

WHAT'S THE LEAST  
YOU CAN BELIEVE

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AND BE A  
*Christian?*

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MARTIN THIELEN



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*To the congregation and staff at First United Methodist Church,  
Lebanon, Tennessee, who for a  
decade joined me in proclaiming a vibrant  
mainline faith of “Open Hearts, Open Minds,  
and Open Doors” to our community.  
As Paul said to the church at Philippi,  
“I thank my God upon every remembrance of you.”*



## PREFACE

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When I first met Danny, he said, “Preacher, you need to know that I’m an atheist. I don’t believe the Bible. I don’t like organized religion. And I can’t stand self-righteous, judgmental Christians.”

In spite of Danny’s avowed atheism and my devout Christian beliefs, we became close friends. Over the next year Danny and I engaged in numerous conversations about God, religion, and faith. During that time Danny softened his stance on atheism. One day, after a long conversation, he announced with a laugh, “I’ve decided to upgrade from an atheist to an agnostic.” Several months later Danny said, “I’ve had an epiphany. I realize that I don’t reject Christianity. Instead, I reject the way that intolerant Christians *package* Christianity.” A few weeks after that conversation, Danny said, “Martin, you’ve just about convinced me on this religion stuff. So I want to know—what’s the least I can believe and still be a Christian?”

“What’s the least I can believe and still be a Christian?” What a great question! This little book represents my best effort to answer that question. Part I presents ten things Christians *don’t* need to believe. In short, Christians don’t need to believe in closed-minded faith. For example, Christians don’t need to believe that Jews are going to hell or

that it's heresy to believe in evolution. Part 2 presents ten things Christians *do* need to believe — what matters most, if you will. They need to believe in Jesus — his life, teachings, example, death, and resurrection. A great benefit of these beliefs is that they provide promising answers to life's most profound questions, including Where is God? What brings fulfillment? What about suffering? And is there hope? Like Danny, many people in the twenty-first century hunger for an alternative expression of Christian faith that's different from the judgmental and narrow-minded caricatures they see on religious television and in the news. This book offers such an alternative. It articulates centrist, mainline, and moderate Christianity in a way that's fresh and easy to understand. It also offers authentic Christian insights that speak to our deepest human needs. So turn the page, and let's begin exploring Danny's interesting question: "What's the least I can believe and still be a Christian?"

# CHAPTER 1



## GOD CAUSES CANCER, CAR WRECKS, AND OTHER CATASTROPHES

*Those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you.*

—Jesus, in Luke 13:2, 3–5

One summer afternoon a country preacher went to visit a farmer in his congregation. As the preacher and farmer sipped iced tea and talked, the farmer's son bolted into the house, carrying a dead cat by the tail. In his excitement the boy did not notice the preacher sitting on the other side of the room. He rushed up to his father, held up the dead cat, and said, "Dad! I found this stray cat in the barn. I hit him with a board, then I threw him against the barn, then I kicked him, and then I stomped him." At that moment the boy saw the preacher. Without missing a beat, he said, "And then, Pastor, the Lord called him home."

God often gets blamed for things God does not do. When I was a teenager, a friend of mine named Rick died

in a car wreck. Rick, a delightful young man and deeply committed Christian, had planned to become a minister. At his funeral the pastor said, “Although we cannot understand it, God’s will has been done.” Even though I was only sixteen years old and a new Christian, I knew better. God didn’t kill my friend Rick: a drunk driver did.

Just last week a young police officer from middle Tennessee lost his life in a traffic accident. His police chief said, “Not knowing how the good Lord makes his decisions sometimes, we were all caught off guard by Jeremy’s sudden demise.” But it wasn’t the good Lord’s decision that killed this young man. It was the driver of a pickup truck who ran a red light. If God had actually been the one who killed this fine young policeman, God would not be a “good Lord” at all.

Unfortunately, people attribute awful events to God all the time. A child dies of leukemia, and people say, “God wanted another angel in heaven.” A young woman dies of breast cancer, leaving behind a husband and young children, and people say, “God works in mysterious ways.” A fifty-year-old man works twelve hours a day, seven days a week, chain smokes, eats unhealthy food, and never exercises. He then suffers a deadly heart attack, and people say, “The Lord knows best.” On their prom night two teenagers die in a car wreck, and people say, “God must have had a purpose.”

An extreme example of blaming tragedy on God happened after September 11, 2001. Several days after the terrorist attack on New York City, a well-known television preacher claimed that 9/11 was God’s retribution for America’s sins. He said that abortionists, feminists, gays, lesbians, and the ACLU had angered God so much that God used the terrorists to punish America. I doubt that theory would go over very well with the families of the victims. Years earlier the same preacher claimed that God

created AIDS to punish homosexuals. Try telling that to the young hemophiliac in my congregation who suffered and then died from AIDS after receiving a contaminated blood transfusion. Or try telling that to children born with AIDS or spouses who get AIDS because their husband or wife was unfaithful. Or for that matter, try telling homosexual men or women, created in the image of God and loved by Jesus, that God gave them AIDS to punish them for their sexual orientation.

A more-recent example of blaming God for tragedy came after the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti. One well-known religious leader suggested that Haiti's suffering was the result of a voodoo "pact with the devil" that Haitian slaves had made two hundred years earlier, during their rebellion against French colonization. That bizarre theory strongly implies that God sent the devastating earthquake to Haiti as a punishment for their past sins. It's beyond my comprehension how Christians can believe that God would purposely annihilate over two hundred thousand people for any reason, much less to punish a poverty-stricken nation for a two-hundred-year-old sin. We need to be careful about attributing terrorist attacks, disease, earthquakes, or other catastrophes to God.

## Acts of God?

Last year tornadoes ravaged several communities in my home state of Tennessee. The next night on the evening news, a local official from one of the hardest-hit communities called the tornado "an act of God." When people and property are destroyed in tornadoes, earthquakes, tsunamis, and cyclones, we often refer to it as "an act of God." But do we really want to believe that? When a tornado rips through a trailer park and kills little children, or a

devastating earthquake kills massive numbers of people, do we really believe that is an act of God? An act of nature, yes. But an act of God? How can we worship a God like that? How can we love and serve a God who inflicts cancer on children, wipes out teenagers in car wrecks, destroys families in tornadoes, or kills hundreds of thousands of people in a tsunami or earthquake?

Christians don't have to believe that. Christians should *not* believe that! The God of Jesus Christ, who placed children on his lap and blessed them, does not go around killing people with tornadoes, earthquakes, cancer, and automobile accidents. God does not have a weekly quota of malignant tumors to distribute, heart attacks to pass out, or battlefield wounds to inflict.

Just because something bad happens does not mean God causes it to happen. Jesus understood that. We see an example in Luke 13:4–5. Although we don't know the details, eighteen laborers were killed in Jerusalem in an apparent construction accident. People in Jesus' day assumed that God caused the accident, presumably to punish the workers for their sin. Jesus rejected that idea and so must we. In response to this tragedy, Jesus says, "Those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you." God didn't cause that tragedy back then, and God doesn't cause tragedies today.

Years ago a woman in my congregation lost her teenage son, Daniel, in a tragic car wreck. At first she felt bitter toward God. Overwhelmed by grief, she said, "I hate God for taking Daniel away from me." Several months later this woman came to realize that God did not "take" her son. With keen theological insight she told me, "It's not God's fault that Daniel is dead. God did not create cars and highways. Daniel's death was just a terrible accident. God did not *take* Daniel. Instead, God *received* him when he came."

## Bringing Good Out of Bad

God does not cause cancer, car wrecks, or other catastrophes. God is not the author of suffering. However, that does not mean that God cannot redeem suffering; God can and God does. In fact, God brings good things out of tragedy all the time. For example, take Daniel's mother mentioned above. Whenever anyone in her community loses a child, she's always there. She empathizes with their pain, grieves with them, and helps them walk through their nightmare. In mercy God brought something good out of that sad story. But that does *not* mean God caused the tragedy. As God tells a grieving father in the bestselling novel *The Shack*, "Just because I work incredible good out of unspeakable tragedies doesn't mean I orchestrate the tragedies."<sup>1</sup>

Suffering is a complex issue for Christian believers and has no simple solutions. We will deal with the problem of suffering in more depth in part 2 of this book. But for now it's enough to affirm that God does not cause pain and suffering. The idea that God does cause pain and suffering is "old-time religion" that Christians can and should abandon.

Many years ago, a few months after I arrived at a new church, I went to visit an inactive member of my congregation. Although he used to attend church regularly, after his wife died, he quit coming. By the time I arrived at the church, he had not attended worship for several years. During our visit I said, "The congregation and I would love for you and your children to return to church."

"Thanks for the invitation," he replied, "but I don't believe in God anymore."

"Tell me about the God you don't believe in," I said.

So he told me his story. Years earlier, he, his wife, and their two young children came to church every Sunday. But then his wife developed breast cancer. In spite of all

their prayers and the best medical treatment available, she only got worse. He begged God to save her, but she died anyway. He told me, “When I buried my wife, I also buried my faith. I don’t believe in a God who kills twenty-eight-year-old mothers with cancer.”

I replied, “I don’t believe in that kind of God either.”

\* \* \*

Bottom line: *Although God can and does bring good results out of tragedy, God does not cause tragic events to occur.*

## Note for Chapter 1

1. William P. Young, *The Shack: A Novel* (Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007), 185.

## CHAPTER 2



# GOOD CHRISTIANS DON'T DOUBT

*I believe; help my unbelief!*

—the father of the convulsing boy, in Mark 9:24

Several years ago Hollywood produced a powerful film called *Cinderella Man*, starring Russell Crowe and Renée Zellweger. If you're not familiar with the movie, *Cinderella Man* tells the true story of Jim Braddock, a boxer during the Depression years. After injuring his hand, Jim's boxing career came to an end. Unable to find regular work, Jim and his family struggled greatly during the Depression years. Although a devout Roman Catholic, those bleak years strained Jim's faith in God. In one poignant scene of the movie, the Braddock family had no money, the kids were sick, the electricity had been cut off in their apartment, and they had little food.

Late that evening, Jim came home after another unsuccessful day of seeking work. The kids were in bed, coughing with a bad cold; the apartment was freezing; and the

only light in the apartment came from a candle. Jim sat down at the table with his wife to eat a meager bite of dinner. He and his wife joined hands and bowed their heads to say a blessing over the tiny meal. She began the prayer, "Lord, we are grateful . . .," but Jim did not join her. She looked up at him, and with her eyes asked, "What's the matter? Why are you not praying with me?" For a moment Jim looked at her in silence. Then he said, "I'm all prayed out."

## All Prayed Out

Have you ever felt all prayed out? Do you ever have doubts about God? Do you ever wonder if God really exists? Or, if God does exist, do you ever wonder if God is as good, loving, and just as you have been taught? If so, you are in good company. People have felt all prayed out for centuries, including many biblical heroes.

After years of praying for a child with no results, Abraham and Sarah felt all prayed out. Frustrated with leading the people of Israel through the wilderness, Moses felt all prayed out. Sick in mind, body, and spirit, Job felt all prayed out. Hiding for his life in a desert cave, his enemies in hot pursuit, David felt all prayed out. Crying out to God in anger and anguish, the prophet Jeremiah felt all prayed out. Believing that God had abandoned him, the psalmist felt all prayed out. After denying Jesus three times, Peter felt all prayed out. After repeatedly praying for healing but not receiving it, the apostle Paul felt all prayed out. In anguish over his inability to believe that Jesus was alive, Thomas felt all prayed out.

At one point in his life, even Jesus felt all prayed out. The authorities were breathing down his neck. Powerful people wanted him dead. He had less than a day to live. So he went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. Three

times Jesus poured out his soul to God to spare his life. “Father,” he pleaded, “Don’t let me die; let me live!” But the heavens were silent. Instead of being rescued by God, Jesus was arrested, abandoned by his disciples, denied by his best friend, put on trial, condemned, beaten, mocked, and cruelly executed. Hanging on the cross, Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Like so many others through the years, Jesus felt all prayed out.

Some people believe that religious questions, struggles, and doubts are a sin—but they are wrong. Doubt is not the enemy of faith but part of faith. Tennyson was right when he said, “There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.” When author Madeleine L’Engle was asked, “Do you believe in God without any doubts?” she replied, “I believe in God with all my doubts.” Her response reminds me of a profound passage in the Bible that says, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24 NKJV). Most of us can relate to that. We do believe, but we also have times of unbelief. That’s always been true for people of faith, and it always will be.

## But Some Doubted

Take, for example, the resurrection of Christ. Most people would agree that belief in the resurrection is the heart-beat of Christian faith. But when God raised Jesus from the dead, skepticism about his resurrection abounded. In fact, doubts about the resurrection are recorded in all four Gospels. When the early followers of Christ heard the glorious news of the resurrection, they struggled to believe it. Matthew 28 says, “When they saw him [after the resurrection], they worshiped him; *but some doubted*” (v. 17, with added emphasis). Mark 16 says, “When they heard that he [Jesus] was alive and had been seen by her [Mary

Magdalene] *they would not believe it*" (v. 11, with added emphasis). Luke 24 says, "Returning from the tomb, they told all this [about the resurrection] to the eleven and to all the rest. . . . *But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them*" (v. 9, 11, with added emphasis). John 20 says, "The other disciples told him [Thomas], 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, '*Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe*'" (v. 25, with added emphasis). Skepticism, doubt, and uncertainty exist in all four Gospel accounts of the resurrection. Eventually Christ's followers affirmed faith in his resurrection, but they had to work through their doubts, questions, and struggles to get there.

I had my first serious struggle with religious doubt during college. I did not grow up in church but became a Christian believer during my sophomore year in high school. For three years my church nurtured me in an ultra-conservative, intensely emotional version of Christianity. My church was heavy on heart religion but light on head religion. Then I went off to college. For the first time in my life, I had serious discussions with agnostics and even atheists. I studied philosophy, world religions, and evolutionary biology. I was also introduced to critical academic study of the Bible and advanced theology. My professors taught me things I never heard in Sunday school.

My simple, conservative, emotion-based Christian faith was seriously challenged. In that setting I struggled deeply with my faith. I grappled with hard questions like, If God is all-loving and all-powerful, why is there so much suffering and evil in the world? I wondered, How can I reconcile my belief in science with my belief in the Bible? My simplistic "Love Jesus with all your heart" religion was not adequate anymore. For a while I thought I was losing my faith. I shared my struggles with my college advisor and

mentor. At the conclusion of our visit, he handed me a book written by an Episcopal priest called *Honest to God*. There's little in that book I would agree with today, but at the time it served as bread for a hungry beggar. In many ways that book saved my faith and my vocation as a minister. It taught me that doubt is not the enemy of faith but part of faith. It taught me that it is OK to ask hard questions about God, that you can be a thinking person and still be a Christian, and that science and religion are compatible with each other. Since that difficult faith struggle during college, I've learned that it's OK to say, along with the great heroes of the Bible, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"

\* \* \*

Bottom line: *Doubt is not the enemy of faith but part of authentic Christianity.*

## CHAPTER 6



# BAD PEOPLE WILL BE “LEFT BEHIND” AND THEN FRY IN HELL

*About that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven,  
nor the Son, but only the Father.*

— Jesus, in Matthew 24:36

When I was fifteen years old, I attended a youth lock-in at a conservative Southern church. After eating dinner and playing games, we had a Bible study on the second coming of Christ. The teacher talked about strange things, including the rapture, the antichrist, the seven-year tribulation, and Armageddon. Then we sang a song about the rapture called “I Wish We’d All Been Ready.” The closing words of the song say, “There’s no time to change your mind, the Son has come and you’ve been left behind.” At that point they showed us a movie called *Like a Thief in the Night*, which depicted the rapture, the second coming of Christ, and the end of the world. It scared me half to death.

That youth lock-in was my first exposure to a theological view called “premillennial dispensationalism.” This view is widely held among conservative and fundamentalist churches in the South. Made popular in the 1980s by a book called *The Late Great Planet Earth*, the same view is being promoted today by a series of wildly popular novels called *Left Behind*.

According to left-behind theology, Jesus will secretly come to earth and transport true believers to heaven. This is known as “the rapture.” During the rapture people will literally be snatched up into heaven. That’s the meaning behind those bumper stickers that say, “Warning: In Case of Rapture This Vehicle Will Be Unmanned.” After the rapture those who are left behind will face seven years of tribulation. During these seven years of tribulation, the antichrist will inflict global warfare and horrible natural disasters upon the world. After seven years of tribulation, Christ will gloriously return and defeat the forces of evil at the great battle of Armageddon. That will be followed by Christ’s one-thousand-year reign over the earth. After that the world will end, and eternity will begin. Although variations exist, in broad strokes that’s the basic outline of left-behind rapture theology.

Although good people believe this theory, it’s fraught with major problems. I’ll quickly review four of them. For a more detailed critique, see Barbara R. Rossing’s excellent book, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*.<sup>1</sup>

*Biblical problems.* The Bible does not support this elaborate, left-behind system of thought. For example, no passage in the Bible even uses the word *rapture*. Not one verse in the entire Bible talks about Christ’s coming twice, once in secret to rapture his church and then a second time seven years later. The Bible teaches that Jesus will return once

and once only. The only way to make this theory work is to take dozens of unrelated biblical passages, many of them obscure and most of them out of context, and piece them together into an elaborate system. Contrary to what this view claims, the Bible does not lay out a detailed master plan of the end of the world. Even the book of Revelation is not a road map to the future; it spoke to the people of its day. For example, it dealt with many issues of first-century Rome, including Emperor Nero and the persecution of the early Christians. In short, the entire left-behind rapture theory does great injustice to the Bible.

*Historical problems.* Left-behind rapture theology is a new invention in the church. This theory was first developed in 1830 by a man named John Darby. For over eighteen hundred years the church did not hold this view. Until then, the church simply affirmed that one day Jesus would return, judge the world, and usher in the final kingdom of God. For example, no rapture is mentioned in the two great historical affirmations of faith, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. Left-behind theology is not the historical faith of the church.

*Theological problems.* Left-behind theology presents God as a vengeful, bloody, wrath-filled, violent deity. The God of left-behind theology doesn't remotely resemble Jesus' view of God as the loving heavenly Father who seeks to redeem the world. Left-behind theology gets God all wrong.

*Social problems.* For all practical purposes, left-behind rapture theology abandons the world that God has created and wants to renew. For example, people who hold this view often say that nuclear war is inevitable, the pursuit of peace is pointless, and environmental woes are unstoppable. As a result, there is no call for social justice, no concern about caring for the environment, and no effort to make peace among the nations. It's a recipe for social irresponsibility and even social disaster.

## All You Need to Know about the Second Coming of Christ

If left-behind theology gets it wrong, and it most certainly does, what *does* the Bible teach about the second coming of Christ? In a nutshell, the Bible teaches four truths about last things. First, Jesus will return. The Bible clearly affirms that one day Christ will return and end history. Second, we don't know the details. Therefore, we should not speculate about them. Third, we need to be ready. We prepare for the second coming by affirming faith in Jesus Christ. Fourth, we need to be working. Before Jesus returns, we are called to engage in God's work to share the gospel, meet human need, and seek justice for all people. Those four things are really all we need to know about the second coming of Christ.

### Final Judgment

The Bible tells us that when Christ does return, he will judge all persons. As the Apostles' Creed affirms, Jesus "shall come to judge the quick and the dead." The "quick and the dead" simply means the living and the dead. Every person who ever lives will one day be judged by Christ. Thankfully, by the grace and mercy of God and the sacrifice of Jesus, Christian believers will be spared punishment. But what about nonbelievers? What happens to people who reject Christ? What happens to people who never seek God's mercy, who never spiritually prepare for death or the return of Christ? Christians hold three different theories on this subject. An overview of each theory follows.

*Eternal punishment.* This traditional view of hell says that people who reject God in life will be forever separated from God in eternity, with no hope of salvation. Some proponents of this view say that people in hell will be forever tormented

with flames of fire. Others say we should not take that literally since hell is also described as a place of utter darkness. The point is, hell is a bad place, a place where God is not to be found, and a place where there is no hope.

Although some biblical passages support this view, it's fiercely debated. For example, many theologians and biblical scholars argue that if this position is true, God ultimately loses. If people are forever cut off from God, then God will eternally be sorrowful that many are forever alienated from God's love. Another problem with this view, according to its critics, is that being banished to an eternal hell is a highly disproportionate penalty. For example, if a person is caught stealing a twenty-dollar CD from Wal-Mart, the courts don't give them life in prison or the death penalty. That would be disproportionate punishment. That same thinking says that even if people live horrible lives for seventy or eighty years, it would not be just to punish them for all eternity. They argue that God would not punish people so disproportionately. In spite of these concerns, this traditional view of eternal punishment is held by many sincere and good Christian people, especially among conservative churches.

*Possible redemption.* This second view holds out hope that people, even after death, can be redeemed. People who affirm this position argue that there is no place, not even hell itself, that is cut off from God's grace, love, and mercy. This view holds out the hope of final salvation for all, a view known as universalism. Many people who hold this position do believe in hell. However, they view hell as redemptive punishment—punishment given not for vengeance but for purifying. For example, author Madeleine L'Engle once said: "I cannot believe that God wants punishment to go on interminably any more than does a loving parent. The entire purpose of loving punishment is to teach, and it lasts only as long as is needed for the lesson. And the lesson is always love."<sup>2</sup>

Advocates of this view sometimes argue that the phrase in the Apostles' Creed that says Jesus "descended into hell" was God's way to give people who have died another opportunity to say yes to God. They also point to several passages in the Bible that seem to hold out hope that, in the end, all persons will eventually come to God. For example, they believe that 1 Peter 3 and 4 suggest that after his death, Jesus went to hell to proclaim the gospel, giving nonbelievers a second chance. Although this position is certainly not clear-cut in the Bible, some support exists for this view. As a result, a good number of theologians and biblical scholars affirm this position.

*Final annihilation.* This view says that people who reject God will ultimately cease to be; they will be annihilated and exist no more. Instead of eternal punishment, their lives will be extinguished. Numerous passages in the Bible seem to support this view. Therefore a growing number of scholars, including conservative scholars, support this view of final annihilation. For an engaging and comprehensive view of all three of these positions, see *Razing Hell: Rethinking Everything You've Been Taught about God's Wrath and Judgment*, by Sharon L. Baker.

What happens to nonbelievers after death? What is their final destiny? Some say they will spend eternity in hell, forever separated from God. Others say they will have a second chance for redemption. Still others say they will finally cease to be: they will be annihilated. Which one is right? I'm happy to give you the definitive answer: we don't know! Good Christians disagree on this topic. In the end we simply have to trust God to do the right thing, whatever that is.

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Bottom line: *Left-behind rapture theology is neither a biblical nor a historical Christian belief and should be left behind by mainline*

*and moderate evangelical Christians. The final destiny of non-believers is in God's hands, not ours, and God can be trusted to do what's right.*

## Notes for Chapter 6

1. Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004).

2. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 171.

## CHAPTER 8



# EVERYTHING IN THE BIBLE SHOULD BE TAKEN LITERALLY

*O daughter Babylon, you devastator!*

*Happy shall they be who pay you back  
what you have done to us!*

*Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
and dash them against the rock!*

—Psalm 137:8–9

Many centuries ago a bald holy man walked down a road on his way to the city. As he neared the city, he came upon a group of boys. When the boys saw his bald head, they began to tease him, saying, “Go away, Baldhead! Go away, Baldhead!” In anger the holy man called down God’s curse upon the little boys. Immediately, two vicious bears emerged from the woods and mauled them. Unfazed by the screaming, violence, and blood from the bears’ ripping the little boys’ bodies apart, the holy man continued his journey into the city.

Where does that awful story come from? It comes from the story of the prophet Elisha in the Holy Bible (2 Kings 2:23–25). And there are plenty more biblical texts just like it, including the vengeful passage listed above from Psalm 137. In this text the psalmist, full of hatred for the Babylonians, wants to murder Babylonian infants by smashing their little bodies against the rocks.

Somewhere along the way, Christian believers must answer a crucial question about these kinds of troubling texts, which are so prevalent in the Bible. Are such passages meant to be taken literally? Does God really send bears from the woods to rip apart little boys for teasing a prophet? Or was this a campfire story the ancient Israelites told their children and grandchildren to engender respect for the holy prophets of Israel? How you answer that question will have a huge impact on how you understand Christian faith. Ultimately it will determine if you fall into the literalist, fundamentalist camp of Christianity or the mainline and moderate camp.

People hold one of three positions about biblical inspiration. People believe that the Bible is either (1) all human, (2) all divine, or (3) both human and divine. Let's review all three.

*The Bible is all human.* This position says the Bible is inspired, but no more so than Shakespeare or any other great work of literature. However, this is not a viable option for Christian believers who consider the Bible to be “the Word of God for the people of God.” From the very beginning, Christians have affirmed that the Bible is “Holy Scripture.” Although Christians hold differing views of biblical inspiration, as we'll see below, virtually all Christian believers and churches affirm that the Bible is divinely inspired. As a result, Christians hold the Bible in high esteem, turning to it for both doctrinal beliefs and

behavioral guidance. Therefore, for the vast majority of Christians, an all-human Bible is not an acceptable option.

*The Bible is all divine.* This position says that everything in the Bible is literal, including all historic, geographical, and scientific details. Although this view is held by fundamentalist churches, it's not the historic Christian position. In fact, this view of the Bible, called "biblical inerrancy," is quite new in Christian history. It first appeared in the early 1900s in reaction to modern science (especially the theory of evolution) and modern biblical scholarship (called "the historical-critical method"). Conservative believers felt threatened by these modern views, so they adopted the concept of an "inerrant and infallible" Bible that could not be questioned by modern science or scholarship. Unfortunately, this view of Scripture is overwhelmingly problematic. For example, if everything in the Bible is literal, then —

- The earth is flat.
- Creation took place six thousand years ago.
- The world was created in six, twenty-four-hour days.
- Women are the property of men.
- Slavery is approved by God.
- Polygamy is approved by God.
- In order to win a bet with the devil, God let Satan kill all ten of Job's children.
- God throws raging, jealous, violent fits, killing thousands in the process.
- Eating shellfish is an abomination to God.
- Wearing blended garments (like cotton/polyester) enrages God.
- Menstruating women and handicapped men are not allowed in public worship.
- God's preferred system of government is a monarchy.
- All governments, even highly oppressive ones, are established by God.

- God approves of genocide and commanded people to practice it.
- Women are to be silent in church.
- Women are to wear veils in church.
- People who commit adultery should be stoned to death.
- The penalty for working on the Sabbath is execution.
- Sassy teenagers are to be executed.

The above examples are just a few of the massive problems that come with biblical inerrancy. For example, if the Bible is all divine, how do you explain its inconsistencies? In the book of Matthew, we are told that Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus, hanged himself. However, in the book of Acts, we are told that Judas fell down in a field and died from massive internal rupturing of his organs. Both stories can't be true. So why do we have two conflicting stories in Scripture about the death of Judas? The answer is simple. When the Bible was written—many decades after the original events occurred—two different stories were circulating about Judas's death. The writer of Matthew picked up one story, and the writer of Acts picked up the other. If space permitted, hundreds of examples of inconsistencies in the Bible could be given, including conflicting accounts of the birth and resurrection of Christ.

Another example of the problems that come with biblical literalism can be found in the familiar story of Noah and the ark in Genesis 6–8. Although many people believe that the Noah story literally happened, a lot of sincere and thoughtful Christians are reluctant, for several reasons, to affirm a literal reading of the text. First, no scientific evidence exists to suggest that the earth ever experienced a worldwide flood. Major floods have occurred locally and regionally, but it's doubtful that the entire earth ever flooded. Also, how is it possible that every species on the planet was placed into one boat, even a big one? From a scientific analysis, the story

has overwhelming problems. Second, the Genesis flood story is extremely similar to an ancient Babylonian myth that predates the Bible. Even a casual reading of the two stories leads to the likely conclusion that the Israelites borrowed the ancient story, adapted it, and retold it according to their purposes. Finally, significant theological challenges exist with the passage. If the Noah story literally happened, then God purposely annihilated every living creature on the earth in a worldwide genocidal flood. This image of God is hard to reconcile with Jesus' teachings that God is like a heavenly Father who deeply loves his children, even sinful ones like the prodigal son. Valuable theological lessons can be found in the story of Noah, including the fact that God takes sin seriously, and God expects us, like Noah, to live righteous and faithful lives in a pagan culture. But one can affirm these theological truths without believing in a literal, worldwide, genocidal flood.

Many years ago I had a conversation about biblical literalism with an extremely conservative pastor. We were talking about the Old Testament stories of David killing his archenemies, the Philistines. Several of those stories claim that David singlehandedly killed hundreds of Philistines at a time. I said to this pastor, "What if the biblical writers exaggerated the number of Philistines that David killed in any given battle? What if he only killed thirty instead of three hundred? Would that matter?" The pastor replied, "If that were true, I would have to quit the ministry and renounce my faith. If I can't believe everything in the Bible, then I can't believe anything in the Bible." Sadly, this kind of radical literalism is extremely damaging to the Christian faith. It forces people to take an all-or-nothing approach to Scripture, a totally unnecessary choice that the Bible does not require.

For these and many other reasons, the vast majority of Christian believers do not affirm biblical inerrancy. And

they don't need to affirm or accept it. Only a small percentage of Christians advocate this position. The Bible itself never claims to be inerrant; it claims only to be inspired. Biblical inerrancy has never been the historic position of the church. In fact, the church existed for nineteen centuries *without* this view. Belief in biblical inerrancy is not necessary for Christians and is, in fact, detrimental to authentic faith. Telling people they must believe something that intellectual and theological integrity cannot authentically accept only hurts the Christian cause. Thankfully, a third and far more promising position exists concerning biblical inspiration.

*The Bible is both human and divine.* This is the classic position of the church, held by virtually all mainline and moderate denominations. This view states that the Bible was inspired by God. People who hold this position affirm, along with the Bible, that “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16 NIV). The Christian church has always affirmed that God inspired the Bible, that Holy Scripture has a divine element. But the church also affirms that the Bible is a *human* document. People, not God, wrote the Bible. And they wrote it according to the worldview of their time, which was a prescientific world. For example, the biblical writers believed that the world was flat and that mental illness was caused by demons. Those kinds of prescientific views are reflected throughout the Bible.

A concrete example of human involvement in the Bible is found in Luke 1. Luke begins his Gospel by writing, “Therefore, since I have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account” (1:3 NIV). We clearly see human involvement here. Luke did his homework. He researched his subject well and eventually wrote the Gospel of Luke and the

book of Acts. Although God inspired Luke's writing, Luke was fully involved in the process. In short, Luke's Gospel is the product of divine inspiration as well as human insight and human limitations.

Clearly Christians do not have to interpret everything in the Bible literally. In fact, since some passages of Scripture express pre-Christian and even sub-Christian views of God, Christians *should not* interpret everything literally. However, that does *not* mean the Bible is not true. For example, take the first book of the Bible. Genesis is full of many great truths: God created the world, human beings are created in God's image, human sin is real, and God dearly loves all creation. However, a person can believe these great truths without believing that the earth is flat, that the world is only six thousand years old, that serpents talk to people, or that Noah literally placed two representatives of every living creature on earth into one boat.

I love the Bible. My life has been transformed by the message of the Bible. I believe that the Bible is true and trustworthy and reliable. I affirm the great truths of the Bible. For example, I believe God created the world. I believe God called Abraham and Sarah to give birth to a nation through whom God blessed the world. I believe the Ten Commandments and the prophet's demands for justice. I believe the Great Commandment, the Great Commission, and the Golden Rule. And most important, I believe, as the Bible teaches, in the life, death, and bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, like most Christians through most of Christian history, I do not believe that everything in the Bible has to be understood literally.

Christians must always remember that we worship God, not the Bible. The Bible *points* us to God, but the Bible is *not* God. Many years ago John the Baptist came upon the scene, preparing the way for Jesus. When people went to hear John preach, they asked him, "Are you the Messiah?"

John said, “No, I am not the Messiah, but I bear witness to the Messiah.” The same is true for the Bible. The Bible is not God, but the Bible bears witness to God. Therefore, Holy Scripture is central to our faith.

\* \* \*

Bottom line: *Although we must always take the Bible seriously, we don't always have to take it literally.*



## CHAPTER 11



# JESUS' IDENTITY

## *Who Is Jesus?*

*But who do you say that I am?*

— Jesus, in Matthew 16:15

You don't expect a crude comedy about NASCAR racing starring Will Ferrell to raise issues about the identity of Jesus Christ. However, *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* does exactly that. In the funniest scene of the movie, NASCAR racer Ricky Bobby, along with his family and best friend Cal, gather for a dinner of Domino's Pizza, KFC, and Taco Bell. Before they eat, Ricky offers grace.

He begins his prayer, "Dear Lord Baby Jesus." He then proceeds to thank baby Jesus for various blessings, including his "red-hot smoking wife, Carley." As he prays, he continues to repeat the phrase, "Dear Lord Baby Jesus."

Carley interrupts him and says, "You know, Sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don't always have to call him baby."

Ricky Bobby replies, “I like the Christmas Jesus best, and I’m saying grace. When you say grace, you can say it to grown-up Jesus, or teenage Jesus, or bearded Jesus, or whoever you want.”

Ricky Bobby continues his prayer, “Dear tiny Jesus, in your golden fleece diapers, with your tiny balled-up fists.”

His father-in-law angrily interrupts, “He was a man. He had a beard!”

Ricky Bobby snaps back, “Listen, I’m saying grace, and I like the Christmas version best!”

Ignoring the conflict between the two men, Ricky Bobby’s best friend Cal says, “I like to picture Jesus in a tuxedo T-shirt. It says like, I want to be formal, but I’m here to party too.”

One of Ricky Bobby’s sons says, “I like to picture Jesus as a Ninja, fighting off the evil samurai.”

Cal then adds, “I like to think of Jesus with giant eagle wings and singing lead vocals for Lynyrd Skynyrd with an angel band.”

Ricky Bobby returns to his prayer, saying, “Dear eight-pound, six-ounce, newborn infant Jesus, who doesn’t even know a word yet—little infant, so cuddly but still omnipotent.” He then thanks baby Jesus for all his NASCAR victories and the millions in prize money he has won. He concludes grace by saying, “Thank you for all your power and grace, dear Baby God. Amen.”

Immediately after the prayer, Cal says, “That was a hell of a grace, man! You nailed that like a split hog!”

Count on Hollywood to raise important religious issues in such an irreverent yet hilarious way. That scene in *Tal-ladega Nights*, irreverent as it is, raises major theological questions. Who is Jesus? Which version of Jesus is accurate? It’s imperative that every person have a clear understanding of the identity of Jesus, for much is at stake.

## Who Is This Man?

From the first century until today, speculation and debate have swirled around Jesus of Nazareth. People hold divergent and conflicting views about his identity. That was certainly true in Jesus' day. For example, John 7 tells a story about Jesus going to Jerusalem for a religious festival. By then Jesus has become quite a celebrity. The whole city is abuzz about this amazing miracle worker and teacher from Nazareth. However, no consensus has emerged concerning his identity.

Some people at the festival say, "He is a good man" (v. 12).

Others say, "No, he is deceiving the crowd" (v. 12).

Still others think Jesus is an insightful teacher. They say, "How does this man have such learning, when he has never been taught?" (v. 15).

A few believe Jesus is deranged. They say to him, "You have a demon!" (v. 20).

Others ask, "Can it be that . . . this is the Messiah?" (v. 26).

Electricity fills the air. People want to know: Who is this Jesus? Is he a good man, a deceitful threat, a wise teacher, a deranged lunatic—or is he perhaps the long-awaited Messiah?

This story from John's Gospel reminds me of an old Christian ballad called "Outlaw." The song, written by Larry Norman, offered five possible explanations of Jesus' identity. According to the ballad, some people in Jesus' day said he was an *outlaw* who roamed the land with his twelve partners in crime. Others said he was a *poet* who mesmerized the crowds with strange parables. Some claimed he was a *politician*, seeking a following for political gain. Many believed he was a *sorcerer*, performing magical feats that

amazed people. However, some confessed that he was the *Son of God*, who came to serve and to save.

## “Who Do You Say That I Am?”

The question of Jesus’ identity is vividly raised in Matthew 16. In this story Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (v. 13). After the disciples answer his question, Jesus asks them a second, more-important question. It’s perhaps the most important question Jesus ever asks: “Who do *you* say that I am?” (v. 15, with added emphasis). In short, Jesus asks his disciples to make a verdict about his identity. For Christian believers the most important question in life is not, What career should I choose? Or, Whom should I marry? Or, Am I financially secure? Instead, the most important question in life is, Who is Jesus Christ to me?

When Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter responds, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16 NIV). Peter’s confession of faith is one of the most important christological affirmations ever made. Entire books have been written about this remarkable affirmation of faith, so I can only scratch the surface of Peter’s comment. But in a nutshell Peter claims that Jesus is far more than a good man, a wise teacher, or even a prophet of God. Instead, Peter’s confession is a profound affirmation of the divinity of Jesus—an affirmation that Christians have made ever since. When we confess Jesus as “Christ” (literally, the “Messiah”), we affirm that Jesus is the Savior of humanity, liberating us from sin, death, and hopelessness. When we confess Jesus as “the Son of the living God,” we affirm that Jesus is uniquely related to God, fully reveals the nature of God, and connects us to God in a way no other person can. Therefore,

when we, like Peter, affirm that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” we acknowledge that Jesus is worthy of our highest praise and ultimate loyalty.

## Making a Verdict about Jesus

At some point in life, every person needs to grapple with the question of Jesus’ identity. We cannot defer the question to our parents, our preacher, or our church. Ultimately every person must answer Jesus’ question: “Who do you say that I am?”

I answered that question many years ago. At the time I was a young, mixed-up, and troubled teenager. I didn’t understand everything about Jesus then and still don’t. However, I knew enough about Jesus to know that I desperately needed him in my life. So on a Sunday morning in a conservative Baptist church in Muskogee, Oklahoma, I affirmed my faith in Jesus Christ. The next Sunday morning I was baptized. It’s the most important thing I’ve ever done—or ever will do—in my entire life.

Along with the apostle Peter, I believe Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” I place my faith and trust in Jesus. I accept his love, grace, and forgiveness. And I try to follow him as my Lord. I still have plenty of questions about Jesus. And I’ve had my share of doubts about him. However, Jesus has transformed my life and continues to transform it. Jesus gives my life meaning, direction, and purpose. Jesus gives me courage and strength for living. Jesus gives me hope for life and hope even for death. And as you will see in the following chapters, Jesus provides answers to my deepest questions. My faith in Jesus Christ is the most important part of my life. I hope the same is true for you. For further information about what it means to be a Christian believer and how to

become one, please see chapter 21, “A Final Question: Do Mainline Christians Believe in Getting Saved?”

During my college years an acquaintance named Blake Greenway wrote a song about Jesus called, “If He Was Just a Man.” The words go like this:

I’ve heard his name most all my life.  
They tell me he once healed a blind man’s eyes.  
They tell me he walked on the sea.  
They tell me he gave his own life for me.

But if I really told the truth,  
I’d say sometimes I’ve doubted just like you.  
But there’s one thing I go back to.  
There’s one question I’d like to ask you.  
If he was just a man,  
There is one thing I cannot understand.  
How could he change my life so,  
If he was just a man?<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

Bottom line: *Jesus “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” is the heart of Christianity.*

## Note for Chapter 11

1. Lyrics quoted from “If He Was Just a Man,” by Blake Greenway. Printed with permission of Blake Greenway.

## CHAPTER 13



# JESUS' GRACE

## *Am I Accepted?*

*Jesus . . . said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you? She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you."*

—John 8:10–11

Several decades ago, a group of theologians gathered in England for a conference on comparative religions. They grappled with the question "Is there one belief completely unique to the Christian faith?"

As they debated that question, world-famous theologian and author C. S. Lewis walked into the room. "What's going on?" he asked.

Someone told him that his colleagues were discussing the question "Is there one belief unique to Christianity?"

C. S. Lewis responded, "Oh, that's easy: it's grace."

By the end of the conference, the theologians agreed with Lewis. God's unconditional grace, offered to human beings with no strings attached, is indeed unique in the world's

religions. Buddhists follow an eightfold path to righteousness. Hindus believe in the doctrine of karma. Jews, in order to receive God's blessings, must obey God's covenant. Islam has a strict code of law that all Muslims must follow. In one way or another, every religion of the world requires people to earn God's approval—every religion except Christianity. The one belief that is completely unique to the Christian faith is grace: God's unconditional love and acceptance of us just as we are.<sup>1</sup> Of course, some Christian groups have added additional requirements to the baseline of God's unconditional grace. But at its core, pure Christianity is all about the "Amazing Grace" of God. That grace, more than anything else, draws people to Christianity.

## God's Job Description

That proved true for Anne Lamott. In her irreverent yet delightful book *Traveling Mercies*, Anne shares her journey toward faith in Jesus Christ. Anne's story of faith is mostly a story about being drawn to God's grace. Years ago Anne found herself broke, drunk, bulimic, depressed, and addicted to drugs. She said, "I could no longer imagine how God could love me." Desperate, Anne set an appointment with an Episcopal priest.

She told him, "I'm so messed up that I don't think God can love me."

The priest replied, "God *has* to love you. That's God's job."<sup>2</sup>

Anne's priest was absolutely right. God works full-time offering unconditional love to all human beings. God's affirming and forgiving love, what theologians call "grace," is God's best gift to humanity. Grace means that in spite of all our flaws, failures, and sins, God dearly loves us and offers us forgiveness. As renegade Baptist preacher Will

Campbell once put it, “We’re all bastards, but God loves us anyway.” Although crude, that statement rings true. Every human being fails to live up to God’s standards. However, in spite of that, God continues to offer us grace upon grace.

## Party for a Prostitute

My favorite story about God’s grace comes from Tony Campolo, a well-known author and speaker. I heard him tell it at a conference in Honolulu. You may have heard this story before: it’s becoming quite famous. However, even if you’re familiar with Tony’s story, it’s worth retelling.

Years ago, Tony traveled to Honolulu to speak at a conference. Upon arriving, Tony went to his hotel and fell asleep. He woke at 9:00 a.m. his time, but in Honolulu it was 3:00 a.m. Wide awake and hungry, Tony walked to a small diner near the hotel and ordered coffee and a doughnut. At 3:30 a.m., a group of provocatively dressed prostitutes walked in the door. Their loud and crude talk made Tony uncomfortable, so he prepared to leave.

But then he heard one of the women say, “Tomorrow’s my birthday. I’m going to be thirty-nine.”

Her friend responded, “So what do you want from me, a birthday party? You want me to get you a cake and sing ‘Happy Birthday’?”

“Come on!” said the woman. “Why do you have to be so mean? I was just telling you, that’s all. I don’t want anything from you. I mean, why should you give me a birthday party? I’ve never had a birthday party in my whole life. Why should I have one now?”

When Tony heard those words, he made a decision. He stayed in the diner until the women left. Then he said to the owner, “Do they come in here every night?”

“Yeah,” he said. “You can set your clock by it.”

Tony said, "What's the name of the woman who sat next to me?"

"That's Agnes," he replied.

Tony said, "What do you think about us throwing a birthday party for her — right here — tomorrow night?"

A smile crossed the owner's face, and he said, "That's great! I like it! I'll even make the cake."

At 2:00 the next morning, Tony went back to the diner. He put up crepe-paper decorations and a big sign: HAPPY BIRTHDAY, AGNES! The workers at the diner obviously got the word out because by 3:15 just about every prostitute in Honolulu crowded into the place. At 3:30 sharp, the door swung open, and in came Agnes and her friends.

Tony had the entire group scream, "Happy birthday, Agnes!" Agnes, absolutely stunned, felt so overwhelmed her friend had to hold her up. Everyone in the diner began to sing, "Happy Birthday to You."

When they brought out the cake covered with thirty-nine candles, Agnes began to cry. Too overcome with emotion to blow out the candles, she let the owner of the diner blow them out for her. Before she cut the cake, Agnes hesitated. She asked if she could take her cake down the street, show it to her mother, and then come right back. The owner of the diner said that would be fine, so she did.

When the door closed behind Agnes, silence filled the diner. Tony broke the silence by saying, "What do you say we pray?" It probably seemed strange for a roomful of prostitutes to bow their heads in prayer, but that's what happened. Tony prayed for Agnes and for the other prostitutes in the diner, affirming that they were beloved daughters of God, with great value, worth, and promise.

When Tony finished the prayer, the owner of the diner said, "You never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?"

In a moment of divine inspiration, Tony said, “I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning.”<sup>3</sup>

## Friend of Sinners

I love Tony’s story because it reminds me so much of Jesus. Rather than judge people, Jesus loved and accepted them. We see a vivid example of this in John 8. In this story a woman is caught in the act of adultery. Religious authorities bring her (but not the man) to Jesus, demanding that she be stoned to death, in accord with Jewish law (vv. 3–6).

Jesus says to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (v. 7).

One by one they slip away from the scene, leaving their stones behind (v. 9).

Jesus asks, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” (v. 10).

She replies, “No one, sir.”

And Jesus says, “Neither do I condemn you” (v. 11).

The Bible contains numerous stories about Jesus’ spending time with and offering grace to flawed people, including adulterers, prostitutes, tax collectors, and other sinners. The Pharisees, a group of self-righteous and judgmental religious leaders, vigorously complain about that, as we see in this passage from the Gospel of Matthew:

And as he [Jesus] sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who

are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." (9:10–13)

At his core, Jesus was a man of mercy and grace. He consistently loved, accepted, and welcomed imperfect sinful people into God's family. It's not that Jesus approved of sinful behavior: not at all. For example, when Jesus offered forgiveness and grace to the woman caught in adultery mentioned above, he told her, "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11 NIV). Jesus did not condone sinfulness. He did not lay aside the Ten Commandments. Yet Jesus loved sinners, accepted them, and welcomed them as they were. In spite of their sin, Jesus refused to judge and condemn them. Instead, Jesus saw them as beloved children of God, created in the image of God, with great value and worth. Obviously Jesus hoped they would change for the better. He wanted them to grow in morality and purity. But even with their flaws, Jesus warmly welcomed sinners and offered them forgiveness, love, and acceptance. In short, Jesus offered them grace. He does the same for you and me.

Not only did Jesus live out God's grace; he also told wonderful stories about God's grace. Perhaps the most famous example is Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son found in Luke 15. In that story an arrogant son demands his inheritance from his father. He then takes the money, leaves home, and squanders his inheritance on sinful living. After going broke, the boy returns home, tail between his legs. In spite of everything, the father welcomes the boy back home with love, forgiveness, and even celebration. In this parable Jesus teaches us that God is like a loving parent who grants amnesty to his or her sinful children. In short, Jesus teaches us that God is a God of grace.

Jesus lived out grace. Jesus taught grace. Even Jesus' death was grace filled. When the authorities and crowd condemned, mocked, and crucified him, Jesus offered them grace, saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). On the cross, even though he was suffering in agony, Jesus took time to hear the confession of the dying thief hanging next to him. Jesus offered him grace, saying, "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Grace—more than any other trait—defined Jesus' life, his teachings, and even his death.

### Jesus' Theme Song

If Jesus had a theme song, it would be "Amazing Grace." As you may know, this famous hymn was written back in 1779 by a former slave trader named John Newton. In spite of his horrendous sins in the slave trade, Newton experienced the forgiving and transforming grace of God. Thus he could say, "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound / that saved a wretch like me! / I once was lost, but now am found, / was blind, but now I see." Because of Jesus' amazing grace, sinners like the woman caught in adultery, the prodigal son, John Newton, and you and me can know God's love, forgiveness, and acceptance. As the Gospel of John says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (3:16–17).

However, this does *not* mean that we can accept God's grace and then live any way we please. That would be, in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words, "cheap grace." Yes, God

loves us as we are. However, God wants us to become *more* than we are. Once we accept God's grace, God expects us to live differently. As beloved children of God, we are called to live like God's children—full of integrity, love, morality, and spiritual maturity. As we say in the United Methodist Church, we must move from “justifying grace” (grace that makes us right with God) to “sanctifying grace” (grace that leads to spiritual maturity). In the words of John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, after we receive God's grace, we must “move on toward perfection.” For a more-thorough discussion of this important subject, see chapter 21, “A Final Question: Do Mainline Christians Believe in Getting Saved?”

## Dancing with Grace

Several months ago I watched an old movie called *Awakenings*, starring Robin Williams and Robert De Niro. Produced back in 1990, it won Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Actor, and Best Adapted Screenplay. It's a true and touching story about a group of catatonic patients at a mental hospital who had lived in a coma-like existence for decades. However, through the use of a new drug, a caring doctor woke the patients out of their catatonic existence. Among them was a man named Leonard. After decades of living in a vegetative state, Leonard awakened to life. As the movie unfolds, we delight in Leonard's progress and learn that he is an intelligent, sensitive, and loving human being.

As the weeks progressed, Leonard made friends with a woman who regularly came to the hospital to visit her father. She and Leonard hit it off and became fast friends. However, as the story unfolds, Leonard began to regress.

The miracle medicine slowly lost its effectiveness. Leonard began to develop tics all over his face and body, and he knows it's only a matter of time before he returns to his catatonic state. Before long the tics become so overwhelming that it's difficult to watch him anymore. Still, the woman continued her friendship with Leonard. She accepted him as he was, even with his awful twitches. She still valued him as a human being, cared about him, and affirmed him. In short, she gave Leonard the wonderful gift of grace.

Near the end of the movie, Leonard had lunch with this woman. As they ate, she told Leonard about a dance she had recently attended. Leonard replied that he had never danced before and probably never would. After lunch they both stood. As Leonard prepared to leave, he reached out his trembling arm to shake hands with her, probably for the last time. She took his hand but would not let go. Instead, she put Leonard's arms around her in a dance position and held him closely. And there, on the cafeteria floor of the state mental hospital, she and Leonard began to dance. As they danced, the camera focused on Leonard's face—beaming with joy in an incredible moment of grace.

As I watched this remarkable woman dance with Leonard, I thought to myself, *This is the way it is with God and human beings*. Like Leonard, every human being twitches with flaws and sins and brokenness. And yet God, like this woman, holds us close with compassionate unconditional love and dances with us across the floor. I don't remember the woman's name. But I'd like to think her name was Grace.

\* \* \*

Bottom line: *Even with our flaws, Jesus loves and accepts us as beloved children of God.*

## Notes for Chapter 13

1. Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing about Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 45.
2. Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 43.
3. Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story: Life Lessons from Unexpected Places and Unlikely People* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 216–20.

## CHAPTER 17



# JESUS' RESURRECTION

### *Is There Hope?*

*I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised.*

—the angel, in Matthew 28:5–6

Although I like almost all of Tom Hanks's movies, one of my favorites is *Cast Away*. Hanks received an Academy Award nomination for his powerful role in that film. If you've not seen *Cast Away*, it's a contemporary Robinson Crusoe story. In the movie Tom Hanks plays a FedEx trainer named Chuck Noland. Early in the film, Chuck and several of his colleagues crash into the sea in a company plane crash, killing everyone except Noland. The next day his life raft washes ashore on a deserted island, along with numerous FedEx packages from the airplane. Noland opens the packages, hoping to find items that would help him survive on the island. One box contains a pair of ice skates. Although you wouldn't think ice skates would be much help on a deserted tropical island, Noland manages to

find creative uses for them. He uses the shoelaces for rope and one of the ice blades for a hatchet. He even uses one of the skates as a dental tool. I'll spare you the gory details. But you don't ever want to hire Tom Hanks as your dentist!

Noland also finds a package containing a volleyball, which becomes his one and only friend, "Wilson." Another box contains videotapes, which Noland uses as rope. One of the boxes Noland finds on the beach has angel wings on the outside, but interestingly, he never opens it. Instead, Noland saves that package the entire four years he lives on the island. When he finally departs the island on a raft, he lashes the unopened package onto his boat and takes it with him.

### "This Package Saved My Life"

In the final scene of the movie, Noland, now safely back in the United States, drives down a lonely Texas highway with the unopened angel wings FedEx package in the passenger seat of his car. As he drives, you can hear his radio playing Elvis's old song "Return to Sender," which is exactly what Noland is doing. He is returning the package to its original sender in rural Texas. He finally arrives at the house and knocks on the door, but nobody is home. Noland places the box at the front door along with a note that says, "This package saved my life." A few minutes later the movie ends.

So what did Chuck Noland mean when he wrote, "This package saved my life"? He never opened it. He didn't use its contents. Yet he claims it saved his life. If you've seen the movie, it's obvious what he meant. That package symbolized hope for Chuck Noland. It represented his hope that one day he would leave that island, go home to family and friends, return to his job—and deliver that package. It was, quite literally, a package of hope. And that hope kept him going for

four hard years on a deserted island. At one point the endless drudgery and overwhelming loneliness of the island almost drove him to suicide. But hope of returning home kept him from doing so. "This package saved my life," said Noland. But what he really meant was "Hope saved my life."

I've been in the people business for over thirty years now. One thing I've learned during these years is that hope saves people's lives. Hope saves them spiritually, emotionally, relationally, and sometimes even physically. People hope for many things. They hope for forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing. They hope that faith will return, finances will recover, or grief will finally end. They hope that their addiction can be overcome or their marriage can be saved. They hope for life beyond divorce or courage to face "the valley of the shadow of death." When people can keep hope alive, they somehow find the strength to take another step in spite of the darkness and pain of the present moment. Hope is a powerful force. Hope can save a person's life in every way a life can be saved. And hope is what the resurrection of Jesus Christ is all about.

## Sunday's Coming

Little hope remained for the followers of Christ on Good Friday and on Saturday. They saw their beloved Jesus betrayed, abandoned, placed on trial, mocked, beaten, and crucified. They watched as his abused, lifeless body was placed in a tomb. The disciples of Jesus felt utterly devastated; all hope vanished. They hid from the authorities, fearful for their own lives. But on the third day, on Easter Sunday, God declared that death would not prevail and evil would not win.

Early on Easter morning, the incredible news broke forth, "He is not here; he has risen!" (Luke 24:6 NIV).

And that news of Christ's resurrection from the grave gave Jesus' followers renewed hope—hope for life and hope even for death. The last word of the gospel is not crucifixion but resurrection. The last word of the gospel is not despair but hope. The resurrection of Jesus Christ tells us that God is in the business of bringing life out of death. And God doesn't just bring life out of physical death, important as that is. God also brings life out of smaller deaths, like the death of a dream, the death of a marriage, the death of a career, or the death of good health. And that great Easter hope—that God brings life out of death—gives us hope for living and even hope for dying.

Christianity stands or falls on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As the apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain" (vv. 13–14). But our faith is *not* in vain. Paul continues, "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died" (v. 20). Therefore, Paul concludes, "Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? . . . But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (vv. 54–55, 57).

## "And When I Die, Give Me Jesus"

Several months ago I ate lunch with my close friend and fellow United Methodist minister Michael Welch. During lunch we talked shop, laughed, and fussed a bit about United Methodist bureaucracy. Mostly we enjoyed being together. Michael and I ate lunch together every two weeks for over four years.

One week later, on a miserable, cold, rainy day in middle Tennessee, I attended Michael's funeral. Three days earlier Michael, his wife, and their two young children died in a car wreck. A semitrailer truck rear-ended their van, instantly killing all four of them.

I went to the funeral early, hoping to find a seat in the little country church where Michael served as pastor. Before the service began, I walked to the front of the sanctuary. Pictures of the family sat on a table, along with artwork and personal items belonging to the children. As I looked at the photographs and personal effects of the family, the enormity of that loss hit me. I've officiated at some hard funerals in my life. But I've never buried an entire family. As I took my seat, tears rolling down my cheeks, I thought to myself, *Nothing can redeem this awful tragedy.*

A half hour later the service began. A woman from the choir walked to the pulpit and began to sing a song I'd never heard before. I later learned that it was an old hymn, but it was new to me. The song—slow, sad, and sweet—felt appropriate for the occasion. She began to sing, “And when I die, give me Jesus.”

As I sat in the pew and listened to the song, it dawned on me: the only thing that could begin to redeem this nightmare was Jesus. The only thing that offered any hope was that Michael and his family loved, served, and belonged to Jesus Christ, “the resurrection and the life.” Michael lived and died by that hope, hope rooted in Jesus' victory over the grave. Christ's resurrection did not answer the question of why Michael and his family died. Nor did it take away the pain and grief we all felt. But the resurrection of Jesus Christ offered hope that death was not the final word for Michael, Julie, Jesse, and Hannah Welch.

As a Christian minister I officiate at a lot of funerals. Each funeral service is unique, depending on the person

who died. However, one part of the liturgy never changes. I begin every funeral for a Christian believer with the words of Jesus, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live” (John 11:25). In life, in death, and in life beyond death, we are hopeful people because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. Thanks be to God!

## The Last Word Is Hope

My all-time favorite movie is *The Shawshank Redemption*, starring Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman. *The Shawshank Redemption* tells the story of a young bank executive named Andy Dufresne. Andy, falsely convicted of murdering his wife and her lover, is sentenced to two life terms in a notoriously brutal state penitentiary called Shawshank Prison. While there he meets a man named Red, and the two strike up a unique friendship. It’s a long and complex story, but ultimately it’s a story about affirming hope in a place where little hope exists.

In spite of being an innocent man in a tough prison, Andy holds on to hope—hope of escape, and hope of life beyond prison walls. And that hope is what keeps him going. Andy’s dream is to go to a little Mexican town on the Pacific Ocean called Zihuatanejo. His plans include buying and running a hotel, including fixing up an old boat to take his guests deep-sea fishing. He once asks Red to be his assistant, but Red says he doesn’t think he can make it in the outside world. A few minutes later Red chastises Andy for holding on to such a fairly-tale pipedream.

In one of many powerful scenes in the movie, Andy talks with his friends about the need for hope, especially in prison. Red, angered by Andy’s naive words of hope, says, “Let me tell you something, Andy Dufresne. Hope is

a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane. It's got no use on the inside [of prison]."

But Andy doesn't buy what Red has said. Andy continues to hope, even after twenty hard years at Shawshank prison. And Andy doesn't just have hope for himself: he also inspires hope in others. For example, he helps young men get their GED, and he builds a first-class library for the inmates. In the end Andy even inspires hope in his dear friend Red, the one who has said, "Hope is a dangerous thing."

After spending twenty years in Shawshank prison for a crime he did not commit, Andy finally escapes. Not long after Andy's escape, Red finds himself paroled. But Red isn't adjusting well to life outside prison. In fact, he almost decides to commit a crime so he can return to the security of prison life. However, one thing keeps him from implementing that plan. Andy has left Red a letter, inviting him to come to Zihuatanejo and be his helper at his hotel. In the letter Andy says to Red, "Remember, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies." And so, with hope in his heart, Red decides to go to Mexico. As he travels on the bus, excited as a schoolboy, Red speaks the final words of the movie: "I hope I can make it across the border. I hope to see my friend and shake his hand. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams. I hope."

Like the gospel of Jesus Christ, the final word of *The Shawshank Redemption* is the word *hope*. In the final scene of the movie, Red and Andy are reunited on the beach at Zihuatanejo. And so it happens that through the power of hope, Red is finally redeemed.

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Bottom line: *Jesus Christ's resurrection gives us hope for life and even hope for death.*