion is really like. Instead, we've made our own religion out of bits and pieces of Bible, a religious Frankenstein that will never come to life.

Here's an example: Paul the Apostle once wrote to a group of churches in Galatia who seemed to believe all the right things. Their "church services" didn't look all that different from others, they talked about God a lot, and yet, this is what Paul writes to them in Galatians 1:6-9 (ESV): "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ."

Paul says that they're abandoning their entire faith. That's scary—because it means you can believe a lot of the right things according to the Bible and yet be utterly wrong at the core. For those of us who consider ourselves religious it's a stark warning to carefully examine whether the religion we're practicing is the religion the Bible preaches or another religion entirely. But for those who don't think of themselves as religious, maybe because they've been burned, it's an invitation. It's an invitation to question everything you know about religion and discover better news.

## **A Recovering Pharisee**

I've discovered that one of my ancestors was a preacher who sometimes, after church on Sunday, would go drink in the outhouse until he passed out. He stole money from one of his kids and abandoned his family for long periods of time. When I heard about this, I remember feeling angry. How could he possibly be claiming to be a Christian and then just using the stuff of religion to benefit himself?

But I did the same stuff.

I was saved not from drugs and alcohol, but from being a self-righteous jerk. I was an older kid sitting in kids' ministry, feeling smug about how I was better than everyone else in the class, when God saved me. Until then, I didn't think the "gospel" was very "good news." I mean I thought it was great that Jesus was so nice to everyone, especially to good kids like me. Going to church was way more about how I was a "good kid" (especially compared with some others) than about anything else. I learned how to play the church game and get a pat on the back. But my religion was all about myself and getting God and other people to do what I wanted.

Then God saved me from myself.

## **Gospel Religion**

What defines the religion laid out in the Bible? What makes it different from every other religious system? In 1 Corinthians 15:1 the Bible tells us: "For I delivered to you as of first importance..." Paul the Apostle, a towering figure in the New Testament, the man who even non-Christian historians agree helped reshape the world, the man who planted churches from one end of the Roman empire to the other, is telling us something profound. Out of all the pages of theology he ever wrote he's saying, "This one thing is more important than anything else." Get this and you'll get the heart of the Christian faith.

So here it is in his first letter to the church in Corinth: "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve..." (1 Corinthians 15:3-5).

Do you see what's of first importance there? It's not a specific ritual or a series of prayers or a list of songs to sing in church. It's not a "thing" at all. It's a person: Jesus.

And it's not just Jesus in general, but specifically the good news about His life, death and resurrection. Note the contrast—self-made religion is all about us and what we do, the religion of the Bible is all about Jesus. At the center of the "good news" is not us, but Jesus. That's why it's such good news.

## **My Confession**

Now, I have a confession to make here. I'm here to preach at you.



I want you to hear the story about Jesus from the Bible and see for yourself why it's such good news. I am a good old-fashioned Bible peddler and revival preacher. I want you to stop walking down a path that is utterly killing you, enslaving you, making you miserable, and that will end very, very, badly. I want you to hear the best news in the history of the universe. I think in a world of over-hyped promises and gimmicks there's better news out there and it's found in Jesus.

But if you think of yourself as a Christian but don't think the gospel is very good news—or at least not life-shaping and universe-shaking—you need to hear it again. I am convinced that far too many Christians spend their lives wandering around life looking for what can only be found in Jesus. I think we too quickly forget why the story of Jesus is such unbelievably good news. I want you to fall in love with the gospel of Jesus Christ again, and I want you to live differently after you do. I want the religion you practice and preach to be utterly full of gospel, utterly full of good news about the death and resurrection of Jesus.

When I understood not just the facts of the gospel but how the gospel applied to my own life, it began to change every part of me. It began to change my relationship with God so that I was eager to run to Him. It began to change my relationships with others so that I was more honest and more loving. It began to change my relationship to the church from being a place of performance to a place of community. I want this for you too.

As we go, I'll make you two promises: First, I'll be honest about what the Bible says, even when it's uncomfortable. Not everything that follows will be easy, but it will be true as the Bible tells it. Second, I'll try to make the Bible's message clear and help you see these things in Scripture for yourself.

Now, are you ready to hear the best news in the world?

It doesn't start with us at all.

## CHAPTER 2: GOD

Heading east from El Paso, we drove three hours across the flat, dead West Texas desert into the middle of another planet. It was a of sun-scorched two-lane highway with sometimes more dirt on the highway than road. Big groups of tumbleweeds would appear from the sides of the highway, making my dad swerve sometimes. I was just a kid and as I started wondering where the next gas station was, mountains rose out of the horizon. Within a few minutes we were gaining altitude and seeing trees.

My dad and I pulled into Fort Davis, TX. It's the kind of West Texas town that should only exist in your imagination. There's a restored hotel built in 1884, a cafe with a genuine soda fountain (complete with counter and bar stools), and friendly folks who are always ready to swap stories. It's hours and hours from any major city (and then a few hours after that). We stopped for a burger, then kept driving past the town up into the mountains.

Fifteen miles up into the Davis Mountains we arrived at the McDonald Observatory.

I know we saw a presentation at the Visitor Center, which I'm sure was great, but I don't remember that at all. I know we received an informative presentation about the size of the universe, the makeup of stars, and the composition of the galaxy, but I don't remember that either. I'm sure we drove back and stayed somewhere after visiting the observatory, that I had a pillow and sheets, but I don't remember any of that.

All I remember is looking up into the night sky.

I was undone.

There were stars, yes, but not just a lot of stars. They were so clear, as if they were just out of reach. I could see the Milky Way stretching from one horizon to the other in a thick dusty band. As the sun's last rays faded more and more stars quietly exploded into the dark blue like fireworks and froze. One astronomer pointed out a galaxy, what looked like a smudge in your vision, that you could see with your naked eye. I felt dizzy thinking that all I was seeing was just one of countless views from countless galaxies in the galaxy. Then we looked through telescopes—at planets, at nebulae, at star clusters. In every direction, more stars, more wonder.

When I try to put into words what I felt as a kid staring up at the sky with my mouth open, only one word describes what I felt.

Heavy.

I felt like the weight of all the stars was weighing down on my shoulders, like it was overwhelming me with its size and scope, like my brain was shorting out.

Even as a kid I was smart enough to make the connection: If there is a God, He can't be a small God. The universe is gigantic, huge, and mind-bogglingly big. If there was a God who made this, He had to be bigger.

And looking back I think that's what overwhelmed me. The sky overhead, the galaxies I could see with my naked eye shouted out: Someone made this.

Before we can explore the gospel, we must understand the God of the gospel. The story starts with God. If our view of God is wrong, our view of everything else will be wrong: If we pray, who exactly are we praying to? If we reject the idea of God, what idea are we rejecting exactly? If we shrug our shoulders and think God isn't worth thinking about, why is that exactly?

The gospel hinges on what the Bible says about God, it hinges on having an accurate picture of God. So, let's allow ourselves to drop our preconceived ideas and look at a few of the most critical things the Bible says about God.

## **Glory**

"The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them he has set a tent for the sun." (Psalm 19:1-4 ESV)

In Scripture God is described as "glorious." At its most basic form glory means "honor" or "excellent reputation." Some theologians see God's "glory" as a summary attribute of God's character, meaning that it "sums up" something of all of God's beauty and majesty and power. To declare the "glory of God" means to declare something of the immense weight of God.

Glory is a hard concept for us to grasp but it's essential to understanding the God of the gospel. One of the problems with our self-made religions is that they give us a God that is far too small. Often we think of God simply as a really, really powerful being just like us. Sort of like a superhero, or like a powerful wizard, or a genie.

But when your picture of God doesn't line up with the true picture of God laid out in the Bible your gospel gets warped. You start imagining you can keep God in a box you take out on Sunday mornings, then put Him back into for the rest of the week. You think you can sort of trick God into doing things, like a hero in a fairy tale who tricks Rumpelstiltskin into revealing his name.

Isaiah 40:12-15 says this about God: "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance? Who has measured the Spirit of the Lord, or what man shows him his counsel? Whom did he consult, and who made him understand? Who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?"

Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales; behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust.”

Think about what this means for our view of God. All the oceans on the earth are like the handful of water you use to clean a stain off your shirt. He marks off the entire immense space of the universe (stars, galaxies, black holes, galaxy clusters, etc.) with the span of space between His thumb and pinky finger. He picks up Mt. Everest and Mt. Kilimanjaro and all the rest and flicks them up on a scale. When He created the universe, He didn't need help, He didn't consult Albert Einstein about relativity, and He didn't need a class on nuclear physics. He takes the combined nations of the world and even the power of their armies—from the phalanxes of Greek soldiers, to the cavalries of Roman Empire, to the navy of Great Britain to the nuclear arms of the United States—and when He puts them on a scale they're like the dust you accumulate from leaving it in the pantry too long.

The reality is that if the God of the Bible exists, He defines your entire existence.

Think about that for a second.

So much of our religious stuff is about how to fit God into our personal world. But what if we've got it wrong? What if God doesn't live in our universe? What if we live in His?

### **Creator**

We get it wrong when we turn to the Bible and are primarily wondering how the Bible can help us, what it can do to help us be good parents or be more successful.

The Bible starts with a beautifully offensive statement: “In the beginning, God...” (Genesis 1:1).

The Bible is not mainly a story about you. It is about the one who created you. The Bible is, fundamentally, a story about God. The Bible is about the one who created *everything*.

Colossians 1:16-17 says, “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” This about covers it. He created everything on the planet, and in space, and invisible dark matter kind of stuff we haven't even discovered yet. The “rulers” and “authorities” language probably refer here to the Jewish order of angels or spiritual powers, meaning that, yes, God has all the invisible spiritual stuff covered too.

God is also not just a powerful being who was Big-Banged into existence alongside the universe. He was before everything. He is more than the universe we see. He doesn't play by the universe's rules, He made the rules.

Not only did He create it all, the book of Colossians says He is actively, currently, presently holding everything together (Colossians 1:17). That means that if you're reading these words, God is keeping

your hand from spontaneously flying apart as you turn the page, that He's keeping your retinas attached to your eyeballs, and that He's keeping the electricity flying around in your brain under control so you don't accidentally electrocute yourself with your own mind.

This distinction is utterly crucial for understanding the gospel: We are creatures, God is the Creator. If you don't get that everything else will be warped.

## **Holy**

In a vision of the prophet Isaiah, we see a profoundly uncomfortable aspect of who God is. It's beautiful and abstract but terrifying to us: "In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!'" (Isaiah 6:1-3).

Ancient Hebrew didn't have capital letters or italics or underlining or any of the things we normally use to really emphasize an idea. Instead, to underline an idea they'd repeat it. If there was a normal sized pit they'd call it a "pit" but if it was unusually large and deep it was a "pit pit" (see Genesis 37:4). This double repetition was used sparingly. So, to call God "holy holy holy" meant that these heavenly creatures were shouting God's superlative holiness to an infinite degree. God is more than "holy" or "holy, holy", He is "holy holy holy".

Keep in mind who is shouting this to God. These are creatures that would make any of us fall to our knees in fear. They're terrifying and powerful. But they're the ones covering themselves because they're unworthy in the presence of someone even more glorious and holy than themselves.

Holiness isn't any easy concept to grasp. Theologian Wayne Grudem defines it this way: "God's holiness means that he is separated from sin and devoted to seeking his own honor." There is a "separateness" to God that has profound implications.

First, this points out that there is a relational quality there in that there is something that He's utterly apart from: sin and evil. We are so used to swimming in a sea of little evils that it's hard for us to imagine what a complete opposition to any evil of any kind would be like. God is utterly and completely untainted and untouched by sin.

Second, this shows that there is also a moral quality here in that God is simply morally excellent and praiseworthy. God is uncorrupted and incorruptible. There has never been a moment God has had a sliver of sin or evil in His being. We chuckle at the legend of young George Washington who couldn't lie about chopping down the cherry tree, but God has not, will not, and cannot lie (Titus 1:2). All that is good and just and right He is and He is in perfect abundance.

One of the most common and popular conceptions of God among the nominally religious is that God is just a kindly old grandfather in the sky. This grandpa God wags his finger at sin but winks at us when we're walking away. He wants us to keep away from the "bigger" sins like genocide but who isn't okay with a little lust? Or a little envy of our neighbors? Or a little hatred for our one-upping co-worker?

Utter moral perfection. That is who God is. That is what God demands.

## **Goodness**

There was a common song in the Old Testament from the people of God. They sang it when they recovered the ark and brought it to Jerusalem (1 Chronicles 16:34), when they placed the ark in the temple (2 Chronicles 7:3), and when they rebuilt the altar after it was destroyed (Ezra 3:11). These were times when the people saw and sensed the greatness of God, yes, but also His goodness. Here's the song: "Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!" (Psalm 118:29).

This is the amazing truth about the God of the gospel: He is as infinitely good as He is infinite. He is as eternally loving as He is eternal. Once we begin to grasp the big-ness of God, we are surprised to learn that as unthinkably big as God is He is also that unthinkably good.

In Psalm 23, perhaps the most famous Psalm of all, we see God pictured in His goodness as a shepherd who is caring for his sheep: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." In verses 1-3 we see that this God provides abundantly for us. He knows what we need and gives it to us generously. He restores our very souls in the way we most long to be restored.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." (Psalm 23:4). In verse 4, God doesn't move away from His people when there is danger to them or evil around them. Instead, God's stays with us. He's strong enough to protect us. We feel safe with Him knowing He will not leave us.

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever." (Psalm 23:5). In verses 5-6, we see that God gives us so much good that it "overflows." An ancient symbol of blessing and abundance was oil running over in abundance. We personally experience God's goodness running over our heads. In fact, because God is with us, mercy and goodness themselves are our shadows forever and will never leave us either. This is the kind of God who doesn't just visit us but desires to bring us to dwell with him forever.

This is exactly what we see revealed about God throughout the Old Testament. He comes to people like Abraham and generously offers them good things. He rescues His people from Egypt and

protects them and brings them to a place of abundance. He is with them through the darkest times, even when those dark times are caused by their own repeated failures. He is a good shepherd. He can defend us, rescue us, sustain us, bless us.

When we see the God of the Bible described clearly, our response is that we long to dwell with Him forever.

### **Rebuilding Our View of God**

In Spain, a few years ago, a portrait of Jesus on a church wall was fading. In a misguided attempt to help a local woman drew all over the face to “repair” it. Unfortunately, the result was once a soft portrait of Jesus turned into a monkey-faced man with black slits for eyes and a beard that wrapped around his face like a scarf. I’m sure this woman was trying to help, but her “help” only made the original portrait more difficult to see.

I think our view of God is something like that. The Bible lays out who God is but along the way our portrait of God is more informed by our life experiences, our thoughts, our feelings, our assumptions, the advice of others. Before long the picture of God in our minds bears little resemblance to the God of the Bible. Before long the God we’re praying to is not the God of the Bible. The God we’re angry at isn’t the God of the Bible either. Our view of God is in constant need of being rediscovered and reset.

God is bigger, more glorious, more holy, and more good than I can possibly imagine. It should not surprise us then that He’s the author of the good news that changed the world. But first, we’re about to hear some bad news.

Brace yourself.

### CHAPTER 3: HUMANITY

They wheeled the small, painfully white coffin out of the sanctuary and into the street. My pastors and I followed the hearse through the unpaved roads to a small cemetery.

The boy had only been two years old.

There was no grass, just dirt, and the shovels the men were using to dig the dig the grave rang on the rocks. All of them were dressed in their best clothes—collared shirts, pants, a tie. When the sweat began to show on their backs, they'd hand the shovel off to another waiting worker. The mother simply wailed until she was breathless. The father drove his fist into the dirt, again, and again.

Those of us not from the small Mexican town stood to the side, heads bowed. I don't think we could think of anything else to do. Those close to the family openly wept with a ferocity I'd never seen before. Often we in America weep a fraction of what we feel—with soft sobs at quiet funerals. But at this funeral they didn't restrain their grief—it rolled down their faces and poured out of their mouths.

The boy's parents worked at a Christian home for orphans. His parents loved God and loved helping the kids at the ranch. The director of the ranch was a friend of our church. Churches all around the country sent kids to serve at the ranch throughout the year. Things were good at the ranch—kids were being helped and healed. And yet, this boy was being buried.

Almost from birth the boy had fought cancer and other physical ailments. He endured terrible pain when his body turned against itself, and more pain during treatment. When Jair's parents couldn't afford a surgery, the money would unexpectedly appear. There would be good news. Followed by bad news. Followed by another surgery. Until, at age two, death took him.

At the funeral, they played music. The songs were about Jesus and His goodness. They were sung with dead earnestness. Carlos, a pastor in nearby Juarez, didn't try to pretend this wasn't a nightmare for the family and friends. But he preached hope to all gathered.

The wind whipped around us as we watched the casket lowered from the hearse, lowered over the ground. They held it there for a long moment. Then it sank slowly.

There have been few times in my life I've known anything so clearly as when I stood in the dirt watching Jair's casket be lowered into the hole they'd dug.

This is what I knew: This should never have happened.

Fathers shouldn't dig a child's grave. Mothers shouldn't scream their lungs out at a casket. Something with this world has gone very, very wrong.



One of the problems we have with understanding the true gospel is truly understanding the problem with humanity. We get too used to the world we live in. Things that should not be normal become normal. We have religious categories for the world—little boxes we put the events of the world in. But these boxes can keep us from truly seeing what's around us. We need to see it all—the good, the bad, the beautiful, the cruel—if we're to see correctly.

Here's what I desperately need you to see: Humanity is at once both far more glorious than we think and far more broken than we think.

### **In the Image of an Infinite God**

The first chapter of Genesis tells us many things about God: That He is sovereign, and infinite and creator, and good. But it also tells us something amazing about ourselves: "Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.... So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:26-27)

But what does that mean? To be in the image of something, means to be like it, to reflect it, to be made in a similar pattern. Now this doesn't mean we are the same thing as God—we've already been over the Creator/creature chasm. What it does mean is that in our being we bear resemblance to God, that there are things about us that correspond and reflect the infinite God of the universe.

It means that there is something of the glorious Fort Davis skies about us all. That when we rightly stand in awe of God, we learn that we are a tiny tiny tiny reflection of Him. This glory doesn't come from ourselves, it comes from the fact that God is glorious and we reflect Him.

Religion goes off the rails when we downplay how gloriously good God's design for humanity was. So much of religion and human effort is spent trying to "elevate" humanity, to make it divine, to make it amazing. But humanity is already amazing. In fact, humanity's design is far more amazing than many religions or systems of philosophy dare to hope.

Here's an example: Women spent decades just trying to find their dignity acknowledged in the public sphere—even legally. This is grieving. But it illustrates the problem: if women find their value in society's acceptance of them, they're subject to the norms of the society. If their value is tied to something that fickle there's reason to fear. But if their value is tied to something unchanging then it can never truly be taken away. When rightly understood, the Bible says women (and men, and all human beings for that matter) have inherent dignity and worth that can't be taken away by society. Human beings are made in the image of God and in this there is glory. God said he made them "male and female...in his image" meaning both have unique dignity, value, and worth.

This image of God is why humanity is amazing: It is why we could sail around the world in wooden ships, it is why we could launch rockets out of our own atmosphere, it is why we cured diseases that consumed whole generations, it is why our hearts thrill watching someone new break the 100m

sprint record. Even feeding the baby a bottle, cooking dinner, playing music, and doing taxes, we have something of God's image about us.

Humanity is extraordinary because it bears the very fingerprints of God.

### **An Image Shattered**

But what about the rest of our human experience? What about the pain of breakups, and the pain of deep poverty, and the frustration of a simple 9-5 job? What about graves for two-year-old children?

If we were created so perfect, what has gone so wrong?

The Bible has an answer we don't like. And here's where religious teaching often flinches. The answer, it seems, is just too uncomfortable, and too unacceptable, and too offensive to be true.

But this is what the Bible says: The problem with the world is us.

There's an old story that a British newspaper once sent out a question to several authors and writers that asked, "What's wrong with the world?" The paper wanted essays from different perspectives. But one well-known author, G.K. Chesterton simply responded with the following: "Dear sir, I am." Chesterton meant that we often want to find the problem with the world outside us but the real problem is staring us in the mirror.

We are the problem. Humanity has wrecked everything. And we can't fix it.

In the familiar third chapter of Genesis, we see that old Sunday school scene with a snake and shiny red apple and laugh. But that garden was humanity's Chernobyl. Evil entered the world God had made in the form of a snake but we know it was Satan—an angel created to serve God that had rebelled. He comes to earth to try to wreck what God has done.

But we should have been immune. Our first parents Adam and Eve had every good thing in the garden. They were glorious. They had all they needed. They walked with God. But Satan tempted them with more than fruit. He said that if they ate the fruit they would "be like God", that God was holding out on them, and that they should seize the reigns of the universe themselves (Genesis 3:5).

In that moment Adam and Eve disobeyed God, defying His good rule. But they also sought to displace God from His throne. This was no peaceable separation; it was an act of war. And a perfectly holy God opposed to sin had to act.

In that moment, the world shattered. You see the carnage everywhere in those first chapters of Genesis: Adam and Eve are suddenly filled with shame and hiding from God (Genesis 3:8). The guy singing love songs a page earlier is blaming his wife on the next page (Genesis 3:12). The good act of bearing offspring is filled with pain (Genesis 3:16). The creation itself begins to turn against

humanity (Genesis 3:18). The good act of work is corrupted and frustrated (Genesis 3:19). One of Adam's sons kills in cold blood the next son because of jealousy (Genesis 4:7).

All of this because humanity embraced sin and rebellion in the garden. But we can't be self-righteous. After all, we make the same choice all the time.

Romans 1:18-25 brings blunt honesty to our situation: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men... For [God's] invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore, God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen."

All of us, whether born in New Delhi or New Hampshire, see God's fingerprints all over the universe. We can't make excuses that we don't know there was a Creator or that we're accountable to Him. The best we can do is suppress what we know deep down. And because of our sin God's wrath, meaning His just punishment, is progressively being revealed against humanity.

If God is perfectly good and perfectly sovereign, He can't allow sin to continue unpunished.

While we're on earth one of the ways God exercises His justice is in letting us experience the consequences of sin. The phrase "therefore God gave them up" is devastating. It means God removes His restraining hand and allows our sin to wreck the world. But the Bible also tells us that once we die and face judgment there's far more justice yet to come. The nature of God requires His infinite, terrible, wrath against sin.

### **The Deeper Problem**

But what exactly is sin? The Bible defines "sin" as either doing the evil God commands us not to do, or not doing the good God commands us to do. It means that if we know even the basics of biblical teaching and we commit adultery or envy we're sinning. It also means that if we don't show compassion and mercy we're sinning. And we all sin. Every single one of us. We're all implicated in the destruction of the world.

How bad is sin really? It's worse than we can imagine. We are so used to living with it that we're desensitized. But I shared the story of the young boy's funeral to make a point: sin's effects are absolutely devastating. If that cancer and that grief are the outworking of our sin, if they are the result of sin, then how terrible must sin truly be? We can't fully grasp how offensive sin is to God,

but we can grasp how horrific its consequences are. If we could grasp how morally offensive sin was to God even the horrific symptoms would pale in comparison.

In the Old Testament, God requires the people to sacrifice the blood of animals when they sin, even though this blood can't take away their sin. Why? It was meant to point to several things but one important one was that He wanted His people to see the terrible state of the universe. Sin equals death. It was true for them, for their nation, for the world around them. The universe groans under the weight of sin and death and so do we.

This isn't easy, but we must grasp this if we're going to get the gospel.

Here's the problem with many religious views of humanity, even views that call themselves "Christian": They make us out to be better than we are. Now that's hard to believe especially since we often view religious people as the folks you don't invite to really good parties out of fear they're going to kill the vibe. But they all contain the subtle and slippery idea that if we just do a few certain things, we'll put this all back together.

Here's one of the deadliest lies: We can dig ourselves out of this hole.

Every religious worldview must answer the questions "What is wrong with the world?" and "How can it be fixed?" Many contain some variation to the acknowledgment that really, we are basically the problem with the world—either us individually or us collectively or our society, etc. Then they prescribe some three, or five, or hundred step process to get it right. For some people the cure for the world is found in all of us buying incense and breathing deeply. For others, the cure is making sure no one drinks, smokes, or sleeps around, because--God forbid-- all that could lead to dancing. For most people in America, I think if we're honest we sort of make up our own moral code that we try to live by (strong on stuff we're good at, a little more permissible about gluttony or pornography).

I once took a college class where the professor's whole argument was in essence that if we stopped eating meat and milk products altogether the world would be fixed. Without eating meat we'd have a deeper connection to the innate divinity inside us. Wars would cease. We'd be healthy. We'd see a golden age. Now look, I'm a fan of taking care of our bodies and of the earth and of our animal friends but I'm not naive enough to think being a vegan is going to cure cancer or stop wars in the Middle East.

Why do we do this? Why do we continue this path of self-made religion? Why does every generation spin off new religions and sects and cults? It's because we believe that our steps will lead us to being restored to God. We believe if everyone followed our steps we'd all get along and have peace. We believe that somehow, someday, we can get back to the Garden where everything was perfect. But we can't deal with the sin that shattered the Garden in the first place.

For all of us, religious and non-religious alike, Paul unloads the following string of Old Testament quotations in Romans 3:11-12 “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” For all our efforts, Paul says, we're all corrupted by sin and can't please God.

### **The Test Results We Don't Want**

But what about trying to follow the Ten Commandments? What about people trying to follow God's laws laid out in the Old Testament? If we do that, will we fix the world? Romans 3:19 says, “Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”

The law of God is good. It reveals what God is like. It resets our moral compass to the true moral compass of the universe. It shows us that things we think are okay are really not okay. But ultimately the purpose of the law is to give us "knowledge" of our sin.

The law is like a set of lab tests to prove to an unruly patient that surgery is necessary. The doctor says he has gangrene. The patient claims his arm is feeling fine. The doctor prescribes a set of tests to show the patient is in denial, starting with a sight test ("Is it gross looking?") and the smell test ("Is it putrid?") moving on to blood work and lab results. Eventually the patient can't deny it anymore. He has a serious problem, and something must be done, even something radical.

That's the law: It's meant to show us how bad our condition is and to show us that ultimately, we can't do enough good simply to cover over the bad.

In many ways, the scene at the funeral in the desert is a perfect picture of humanity's condition: There is still goodness and glory about us in the love shown to the family, in the arms around shoulders and the tears of sympathy. But there is a ravaging disease we cannot stop for all our skill and effort.

And yet, there is hope.

There was hope even in the Garden as God foreshadowed a son of the woman that would come to put things right (Genesis 3:15).

Help was on the way.

## CHAPTER 4: JESUS

We bundled the boys up, pulled out the little red wagon, and started walking toward the lights. By now it was an annual Christmas tradition. We went to Tom and Lisa's house, ate stacked red enchiladas with their family, crowded too many people around their kitchen table, and then headed out into the cold. Just around the corner from their house was a neighborhood called Eastridge, and it was the reason we were all sneezing and sniffing the next day. But it was worth it.

I'm not sure how it began, but I know what it is today: house after house with homemade light displays of all shapes and sizes. Giant towering trees of white lights. Icicle blue lights. Red strands of lights covering whole roofs. Green lights hung dangerously high in trees. Every other neighborhood in my city is hit or miss with Christmas lights, but not Eastridge. Year after year the neighborhood spends whole weekends setting up light displays for those glorious few weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Some people drive through the neighborhood, tuned to the non-stop Christmas station. But the real fans walk it. So we usually walk it, even if we have to haul half-sick children around in a little red wagon.

Along the way there are Peanuts houses with Snoopy and Charlie Brown and friends. There's an intensely patriotic home with nothing but Texas stars covering their lawn and roof. There's a Nightmare Before Christmas house. There's a Star Wars Christmas house. There are photo ops as Mr. and Mrs. Clause. There are even people smart enough to load up on glow sticks, light up swords, and hot chocolate who sell them on the sidewalk to families caught up in all the Christmas magic.

But in the midst of all this holiday bling there's something that seems out of place. In between Elvis Santa and his convertible sleigh, and the cast of Frozen, there's a little baby sleeping out in the cold. Usually with these particular displays the lighting is softer and more subdued. There's little razzle-dazzle, instead the focal point is often on a simple scene cut out of wood: two parents, a baby, in a stable, under a star. It's the simple scene of baby Jesus. Around these displays cars drive a little slower and the families pushing strollers pause a little longer there. It's strange to find this baby Jesus amid all the flashing lights and nonstop action of Eastridge. He's in an awkward place. He's important enough to still be included, but He's fighting for space and attention with a world that seems to move further and faster every year. He's one Christmas ornament among many. He's a religious symbol stuck into the whirlwind midst of modern technology, Americana nostalgia, rampant consumerism, and awkward seasonal family reunions that is the American Christmas season. I'm not one of those "War on Christmas" people by any means. I love cookies shaped like trees and reindeer as much as anyone. But I think Eastridge is an illustration exactly where Jesus is in our culture today. Many people still have a basic awareness of a man named Jesus, even a general respect, but He's fighting for attention against streaming television and the latest smartphones and news of the latest political clash. He can fade into the fuzzy backdrop of our lives while the real action moves elsewhere. Like most things in our world today, He now means different things to different people. People agree that He's important, but they agree on little else about him.

No one can deny that 2,000 years ago a baby came that changed history. But who was He? And why does it matter for our lives today?

Get ready to meet Jesus again. **Choose Your Own Jesus**

If you have a religious background, you probably grew up with a view of Jesus. Even if you didn't, you think something about Jesus. We come to him with our preconceptions. Here are a few stereotypes of Jesus that float around in our culture.

*Poor Martyr Jesus:* He takes His place alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. as a great man who had a great dream for tomorrow but was killed before His time. His death means we can feel inspired.

*Social Justice Jesus:* This poor nice man walked around barefoot trying to help people all just get along and encouraging them to stamp out injustices like oppression and slavery and chickens who are living in cages. His death was the ultimate protest against injustice.

*Good Teacher Jesus:* This simple Galilean and His homespun and pithy sayings still give wisdom even in our modern age. He's suitable for good quotations on coffee cups and soft pastel paintings. His death was sad but let's not talk about that.

*Spiritual Figure Jesus:* Perhaps He was a prophet according to Islam, or perhaps he was a powerful spiritual leader according to Eastern religions, perhaps a powerful spiritual person in touch with the universe. His death had some spiritual significance like rising to a higher spirit plane. But He's simply part of a broader spirituality people have, not the thing that defines it.

These pictures of Jesus all have a problem—all of them have bits of truth but none of them are the whole picture of Jesus. To get to know Jesus as He truly is we have to dig deeper. And to dig deeper we need to read Jesus' book.

The New Testament wasn't physically written by Jesus, but the gospels were created and shaped by eyewitnesses to Jesus. Matthew and John were present for the things they wrote about. Mark probably relied heavily on the testimony of Peter. Luke approached his gospel with the skill of an investigative reporter piecing together testimony. Remarkably, they all hold together, telling one big story.

Beyond this, the New Testament claims that these documents are authoritative and inspired by Jesus Himself. If this seems ridiculous to you, remember who God claims to be in Scripture. If He could spin pulsars into existence, I'm sure he could make sure some of His disciples got their gospels right. The Bible claims to be written by God, let's at least be willing to read it according to its own claims about itself. To understand Jesus, we need to understand two things about Him: That He was more human than we think, and that He was more divine than we think. Taken together these two aspects of Jesus help us rediscover what He did on the cross and why. **More Human Than We Think**

Sometimes in Christian religion, Jesus is acknowledged as divine, but He's so divine He bears little resemblance to us. Or He's a spiritual Jesus that was more spirit than man. He seems to glide from hilltop to hilltop as He teaches and He never gets wet in rainstorms. Not true.

Jesus was born the way all of us are (Luke 2:7). Jesus grew physically as well as mentally and even in wisdom (Luke 2:40, 52). As a grown man, He got tired after walking for a long time (John 4:6). He got hungry after He didn't eat (Matt 4:2). He felt real grief (Matthew 26:38). He was astonished (Matthew 8:10). One of His best friends in the whole world died and He openly wept about it (John 11:35). Jesus wasn't a spirit figure who sat at a distance from humanity's condition and even humanity's pain.

Jesus also experienced all the temptation we experience and more (Luke 4). I've been sorely tempted but I've never had the devil show up, in person, after I haven't eaten for days, and offer me delicious food. I've never had the devil personally offer me control of the nations of the world to do with as I please. I've never had the devil throw every weapon in his arsenal at me all at once. But Jesus did. And Jesus didn't sin, not even once. Looking at Jesus' whole life Hebrews calls Him "one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15).

Jesus did what we could not do and lived a perfect life, utterly acceptable to God. He was Adam in reverse—doing the right thing at every point Adam failed.

Jesus is not a spirit-figure detached from the realities of the world. He wasn't a God-controlled robot that stiffly marched around delivering speeches through his mouth/speaker output. He bridged the chasm between Creator and creature. He invaded the world we ruined to come to us.

This is good news.

### **More Divine Than We Think**

This is perhaps the more difficult part: I think that in general in today's world we are more okay with Jesus being a real person than we are with Him being utterly divine. We think highly of ourselves and think, perhaps, we are not too many steps removed from Jesus ourselves.

Yet, while Jesus is not less than human, He is far more than human.

The Bible lays out a Jesus that is not just a few steps above us, but a Jesus who is infinitely above us. Colossians 1 says that Jesus is "the image of the invisible God" but that He is far more the image of God than the way we are "in the image" of God. Jesus, unlike us, has all the attributes of God in fullness. I referenced Colossians 1:16-17 about God creating all things invisible and visible and holding them together. Actually, to be more specific, it says that Jesus is the one that does all that. Everything we talked about in the chapter on God is applied to Jesus. Now, Jesus did lay aside some aspects of His glory when He walked the earth according to Philippians 2:7 but He was still truly and



fully God. Scripture says that all the fullness of God dwelt in Him (Colossians 2:9). Jesus was not sort of God. He wasn't sort of powerful. He was as fully God as He was fully man.

We see glimpses of Jesus' utter power while He was on the earth. He tells evil spirits what to do and they obey (Luke 4:36). He saves people from diseases from which there was no cure without a drop of medicine (Luke 4:13). He brings paralyzed people to full strength without surgery or physical therapy (Luke 4:24). He even raises people from the dead far long after the time for CPR and chest compressions is over (Luke 8:55). And notice that Jesus doesn't go on an epic quest to gather the five mighty stones of power to use a secret spell. He just does these things.

This matters because if Jesus is who He claims He is, it's not only incredibly offensive to see Him as a good teacher or an inspirational figure it's also incredibly stupid. If God came to earth as Scripture claims, then the implications shake the universe. To be more specific, the implications shake the foundations of our lives. If God came to earth, we shouldn't be able to rest until we find out what this means and why it matters.

## **To Seek and Save**

So why did Jesus come to earth?

Remember what we've learned so far about God and about us. God is perfect and holy and just and made the world good. We are broken and sinful and have ruined what God made. Why then would God come to earth? Why then would he even bother?

Jesus tells us Himself why He came: "to seek and save the lost" (Luke 19:10). That's remarkable. He came on a rescue mission. He could have come simply to bring the justice we deserved. He could have come to settle our accounts with God. Instead, He saw people that needed saving.

Why would He care? John 3:16 tells us that "God so loved that he sent his one and only son..." It was love that caused God to send Jesus. It was love that caused Jesus to go. Love for the unlovable. Love for people like you and me. That's why He came. **Pushed and Pulled**

When we see Jesus as He is in Scripture, we'll have the same reaction that the people in Jesus' day did—we'll be intrigued and pulled close but also offended and pushed away.

Again and again, crowds built up wherever Jesus went. When He enters Jerusalem at the end of His life there are crowds shouting His name, calling Him the King of Israel, a prophet of God. This is the truly amazing thing: It wasn't just religious people who came to Jesus--the people in their Sunday best with a respectable marriage and obedient kids who always said prayers before they ate and never missed a church service. No, Jesus received the uneducated, the poor, the broken, the hurting, the lowly. And He went further. He didn't just let them come near; He went after them. He pursued people who ripped other people off, people who sold their bodies in exchange for money, people who started insurrections.

There's something about Jesus that intrigues that draws us in, that continues to fascinate people long after He walked the earth. Here's why I think that is: When we see Jesus, we see God. Jesus is the exact imprint of God's nature but in human form (Hebrews 1:3). The thing we long for is that original relationship with God which gives us meaning and purpose and life. When we watch Him welcome beggars and the poor, when we watch Him speak with wisdom, when we watch Him display power, something in our hearts is drawn to him.

I have a friend who took his daughter to Disneyland. When she met Mickey Mouse for the first time she said, "Oh Mickey, I've missed you for so long!" I love that. Her little heart felt like it was finally full in a way she'd always missed. I think when we see Jesus, even for the first time, something in our hearts says that we've missed him.

But something in us also makes us uncomfortable about Jesus and pushes us away. In all this, Jesus is the perfect representation of the Father. He's perfect and just and holy. But we don't like looking in the mirror. We don't like seeing the gap between Jesus and our own lives.

Repeatedly in the gospel of John we see people trying to kill Jesus. For example, in John 11 Jesus literally raises someone from the dead (!) and the response of some religious leaders is that He's getting too popular, He's going to upset the balance of power, so He needs to die. They've just seen a man raised from the dead and they think, "We've got to get rid of Him."

Before we judge those leaders too harshly, I think we need to look in the mirror. See Jesus made all kinds of people angry because His existence threatened them. In rejecting Jesus, the religious leaders wanted to preserve what they'd built instead of pursuing God Himself. Today we often do the same thing. If we rightly understand Jesus, we'll see that He threatens our life as it exists now.

Jesus lays some strong claims on our lives that are uncomfortable. He tells people who they can sleep with and who they can marry. He tells them to love their enemies. He tells them that anger is like murder. His teaching makes us uncomfortable because it demands that we drop what we're doing and follow it. He demands not only that we follow His teaching but follow Him in every respect as His disciples.

In the end Jesus is killed. In the end humanity chooses to push Him away. The religious leaders arrest Him, and lie about Him, and deliver Him to the Romans. The Romans ask the crowd, and the crowd calls for Jesus to be killed.

It looks like the story of God and humanity is over.

But it's only beginning.

## CHAPTER 5: CROSS

In downtown Dallas there's an old warehouse building built in 1901. It's a beautiful plaza of old buildings to walk around during the day but probably not the kind of area you'd want to wander around at night. The building itself doesn't seem particularly remarkable, except for the families towing kids toward it from all directions.

I visited the building as a teenager, not totally prepared for it. I knew we were supposed to go to a museum but I was likely more wrapped up in a book than where we were going.

I should have paid attention.

Packing my family and other friends of our family into the elevator we took it to the sixth floor. Exhibits filled the open room but around the corner kids and adults were gathered around one of the corners of the building.

It was a corner with large windows surrounded by stacks of book boxes that looked like they hadn't been moved in decades. They hadn't.

Because out that window was a road and a grassy knoll.

Because at that corner window, squinting through a scope, a sniper killed a man who was sitting in a convertible and waving at the crowds around him.

This was the place Lee Harvey Oswald shot President John F. Kennedy.

It was strange then to see curious onlookers with their faces pressed up against the glass that preserved the corner perch. It was strange to see kids pull their dads shirts and pointing at the place a disgruntled former Marine shot his Commander-In-Chief.

As a teenager, I put my book down and started paying attention. After the infamous corner window, the museum turned to various explanations for what happened that day, who was behind it, and what it meant. There was an FBI model of the plaza, dozens of pictures, and presentations of various theories.

I had never grown up hearing stories about JFK's assassination, I didn't see it on the news, I barely read about it in history books. So I felt like an archeologist sifting through newspaper clippings and eyewitness testimony to piece together what actually happened. And the more I read, the more I looked, the more I dug, the more confusing it became.

There seemed to only be one thing everyone agreed on: Those three shots (two? four?) changed the world. After that, there was no going back.

It's funny, isn't it? The way a man is killed rewrites the pages of history before it and echoes into the pages after it.

In some ways trying to examine Jesus and His death is something like a trip to Oswald's storage room perch. Everyone agrees something happened, that it was important, that it changed the world. But there are so many versions of Jesus, so many explanations of the significance of His death, that you feel like an archeologist piecing the information together.

So what really happened and what does it mean?

### **Beneath the Surface**

In the Gospels, Jesus keeps doing something that shocks the religious leaders of the day more than healing or raising the dead: He keeps claiming He can forgive sins.

In one story, Jesus is teaching in someone's house when the roof comes off. At this point in the story His reputation has already spread quickly. People whisper that Jesus can heal anything or anyone. In a day when there were few medical cures and serious illness or disability was often a life sentence, Jesus was a miracle worker. This helps you understand why some desperate men did a desperate thing—they climbed up onto the roof, tore a hole in it, and lowered down their paralyzed friend. And Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven you" (Luke 5:17-26).

This is a fascinating moment. Jesus is a compassionate man, He has the power to heal, and faced with a man who is paralyzed...He forgives His sins? Why? Because Jesus was addressing the man's greatest need. Because Jesus loved this man and wanted what was best for him.

Often we get our greatest need wrong. We think it's paying our bills, or being in a relationship, or even being healthy. Or maybe it's an end to world hunger, or to war and conflict somewhere in the world. Jesus sees those needs. They're real. But He sees that underneath it something is causing those problems.

A few years ago I went to the ER with horrible stomach pain. I couldn't think straight. Honestly, if you asked me what I wanted most in the world I would have said, "I just want the pain to stop." Then after some scans the doctor came in with the results: "Your appendix is about to burst," he said. "We've got to get it out." The doctor saw that the source of pain was deeper than I thought. He saw what I really needed.

This is exactly what Jesus meant when He said He came to "seek and save the lost." He came to save us in a deeper way than we knew we needed.

After Jesus heals the paralytic the religious leaders said "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Luke 5:21) and they were right. Only God can forgive sins and as we've covered Jesus was no mere man, but God Himself.

But that question should bother us in light of what we've read in the Bible: How can sins actually be forgiven, even by God? If you understand the reality of God's holiness and the reality of our sinfulness, claiming you can give out forgiveness of sins with no punishment for sins, no justice, is wrong. It seems impossible even for God Himself to say this. If God is holy in His nature and sin is utterly opposed to His nature, He can't forgive sins without bringing justice either.

Unless—unless God himself made another way that would see sin punished and justice served.

### **Him for Us**

This brings us to the death of Jesus.

Too many people still think that Jesus was the subject of forces beyond His control, that He was simply at the wrong place or wrong time, that He was another sad martyr like Martin Luther King, Jr. But this was Jesus' plan all along. In Matthew 16:21-21, He tells His disciples clearly that He's going to Jerusalem to suffer and die and claims He'll rise again on the third day. The cross of Christ wasn't an accident. It was the plan all along. It was the way Jesus would save the lost, the way He would forgive sins.

Jesus was beaten and whipped viciously. He was nailed to a wooden cross, hung until He couldn't breathe anymore. He was humiliated and mocked. And when He died, His last words were surprising: "It is finished" (John 19:30).

But why? Why did Jesus have to die? What was he "finishing?"

I love the simplicity of 2 Corinthians 5:21 in explaining the death of Jesus: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." On the cross, God treated Jesus as if He had committed all our sins. This means that the brutal whipping that flayed Jesus' back open, the unjust trial, the crown of thorns, the spikes driven through His wrists and His feet, the agony as Jesus pushed Himself up on His heel to keep from suffocating, was not even close to what He experienced behind the scenes. On the cross, God poured out the just wrath that had been stored up for sins, but He poured it out on Jesus. God's infinite holiness and infinite power resulted in unbelievable, universe-tearing wrath.

Sin equals death, and Jesus bore the just punishment for our sin.

The punishment Jesus endured was the punishment we deserved. If God were to punish sin, then justice would be the result and that justice would be terrifying. But Jesus stepped in. Jesus exchanged places with us. Jesus was treated by God as if He'd committed our sins.

The Books of the Law highlighted sin's consequence with every drop of blood shed in the temple. Sin equals death, the sacrifices, the shedding of blood shouted. And over the course of our lives, sin would store up more, and more death for us. Perhaps we'd taste justice in this life but we'd fully

bear justice in the life to come. Until one day a final sacrifice was made. Christ's blood was shed for us. He was poured out and spent, for us.

Jesus did this so that if we are "in Him" we might become righteous again according to God's standards. Not sort of righteous according to God's standards, not more righteous, but wholly righteous in God's sight. Jesus was perfectly righteous before God; He met the standard of holiness.

This is not simply more religion. This isn't a self-help manual for us to save ourselves. This isn't "Spend 20 years trying in vain to do more good deeds than bad deeds." This is far better news.

### **Inside the Cross**

But how exactly can this work? How is this possible?

Romans 3:2-25 takes us into the machinery of those moments on the cross a bit more: "For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins."

Two crucial words there: justified and propitiation. If you don't get those words the sentence reads like a long piece of Latin mumbo jumbo, the kind of thing I memorized as a kid but had no idea what I was saying. But these two words are some of the best news in the world.

Justification is a term from the legal world. It evokes a courtroom where the obviously guilty prisoner is about to be sentenced to death in view of the stacks of evidence against him. But a commotion rises in the back of the courtroom where the mayor himself steps over the railing and presents himself to the judge saying, "Punish me instead. Give him my good name and let him go free." Jesus did this on a cosmic scale.

Jesus died to switch places with us, taking a position He didn't deserve so we could have a position we didn't deserve.

Propitiation is a term from the temple. When sacrifices were offered to God or to the gods, they were offered to placate wrath and to gain favor. In the Old Testament God instructed His people to offer sacrifices, even though the blood of animals can't ultimately pay for the sins of mankind. God "passed over" those sins because of what was coming. So why did He do this? To show them a pattern: Sin equals punishment which equals death. If you sin, something must die, or more accurately someone must die. On the cross, someone did die.

Jesus died to step in front of the freight train of God's wrath rushing toward us so that not a drop of wrath would be left for us, nor would a drop of blood still be necessary.

But the story doesn't end there.

## **Brought Back**

We can finally go back to the thing our hearts long for. We can finally know the God of the endless stars, the God of endless goodness and love. We don't have to wander life anymore looking for something we can't put our finger on. We can finally come home.

The Apostle Peter says that Jesus suffered," the righteous for the unrighteous that he might bring us to God" (1 Peter 3:18). Jesus did all this—dying as the righteous for the unrighteous—so that He might bring us back to God. The relationship we were made for and long for is restored.

God does not just save us and then leave us at arms' length, He brings us near.

My grandfather was an intimidating man. By the time I began visiting his office, he was already an old man. But when he walked in the warehouse, he would still send employees scurrying around. Everything in his office was spotless, and pristine, and dignified. He'd been in business many years, he was a respected man, and people treated him with respect. Every time I visited his office, I would be quiet and hang back. But he would smile and invite me to come sit on his lap and offer me an orange gummy candy he kept on his desk.

He brought me near.

God is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. He has unlimited power, and yet He makes a way through the cross to invite us near.

Paul the Apostle says in that "God sent forth his Son...to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Galatians 4:5). We don't just have a close relationship with God on the other side of the cross, we are family. We have a father who will never leave us or forsake us, whose love and affection is secure.

And it gets even better.

## **Made New**

Three days after being killed in front of everyone Jesus wasn't in His tomb. Death itself could not hold Him. He rose again completely conquering death and sin. His resurrection was His vindication, His proof that all He said was true, that all that Scripture says happened on the cross really happened.

And the news gets even better. For those who believe in Christ, all that Jesus experienced on the cross, He experienced for us. Scripture says that we are "in Christ" and are treated as if we've already paid for our sins, because our sins were paid in Christ. But being "in Christ" also means that what happens to Christ in His resurrection will happen to us as well. It means that not only did Christ pay for our sins (which itself is amazing) but because He rose again to new life, we can receive new life too.

Jesus not only conquers death, he brings life.

When I was growing up, our church would often do some kind of Easter drama. The best one we ever did started with a full 30 minutes of singing, followed by a lengthy drama reenactment of Jesus going to the cross. Finally, we got to the resurrection part. The whole back of the stage was our baptismal pool and it was covered to look like a tomb. Everyone looked around and waited for someone to run up on stage and pretend to be Jesus, but no one did. Instead, out of the tomb itself, someone burst out of the paper and cardboard rubble. People gasped. I'm not sure whether they gasped because they were excited by the story or because we all realized together that this guy had been hiding in a tiny cramped baptismal pool for over two hours just for the big reveal. But we all gasped together. I remember him trying to hold back a smile as he burst out victoriously.

Here's the best part: Those of us "in Christ" burst out of the tomb with Christ. For so long we'd lived as though dead, but when Jesus' heart restarted, our heart restarted. When His life was renewed, our life was renewed.

Scripture says that we are "new creations—the old is gone and the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). It means that we have the same power that raised Jesus from the dead living in us (Romans 8:11). While in this life we may still struggle with sin at times, but we'll be fundamentally different people. Old addictions can be broken. New patterns can be set. All with the power of Christ.

Not just for a little while, but forever, really. In John 3:16 God says that He sent His so that we could have "eternal life." This new life we have is glimpsed here and now but one day we'll have it in all its fullness. When we die, we will not stay dead but be raised like Christ to new life. Jesus' resurrection is our guarantee of it. If we are in Christ, and He was raised, we too will be raised to something better than we've ever experienced.

Life. With God. Forever.

That's what Jesus has opened for us.

It changes everything.



## CHAPTER 5: RESPONSE

It started out as a great idea, but it ended up nearly stranding us on the mountain.

I was with four friends on an evening hiking trip. One of the guys kept remarking about how great the view was, and it was, but I stopped caring about the view after I stopped being able to breathe. Two of the guys hiked frequently, another was a solid hiker, and another friend and I rarely hiked. Normally, that wouldn't be a problem, but we were chasing daylight.

My city is split by a mountain in the middle and there are several trails running from one side to the other. This means you can have access to real, craggy, challenging hiking trails within a few minutes drive. We decided to start our hike right after work, since a couple guys couldn't get off any earlier. Not a problem, we thought, since we should be able to do the hike with time to spare before the sun set. We all laughed when we heard stories on the local news of people getting airlifted off the mountain. Hikers would underestimate the trail, or themselves, and they would still be up there as darkness fell. They'd slip or get hurt, or just plain get lost in the dark. We were sure that wouldn't happen to us.

The first half hour was great. Then I started to worry.

I realized that I had a few problems: First, I didn't know the trail and never bothered looking it up, so I was totally dependent on our two guides. Second, even while I was on the trail, I sometimes lost sight of the trail. This wasn't a trail in the woods with a clear path through the trees, but a dirt trail through more dirt and rock. Third, if I went at the pace my body wanted to go, I'd finish at approximately midnight. Normally I'm the kind of person who likes to have a backup plan. But as I ran across a narrow trail on the side of the mountain, I realized I had no backup plan.

When one of the guys remarked that we were about to hit the halfway point I seriously thought about turning back. How reliable were these guys guiding us? They were good friends but were they decent guides? Did I trust them enough to set the pace and keep the trail with no mistakes so we could get home that night?

I decided to gut it out. For about the last hour I stopped thinking. I simply looked at the backpack of the guy in front of me and followed. Where he ran, I ran. Where he used foot and hand holds, I used the same holds. If they stopped for a water break, I stopped. If they sprinted through a section, so did I. As the daylight faded all I could do was focus in on where they were and what they were doing.

In the end, I made it down before dark.

Usually I trust people or things in life up to a point, but I often don't fully trust them. I trust my backup plan. Or I trust I'll figure it out another way. Many times in life, you can get by doing that. But sometimes you have to trust something completely. On the hike it was simple: either I trusted

my friends completely or I didn't. There was no in between. Trusting them meant fixing my eyes and running hard. It meant giving up on trying to figure my own way back down the mountain. It meant going all in.

Jesus is one of those things you can't trust halfway. If all that we've been saying about Jesus is true, then our response is simple: we trust Him completely and follow Him.

## **Grace and Faith**

All that I've said about Jesus and what He's done is true, but it's not automatically applied to us. We must do something to receive this new life. This is a gift. But we must do what Scripture says to receive this gift.

Romans 5 says all this is "to be received by faith." We look to Jesus. We believe that He's the person He claimed to be. We place our trust in Him for salvation.

I've heard it described this way: You can have a chair in your house. You can think it's beautiful. You believe that theoretically it's sturdy enough to sit on. You can display it for other people. But that's all a very different thing from sitting in the chair. You must trust it with your whole weight. That's faith.

You must believe enough to sit down.

Sometimes we overly complicate what it means to become a Christian. When I put my faith in Jesus it was very simple. I thought I was a good person but in an instant God helped me see the truth: I wasn't a good kid. I was a kid who was self-righteous toward others but still had more than enough private sins of my own to make me ashamed. I realized I was a sinner, I realized I needed a Savior, I realized Jesus was that Savior, so I said simply, "Please save me." I couldn't do it, only Jesus could. Faith receives what Jesus has done and places its trust in Jesus.

This receiving by faith is simple and wonderful, but it is also hard.

It's hard because receiving the gift of Jesus means admitting some radically uncomfortable things: It means admitting that we are sinners who are clearly condemned before God. It means admitting that there's nothing we can do to save ourselves. It means admitting the way we've lived our lives is useless and foolish and that we want to follow Jesus now.

But it is utterly wonderful. It means that you can finally find forgiveness from God, that your sins can be completely and totally wiped away forever. And that after all this happens our relationship with God can be restored once and for all. It means that the longings in our souls, placed there by God, can be fulfilled by God again.

If you've never put your faith in Christ, if you've never committed your life to follow Jesus, then this is the invitation I promised you at the beginning. I believe that a relationship with God is what your

heart longs for. I believe that you long to know that when you stand before God you won't be condemned but embraced. I believe that this is all possible because of what Jesus offers. Place your faith in Him. Turn to follow Him.

This means you let go of a lot of things and trust one thing.

When I began indoor rock climbing, I had a problem letting go. I would never totally place my weight on the next hold because I was still trying to hold on to the other holds I could more easily see. There was one route in particular I could never get past. I had to let go of everything else and reach for the next hold, above my head where I couldn't see it, but I couldn't do it.

Finally, one of the guys at the indoor climbing gym said, "You just gotta trust it. Just let go of everything else and trust it."

Placing your faith in Christ is feel like that. It can seem scary to think of letting go of everything else and trusting your hold on Christ. But there are many who have climbed this way before. Grab hold of Christ. Trust that He is who He claimed. Trust that He paid for your sins on the cross. Trust Him enough to turn from sin and follow Him. He will more than hold the weight of your life and your eternity.

### **Follow Him**

At the very beginning of the gospel of Matthew Jesus finds two brothers who were fishermen and simply says, "Follow me" and that "immediately they left their nets and followed him" (Matt hew 4:19-20). We think that's strange but we don't know half of it. He was asking them to come talk to Him. He was asking them to become His disciples.

In the ancient world, becoming a disciple of a Rabbi like Jesus didn't mean registering for a series of lectures or showing up once a week for a religious service. No, being a disciple meant following your teacher 24/7. It meant that you traveled with him, stayed where he stayed, ate what he ate. You learned as he taught you and others. You would imitate his way of life, his teaching and everything about him. Your identity would change. You wouldn't just be "Ricky" but "Ricky, disciple of Jesus." It would become part of who you were, forever. For the fishermen Jesus called it meant walking away from their business, from their town, from all that they'd known.

This is what Jesus was asking of his disciples—that they would drop their old lives and take up a new life spent following him.

This is what Jesus is asking of us as His followers today.

When we trust Jesus for our salvation, when we come back into relationship with God, then we become disciples of Jesus. But what does this mean for us practically?

First, it means that more and more we look like Jesus in every area of life. Jesus showed us the very character of God and we are to imitate it. We are to be loving as Jesus is loving, just as He is just, holy as He is holy. In this life we may fail and fall but it should be our lifelong pursuit. More and more each year we should imitate the character of Jesus. God saves us so that we might be “conformed to the image of his Son” (Romans 8:29). In other words, we should look a little more like Jesus every year.

Second, it means that more and more we follow Jesus in every area of life. It means we submit our lives to Jesus’ teaching. It means that we place ourselves under His authority and let Him tell us how to live our lives. It means we’re not the only one calling the shots. Jesus taught about what we should do with our money, with our sexuality, with marriage, with anger, with the poor, with those very different from us. We should seek to understand what Jesus says, and what the rest of the Bible says, and commit to follow it.

Now this doesn’t mean that within a week, or a month, or a year, we’ll have this nailed down. In this life we’ll continue to strain toward these things.

My 4 year old son’s soccer team has a chant they do before every game. They put their hands into a big pile and shout “Every day, a little bit better.” They shout louder and louder until they break down giggling and laughing. At first I thought it was the weirdest sports chant of all time, but then I realized it was profound. The coaches knew that the kids needed a simple goal and could easily be discouraged. So their goal was simply to keep trying and to do a little better every practice and game. I love that. And I think in some ways this is what discipleship looks like. There will be times we fail and fall but we should have a commitment to keep pressing on, to keep following, to keep striving to look just a little more like Jesus.

## **Taking Up Our Cross**

In Matthew 16:24 Jesus says bluntly, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” Being a Christian means a beautiful eternal hope, but it also means very real sacrifice and difficulty on the road of following Jesus.

Christians aren’t immune from suffering. In fact, we should expect it. We will still struggle with sin in this life. We may be mocked or persecuted. We may encounter disaster and calamity. The Apostle Peter encourages us: “Do not be surprised by the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share in Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (1 Peter 3:12-13). Jesus’ road ended in glory, but it went through suffering. Following Jesus will mean that there will be hard moments but we shouldn’t be discouraged, this is our Savior’s path, and it leads to eternal life and wholeness.

But if we understand Jesus, we’ll follow even when the road gets rocky. We know He loves us. We know He wants what is best for us. If we doubt that, we only need to look at the cross to see it

proved out. If Jesus would give even His own life for us because He cares so deeply for us, because He sees our needs better than we can, shouldn't we trust Him enough to follow Him?

## **Help for the Journey**

If this seems a little intimidating then, good. It is. But Jesus didn't leave us to figure out all this on our own, He sent help.

### *A Helper*

On His last night with His disciples before His death, Jesus made an amazing promise. He said that was going away but that He would not leave His disciples to fend for themselves. Instead He says, "I will ask the Father and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever" (John 14:16). This is not just any helper. Jesus said that it would actually be to our advantage for Him to leave because then this Helper would come, which would be even better (John 16:6). There are sure days I wish I had Jesus in the flesh, walking alongside me to help me and instruct me. But there's good news: Jesus says that someone else will be with us that will be even better.

Most of us know this helper by another name: The Holy Spirit.

What gets revealed elsewhere in Scripture is that the Holy Spirit is fully God the way Jesus was, but He's with us in a different way. Where Jesus lived and walked in the flesh, the Holy Spirit is with us in spirit but in no less a real way. The thing we've longed for with all our being has happened: God has come to dwell with us. While one day it'll be true in all of its fullness, we can experience a real taste of it now. The God of stars, and galaxies, and sunsets, and salvation, has come to help us and will never leave us.

As Christians, if we have placed our faith in Christ, there are two things fighting for control in our lives. One is often called "the flesh"—meaning the "old us." But we also now have the Holy Spirit, this new helper. This means our task is to cooperate with the Spirit's work in our lives. Peter encourages us to, "Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh" (1 Peter 5:16). As we follow Jesus we have a helper, we are to walk with Him, and not according to our old life. And in doing so we find, strangely, that we have new power with each step.

### *A Roadmap*

Following Jesus in every area means we learn to love the Bible. Some people treat the Old and New Testament as if they have nothing to do with each other, but Jesus believed and taught the Old Testament. Some of its interpretation changes radically once we understand Jesus, but it only brings everything into clearer focus. All Scripture is "breathed out by God" and contains something much deeper than human wisdom (2 Timothy 3:16). It carries the very power of God. The Bible is our roadmap to following Jesus.

Sometimes people pit Jesus against other parts of Scripture like the Old Testament, but Jesus loved Scripture. He didn't throw it out, he explained it and applied it. In fact, after being raised from the dead, Jesus finds two disciples who do not recognize Jesus and are discouraged that He died. Jesus sees that they didn't understand His true mission so "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). That's an extraordinary statement. He walked through every section of the Old Testament, even the seemingly dusty and dry law books of Moses, and showed how they all pointed to Him and His work.

This means that in every part of Scripture there are connections to Jesus. He's the main point of it all and as we read more and more we'll see more of Jesus and how to follow him.

### *A Family*

Jesus doesn't just save us; He brings us into a family. Once we were "strangers and aliens" to God but because of Jesus that all changes and we're now "fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:19-20). When we come to trust and follow Jesus our relationship to God changes and we're brought into His family. But our relationship to others that are following Jesus also changes as well. There are three images there that are striking:

- *Fellow citizens*—We once were separated by all kinds of "citizenships" and identities. We were heartland Republicans or coastal liberals, or white collar or blue collar, or American or Cuban, and those things defined our identity. But now we have a "citizenship" to a new country, Jesus' country.
- *Members of the same household*—We aren't just linked at arms length, we're brought into the same family. Now we share family meals. We laugh and cry and rejoice and mourn together.
- *A building*—This is all going somewhere. There's a purpose behind bringing us together. So we intentionally embrace that and keep building with one another. And we're being built into a "dwelling place for God by the Spirit."

This matters so much because we live in a constantly connected but constantly disconnected world today. We long for real connection over things that really matter. We were made for that. In Christ, this begins to be restored more and more. As we draw close to God we'll draw close to one another. After all, if we've found the greatest news in the world, wouldn't we want to talk about that and dream about that with others who have found it too?

This doesn't mean that everything is magically easy in Jesus' family. There will be plenty of heartache and there will be conflicts that need to be resolved. But what unites us in Christ is clear: we have the same Savior, the same path of following Him, and the same Spirit at work in us (Ephesians 4:4). In light of this we should be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). The Spirit is working to unite us, we don't have to drum something up, but we should be eager to maintain that unity.

This should mean joining a real life, flesh and blood, local church. In our day we cling so tightly to individualism that we want to simply follow Jesus on our own. We think we can follow Him just as well by setting the terms for our involvement with other Christians, maybe reading an inspirational book here or there.

But here's the thing: Jesus calls us to relate to real people, with real problems, and to do it often, even when we don't want to see them.

Jesus calls us to hear solid teaching about Him from the Bible.

Jesus calls us to resolve conflicts when we have them, so we'll learn to look more like Jesus.

In 1 Corinthians 12, there is a beautiful picture of the local church as a "body" that needs many kinds of people to function effectively. A Christian without a church is like a hand crawling around on its own—it's weird, and it's probably not going to get far. We need one another.

But in the beautiful mess of Christian community there is grace and beauty.

Every Thursday, a group of people I might not be friends with otherwise show up at my house. Bill and his wife Mary Ann drive for over 30 minutes to be there and have walked with one another and the Lord for decades. Andrew and Anna walk across the street with their little girl. Some of the people are native to my city, others are new, others are temporary. There's always a lot of chaos with little kids running around and a lot of food. We read the Bible, pray, talk, catch up, rejoice with one another, and sometimes cry with one another. And I love everything about it. We've all come from different places, with different backgrounds, but we're all on the same path.

We're all following Jesus and that makes us family.

### **Always Better News**

The gospel is always better news than you think. The more you learn about Jesus, the more you'll stand in awe of the fact that He came to seek and save you. The more you read the Bible, the more you'll see it reveal Jesus. The more you walk with other believers, the more you'll see Jesus. And the better news will just keep getting better, and better.

The gospel is not just the most important thing for people who don't know Jesus, it's the most important thing for the most mature Christian too. In 1 Corinthians 15:1, Paul the Apostle, tells the church "Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you..." He's just spent 14 chapters telling them about the gospel, but he can't end the book without another reminder. He says it is of "first importance" (1 Corinthians 15:3). It's not optional, but essential. It's not something you learn and move on from, it's what the rest of your life and faith rest on.

If we really get all this, then it will have one last effect: we'll want to tell someone about it.

When I receive good news about something it's hard for me to hold it back. I know some guys that will surprise their wife with a gift and be able to hold the secret until she discovers it the next morning or something. I totally cannot do that. If I have a gift, I have to give it because I start smiling uncontrollably.

If the gospel is good news, we should tell others. At the beginning of Jesus' ministry, He calls people to follow him. Then at that ministry he gives those disciples a mission. He reminds them that "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18). Jesus is the sovereign ruler of the universe. There's nothing we should fear from following His commands with Him on our side.

Jesus tells His disciples, "Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20). We as disciples of Jesus are to make new disciples. This doesn't mean running around forcing people to our Bible study under threats of biblical plagues (obviously). Instead, it means that we introduce people to Jesus. This shouldn't be hard because, after all, the news about Him is pretty great. Then if they follow Jesus, we help them along (and usually before long they're helping us along too.) It also means that for the other followers of Jesus around us, we should seek to encourage them in their walk as well. We should do whatever we can to help observe all Jesus commanded.

Because this is what we know: our hearts long for this. St. Augustine once said that "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee." The good news of Jesus offers a way to find that rest. So, rest in it today. Rejoice. Then tell someone about it. Our world makes a lot of claims about "good news" that turn out to be over-hyped promises that never fully come true. They always leave us restless.

In the gospel of Jesus, we've found something better.



## NEXT STEPS

If you're looking to take the next step in following Jesus here are a few basics:

- Specifically **put your faith in Jesus for salvation**, turn away from sin, and commit to follow Him. This doesn't have to be fancy, but it should be done in your own words. Simply talk to God about the gospel and your response to it.
- **Start reading the Bible.** You may not understand everything, but you'll be surprised how much you will understand. Consider starting with the Gospel of John to understand more about Jesus and His teaching. Ephesians also provides a great clear explanation of what it means to be a Christian and be part of Jesus' family. The Psalms help teach us how to talk to God.
- None of us are meant to follow Jesus alone so **find a local church.** Look for one that clearly teaches and proclaims the good news about Jesus and lines up with what you read in the Bible. You might be new, but you have something in common with the people there: they're all following Jesus and part of His family too.
- If you've never been baptized, then **get baptized.** Baptism is an outward symbol of an inward spiritual reality. When people are placed in the water it symbolizes them dying to their old life and when they come out of the water it symbolizes them being raised to new life in Christ. Baptism is a way of publicly identifying with Jesus and it's an important step in following Jesus.
- Even if you're new to following Jesus you can **tell others about the good news too.** There are probably friends and family you know that don't know this good news about Jesus. Share it with them and the difference it's made in your life.