

Hope Gone Wild

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How Obscure Scriptures Can Unlock the Mystery Of Sacred Optimism

Ben Courson

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Introduction

If the multiverse is real and there are clones of me in dimensions outside the four we know, I'd like to think that one version of myself might be the boss of a pillow embroidery company.

It'd be a lucrative enterprise! I can imagine it perfectly. The pillows are pink. Fluffy. With lace. Lots of lace and bows and things.

On the pillows are "inspirational" verses from the Bible. Or maybe not so inspirational. Instead of verses like "All things work together for the good" or "God so loved the world" etched into the luxuriant fabric, I would print...some different passages.

"Are you still so dull?"

I picture someone laying their head on the pink lacy pillow, looking down at that quote, and asking, "Who said *that*?"

"Jesus." I'd shrug.

There would be other pillows:

"Your father is the devil."—Jesus.

"You travel across land and sea to make converts who become twice as much sons of hell as yourself."—Jesus

"Get naked and buy swords."—Jesus

Bahahaha! My friends and I have spent far too much time laughing hysterically over that last verse. Okay, maybe it's a paraphrase, but Jesus *did* tell his disciples to sell their cloaks and buy swords. When they said they had two swords, he replied, "That's enough" (Luke 22:36–38).

I get a kick out of that every time. Perhaps with ironic eyelids at half-mast, as though to mourn the death of the Jesus they thought they knew, they listened as he told them to get naked. Buy swords. And told them *two* swords was enough.

One minute you're convinced Jesus was a pacifist with all that turn-the-other-cheek-subvert-the-Law-Of-Hammurabi biz, and then he seemed to prop up the Second Amendment?

Fascinating guy.

Now, before you think Jesus was a jerk who told people to purchase semiautomatics and claims their mom shagged the devil when they questioned his own...ahem...*virgin* birth, it's worth noting that when Jesus went postal, his anger was almost invariably directed at Pharisees. He didn't vibe with sanctimonious people. He tended to get along better with the mob and hookers and the like.

My point is that the Bible, and its main character Jesus, says things *way* more wild, wacky, and weird than can be found in inspirational memes or greeting cards or pink pillows bearing quotes about moving mountains. I love all that "future and hope" stuff, but it's quite fun to delve into the verses no one knows about. In other words, the verses no one puts on pink fluffy pillows with lace.

Like "Eglon was a very fat man."

That pillow would definitely be egg-shaped and soft as Eglon's belly.

When the Bible uses the adverb "very" to describe this Moabite king's excess cellulite, you know we're talking about a distant relative of Jabba the Hutt, once or twice removed. After all, his fat swallowed up the sword that was his assassin's weapon of choice. It got lost in a sea of blubber. Wonderful.

The illustration of that event doesn't tend to make it onto the church murals or walls of a nursery.

Neither do the *goblins* of the Bible. Yes, Tolkien is not the only one who favors the use of orcs as antagonists. The Bible tells us how we can go on an epic quest of our own to defeat all manner of dark creatures (more on that later)!

Many compelling words in the Bible are arcane and obscure, awaiting fresh discovery. In this book I'm going to take you deep into the "water of the Word." And we'll explore mysterious places and see what we may see. The Bible is a sea, and my book is a submarine. In the same way that 71 percent of the earth is covered in water, 80 percent of which are unexplored¹ (we know more about the surface of Mars than we do about our own oceans), the Bible on your shelf is largely uncharted by today's generation. There's so much depth!

With the rise of TikTok, we long for spiritual depth in a superficial age. According to TechCrunch, "From May 2019 through February 2020, the average minutes per day kids spent on TikTok increased by 116% in the U.S."² What?! A 116 *percent increase*? Wow. No judgment here, but TikTok does not exactly supply substantive weight, what with all the dancing girls and happy tropes. Much of the content probably makes Kant and DFW turn in their respective graves. Clearly quantity of views is not equated with quality of content. Just sayin'.

If you love TikTok but are also craving depth in your life, you're in the right place. You might be surprised that going deeper doesn't necessarily mean going darker. As we explore these depths we'll discover an anchor at the bottom—an anchor of hope.

In my experience books are either deep and depressing or happy and shallow. This book is my attempt to show that you can go deep *and* be happy!

I've been devouring literature voraciously for a decade and a half, and to be honest, the Dostoevskys and the Salingers, and even the Greens and the Kings, are phenomenally deep but sort of tragic. If you want hope and read Sartre or *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, it'll leave something to be desired. They're not strong in the joy department.

Conversely, the books that are happy usually play in the shallows. You know, the shiny books in the Christian inspiration aisle that offer platitudes and encouraging iterations of Romans 8:28 but not a map of the really messy bits of life or how to negotiate their treacherous waters. Cheery these books may be. But they often offer simplistic answers to complex problems. Pollyanna is sure better than Puddleglum, but rather than giving us answers, she alleges that question marks are but exclamation marks bent out of shape. In the shadowy and Stygian corners of the mind, festering questions lurk and prowl. The Bible says to give a *reason* for the hope that is within you. But proffering a hope bifurcated from reason is a fool's errand.

This book revolts against shallow happiness *and* exalted suffering. It's neither a vanilla Christian inspiration title nor a deep literary novel that leaves you in an epistemological crisis where absurdism claims the order of the day.

Cliches and despair will be equally taboo in this domain.

According to Paul—a gnarly guy who walked upwards of twenty miles a day during his missionary journeys and was so scarred he claimed to “bear the marks of Jesus” on his body—the Bible was written so that “we might have hope” (Romans 15:4 ESV).

In this book we'll discover how the Bible is a deep manifesto about *hope!* We are going to study obscure characters like Araunah the Jebusite and verses riddled with rant and satire, such as Isaiah saying to the king, “Your palace is a hut in a field of melons” (Isaiah 1:8).

Yes, that's in the Bible.

This whole book will leave you saying, “*That’s* actually in the Bible?” Yup. Only our depts won’t lead us to the bottom of a bottle or to another hackneyed Yawnsville quotation about how “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Rather it will surprise you with unknown verses etched onto pink fluffy pillows (of the lacy variety!) upon which you can rest your tired soul.

Where Did the Bible Come From?

Trivia time!

Do you know the first time in the Bible when a character was told to write the Bible?

Exodus 17!

It’s quite a strange story. There was a battle in Rephidim. The Amalekites faced off against the Israelites. Moses stood on on the mountain while Joshua fought in the valley. As long as Moses held up his hand and lifted his staff, Israel prevailed. When he got tired and let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. Of course, Moses couldn’t lift his rod forever. So he sat on a stone and got help from Aaron and Hur, who flanked him on either side, supporting his hands, which remained steady until sunset. And voilà! Joshua won the battle! Then the Lord told Moses, “Write this for a memorial in the book” (Exodus 17:14).

This is the first time in the Bible that someone was told to write the Bible. Moses built an alter and God revealed his new nickname: *Jehovah Nissi*, which means “The Lord is my banner.”

There’s the first mention of a character in Scripture breaking down the fourth wall to write the Bible we read. But notice what Moses wrote: a story.

Not a laundry list of rules. Or a moral to-do list. But a story!

Some people think the Bible was written by humanlike automata who were zapped by the Holy Ghost, tripping out and having some spiritual trance, their hand guided by heaven. But this is a book written by actual people who, it turns out, were telling a story.

Many people think of the Bible as a book of commandments. But according to the first mention, the Bible is a storybook, not a rule book. All the commandments you read about are in the context of a people who'd entered into a contracted agreement with God, and the Old Testament is just a recounting of their narrative arc.

Where did this strange storybook come from?

The many translations of the Bible's Old Testament that we read today come from the same source, the oldest complete collection of the Hebrew Scriptures called the Leningrad Codex. It dates back to the year 1008. But where did the Leningrad Codex come from?

It's copied from earlier sources of the Jewish Bible, also called the Tanakh. It's composed of three parts: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.

While there is some disagreement among Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, and Catholics about how many books should be included in the Old Testament, these major branches of Christendom basically agree on which books should be in the New.

Sorry evangelicals, no Bel and the Dragon for you!

The books of the Bible went through at least three stages: (1) they were composed, (2) they were circulated (and in many cases collected with later books), and (3) they were confirmed. This final step transpired when most of the communities who used these books officially agreed that no more books should be added to, or subtracted from, the overall collection. For the New Testament, this happened between the first and fourth centuries. Official agreement was established in the late fourth century.

Now it's important to remember, getting people to agree is no small feat. It can be done, but it takes some doing.

Ask Constantine.

Constantine, the Roman emperor, wanted his people to all believe the same thing. That's expedient when you're trying to rule an empire. So he personally attended the Council of Nicaea for political purposes in AD 325. Three hundred eighteen bishops were in attendance. One of the issues they wanted to settle was when to celebrate Easter. Disagreement over this subject led to one of the schisms that ultimately separated the Eastern Orthodox Church from the pack.

At one point during the council, a brawl even broke out!

You know it was really a problem when the Roman emperor had to tell everyone to try to get along because they are, after all, Christians.

It's not easy to get people to agree. But the New Testament is a generally-agreed-upon collection of books. That's a small miracle! Especially for a species prone to disagreement, warring, sectarianism, and factionalizing. Fundamentally flawed humans did, after all, write the Bible.

You heard me right.

News flash: *humans wrote the Bible*. Golden tablets did not fall from the sky. Actual people wrote the Scripture. That doesn't mean it can't be breathed on by the Divine or inspired. Have you ever tasted Swiss chocolate and said, "This is positively divine"? Or heard a symphony or watched a swirl of stars and felt the breath of God? Have you ever read a novel and been transported somewhere else? God can breathe on human things to make them divine things.

The writer to the Hebrews even said the Bible is living and powerful. It's alive. Lucid. Malleable. It can adapt to the times, morph and flow into each generation, and change its shape

to meet the modern literary, spiritual, and social needs of its day. It's not static, it's kinetic. It's not dead, it's alive.

You don't have to read the Bible as a dusty old rule book. It was originally meant to be a storybook.

And it's a story of hope.

Paul said the Scriptures were written that we "might have hope" (Romans 15:4).

While theologians hermeneutically speculate as to why the Bible was written, and pastors postulate what the Bible is all about, and scholars debate its theology, I'd rather trust the guy who said the Bible's all about *hope*. Oh, and by the way, that same guy was Jewish, spoke five different languages, and wrote half the books of the New Testament.

He probably knows what he's talking about.

The Bible and the Brain

As I attempt to aid you in your quest to become a person humming with jubilation and fleshing out a hope gone wild, we'll have to get to know both the Bible and the brain. This will serve you well, young padawan!

Scripture talks loads about your mind:

Romans 8:6 declares, "to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace" (ESV).

Paul wrote to the Ephesians about being renewed in the spirit of the mind (4:23).

Proverbs 23:7 says, "As a man thinks in his heart so is he."

First Corinthians 2:16 promises that we have the mind of Christ.

Scripture commands us to take our thoughts captive, and to keep our minds stayed on God so we will have perfect peace (2 Corinthians 10:5).

In Matthew 22:37 Jesus told us to love God with all our mind, heart, soul, and strength (which can literally be translated “muchness”)! We should use all our brain power to love God!

As a matter of fact, trendy as meditation is today, people forget that it, too, has roots in the Bible. The author of Psalm 119 said, “I will meditate on your wondrous works” (v. 27 ESV).

The Bible is brimming over with advice on how to order and organize our minds. But remember the important psychological axiom: the mind is what the brain does.

As neuroscientists like to say, everything psychological is biological. To understand the nature of this battlefield—our neurobiochemistry upon which transrational and psychospiritual forces play—we’ve got to scout out the land! The battle is in the mind, so let’s get familiar with its terrain so we can gain a tactical advantage.

First, a disclaimer. The neurological mapping I’m about to lay out is grossly oversimplified to make it accessible, when in reality there is far more overlap and networking and complexity to your brain than is revealed here.

But it’s a good starting place.

Now, as you peruse these pages, I’ll bet you are not thinking about your breathing, heartbeat, or your blood pressure, but not to worry! Your medulla has that covered! It regulates all these unconscious things.

When you listen to “Broken Time” by John Mayer as he riffs on a guitar or see the flashing lights at his concert or taste the drink at the concession stand, that sensory info is all connected to your thalamus.

But don't drink too much! This may just threaten your bladder control and get you tipsy by impairing your cerebellum, which is connected to voluntary movements and balance as well as your perception of time.

Maybe after the show you get sleepy and long to snuggle up under the covers. This is because your hypothalamus regulates your sleep cycles and body temperature. And your occipital lobe processes visual stimuli, such as the colorful prose before you!

But don't forget to try to retain all the content I am sharing! You don't want to end up as an amnesiac like the protagonist of a Ludlum novel! Jason Bourne had problems with his hippocampus. It's the Greek word for "seahorse" because it looks like one, and this is the part of your brain involved in memory consolidation.

Seeing the not-so-cuddly barrel of Bourne's gun may just activate your amygdala. This almond-shaped set of nuclei is where fear and anger are located. Interestingly, when the Bible says "perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18), the word for "fear" in Greek is *phobos*, from which we get our word "phobia." God's love can cast the phobias out of our amygdalae!

Conversely, the cuddliest part of your brain is the anterior cingulate cortex. That's where compassion, empathy, and intimacy are found.

Of utmost importance is the prefrontal cortex—the seat of analytical and rational thought. Within it is the orbitofrontal cortex, which is integral to your ability to weigh the repercussions of an action you're thinking about taking. This part of the brain is underdeveloped in teenagers. Their executive function is deficient compared to that of adults. No wonder teenagers make such reckless choices. That part of the brain isn't developed yet. Blame the biology! Notice the Bible says that if you raise up a child in the way he should go, when he is *old* he will not depart. It doesn't say he won't make stupid decisions as a teenager.

I think you're beginning to see just how intricate and potent the brain is. It's the most complex organism in the universe. The brain is the only thing in the universe wherein the object and the observer are the same thing!

Your brain is powerful. Through neuroplasticity, you can actually change it. You can terraform your mind. It's plastic and elastic, malleable and adjustable. With practice, you can drive your thoughts toward hope.

No wonder Philippians, the Bible's guide to joy, speaks of "the mind" or "mindset" eleven times in only 104 verses.

Joy is about mindset.

Sometimes we have to make conscious choices to think about hope and choose gratitude, no matter how off-kilter our brain's chemistry is. Sometimes we have to fight for what we don't feel. Because hope is a journey and joy is a choice, as my sister Christy says, "You've got to let your emotions subside before you decide."

The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio said our feelings decide for us 95 percent of the time. Would any of you trust a friend who lied to you as much as your emotions do?

Our feelings fib. And if you want steady joy, you've got to tame and train your brain. Use your memory center to recall God's past faithfulness as you meditate on his wondrous works. Develop richer and thicker gray matter in your prefrontal cortex by meditating on a loving God.

Bask in that love so your amygdala stops terrorizing you with phobias. Let his perfect love cast out fear. Wield your pons to smile into the gates of Hades, as you bask in the light of God's countenance when you venture through the valley of shadow and death. Increase blood flow to your anterior cingulate cortex and let intimacy with God make you feel cuddled by the Divine.

No more phobos.

No more fear.

You have the power to change your mind. You have the power to tame your brain for hope. After all, the Bible doesn't say you have a sick mind, but a sound mind.

Is Christianity Dying And Is Atheism Rising?

First Peter 1:25 says, "The word of the LORD endures forever."

That verb "endures" is the Greek word *menei*, which means "to remain."

The word has spread so much that its staying power is nothing shy of impressive. This movement—called the Way or the sect of the Nazarenes—has remained. The followers were first called Christians in Antioch, the ruins of which lie in modern-day Turkey. And two millennia later, the movement still stands.

Rebecca McLaughlin—who in some ways is the second coming of C. S. Lewis in female form—pointed out very interesting facts here. Forty-odd years ago, pretty much every sociologist of religion worth their salt said religion was on the way out, that it would decline as the world became more modern and educated and scientific. That prophecy failed. Now in forty more years they're expecting an "*increasingly* religious world"!

"By 2060, the latest projections suggest, Christianity will still be the largest global belief system, having increased slightly, from 31 to 32 percent of the world's population.... By 2060, the proportion of humanity identifying as atheists, agnostics, or *none* will have declined from 16 to 13 percent."³

You read that right.

Declined!

Christianity is growing in Latin America and Oceania. It's exploding in Asia and Africa. Far from shrinking, the Christian faith is actually growing at 0.07 percent *faster* than the world's population is growing.⁴

While I'm not a fan of all the baggage that sometimes comes along with the Christian label, it is a pretty resilient faith.

As Chesterton said, any time people predict that Christianity is going to the dogs, it's the dogs that die.

That's why this spiritual text, call it the Bible or Torah or the Old Testament or New Testament, is worth talking about. The people who wrote and collected it apparently created something that has staying power thousands of years later. That's worth exploring.

Part 1

Digging for Hidden Treasures in Secret Scriptures

Chapter 1

Does God So Love the World or So Flood the World?

People often think of the Bible as a rule book. But actually 43 percent of the Bible is narrative or story and 33 percent is poetry. So nearly 80% of the Bible is either story or poetry. Less than 20 percent is a letter or a teaching. If you add up all the commands in the Bible, you're well into the single digits percentage-wise, and even those—like God telling Hebrews not to mix cloth or lay down with a beast—were given to a specific group of nomads in the context of a contractual agreement, otherwise known as a covenant.

In other words, the Bible is mostly a story. And in Jesus' case, it's often stories within stories. For example, many of the stories about Jesus are about him telling stories! Feels like we are falling down the rabbit hole with all these dreams within dreams, but what's important to know here is Jesus was down with metaphor.

“Without a parable he did not speak to them” (Mark 4:34). Jesus and the biblical authors knew the power of story. Storytelling keeps us from daydreaming which is the normal state of the human mind. Up to a third of our waking hours are spent daydreaming and fantasizing. C. S. Lewis believed fictional stories lowered the watchful dragons in our lives so that truth could sneak in.⁵

Any skeptic can dismiss the Bible as vestigial remnants of a purple/blue epoch of spiral dynamics. Hey, if we're going to study the Old Testament we might as well shake our rain sticks while we're at it, do a dance, and offer goat's blood to boot!

Right?

Within the story of the Israelites is a code-of-value theory that is ahead of its time. Many people think of the Bible as a dusty, antediluvian tome, an anachronism and ridiculously outmoded—*especially* the Old Testament. But the Old Testament is more sophisticated than you might suspect. Even the commands in the context of the Jewish story have uncanny pertinence today.

How about caring for refugees, widows, and orphans? Sounds pretty modern, doesn't it? Progressive? Well, that law is laid down in *Deuteronomy*!

How about leaving a corner of your field unharvested so the poor can have something to eat?

That's found in Leviticus.

Don't carry a grudge or seek revenge?

Leviticus for the win!

Feed your enemies when they are hungry and give them water when they are thirsty?

Proverbs!

(By the way, Elisha took this to heart. After striking his Syrian enemies with blindness, the bald prophet led them to Samaria to feed them and give them a drink. Hey, cut the guy some slack. At least it was temporal blindness! We are still in the Old Testament, after all).

How about this one: "Do not say, 'I will do to others as they have done to me.'"?

Those aren't Jesus' words; those are straight from Proverbs! That's the golden rule inverted.

It is good to give one's cheek to the smiter?

Sounds like Jesus telling us to turn the other cheek, doesn't it? But that verse is found way back in Lamentations 3:30!

There are *splendors* spangled like sapphires throughout the Old Testament!

Even a story as barbaric as the Great and Terrible Flood was a step forward in the onward march of human consciousness. While atheists fetch a sigh at the mention of such a tale—and fundamentalists see it as so much red meat—what both groups have in common is they read the Bible *literally* but not *literately*.

To both sects, the main point is a flood really *did* swamp the whole planet. And yet the didactic *meaning* of the story gets missed in all the debating.

More on that in a moment. But first, some thoughts.

In the ancient world, Mesopotamian local flash floods would seem global to people who never traveled more than a few miles from their homes. Their whole world, as they knew it, *was* destroyed.

And Noah's isn't the only flood story.

The Sumerians, Mesopotamians, and Babylonians told flood stories. There were even stories about people building boats to survive. Not surprisingly, the Hebrews had their own version.

While the other flood myths are generally about grumpy gods wiping out everyone—satisfied only when everybody died—Noah's story had a surprising plot twist. Unlike the ticked-off tribalistic deities, Noah's God ended the story with... a promise?!

The literary device of using a rainbow as an ensign of treaty and symbol of pacifism is genius! Unlike the angry gods who exterminated humanity through the flood and left no hope, Noah's God laid down his arms and surrendered his bow in the sky to declare he was *not* at war with humans. Hence God relinquished his *rainbow* (shaped like a bow for arrows). He was declaring peace with mortals. What a thought! God laid down his colorful weapon—his bow—in

the sky. He laid down his arms! And he relinquished his arrows and bolts of thunder, stilling the storm and promising peace. Notice how the bow is aiming upwards, as if God is pointing the bow at himself. He's deadly serious about being true to his word. It's as though he is threatening to doom himself were he ever to break his promise.

It's easy to see how this was a giant click forward in the ancient people's understanding of the forces governing the affairs of the world.

Thank goodness the message isn't: "God hates the world. Umbrellas out, class!" The climax of the story is a rainbow.

Many people are so wrapped up in arguments over the literal, physical geography of the flood (there are fossils in the mountains!) that they miss its literary potency. Noah's flood is the only one of the ancient stories that had a *happy* ending and redemption.

The gods were ticked off.

But not Noah's God. Noah's God gave him a rainbow.

I think that's beautiful. The metaphor is life-giving even today. It reminds us about how gracious God is.

Noah's story has hidden truths baked into it, but we'll never be initiated into the mysteries as long as we are arguing about it. You'll notice I'm not offering advice regarding what you should or should not believe about the topography of the flood but instead am taking you a level deeper to what it all means. Whether you're agnostic, Baptist, or anywhere in between, I am simply endeavoring to show you that this story was wonderful for its time *and* is meaningful today.

And Noah's story wasn't over!

Our word “baptism” (*baptisma* in Greek) can mean a tropical storm of overwhelming calamities. In other words, Noah was baptized by the flood.

But although he passed through the baptismal waters, he was no unicorn. After the flood, Noah got naughty. Once his forty day trial was over, he found a dove and a mountain, and fell into temptation by getting hammered on wine. If you’ve read any of the gospels, which come much later in scripture, this story might sound familiar.

Jesus also passed through the baptismal waters, went through a forty day trial, found a dove and a mountain whereupon he overcame temptation, then his first miracle was to turn water into wine. Jesus’ story parallels Noah’s so precisely that it redeems Noah’s... whom Peter called the “antitype.” Like Noah, Jesus was baptized in the waters, his trial lasted forty days, a dove hovered above the water, he found himself on the mountain, and then redeemed wine, while Noah was destroyed by wine. It’s as if Jesus was running commentary on Noah’s story, making it even *more* lovely and transcendent. It’s as if Jesus was Noah 2.0, taking God’s grace to a whole other stratosphere.

Notice, Jesus didn’t say, “God so floods the world.” He said, “God so loves the world.”

And in Revelation his throne is surrounded by—wait for it...

Rainbows!

And the psalmist said God’s *enthroned* on the flood: “The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord is enthroned as King forever” (Psalm 29:10 NIV).

The beginning of the Bible has a flood and a rainbow, the middle of the Bible has a flood and a throne, and the end of the Bible has a throne and a rainbow! Metaphors abound! And they help connect us to a story that we would otherwise dismiss or overanalyze. This is part of the Bible’s staying power.

Merdogs

Now when people talk about the book of Jonah, they often fall into the same trap we see with Noah's flood—they debate whether a fish could *really* swallow a guy. While they debate the book's zoology and ichthyology, they fail to grasp its parlance and the intricacies of its rhetoric and syntax.

Jonah's name means "dove." And when God asked Jonah to go to Nineveh, he flew away. Far away. Nineveh was about five hundred miles east of Jonah. He flew to Tarshish, which was on the southeast of Spain and twenty-five-hundred miles in the *opposite* direction.

After getting swallowed by a fish, Jonah's vomited out to Nineveh. The chief deity of that city was Dagon. Dagon was half fish, half man, just like a seal is half dog, half mermaid...a merdog!

Do you see the irony? God sent a fish to deliver Jonah to a city that worshipped a fish god.

Of course, as Jonah feared, after his sermon Nineveh repented (including the animals! The beasts themselves showed their contrition: they fasted, they wore sackcloth, they bellowed out to the Lord—whoever said animals don't go to heaven?) and God showed mercy.

Nineveh was in Assyria, and Assyria was the hated enemy of the Jews. Skeptics argue, "A whale swallowing Jonah? Seems fishy to me." But skeptics miss the much more important message.

God was teaching a nation to love her enemies.

If you're a Jew listening to the story of Jonah running away from Nineveh, you'd be rooting him on! Jonah was patriotic! He had no intention of saving Israel's arch-nemesis.

That's why the book ends not with a conclusion but a question, when God rhetorically asked Jonah why he *shouldn't* save Nineveh. God was teaching Jonah non-dual thinking. He was helping Jonah unlearn his us-and-them mentality.

Let's flesh this out. Jonah was one with the Ninevites in that he was mortal flesh and bone just like them, part of the brotherhood of mankind, and parcel of a cracked-at-the-seams human race. Any binary of friend and foe was contrived: both bitter Jonah and the violent Ninevites shared a need for grace and forgiveness. God was teaching Jonah to give up his moral high ground and forgive the enemies he so hated.

Yet the debate rages whether a guy could get swallowed by a fish.

This is a giant exercise in missing the point. It's like when you're watching Star Wars, and your friend points out quite scientifically that "those explosions in outer space couldn't make that sound in real life," all the while missing Luke Skywalker blowing up the Death Star!

The point of the story isn't the fish.

The point of the story is about a nation learning to forgive her enemies.

Whether you think a fish *literally* swallowed Jonah is less important than what *literately* happened in Nineveh.

I, for one, am a big believer in miracles, but I don't want to lose sight of the larger message at play. And do you know what's a greater miracle than a whale giving free belly-rent to a guy for three days?

Nations forgiving one another and laying down their nuclear arms. According to the Federation of American Scientists, as of 2019 the US has 6,185 nuclear warheads.⁶ And yet if we

learn anything from the story of Jonah, it's to lay down our arms, just like God laid down his rainbow in the sky and surrendered *his* arms in Noah's day. What if every nation did this? We would have hope for global peace. Now we're cooking with gas!

The stories of the Bible are timeless truths for truthless times. And they're always timely because they're timeless.

The whole narrative arc is laced with hope! No matter how much the flood rages, no matter how dark and smelly the belly of a fish really is, there's a throne and a rainbow, there's unfathomable forgiveness... if you'll have eyes to see.

Chapter 2

Fundie

The Bible never says that when you pray, you're supposed to fold your hands. Or even close your eyes! I'm guessing parents made that up to keep little kids from getting squirrely and distracted during prayer. Back in ancient times, Jewish men would actually stand up when they prayed, lifting up their hands with their palms facing outward.

On a few rare occasions, however, the Biblical characters would kneel, which was to say they went prostrate before God.

Ezra went prostrate when expressing penitence over the degenerate state of his people.

Stephen went prostrate before God when the Jews murdered him.

And Jesus did, too, when he sweat blood in the garden of Gethsemane.

Paul did in Ephesians 3 when he prayed. What would occasion Paul's kneeling and bowing? "That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith," Paul prayed, "being rooted and grounded in love."

In other words, he asked God to make the Ephesians loving.

This is the need of our day. With racism running rampant, vitriolic social media comments infesting the internet, people arguing and angered over whether you're wearing a mask during COVID-19, and the DNC and RNC at each other's throats—our culture needs love.

The Bible says love "hopes" all things (1 Corinthians 13:7). Meaning, the Bible doesn't just give hope to *us* but empowers us to hold out hope for *others*.

Easier said than done, right?

But Paul showed us how to get there. Before he prayed for the Ephesians to be rooted and grounded in love, he prayed that Christ would dwell in their hearts richly by faith. That word “dwell” in Greek is *katoikein*, which was a permanent as opposed to a temporary residence.

In other words, you’re not a hotel but a permanent house in which the Christ lives. Most people don’t give a rat’s tush about how they leave their hotel. People trash hotel rooms. They jump on the bed, leave towels on the ground, and have room service food leftovers just outside the door. Their *home* is a different matter. They show tender loving care to their house because they *live* there permanently.

You’re not a temporary hotel but a permanent home for the Lord, meaning you get all his tender loving care.

Paul didn’t use the word *paroikos*—temporary dwelling—for Christ dwelling in your hearts by faith, but he *did* use that word for Gentiles! Before they knew God, the Gentiles were called strangers and foreigners (*paroikos* and *xenos*). The word *paroikos* refers to an alien who was taxed for living on a land he did not own. As William Barclay noted, he was not a naturalized citizen, even though he took up residence in a place. Both the *paroikos* and the *xenos* were pushed to the margins. They were without hope, without Christ, without God, outside the camp, outside the covenant, and outside the commonwealth of Israel.

In olden days when Gentiles visited the Jewish temple, they could not go past their own allotted territory—the Court of the Gentiles. They would do so only under pain of death. But the middle wall of separation in the temple was destroyed by Titus, and now the Jews and Gentiles were one. Love and oneness were possible. Though they were once far away, they’d now been brought near. Paul prayed that Jesus would find a home in the Gentiles’ hearts, as if the indwelling Christ dimension were a thing of degrees.

With the cosmic Christ consciousness animating us, we, like the Ephesians, are now able to be *rooted* and *grounded* in love. “Rooted” is an agricultural word. “Grounded” is an architectural word.

First, we are to be *rooted* in love. That’s a picture of botany and of agriculture. The word *radical* comes from the word “radix” or “radish” (a root plant). Being loving is a radical idea in today’s embittered and embattled world, and yet it’s also such an old idea it is but a returning to our roots. John said the new commandment he gave to us was the old commandment: to “love one another” (1 John 2:7). To do something new in the world—love and unify—is just about the most radical thing going, even though it’s as old as the Bible. That which is radically progressive has paradoxically ancient roots.

Next, he said we’re to be *grounded* in love. That’s an architectural term. The word *fundamental* comes from the word “foundation.” If we are going to be fundie about anything, it should be about love. If we’re going to fight and die on any hill, it should be the hill of love. If we’re going to talk in a sermonizing voice about the (ahem) *foundations* of our faith, remember the context is all love. The foundation in which we’re grounded is love, just as we radically return to the roots of our creed, which is the ancient Levitical command to love our neighbor.

This language emphasizes depth as opposed to superficiality. *Rooted* and *grounded*. Agriculture and architecture. This isn’t a fluffy Twitter post asking, “Why can’t we just get along?” This ain’t puppies and rainbows. We’re to lay *deep* foundations of love in our hearts, foundations on which Christ can build a permanent home. We’re to plant roots of love rather than allowing the root of bitterness to grow up inside us.

But on a practical level, what does real love look like?

Let’s see how this looked in the life and times of Jesus.

Back then the rabbis taught that you were supposed to forgive only *three* times. Rabbi Jose ben Hanina said, “He who begs forgiveness from his neighbor must not do so more than three times.”

Why?

Consider the book of Amos. There’s a series of condemnations on the nations “for three transgressions...and for four” (1:3 ESV). Amos spoke this message to Damascus and Gaza and Tyre and Edom and Ammon and Moab... If God “punished” by the *fourth* transgression, then how dare we be more gracious than God!

What did Jesus say?

Forgive seventy times seven.

Ever the rebel...

Isn’t it interesting how religious people use the Bible to teach others to be *less* forgiving rather than *more* forgiving?

Jesus totally contradicted such rabbinic grouchiness. He lived his life forgiving people. He died to forgive people. When they put him on a cross of some hundred pounds of recycled timber, with the blood and sweat and tears perhaps of previous victims, and he was falling under its weight till it crushed his chest cavity, what did Jesus say?

“Father, forgive them.”

Now *that* is radical.

To be honest, two of my least favorite words are “radical” and “fundamental.” They sound like synonyms for legalism and religious zealotry.

But Paul prayed that people would be radical and fundamental about *love*!

God is love. That's the starting point. God is love. That's the ending point. Everything in between is just an adventure.

Now *that's* a prayer to which I'll wave my hanky and hoot an old fashioned *amen*. If you can be a radical fundie when it comes to *love*, then count me in any day of the week and twice on Sunday!

Chapter 3

Guardians of Sacred Space

Contrary to popular opinion, pantheism is out of vogue. The belief that “everything is god”—including spiral-arm galaxies and moonflowers and eagles—sounds like the stylish religion of Los Angeles. Until you realize that pantheism *also* means god is cancer and the cigarette that caused it. Not great PR. What is more popular, prevalent, and relevant is *panentheism*: the belief that God is *in* everything. Sounds like omnipresence, doesn’t it? Problem is, panentheism makes God as impersonal as the Force, à la Star Wars. It makes him out to be a gaseous vertebra that is a generic *everywhere* rather than a specific *someone* with an actual personality. The *personhood* of God is not to be trifled with, in my humble (and correct) opinion.

While the Bible teaches us about a God who is ever-present, rides the wings of the morning, and dwells in Sheol itself, it conversely anthropomorphizes a God who talks “mouth to mouth” with Moses like a man speaks to his friend (Numbers 12:8 ESV). A *personal* God permeates everything. Now that’s a deity I can believe in!

All is one, including God. You cannot divide the infinite. Malachi said, “Have we not all one Father?” (2:10). And Song of Solomon said, “My dove, mine undefiled is but one” (6:9 ESV). Paul wrote to the church of Ephesus (a chief city in Turkey) that there is “one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all” (Ephesians 4:6).

God is *above* all. That word “above” is *epi* in Greek, and it means “upon the surface of.” Where other people only see the surface, you find the fingerprints of God. He dances on the surface of things and even builds his throne there. Again, Psalm 29:10 says, “The LORD sits enthroned over the flood.” His powers reach higher than the waves that rage over our heads.

He's *through* all. In that phrase is the very providence of God!

He's *in* all. Paul may have taken the germ of this idea from the Stoics. Founded by Zeno who preached from a *stoa* (the Greek word for "porch"), the Stoics were a group of disciplined thinkers who believed God was a fire purer than any earthly flame. They believed that a spark of that fire which was God came and dwelt in a man's body to give him life. They also thought history was cyclic and lasted a mere three thousand years. Then came a conflagration in which the whole universe was consumed in flames! Thus, the whole process of history began all over again, with exactly the same people and events.

While Paul didn't subscribe to the latter half of that rather depressing philosophy of fire, he *did* believe that there was a divine spark in everything, namely, God. He's a consuming fire who never burns what we are; he only burns what we are not. An ember of deity jumps into all things as a divine spark to kindle animation in every living being.

God is so powerful that he is *above* everything, but also works *through* all the events in our lives because he is *in* all!

Shakespeare wrote of "a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them as we will."⁷ God has his finger in every pie. He infiltrates all things. His Presence permeates everything with Oneness. All is sacred. Everywhere is holy ground. As a friend of mine told me the other day: "Shoes are illegal in the kingdom because everywhere I step is holy ground."

String Theory Spirituality

The Bible makes some bold claims about God—God is above all, through all, and in all—but a closer look at a scientific theory in the grand world of physics makes these claims seem less far-fetched.

There are twelve notes in the musical scale embedded in the universe. Millions of songs have been written—all across the world, down through history—all made from the same twelve notes. Little is much in the hands of a creative God like ours!

The universe is not just a predictable machine wound up by a deistic watchmaker. The whole cosmos *sings*! According to the Bible, God *sings* over us, and he does so with rejoicing (which in Hebrew is used of a spinning top). Like a pulsar that spins and hums a steady E flat note in outer space, so God is the bright and morning star who spins and sings over us!

But the telescopic world is not the only musical one. So is the microscopic world.

According to string theory, the reason particles come into existence out of nowhere is because they pop into our reality from other dimensions. When you sing a perfect D note, the D string on the guitar will vibrate across the room in answer to your voice—without you even touching the instrument.

Likewise, the universe is built upon strings. Strings are more complex than point particles, and when they vibrate, they pop subatomic particles into our dimension, just like vibrating strings on a cello pop notes into the air! How can subatomic particles be everywhere and nowhere, exist in two places at the same time, be entangled and communicate with no signal, and pop into existence from out of nowhere? According to this theory, it's because there is more to reality than meets the eye: there are actually *ten* dimensions. Particles *seem* to come from out of nowhere, but strings vibrate said particles into our reality from other dimensions the same way

a cello string vibrates to send notes into the air, thereby making an orchestral symphony out of your microscope.

In other words, the entire universe is built on a song.

As the Eldar sang Middle Earth into motion in Tolkien's epic fantasy, *The Silmarillion*, so the celestial voices weave together the fabric of galaxies.

Music is a central theme of cosmology, yes, but also *theology*!

Job 38:7 says the angels sang when God created the world.

Luke 2:13–14 says the angels sang when God repaired the world.

Shortly before Jesus was crucified he sang a hymn with his disciples.

The psalmist crowed, "Singers and dancers alike say, 'All my springs are in you'" (87:7 ESV).

Paul said we are to build one another up with "spiritual songs" (Ephesians 5:19).

Elisha said, "Bring me a minstrel" (2 Kings 3:15 KJV).

Amos 6:5 says David invented a number of musical instruments.

The father of all those who play the flute and the harp was a guy named Jubal, all the way back in Genesis 4!

Bach, the famous baroque composer from Germany, often dedicated his works to Jesus. He wrote the likes of "The Passion According to St. Matthew" and "The Passion according to St. John." On Bach's musical scores he would often write "I.N.J." for the Latin *In Nomine Jesu*, or "in the name of Jesus."⁸

Of course our friend Johan Sebastian would dedicate his songs to Jesus. He was just joining in on the intergalactic orchestra!

The other day I was hanging out with my friend Cozi. She's an actress on the Disney Channel, and has become an adoptive sister to me. She showed me one of her new songs. I described her voice as being like cathedrals in the clouds. The Bible talks a lot about music because songs have a way of taking us to the stars and transporting us to heaven.

Chesterton, waxing musical in his high-flown English prose, wrote that the poet is sane because he puts "his head into the heavens," but the mathematician goes mad because he crams "the heavens into his head—and it's his head that splits."⁹ The cashier tries to bridge the infinite and goes insane, whereas the bard floats in the infinite chasm and swims in the great mystery.

Float in the song. Swim in the music. The Cosmic Composer uses the minor notes of tragedy to create the most symphonic orchestras. The black keys of wistfulness and sorrow make music every bit as beautifully as the white keys. If life feels like a song and you've forgotten the tune, the Bible has a way of training your ears to hear heaven's music once again.

Our Charge As The Guards

God is Spirit, the world is a temple, and we are guardians of this sacred space. When the Bible describes Israel as a kingdom of priests, that doesn't mean they offered sacrifices for everybody. It means they were guardians of sacred space. That is the same wording used of Adam and Eve, when God told them to "tend and to keep it" (Genesis 2:15). In the first chapter of the Bible, God called Adam and Eve *selem Elohim*—a phrase used for priest-kings in Egypt and Mesopotamia—and the sacred garden in which God walked in the cool of the day was theirs to guard and to keep.

Who was the first human, tasked with this great responsibility? It could be that Adam was one of many of his kind, and he became a human when he received conscience (hence the whole “knowledge of good and evil” bit). His name means “the human,” and he was possibly chosen from four to five thousand pre-homo sapiens who lived at the time and called out to be a guardian of sacred space, just like the priests. Heavy stuff.

Regardless of how you read the creation story, whether Adam was the first human or chosen out of a group of beings God had made, the Genesis poem is no contradiction to science. Science tells us *how* and the Bible tells us *why*. It makes little sense to me why people insist on choosing between God and science. We would do well to remember that some 750 years ago William of Ockham and Roger Bacon—Franciscan friars and monks—invented the scientific method! Christians invented science. It makes sense, then, that two-thirds of western scientists pray to a personal God, believing he will interfere in the affairs of their everyday lives, according to astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson. God and science are friends, not foes!

In any case, Adam—whose name means “dust” or “mankind”—shows us that mankind came from dust (no wonder the dead skin we shed makes up 90 percent of household dust). Both scientists and pastors agree on that. Although we are children of dust, we bear the imprint of the Divine and are tasked with guarding the garden.

Because the whole earth is filled with God’s glory, and because we are sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, we, too, are guardians of sacred space. Everywhere is holy, and all things are dripping with spirituality.

Don’t get me wrong. That doesn’t mean everything is good. I believe in a distortion theology: there is a malevolent force in the world that cannot *make* evil but only *mar* the good

that God has made, which in turn occasions evil. We are guards warding off the enemy from twisting the pure creation that originates from God.

This God—above all, through all, in all—is Ultimate Reality. He is the Prime Mover of metaphysics. He is the Logos activating epistemology. He is The Principle Behind Which You Cannot Go, in whom we comprehend value theory and ethics. He isn't just a law of nature who plays people as if they were a piano key with no will of their own, as Dostoyevsky wrote, but rather he has made us free moral agents who are caught up in a divine dance with predestination. From Wilde's aesthetes to classic Greek statues, aesthetics and beauty reflect a God who surrounds himself with the beauty of holiness.

Indeed, the Bible provides happy depths for a despairing culture, and spiritual deeps in a superficial age! We have a high and exalted calling to rule as kings and to mediate as priests. And when you jump to the New Testament, the news just gets better. In the garden of Eden God walked with Adam in the cool of the day via *visitation*, but the Last Adam breathed the Spirit into his disciples to give them *inhabitation*. He doesn't just walk *beside* us as he did with Adam but lives *inside* us as temples!

We host the very presence of God. And our destiny is to be guardians of sacred space. No wonder Jesus said, "ye are gods" (John 10:34 KJV).

Why, then, should I be depressed when I look in the mirror? I'm staring back at the very image of God.

Chapter 4

Say Yes to Ecstasy

Remember the whole number where Peter falls into a trance? He's on a rooftop and sees a blanket falling from heaven, upon which four-footed critters creep and crawl? The word for Peter's trance in Greek is *ekstasis*, from which we get our word "ecstasy."

In other words, Peter was in an altered state of mind.

This is encouraging because sometimes people think my friends and I are high. Most of us have never done drugs, but apparently, we look as if we do. We are so stoked on life and so frothy on skateboards we look like we're rolling on MDMA and things.

This was the normal vibe of some of the more radical Bible characters. Take Ezekiel. He cooked a meal over a fire of cow dung. He laid on his left side for 390 days and then on his right for 40 days. And then he ostensibly started seeing wheels spinning around his head. He was wacky.

Remember, Ezekiel was a priest. He was a company man. But the temple had been burned to the ground. He had his experience in exile, by the river in Babylon. He had a hallucinogenic vision of wheels.

What does his story tell us?

The Divine can get your attention in all sorts of ways. Even in Babylon. Beside a river of tears. In exile. *Even there* you can trip out on wheels floating through the sky.

God *wants* to talk to you and communicate with you, and he often does so in seasons of exile. I've had some of my best experiences with God during nights of longing and dreams of milk and honey. Yes God speaks, but it might not come through channels or frequencies you

expect. Sure, a cathedral waves and says hello, but as Lewis said, God oft uses pain as a megaphone to arouse a deaf world. Or as his fellow inkling Tolkien wrote, courage is found in unlikely places.

If you'll have ears to hear, you might just be surprised by hope...because God speaks by the rivers of Babylon and his voice is hidden in our wounds. He talks to us through curious modicums and mechanisms: through cities lit like a jewelscape of fireflies and Jedi and traumas of bygone days; through messengers from Satan who buffet us and spinning wheels and rooftop trances!

Back to Peter's trance. His *ekstasis*. This wasn't the first time he was in an altered state of mind. Remember the Mount of Transfiguration? Jesus got all shiny (was Jesus doing the glowing or Peter doing the tripping?), and Peter wanted to build tabernacles for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah—because these two dead guys showed up for the party, you know, like they did sometimes. They were having this heavenly experience, and Peter wanted to go to Home Depot. He wanted to build booths. But the author told us Peter didn't know what he was saying.

There's that ecstasy again.

Must've been one heaven of a trip.

Peter was nicknamed Cephas, which means "a stone," and he gave that name a whole new meaning. He saw blankets and beasts and dead guys and glowing rabbis, and he didn't even know what he was saying!

Sometimes my friends and I talk in pure gibberish like Bible characters. We nickname one another "Sir Frothalot" or call one another "Dad" for no reason. I'll phone my friend Sean and start talking about how elves in green kidnapped me and demand a ransom of hats and ropes, and Sean will ask about the diet of these mischievous little creatures, what with all their lembas

bread, as though having the most normal conversation in the world. We can relate to Ezekiel when he said, “Dude, I saw wheels spinning.” There’s indeed something beautiful about a psychotropic, psychospiritual world of transrationality.

Maybe this is why God often spoke through dreams to people in the Bible. Their revelations of truth were received in an altered state of mind. And they talked like they were on drugs.

Take the prophets, whose poetry is riddled with rant and laced with satire. Isaiah once criticized the political leader of his day. He said to the king, “Your palace is a hut in a field of melons” (Isaiah 1:8).

You know, the kind of thing you usually tell the king.

Whether it’s spinning wheels, a hut in a field of melons, creeping things on a blanket, or shiny people, the Divine can get your attention in all kinds of ways. So keep your eyes peeled. Sometimes “knowing” doesn’t come just from the brain. It comes from the spirit, from instinct, from the sky.

Saint Francis saw Christ crucified in the air and bore in his own body the marks of Jesus—scars magically manifesting on Francis’s flesh. Joan of Arc was considered a witch because she heard voices and saw visions of Michael the archangel and Saints Margaret and Catherine, before dying as a hero of the Hundred Years War while still a teenager. Jung predicted the future through other people’s dreams, and Joseph Campbell found one hero with a thousand faces in every archetypal myth.

I heard God’s whisper: in the sunset, talking to me through the movie *Revenge of the Sith*, in August following my junior year of high school, speaking to my intuition, and telling me that I would have a TV show and write bestselling books and speak his heart to the nation. We may all

seem crazy, out there, or in the tall grass and deep weeds of left field. But guess what? Our visions come true.

Yes, God can speak through altered states of mind.

The application is quite simple...

Say yes to *ekstasis*, kids!

Chapter 5

Heartquake

God loving us wouldn't matter much if he were a snoozy, senile, geriatric dotard who looked like Gandalf but with none of his powers. What good would that do us? If God was nice but weak, praying to and hoping in this divine being wouldn't exactly move the heavens. We need not only a sweet God but a *strong* God.

The book of Ephesians is a case in point. In this letter—nicknamed the “Swiss Alps of the New Testament” and the “Grand Canyon of the Bible”—Paul waxed lyrical on both the love *and* the power of God.

The first three chapters are devoted to orthodoxy and the last three to orthopraxy. Orthodoxy is about doctrine or credenda; orthopraxy is about action or agenda. Orthodoxy is exposition in the indicative, but orthopraxy implies exhortation in the imperative. Orthodoxy may have Sophia heavenly wisdom, but orthopraxy is about practical *phronesis*. At the end of Ephesians 3, after writing about God's love, Paul dove headlong into God's power. In fact, the apostle seemed to be carried away by his own eloquence and by the rhythm of his high-flown tongue.

In a verse that is probably embroidered on a pillow somewhere, Paul famously wrote that God is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the *power* that is at work within us (Ephesians 3:20).

While this verse may sound tired and overused, maybe it's because not many people know the context. Though Paul's audience was in Ephesus, he was writing from prison in Rome. Some believe they have found Paul's jail cell, which was basically a hole in the ground.

Prisoners would be stacked on one another, separated by grates. That meant the guy on the top went to the bathroom...and it fell on the guy below. Johnny Cash wasn't around to fight for prison reform back then, so there was no bathroom or light or running water or fresh food.

The ancient conditions were horrific. And yet this didn't deter Paul from his staunch conviction that God is both loving and powerful. Here was a man forged by adversity.

Ephesus, on the other hand, was luxurious. With a half million residents, it was a very wealthy city and considered the bank of Asia Minor, which is why Paul used economic terms in his letter, such as "inheritance" and "fullness" and "unsearchable riches."

As the capital of the eastern Roman Empire, Ephesus controlled commerce trafficked from east to west. Additionally, it housed a fifty-thousand-seat theater and one of the wonders of the ancient world: a temple devoted to the Greek goddess Artemis.

Paul first visited the city in the spring of AD 52, and he wrote his letter to the Ephesians a decade later, give or take a year. Ephesus became the third Christian capital (behind only such centers for church missions and nexuses as Jerusalem and Antioch). It was through Ephesus that the churches of Asia Minor were started, the same ones Jesus addressed in Revelation 2–3.

Now, the letter to the Ephesians is an apology for ecumenical thinking. Paul was making an argument that God was unifying Jews and Gentiles. This was no small feat. These two groups were at each other's throats. Jews thought Gentiles were kindling for the fires of hell. Conversely, the Gentiles thought anyone who wasn't Greek was a barbarian and, according to Aristotle, barbarians were more prone to bestiality!¹⁰ (Didn't think bestiality would make it in the book, did you?)

Paul's thesis was that the Jews and Gentiles, though once bitter enemies, were now *one* courtesy of Jesus. The Christ who united them is greater than the differences that divided them.

They were no longer separate from each other but together made up a whole new humanity! The impossible occurred; God had done above and beyond what can be imagined. He caused people who hated one another to work across the aisle, tearing down the middle wall of separation and making them one man!

Ephesians 2:15 says that the Lord created “one new man from the two, thus making peace.” It’s not that God made all the Jews into Gentiles or all Gentiles into Jews. Instead he generated a new person out of them both, while they keep their respective cultures (which is running commentary on missionaries who colonialize and westernize third-world countries, sometimes causing great harm). Some sixteen hundred years ago John Chrysostom said that it’s as if one should melt down a statue of silver and a statue of lead, and the two should come out gold! Eureka! It’s a miracle! The power of God to do such a thing is *above* and *beyond* what anyone could’ve asked or even thought.

Right before Paul talked about God’s dynamic power, he prayed for the Ephesians. Roughly half of the book has prayer woven through it. He prayed that his readers would know the *breadth, length, height, and depth* of the Lord’s love which “passes knowledge” (3:19). It was common in the early church to write each word on the four sides of the cross and hang it up in their home as artwork! John Trapp wrote, “God hath not only a fulness of abundance, but of redundance; of plenty, but of bounty. He is often better to us than our prayers.”

After talking about the love that passes knowledge, Paul wrote of the *power* that passes imagination. When he said God can do “immeasurably” more, the adverb used is *hyperekperissou*, which was another coined super-superlative used by these early Christian creative writers. In other words, sometimes you have to make up your own grammar, like Kerouac or Paul, to describe God’s power.

After a love that passes knowledge and a power that passes understanding, Paul closed with a glory that passes from one generation to the next. It's not ephemeral; it's everlasting.

Because we live *coram Deo*—in the face of God—we behold the glory of God with open face. As the priestly benediction says, the Lord's face shines upon us and we walk in the light of God's smile, our path well lit by his glory. I'm painfully aware that "glory to God" sounds quite cliché. But! Its definition is quite enlightening. Our English Bible speaks of "glory" about 275 times. It's a massive mega theme in the Bible. It means the *splendor, beauty, magnificence, radiance, weightiness, prominence, preeminence, luminescence, majesty, holiness, purity, worthiness, and superiority* of God.

Not bad.

This is *real power*. We aren't talking about make-believe fuzzies. We aren't just shaking hands with the stars or drinking the Milky Way (or Kool-Aid). We are talking about the power waves wafting off the Divine in palpable emanations. The same God who lifts islands as though they were a little thing and breaths stars into galaxies has power working on the inside of you. Can you feel the heartquake, the trembling in your bosom before this Great and Terrible power, the hairs on your arms raising like they do when ions are shifting before a thunderstorm? This power creates a gravitic shift in that spirit which, in concert with Paul, is thrilling with doxology!

Chapter 6

Get Naked in Court

Dead authors are like ghosts emerging from the grave with treasure troves under their arms and keys in their hands, unlocking the secrets of wisdom.

Let's study what the ancient rabbis have to teach us.

They said the Torah was like a diamond that you could spin around and around and see it in a new light each time you turned it. In this chapter we'll study a familiar passage in a new light. Like a Labrador Spar, when this passage hits that perfect angle, it scintillates and flashes with splendors of radiance.

As you well know, Jesus taught that when someone slaps you on the right cheek, you're to turn the other cheek; if someone demands your cloak, give your tunic too; and if someone demands you go one mile, go two.

Notice that Jesus said if someone specifically slaps you on the *right* cheek, turn the left also. Jewish people thought it shameful to be a southpaw, and most people are right-handed anyway. So how is a right-handed man going to slap you on the *right* cheek? Unless he performs a bizarre contortion of the body, the only natural way to do this is a backhanded slap. In Jewish culture, a backhand was considered *twice* as insulting as hitting someone with the flat of the hand.¹¹ You would only backhand someone of a lower caste in the Jewish hierarchy, such as your slave or your servant. To hit someone with the *flat* of the hand, however, was to admit them as an equal—albeit an equal at whom you felt royally ticked off.

Here's what Jesus was driving at. If someone *backhands* you, turn your other cheek to your enemy so he has to hit you *as an equal*.

Then Jesus said that if someone sues you for your cloak, give your tunic too. In that culture, a cloak and a tunic were all a Jewish man wore. That meant you'd have to do a striptease in the courthouse. (Saint Francis actually did this. When his father sued him for giving his dad's clothes to the poor, Francis got naked in court. He told his dad he could have everything... including his pants!)

In Hebrew culture it wasn't so much a curse to *be* naked as to *look at* someone else who was naked. When Noah got drunk out of his mind and lay naked in his tent, Ham looked on his father and was cursed for seeing his dad naked. It was the story of Adam all over again: Noah was naked and ashamed. Consequently, Ham's sons—the Canaanites—were cursed, wiped out by Joshua during his campaign of the Promised Land. All because Ham saw his father naked. So when someone sues you for your cloak and you give your tunic too, as you strip down, your litigator is bringing a curse on himself by seeing you in the nude. That'll make him think twice about filing a lawsuit against you!

Last, if someone demands you go one mile with him, go two. The extra mile is never crowded. Israel was an occupied territory at that time. A Roman soldier could tap a Jew on the shoulder with the flat of his spear and demand that he carry the soldier's luggage for one mile, like a pack animal. But it was against the law to demand a Jew carry baggage for *two* miles. So if you took the Roman's luggage the *extra* mile, he was going to get in trouble for breaking the law!

Jesus wasn't teaching you to be a doormat. He could be stern when his disciples were afraid to ask him a question.

He wasn't teaching us to be passive victims, *nor* was he teaching us to get revenge.

Jesus was teaching third way wisdom:¹²

Make your enemy hit you as an equal.

Bring a curse on him by getting naked.

Make him break the law by carrying the baggage two miles.

By doing so, you're giving your enemy a chance to rethink his actions and make an about-face. You're loving him into goodness! This is much higher love than just being a passive doormat or a martyr.

As I wrote in *Optimisfits*, a prime example of this is Gandhi, an Indian lawyer turned anti-colonial nationalist. Through nonviolent civil disobedience he embarked on his famous salt march in March and April of 1930. He was kind to the British occupation by refusing to fight back, so that his enemies got in their ships and sailed away. Because how can you kill a bunch of Indians who won't fight back? That'll crush morale, and quick! Notice, Gandhi didn't *obey* the British. He *revolted* against them. But he did it the pacifist way. And it worked!

Jesus let the lynch mob arrest him and cart him off to his death—but not before knocking them flat on their backs. By not fighting back, he spurred the Roman who speared him to repent. True love isn't about trying to look like a martyr. It's loving your enemy into goodness by making him question if he *really* wants to call you an equal, get cursed, or break the law. This strong love may just make your enemy change his ways. True love is about making your enemy *better*.

Now *that's* third way wisdom.

Chapter 7

What Are Angels?

Glad you asked. In my view, angels are cosmic intelligences—both malevolent and benevolent—that are psychospiritual forces playing on the neurons, synapses, and transmitters of our neurobiochemistry.

Now *that's* a definition.

We are integrated beings, brains and spirits inextricably intertwined. The ethereal and cranial are not so divorced as we might suspect. The spirit world bleeds into our physical world.

The ancients believed in the spirit world. They believed the air was so thick and crowded with demons (some good, some bad) that there wasn't enough room to insert a pinpoint between them! Philo said, "There are spirits flying everywhere through the air." Pythagoras said, "The whole air is full of spirits."

But this wasn't a subject just explored by philosophers. The Bible talks loads about angels. Whether you see them as poetical devices or conscious beings, the point is that the chief forces of the universe are on our side!

We live, move, and breathe in the Christ dimension. Though we once sat in shadow, a light has dawned, a morning star has arisen, a lamp shines in our hearts. The riches of justification, glorification, sanctification, and consolation are ours, and the angels apparently find this all a bit fascinating.

In fact, we have a message for angels! Our stories are tales of unity in diversity, rather than a facsimile of uniformity, and together we put on full display the grace of God with the angels as curious onlookers!

More on that in a moment. First let's explore what the Scriptures say about these ethereal beings:

Paul charged Timothy in the sight of the elect angels to show no partiality, as if angels were *chosen* and therefore the charge was made the more solemn. (And you thought only *people* were elect...looks like angels are predestined too!)

Paul told the women of Corinth to wear head coverings so they wouldn't cause angels to stumble. Gotta love Paul's patriarchal fashion advice. The guy could be a real hoot (1 Corinthians 11).

Peter wrote that when the Holy Spirit sends the good news from heaven, the angels investigate. Those curious buggers are studying, as if with lab coats and glasses, this whole grace thing given to a bunch of monsters, aka the human race. The angels look intently into such things, as the cherubim in the tabernacle looked down onto the mercy seat. They are amazed...and *amused!*

Hebrews says we can entertain angels unawares. Never know what crowd of ghostly apparitions, Force ghosts, and cloud of witnesses might be watching you from the stands as you run your faith race. Or maybe there's more to that homeless guy than meets the eye. Could it be an angel, or even Jesus? "I was naked and you clothed me" (Matthew 25:36).

The Prince of Persia hindered Michael the archangel for twenty-one days. Now that's box office! There's a fight I'd pay to see.

Jesus said every child has an angel who beholds the face of God. Hence the phrase "guardian angel."

One of my favorite lines of poetry is in Job 38:7, where it says angels sang when God created the world.

The Bible says we are going to judge angels. Hopefully I'm not a bad judge, like in the story about the one who accepted a bribe, and who King Cambyses then skinned alive only to cover the former judge's seat in his very own skin, to warn the next guy that he'd better be fair.

Psalm 8 says humans are made a little lower than the angels.

Like Hermes the messenger god, the angel Gabriel delivered the message to Mary that she would bear a son who would be called "great" (Luke 1:32). Of course, Herod the king was nicknamed "Herod the Great." Calling Jesus "great" was a way of saying he'd be the real king of the Jews. Who would've thought angels were political?

When an angel told Zechariah the priest that he'd have a son, the old man didn't believe it, so the angel made the priest dumb for nine months. His wife Elizabeth was *doubly* blessed: not only was she going to have a baby, but her husband was mute!

Gabriel the angel explained visions to Daniel. But the angels don't just teach us. We teach them.

Let's camp here for a moment. In Ephesians 3:10, Paul said the "manifold wisdom" of God was revealed not to the church but *through* the church *to* the angels! Apparently we have a thing or two to teach angels.

Perhaps my cocky personality is not without vindication?

Remember, Paul was writing to highly spiritual people living in Ephesus. This was a place dripping with spirituality. Maybe that's why Paul talked about principalities and demons in Ephesians more than in any other New Testament book.

While it can be argued that principalities and powers (Ephesians 6:12) refers to political economic structures, Paul was most likely thinking in terms of angelology and demonology, not *just* galaxies and governments.

Now, according to Paul, God wasn't using angels to reveal the manifold wisdom to the church, but the church to reveal the manifold wisdom to the angels! Just like Job taught the sons of God that a human was capable of trusting God—even when God's goodness was in question—and acted out his faith on the stage of so cosmic a drama, so these very sons of God watch *us* and learn!

When Paul spoke of the *manifold* wisdom and grace of God revealed to angels through us, the word is *polupoikilos*, which means “many-colored.” It was used to describe flowers, crowns, embroidered cloth, and woven carpets. It was used to describe Joseph's coat, in fact! The children of God have many colors—black, white, brown, etc. We don't look the same. And we don't comprise a uniformity of facsimiles. But we *are* a unity of diversity!

We are teaching angels the manifold wisdom and grace of God! Like Job, how well we perform in this cosmic drama (especially when we suffer) is of great interest to the angels.

We all perform better when there's an audience, right? Especially if the spectators are powerful beings. We are braver, put our best foot forward, and present our best face when we know we are being watched. Guess what? You *are* being watched.

As John Stott wrote,

So then, as the gospel spreads throughout the world, this new and variegated Christian community develops. It is as if a great drama is being enacted. History is the theatre, the world is the stage, and church members in every land are the actors. God himself has written the play, and he directs and produces it. Act by act, scene by scene, the story continues to unfold. But who are the audience? They are the cosmic intelligences, the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. We are to think of them as spectators of

the drama of salvation. Thus “the history of the Christian church becomes a graduate school for angels.”¹³

When you suffer, the members of the ethereal world are watching you. Angels are looking on. You’re like a hero in a movie, and the angelic audience is seeing how you’ll respond to plot twists and a dark narrative arc. They are already amazed at how God’s grace works in our lives. Now they’re curiously gazing to see whether you’ll trust God when he seems to slay you. Will you leave the audience cheering or disappointed? You’re never suffering in isolation. You’re suffering in front of a cosmic crowd. As in the story of Job, the sons of God are onlookers, waiting with bated breath to see how you do under pressure.

Give them a performance worthy of a standing O.

Chapter 8

Slowing

Ninety-some percent of Jesus' parables were nature based.

Here's a case in point.

Jesus told a parable that "the kingdom of heaven is like a *mustard seed*, which a man took and sowed in his field" (Matthew 13:31, emphasis mine). Jesus claimed the mustard seed "is the least of all the seeds," but it grows to be "greater than the herbs." He concluded that the mustard seed becomes such a tree that even "the birds of the air come and nest in its branches" (v. 32).

For all of you botanical/dendrological pedants out there, I know what you're thinking.

The mustard seed is not the smallest seed!

As it happens, both you *and* Jesus are right. Though the mustard seed is not the smallest seed known today, it *was* the smallest seed used by farmers and gardeners in Israel.

Just call me Switzerland. I can remain neutral and say *both* sides are correct! Keep me out of this fight!

And the seed did become a big tree with birds nesting in the branches. Jesus knew his stuff. Under favorable conditions, this plant could reach ten feet in height.

The point Jesus is making is that the kingdom of God will seem to have an insignificant beginning, but eventually it'll spread through the world.

There's something I want you to notice. The kingdom is a *seed*. Not a switch.

I find this compelling because we live in an era not of *seeds* but of *switches*. We get instant gratification by turning on a phone, a light, a car. But before we had such technology, you had to plant a seed, invest in delayed satisfaction, and wait for the results.

This era of switches is the death knell for many an introvert. Since we've moved from seeds to switches as a society, the extroverts have been given the chance to flourish.

It used to be the other way around.

Farming society not only taught people how to cultivate *slowing* but also taught them how to be alone while doing so.

You see, Jung is responsible for painting a line of dichotomy between introvert and extrovert (I personally am allergic to labels, so I'll just call myself an ambivalent ambivert). Anyhow, before the industrial revolution, men largely worked in the fields as farmers. They spent large swaths of time alone. It used to be that 80 percent of the population were farmers, not roughly 1 percent, which is where the number hovers today. Because farming is a lonely business, *extroverts* had to learn to succeed in an *introverted* world.

Then the industrial revolution happened. Men were driven to cities. They worked *together*. Assembly lines were the order of the day. Now it was *introverts* who had to learn to succeed in an *extroverted* world.

Then the coronavirus hit.

I just so happen to be writing this book in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. Everyone has to self-quarantine. Be by themselves. Practice social distancing. The world is an isolated place. It's become a lonesome world again.

So now the advantage has flipped again! *Extroverts* have to learn to succeed in an *introverted* world.

Book readers don't mind being under lockdown. Finally they get to be the ones on the top of the world. They don't have to be around people! Earth is now organized to their liking. They

don't have to be a schmoozer or a ham; they can just return to the pre-industrial revolution solitude of the agrarian society.

What I'm driving at is this: cultured GenZennials have to learn the farmer way, like our forebears, whether they're introverted or not. I mentioned earlier how God told me at seventeen that I would have a TV show and speak in stadiums and arenas. But guess what? I had to wait *over a decade* for that to happen. *And* I had to spend ridiculous amounts of time alone studying and practicing my craft. Greatness is measured by sustained excellent performance over a long period of time. It's about playing the long game. Like Abraham, we have to patiently endure to obtain the promise. And we have to be ok with the slowness and the silence.

In her book about grit, psychologist Angela Duckworth talked about the importance of patient perseverance. She wrote that, across a range of indexes, a key predictor of success and flourishing is *perseverance toward very long-term goals*—more so even than health, IQ, social intelligence, or good looks!

Paul told Timothy to practice the *patience* of a farmer (2 Timothy 2:6).

Jesus said the kingdom was about farming. It is not activated by a switch but is planted like a seed! These were an agrarian people. Agriculture and lonesome farming were the norm. There weren't people bustling around an assembly line working for fast results. The world was a *patient* place.

We can learn something here.

Be patient.

Don't rush.

Practice the ancient art of slowing. Learn to wait.

In the age of machinery, we get everything immediately. But in Jesus' day, the world was slow: you had to wait for the seed to become a tree.

So remember, we don't serve a Hot Pocket God; he's more of a Crock Pot kind of God.

Let his plans marinate. He's not a God of switches but of seeds. Let his plans germinate.

Chapter 9

Predestination

This is a charged word! “Predestination” conjures images of scantily bearded, Reformed, and angry young men dying on hills of Calvinism. These aggressive young blokes should probably sign up for the military as a way to vent their anger. Instead, they jaw angrily about Pauline hermeneutics. They might have you believe that predestination is the dominant theme of the New Testament, and that it only refers to persons of election.

But predestination refers twice to *things* and four times to persons. Acts 4:28 says God does whatever his hand and his purpose predestined to occur. This is quite comforting. The eponymously named apostle wrote, “In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:11). There is an undercurrent of sovereignty beneath all the events of our lives. We can put simple trust in God and relinquish the illusion of control.

History has been defined as one wave of emergency after another. It’s been said we hand down the criminal calendar of Europe to our children and call it history. But Paul believed God is in control of history, and that it is, in fact, going somewhere.

Whether you call it genetic determinism, the laws of nature, or sovereignty, Paul thought history was on a fixed course. The whole world is predestined and purposed to meet the counsel of God’s will. Think for a moment how all the nations of the world are part and parcel of a Logos-Schema. The Greeks taught us *philosophia*. The Romans taught us government. The Jews taught us religion.

All nations on earth were predestined to accomplish some specified objective. In Paul's mind, history was not one wave of emergency after another or the criminal calendar of Europe handed down by our forebears. It was fueled by some mysterious Intentionality. And yes, thanks to the cosmic dance of responsibility and causation, the Divine can redeem even morally autonomous agents to help advance the kingdom's march, no matter how degenerate the player.

He works *all* things according to the counsel of his will. God is the master puppeteer pulling the strings. He can bring the best things out of even the worst things!

In Philippians 1:12–14, Paul wrote about how his imprisonment turned out for the advance of the good news, the royal announcement of the King. The word “advance” is *prokope* in Greek, and it's used of engineers paving the road for the advance of the Roman army, cutting down the trees and undergrowth to clear a path. The prison actually cleared a way for Paul. Because he was in prison and chained to guards in four-hour shifts, the Praetorian—nine thousand elite soldiers who were kingmakers—heard his message. In other words, the prison was a platform for Paul's preaching to penetrate the palace!

Remember, Paul had a rough life even outside of this particular prison stay. He fought with beasts at Ephesus. He bore the marks of Jesus on his body, which was covered in scars. He was whipped with 39 lashes five times (2 Corinthians 11:24) and delivered out of the mouth of a lion.

And you know what Paul said of all his trials?

“None of these things move me.”

Over the course of his missionary journeys Paul walked upwards of twenty miles a day. He survived perils of robbers. Endured nakedness and the cold. Was in prison more frequently

than any other apostle (he got canned more than tuna). And floated in the deep, in the sea for twenty-four hours...without a boat.

He's kind of like the Job of the New Testament.

Yet Paul could weather hell because he knew he was a package sealed for heaven. Let's unpack that (pun intended).

We've spent a good portion of our time together in Ephesians because there are perhaps more happy depths to plumb here than in any other letter of Paul's. That's really saying something, especially for a guy who was so grossly over read that even the greatest teacher of all, Gamaliel, said he couldn't supply enough books to meet the demands of Saul of Tarsus. When I say Ephesians is Paul's loftiest theology, that's no mean feat.

Ephesians was also John Calvin's favorite book. It's easy to see why. Watch what Paul wrote:

In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will, that we who first trusted in Christ should be to the praise of His glory. In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory. (Ephesians 1:11–14)

To Paul, predestination was good news (more on that later). It deals not only in the macro historical but in the micro personal. It's not just heady theology but heartfelt glad tidings for us personally!

We were predestined to obtain an inheritance from God...and *our* inheritance is knowing that we are *God's* inheritance! Deuteronomy 32:9 says that the Lord's people are his portion. We must be pretty special if God counts us his special heirloom and deems us his bequest.

How can we be so sure we are guaranteed so great an inheritance?

Paul said we have been *sealed!*

In times of antiquity (a custom that is followed to this day) when a package was sent off, it was sealed with a seal. This showed *where* it had come from and to *whom* it belonged.

Paul said we are sealed with the Spirit! Look where we came from. The Spirit is proof not only of how far we've come but that we belong to God.

The Spirit is also the guarantee of our inheritance, or a down payment. The word "guarantee" in Greek is *arrabon*. It "was a regular feature of the Greek business world." The *arrabon* (or guarantee) "was part of the purchase price of anything, paid in advance as a guarantee that the rest would be paid in due time. There are many Greek commercial documents still extant in which the word occurs. A woman sells a cow and receives so many drachmae as *arrabon*. Some dancing girls are engaged for a public entertainment" and are given a down payment as a guarantee.¹⁴

Paul believed that the presence of God we experience *in this life*, the Holy Spirit we've been given on earth, is a sneak preview of the bliss to come in heaven. The Spirit is our guarantee that one day we will receive our full inheritance as heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, and we shall possess our possessions!

We've been sealed.

We've been given a guarantee.

We know where we came from, to whom we belong, and where we're headed. Our lives are not sliding down a slippery slope toward death but climbing up a hill toward "the blessedness of God."¹⁵

When things seem terrible, God is up to something sneaky and wonderful, using the redemptive edge to cut out the good from the bad, the "precious from the vile"! I love knowing that when things go bad, it's not that I lost control, it's about seeing that I never had control in the first place.

There's always more going on here.

Underneath are the everlasting arms.

As a precursor for genetic determinism, predestination is progressively ahead of its time. Whether it precipitated soft Kantian determinism or Hobbesian metaphysics or biological discoveries such as that we inherit half of our DNA spiral ladder from our dad and the other half from our mom, predestination says something important about the nature of reality.

Don't get me wrong; hyper-Calvinistic double predestination is utterly absurd. It's nonsense. Total rubbish. In the Bible predestination is never used for dooming people, only exalting people to a privileged place. Spurgeon said, "It's a good thing God chose me before I was born. He never would've picked me after I was born!"

Predestination was meant to be happy news. When that word is used in the Bible it's in the context of celebration! We are chosen for an inheritance. *Yay!* It was never intended to occasion the Portlandian-hipster-theologian's doctrinal scowl.

In fact, when the Israelites complained of genetic causation by saying, “Our fathers ate sour grapes, therefore our teeth are set on edge,” Ezekiel rebuked them (Ezekiel 18:2, my paraphrase). They were blaming their parents for the way they were. Instead they needed to take responsibility (not just morally, but metaphysically). No one ever said children have to become their parents.

The Bible seems to give us the splendors of predestination with all the hope and none of the gloom.

Chapter 10

There Are Goblins in the Bible!

The Bible was written on three different continents, over fifteen hundred years, by forty authors. Yet for all its antiquity, its pertinence upon our cultural moment is impressive.

As I write this, a pandemic has wracked the globe. More people have died from the coronavirus than all the Americans that died during the Vietnam War combined. Nearly half of Americans are reporting that COVID has harmed their mental health. One federal emergency hotline reports a 1000 percent increase in incoming calls from those in emotional distress during April 2020 compared to April 2019.¹⁶

People have locked themselves in their homes, afraid as if goblins are roaming the roads and devils are stalking the streets.

But shelter-in-place is no novel idea. The Bible explores the quarantined life. The Israelites sheltered in place during the Passover, cooking the lamb hot in the hearth (always a good idea to make sure the Lamb is on fire inside your home). Lepers had to quarantine for fourteen days after being inspected by priests who doubled as public health officials. King Uzziah had to live in a solitary house at the end of his life. Jesus resorted to social distancing, retreating to a solitary place, after the death of his cousin.

But the Bible gives us a deep-seated courage in the face of quarantine and disease.

Psalm 91:6 says that we needn't be afraid of the *pestilence* that walks in darkness, nor of the *destruction* that lays waste at noonday. The Vulgate renders the phrase "destruction at noonday" as *noonday devil*, after the Septuagint. As for the phrase "pestilence walking in darkness," the Wycliffe Bible has "goblin."

The psalmist cheered us up: don't be afraid of the goblins of the night nor the devils of the day!

Isn't that what COVID germs are like? A horde of devils and a cohort of goblins lurking behind every corner and stalking in the shadows. We never know from whence they may strike! We lock ourselves inside, hiding from them! The arrow and the terror are upon us.

But when a thousand devils shall pitch their tents on thy right hand and on thy left, Psalm 91 promises they shall not come near you.

If you feel scared, threatened, and isolated, just remember that the goblins cannot touch you; the arrows and terror trained upon you will not find their mark; and when a company of noonday devils stand on your right and on your left, they shall fall.

The author of Psalm 91 had no fear of disease. Fear of the coronavirus is more dangerous than coronavirus itself. David learned to be fearless when he faced many a goblin.

He had to face the goblin of guilt after he got seventy thousand of his own people killed after taking the forbidden census.

He had to face the goblin of greed when he stole his soldier's wife even though he already had many wives.

He had to face the goblin of geriatrics on his death bed when he was so cold even a maiden lying next to him could not give him warmth.

We all have to stare down and defeat goblins. But they have no power over us! Mark Twain said he had had a great and many troubles in his life—most of which never happened! The future of our reality is seldom as awful as the future of our fears. As George Macdonald (author of *The Princess and the Goblin*) said, we fetch tomorrow with our thoughts and redouble

our vexation...for it is not the cares of today but the cares of tomorrow that weigh a man down. Just as imaginary as goblins are the futuristic worlds our worry creates!

Fear not the goblins, friends!

The psalmist promised us victory over them.

How can we be sure of this victory? All the way back in the book of Numbers a plague threatened the camp of Israel. What could stay the pandemic? Aaron was instructed to take a live coal from the alter and put it in a censer. With the live coal contained in the censer, Aaron interceded on behalf of the people. The incense floated up to heaven in concert with his intercessory prayers. And, lo and behold, the plague was turned away.

When incense floats up to heaven, healing floats down to the earth. Prayer is humming with healing powers and vibrates electric with hope. Not only do our brains invest significant neurological real estate into identity formation via religion, but our prayers produce effectual results in the affairs of men.

Why *don't* we pray? The reason I don't pray is because I think prayer *can't* change things and I *can* change things. Both are myths. Without God, I work about as well as the second newest iPhone when it gets a software update. Apple rainbow death wheel, anyone?

Truth is, when you read the Bible, the authors believe prayer *changes God's mind*. They use language like "God repented" and "God relented" and "God heard their cry and delivered them." I know that isn't popular to say. But it's interesting to note that the word *sovereignty* doesn't even appear in the New Testament. We can access a lot more heavenly power through prayer than we think, a power that is activated through petition! I've never found more healing in my life than when I walk with God under stars shimmering cool like sapphires in the sky, pouring out my heart to my Almighty Friend.

The writ of the Bible is filled with stories about Jehovah Rapha applying the healing balm of Gilead to our wounds. This occurs even on unexpected pages.

And before you think that the Lord doesn't really have the power to heal, consider this. There's this story about Jesus doing no mighty miracles in his hometown. Pastors often point out what a major loss this was for Jesus: because of the unbelief of the people, Jesus' powers had a glass ceiling.

But that's not the end of the story.

The Bible says Jesus could do no mighty miracle in his hometown *except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them.*

Umm....

That's still pretty impressive!

The *worst* day for Jesus is better than the *best* day for most churches. And on our worst day with God, we're better off than on our best day without God. When we are going through our worst God is planning his best.

So remember: God is bigger than the coronavirus.

Chapter 11

Charis and Eirene Be with You!

In Philippians 1:2, Paul said, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

I know what you’re thinking.

Yawnsville.

Sounds cliché, doesn’t it?

But before you think “grace and peace” has been exhumed of all possible jewels, let’s dig around a bit more exhaustively. Note how Paul spoke grace and peace over them *from God*. The source of this grace and peace didn’t come from Paul. It came from God.

Great, but which one?

Zeus?

Asclepius, the god of medicine?

Poseidon?

Caesar Augustus?

There’s a veritable *pantheon* in Greco-Roman deities.

When Paul said God *the Father*, he was referring to the Creator God that’s set apart from all the other divinities. The apostle called him the God and Father of *the Lord Jesus Christ*.

I’ve got to confess, in my opinion, the phrase “the Lord Jesus Christ” sounds churchy and religious; it’s got no real punch to it. And I’ll admit, I sometimes get annoyed by people who use this phrase. It’s conventional, conformist, safe, and tame. It’s got no teeth.

Though it sounds like hackneyed Christianese, with Paul, it was the polar opposite:

calling Jesus Christ and Lord was both edgy and dangerous. This was treason. It's why the apostle was in prison. He was an enemy of the state. Paul was the founder of an underground movement.

He was no spineless evangelist.¹⁷

He was the leader of a resistant movement the System hated.

I'm antiestablishment by nature, so I can get on with this.

We think Nero was on the throne when Paul wrote Philippians circa AD 62. Caesar was Kyrios, or lord, so for Paul to say Kyrios Jesus, he was being quite the little rebel. He was calling Jesus the Christ, the King, and Rome didn't like that, not one bit.

At first glance Philippians seems like a normal letter archaeologically dug up from the first century. But back then your run-of-the mill letter ran *Nero* the Lord, not *Jesus* the Lord. The grace and peace Paul offered is subversive. He was thumbing his nose at the system.

Paul was all about these two greetings. He started every one of his thirteen letters with grace and peace!

The word "grace" in Greek is *charis*. The usual greeting in ancient times was *charein*. So this was an assonant play on words. It sounded the same, but the meaning Paul injected into it was teeming with riches.¹⁸

The word *charis* means "grace" or "gift." It's a word that shimmers with ideas of joy and pleasure, brightness and beauty. It also connects to our English word "charm."

Paul used the word *grace* over one hundred times in his letters. Greek scholar Spiros Zodhiates defined "grace" as "that which causes joy, pleasure, gratification, favor, and acceptance."¹⁹ But it's much, much more than acceptance.

People think grace means "God is a nice guy." How true! But that definition is so flat

compared to the splendors contained in this word.

In 1 Corinthians 15:9–10, Paul said the *grace* of God helped him work harder than all the other apostles. So grace is the power for work.

In 2 Corinthians 8:1–9, he talked about the Macedonian churches' financial philanthropy being fueled by *grace*. "To wit of the grace of God bestowed" on them, they were generous with their ancient equivalent of Benjamin Franklins. Again, grace can mean *gift*, a definition which shows out in the Macedonians' case. That's why Paul said that by *grace* Jesus, who was rich, became poor for the Corinthians' sakes, that through his poverty they might be rich. Grace fuels generosity.

In 2 Timothy 2:1–6, Paul told his protégé Timothy to be strong in *grace*, to fight like a soldier, compete like an athlete, and get up early and plant like a farmer. Grace helps us become warriors, competitors, and early risers like patient farmers!

Do you see it now? Grace is so much more than flat acceptance.

Tertullian, a theologian from eighteen hundred years ago, gave the best definition of all: "Grace is the Divine energy working in the soul."

Grace is the energy to work, the generator of generosity, and the fuel for athletic-warrior self-mastery.

One Bible teacher said grace is the living presence of the Creator deep inside you, poured out through the Spirit in a flood of euphoric joy, transcendent peace, and limitless power to be, and do, and live up to God's calling on your life.

May *that* be with you.

Boom.

How much better is that than our usual "What's up?"

But Paul didn't stop with *charis*. He also pronounced a priestly blessing (and yes, there are priests in the New Testament, despite Luther lovers). He spoke *peace* over them.

Peace has been defined as “harmony, tranquility, wholeness, well-being, salvation of the total person, reconciliation of persons and societies to God as well as to one another—peace at the deepest level.” It is not just independent but interdependent; it comes from the God of peace working in us and then it gushes through us.

“Peace” in Greek is *eirene*, and it may well be connected with the Greek word *eirein*, which means “to join or to weave together.” In other words, this peace has to do with interpersonal relationships.

While Paul *wrote* in Greek and got stoical ideas from there, he *thought* in Hebrew. He was a Jew deep down in his bones. The word for “peace” in Hebrew is *shalom*. It is a Jewish greeting to this day. “Shalom” is one-word code for the garden of Eden. It's the world as it should be. That's what Paul spoke over the Philippians.

Our words create worlds.

Peace!

When Paul combined these two fantastic words, *charis* and *shalom*, he was up to something quite innovative. He was taking the usual greeting phrases of two great nations and molding them into one! *Charis* is the greeting with which Greek letters always began, and *shalom* the greeting with which Jews met one another!

This saying itself practices what it preaches.

It brings peace between two different people groups. It gracefully brings people together. Charming, eh?

So I want to speak that over you, dear reader-friend.

May the bombastic, divine energy for work, generosity, and athletic-warrior discipline, the very Presence of the Creator God pulsing and coursing through your veins, along with the harmony, tranquility, world-as-it-should-be Edenic shalom, be with you!

Hello!

Chapter 12

Saint Sally

Isn't it amazing how Paul said the Corinthians were called to be "saints" when they believed that Mardi Gras was how you grow in the Lord?

Speaking of Mardi Gras, most people think of Saints today as the ones in New Orleans, but when Paul talked about saints, he was not referring to the football team. He was talking about God's children. That includes you and me! And as such, we are here to heavenize the world!

Before you think this all superfluity and grandiloquence, let us consider Paul's earlier greetings to his friends at Philippi. The following verse feels prefatory, but if we will stop to explore its nooks and crannies, we may be surprised by what we find:

"Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons" (1:1).

Timothy was not a coauthor of this letter. But he and the Philippians go way back to Acts 16 a decade before. Paul had a father-son relationship—and said as much—with Timothy. He called them both bondservants, which in Greek is *duloi*, meaning "slaves." One third of the empire were slaves. We are talking millions of people. Slaves were not sub-human in the Greco-Roman worldview, but they *were* property. When Paul said he was a *duloi*, he was saying he was owned by his Master.

Paul wrote many of his letters in a Roman prison. He wrote to people like Lydia the business tycoon and to the slave girl, since they were among the first to respond to his message during his visit to Philippi a decade earlier. (For a woman rich through selling purple dye made from shellfish off the coast of Thessalonica and a fortune-telling slave girl—the top and bottom

of the socioeconomic ladder—to be side by side was unheard of in the ancient Near East, yet barriers here were broken.) Paul also greeted the bishops, aka overseers and deacons. Let’s parse out these myopic meanings:

“Overseers” is *episkopois* in Greek. It’s where we get the word *Episcopalian*. In the New Testament it’s used as a synonym for presbyter(*os*) or elder, where we get the word *Presbyterian*. There’s your church history for the day. You’re welcome.

The word “deacons” refers to *diakonois*, usually translated as “servants.” In the early church this was a full-blown leadership position. Deacons were charged with justice in the church—as we see in Acts 6 they gave food to the hungry and worked with widows and the poor.

Philippians is Paul’s one and only letter to start with “together with the overseers and deacons.” To be honest, I’m not a fan of the phrase “deacons and elders.” At all. Sounds über churchy, religious, and doused in all things establishment. Sounds systematic. *But* two things here might prove quite the opposite:

First, a balding, bowlegged prisoner was able to bring together a fortune-telling slave girl, a suicidal parole officer, and a business tycoon into an egalitarian society that turned into perhaps the healthiest church of all Paul’s startups. That’s what citizenship in heaven can do. That’s what an outpost of the kingdom of God looks like. That’s what a colony that heavenizes the world does. Socioeconomic barriers go the way of the pterodactyl: buh-bye.

And second, the word *deacon* sounds like it refers to someone who lords it over others, flashing a religious badge at church people, and wearing a suit and tie with gray hair perfectly parted. But that’s not it at all. The *diakonois* were servants of *social justice*! They were champions of the hungry! They acted like slaves and servants, not unlike Paul, who called himself a *doulos*.

Here's a profound thought: I don't want to be a slave.

Genius, right?

And make no mistake about it: *doulos* is not just a servant. It's more than that. It's a slave. But before this sounds dreary and like so much drudgery, there's more to this than meets the eye.

In the Old Testament, the regular title of the prophets is *the servants of God*. It's the title given to David and to Joshua and to Moses. The highest title laced with honor you could have is *servant of God*.

When Paul took this title, he was placing himself in the succession of the great ones.

This is no cringy Christianese, nor cringing subjugation.

To be Christ's slave is to walk in the world as a king! Paul's joining the Great Succession. But he didn't keep the compliments all to himself.

He called the Philippians *saints*. Now before you think of people who can talk to birds, or patron superheroes of Catholicism who are like us but have powers we don't—like Chastity Man: he can keep his hands to himself—the word has a more ancient history than all that.

The word "saint" in Greek is *hagios*. The Hebrew equivalent is *qadowsh*, and both words are usually translated as "holy." Today it conjures up the idea of holier-than-thou Pharisee types whose favorite commandment is 2 Opinionians 3:5: "Don't cuss, don't chew, don't go with girls who do!" But in Hebrew thought the idea is being set apart as *different*! As priests were different from ordinary men, as the tithe was different from other produce, as the Holy of Holies was different from the rest of the temple, as the Jews were different from other nations, so we are special and different like a Walmart is different from the Sistine Chapel. We are guardians of sacred space!

Maybe your Facebook profile doesn't say "Saint Sally." But God made you different to make a difference. You don't fit in because you were made to stand out. Your oddities are your commodities. Your curse is reversed and has become a blessing. You glory in your weaknesses because when you are weak then you are strong. You own your oddness because God made you different on purpose.

He said this sainthood happens in Christ Jesus (a phrase Paul used eighty-six times in his letters).

You, like the great one Paul, are different because you live in the Christ dimension, ensconced in the atmosphere of a rebel king named Jesus whose anti-imperialist firebrand message about an alternative kingdom got him crucified as an enemy of the state, joining the overseers and servants of justice in an egalitarian culture of unconquerable benevolence.

Chapter 13

How to Love Difficult People

Did you know when Jesus was crushed under his cross, his heart was so traumatized that medical examiners tell us the falling and the crossbar is akin to slamming into a steering wheel with no airbag during a high-speed crash?

And yet he found it in his heart to love the very people who did that to him?

When he was offered a sponge, which was used as makeshift toilet paper in ancient times, and they put it to his mouth, he *still* found it in his heart to forgive them?

This chapter is about learning to love like *that!* Learning to love as Jesus did because if he could love the ones who killed him, maybe we could try to be kind to trying curmudgeons.

Naturally, the Bible offers good, practical tips in dealing with difficult people. If you're not as solitary as Salinger and you actually work with people, this is going to help you.

First, a warning. The kind of love Paul advocated in Ephesians will require toughness. You can't be overly sensitive. You can't be easily offended. Weak people hold grudges. Instead, you've got to learn to be a Kipling man, whom neither foes nor loving friends can hurt. You've got to bathe in the fire, get beat down, and develop rhino skin. You've got to be incapable of being wounded.

This gives a whole new meaning to *tough love!*

Thick skin with a soft heart...that's true power.

Easier said than done.

If our love is to be dominant, of the hopes-all-things variety, if we're to believe the best of those who bother us the most, we're *definitely* going to need some guidance. Here it is: in

Ephesians 4:2, Paul told his readers to practice “lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love.”

These five characteristics have been dubbed the five foundation stones of unity. They’re five jewels. Let’s look at each one.

The first nugget to be mined is “lowliness.” The old-fashioned idea of lowliness was despised in the ancient world. The usual Greek word was *tapeinos*, and it was never met with either admiration or approval.

The word Paul used here, however, is slightly different. He uses the word *tapeinophrosune*, and this is yet *another* word coined by the Christian faith. It’s a made-up word. (I like to use words like “friendventures” and “Optimisfits,” both of which are made up. If the dictionary is too dusty and staid for you and you like to invent your own words instead, there’s your biblical precedent!)

I’m glad Paul used a made-up word. See, in Greek there is really no word for humility that doesn’t also have some suggestion of meanness affixed to it. Although Basil would later describe it as “the gem casket of all the virtues,” before Christianity’s influence humility wasn’t even counted as a virtue. The ancient world despised humility.

But *tapeinophrosune*, the word Paul creatively used here, doesn’t mean you say, “No one likes me, everyone hates me, why don’t I go eat worms?” It simply means “the humble recognition of the worth and value of other people.”

So it’s imperative you don’t misunderstand. We should be godfident (remember, I’m allowed to make up words)! We should know we’re high kings and queens of Narnia. We’re well aware we have dominion over the earth! We love that we own the world. After all, “God hath given the earth to the sons of men” (Psalm 115:16 KJV). Paul said the world is ours (and life and

death also—not too shabby)! The Father declared, “Everything I have is yours”(Luke 15:31).

Umm, that’s quite an inheritance. We are heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ, and Jesus said we are gods.

Who am I to disagree?

That’s quite a call to confidence.

We can have all this chutzpah while also projecting value and worth onto others. Being confident doesn’t mean we have to be snobby elitists looking down our nose at people. Paul went so far as to say we should esteem others as higher than ourselves, which you can only do when you remember that everyone knows something you don’t know, whether big or small, and everyone is better than you at *something*, whether the talent be big or small.

In fact, the more comfortable you are in your own skin, the less you’ll feel the need to demean people. The more secure you are, the more you can appreciate the value in others. When you’re confident, you don’t get intimidated, and therefore you don’t have to patronize others to feel better about yourself. When you know who you are, you’re free to see the worth in people!

But like a pair of twin sisters that can never be rent asunder, humility goes well with meekness. This is the next gem Paul pulled from his trove of wisdom.

The word “meekness” is *praotes* in Greek. It is rich with Aristotelian history. Of course, this word can be used of taming a wild stallion. It can mean power under control. It may also describe humbleness. But *praus* has an even deeper meaning. “Meekness” was defined by Aristotle as always being angry at the right time and never being angry at the wrong time. It’s the golden mean between excessive anger and excessive lack of anger.

Jesus got royally ticked off. Remember when the priests became merchants and sold doves for fifteen times the price they cost in the marketplace? They had turned the temple into a

den of thieves by charging exorbitant rates. Doves were a poor man's sacrifice. Jesus would know—he was so poor that when he was dedicated as a child, his parents offered *doves* as a sacrifice. So when the poor were being shortchanged, Jesus wasn't a puppy shooting rainbows out of his eyes. Sure, he was gentle with the doves, but his whip told another story to the money changers.

It is possible to “be angry and sin not” (Ephesians 4:26 KJV).

And yet Jesus wasn't one bit angry when they plucked out his own beard. Like a lamb to the slaughter he opened not his mouth. He was furious when injustice was done to *others*. But when it was done to *himself*, he was gentle.

Not a bad rule of thumb.

When the poor were being ripped off, he went postal. But when the Romans forced him to carry a cross that weighed one hundred pounds, made of recycled timber with the blood, sweat and tears of previous victims on it, he was gentle and forgiving.

Aristotle's golden mean gives us profound insight. When the money changers lined their pockets with the cash of the poor, hell hath no fury like the wrath of Jesus unleashed. But when he himself was sold for thirty pieces of silver, he called his betrayer “friend.”

Wow.

Next, Paul told us to be patient and to bear with one another, or to *suffer long* with people. The word in Greek is *makrothymia*, which the New Testament repeatedly uses of God. In other words, we are to be as patient with others as God is toward us. This patient forbearance means we are to be long-suffering toward aggravating people. Lightfoot defined it as the spirit that refuses to retaliate. When Paul said we're to bear with one another, it literally indicates

“forbearing mutual tolerance.” Some Christians trash tolerance, but Paul—a man of conviction and not of convenience—championed it.

No hate-mongering allowed.

Last, Paul told us we are to do this all “in love.” The word he used here is the crown and sum of all virtues! Remember there are four words in Greek for “love.” *Storge* is the kind of affection you have for your family...or your guinea pig. (My fluffy cat, Fridge, is plopped beside me while I write this, looking like a fluffy abominable snowman from some alien planet).

Eros is the word for sexual love. Think Song of Solomon.

Philia was the love you showed your nearest and dearest, your kith and kin (i.e., Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love).

Agape is the word Paul used here. This love was something so new that the Christian writers had to *invent a new word for it*; or at least, they had to use a very unusual Greek word—agape. It means “unconquerable benevolence.” It means you seek other’s best when they seek your worst.

It’s easy to see how this word changed the world.

The single greatest contribution of Christianity to the classical world was introducing the idea that because God loves humans, humans are to love one another.

By the way—and here is a crucial parenthetical note—this love was the reason Christianity destroyed slavery. Paul called the slave Onesimus “my very heart” (Philemon 1:2). Luther defines the book of Philemon as a “masterly sweet example of Christian love.”

Slavery was unquestioned in the ancient world. In the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa launched an attack on the idea of slavery when it was taken for granted. In the seventh century, Christian abolitionism gained traction. In the ninth century, Saint Anskar actually campaigned

against the Viking slave trade. (Would you like to challenge Vikings? That takes some guts.)²⁰ In the thirteenth century Aquinas called slavery a sin. And it was because of Wilberforce's faith that he shipwrecked the slave trade in England. Tubman was nicknamed "Moses" because of her effort to free slaves.

Agape compelled Christians to fight for love, even against an institution like slavery! Want to give hope to the world? Want to make it a better place? Here's a good place to start: value the worth of other people. Be angry when others are treated unfairly. Fight on behalf of the oppressed. Be as patient with others as God is with you. Exchange mutual, forbearing tolerance. Tap into the fruit of the Spirit—which is *unconquerable benevolence*—and seek the best for those who seek your worst.

When we love the difficult people, when we love those who are often deemed not worthy of love, when we love tough—in the biblical sense of tough—we channel our inner Tubman and Wilberforce and Aquinas. And when we do this, we just might be able to change the world!

Part 2

Reimagining the Wild God of the Bible for a New Generation

Chapter 14

This One Goes Out to James Dean

One of the reasons I love skateboarding so much is I'm antiestablishment by nature.

I wasn't exactly born to follow instructions.

So this chapter goes out to those who don't fit into the System. This goes out to the marginalized, those pushed to the edges and the fringes, the disenfranchised and disinherited, and the people disillusioned by many of the hippies who once spearheaded the Jesus Movement of the 1960s and '70s and now look like bankers. This chapter goes out to the ones my friend Kellin calls "the Strays." If you want God without the establishment, here is a big dose of hope for you! If Pharisee types drive you mad, you're in really good company.

When you think of a Bible student, you generally don't picture a greaser donning a leather jacket, cigarette dangling from his mouth. You don't picture an antiestablishment rebel who subverts the patriarchal paradigm and breaks lots of rules.

But in this chapter I'm going to argue that Jesus is a lot more anarchic than the goodie-two-shoes-fundie-moralist who, on his free time, denies science and oppresses women...you know, the usual image that is magicked by your conditioned subconscious.

On the contrary!

Jesus was a *rebel*.

Were he walking the streets today rather than two thousand years ago, he'd probably be riding a skateboard into the city rather than a donkey. He was a lawbreaker.

People do not get crucified for good behavior.

The ancient rabbis taught that if a man prolonged conversation with a woman in the streets, he'd go to Gehenna! With which person did Jesus have his longest public conversation?

A woman. And a shady one at that.

So far from joining the troglodytic knuckle-draggers who held women under their collective thumb, Jesus selected for his admin women like Joanna and Mary and Susanna to bankroll his ministry.

Women were the first to witness the empty tomb. Women couldn't even testify in court! Yet those were God's chosen eyewitnesses.

Jesus thought it good form to throat punch the establishment.

You don't tell your boys to put on their birthday suits and arm themselves with the Second Amendment if you're a good boy. "Sell your cloaks and buy swords" should be a memory verse for kids in Sunday school.

But don't you go getting carried away with all your gun-toting, you moral majority! Jesus started an ideological war with the religious right. He went into their temple—which had gone corporate—and did a little, um, shall we say...spring cleaning.

Whips were involved.

As we mentioned previously, Jesus was nice to the doves, at least!

When Judaism decreed a man was not allowed to heal a non-life-threatening disease on the Sabbath, Jesus went into a synagogue to cure a man with a non-life-threatening disease on the Sabbath.

Because, of course, the best place to break rules is in church.

The Pharisees knew it was illegal to harvest on the Sabbath. On that very day Jesus and his boys rubbed grain under the Pharisees' very noses!

Jesus was literally killed for being antiestablishment. He was tried by a kangaroo court for treason and executed by the state.

The Pharisees and Pilate—church and state—colluded to sentence the young insurgent from Galilee to a slow and painful death.

The Bible is not a systematic theology textbook as much as an unsystematic adventure as wild and untamable as its male lead!

The Bible and Rebel Literature

Perhaps the most compelling thing about Jesus to me is just how rebellious he was.

Like Luke Skywalker who fought the galactic empire, Jesus went to war with the Roman Empire. He was given Augustus's title, was worshipped like Domitian, sat at the right hand like Caesar, was given the Roman Emperor's regular designation of *Kurios*, and stole his "Gospel" slogan.

A little background on just how subversive the Way was in its early days. The Roman Empire ruled the world from England to India. Here's where things get interesting. The empire brought in the language of imperial propaganda: "salvation." The superpower that was Roma had cleared the road of bandits and the sea of pirates. It had brought salvation to its citizens.

In fact, on the one-year anniversary of Julius Caesar's death, there were Olympic Games held in his honor. A comet showed up in the sky. Octavian, Caesar's adoptive son, pointed this out as proof that Julius was divine, ascending to the right hand of Zeus! And when your dad is a god, what does that make you? The son of god. This comes in really handy when you're trying to rule an empire with an iron fist.

Nero liked to be called by particular titles. His favorite names for himself were “lord” and “savior.” In fact, one of the central propaganda statements of the empire was, “There is no other name under heaven by which men can be saved other than Caesar.”

Do you see why Jesus is executed and Paul was in prison?

It’s like they were *asking* for it.

The early apprentices of Jesus were not calling Caesar Kyrios (or Lord); they were calling Jesus Lord! No wonder Caesar’s boys massacred the sect of the Nazarene. Both Skywalker and Christ were part and parcel of a rebel alliance.

Luke used a lightsaber.

Jesus used the Word (a double-edged sword), which is a light unto our path (Hebrews 4:12; Psalm 119:105).

But he didn’t resort to guerrilla warfare or killing. Loads of revolutionaries tear things down but have no idea how to build something in its place. The revolution is the easy part. It’s rebuilding that’s hard. This is why so many revolutions just provide another dictator. But Jesus had an actual vision for what a kingdom should be, so he started a resistance movement of grassroots insurgents. These firebrands were card carrying members of a new rebellion which became a groundswell that shook the foundations of the power structure of Rome *and* religion.

The word “religion” comes from the root word *ligament*, which is supposed to hold it all together. Religion was meant to hold our lives together! But the religious class of Jesus’ time had lost the plot, and the Bible tells the story of how Jesus revolted against the corruption of religiosity and the churchianity of the first-century equivalent of liturgy.

Rebel literature has a special place in my heart, as it’s given me the courage to extricate myself from being an orthodox cog in a system and instead fight for *freedom*! The narrative arc

of Scripture gives me a storyline in which I'm not made to be ruled by the system but can instead take on the behemoth of corporate America and legalistic Churchianity.

I make a motion to add the Bible to the genres of post-apocalyptic anarchy literature!

Let's compare the Bible with some of rebel lit's greatest hits:

In *1984*, Big Brother brainwashes Winston Smith. Jesus, too, was woefully wronged by the government, a colored man wrongfully killed by officers of the state.

In *Animal Farm* the pigs start a revolution against the farmer, only to create an even worse power structure in its place. The pigs coin the classic motif: "All animals are equal...but some are more equal than others." The religious elite were effectively entitled power brokers who are now scoffed at for their pious arrogance. The Pharisees were supposed to represent the God who laid down the Shema Yisrael, which was all about love for God and neighbor, but instead they looked down their noses at tax collectors as though they were the scum of society and the dregs of the earth.

This brings to mind the Pharisee who prayed, "God, I thank you that I'm not like...this tax collector! I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all I possess" (Luke 18:11-12). My brother Peter called this "The Worst Thanksgiving Prayer Ever." Imagine at the dinner table:

"What are you thankful for, Stew?"

"I'm thankful for, well, me! I'm overwhelmed with gratitude that you all are fortunate enough to have me in your lives. God is good."

All men are created in God's image...but some bear more of the image of God than others. Ah, Napoleon would be proud.

Lenina in *Brave New World* was unable to conjure up a non-dual awareness between the savages and the civilized because she was too addicted to pharmaceuticals and conditioning—

until her mind became subservient to the government. Likewise, the ancient religious leaders sold their souls to the government. They curried the favor of the procurator of Judea—figurehead of the local Roman government—and were obsessed with their dual awareness of how segregated they were from others. They were all about being ceremonially “clean.” They dare not get sullied by spiritual savages. The word *Pharisee* means “separated one,” and there were never more than six thousand of these system worshippers who treated shady ladies like barbarians, constantly creating a barrier between people.

In *The Hunger Games* Katniss Everdeen hanged the dummy of Seneca in front of President Snow, just as the real-life Stoic philosopher Seneca hanged himself when he displeased Emperor Nero. There’s quite a hermeneutical hyperlink between the girl persecuted by the powers that be—Katniss—and Christ. Jesus was also persecuted by authority figures, and he hung on a cross thanks to the collusion of the church getting in bed with the empire—Pharisees and Sadducees cozying up to their friend Pontius Pilate and dear old Caesar.

McMurphy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* learns that the high officer of the establishment running the insane asylum was crazier than her patients, so he kept whipping the system till the nurse did lobotomy on his brain and made a vegetable out of him. Likewise, Jesus had a predilection for whipping the system a bit more literally and unilaterally. He was really nice to “sinners” but drove the priest-merchants out with a whip until the establishment put him on a Roman executioner’s instrument. They made an example out of him, just like Murph.

Camus’ *Stranger* was sentenced to capital punishment after he wandered among the sands in an absurdist’s delirium. Peter was also executed by the government after he wandered among his apocalyptic visions of a world in flames. Too much firebrand talk makes the Man nervous...

Holden Caulfield in the *Catcher in the Rye* was special *because* he was maladjusted and couldn't fit in with the polite society of phonies that made up the social construct of his day. Jesus didn't fit in with his peers. He was a rabbi (perhaps even a Pharisee) who had many a row with his ilk and milieu; the other religious teachers got so jealous of him they handed him over to the state.

Esther Greenwood in *Bell Jar* found skiing and haute couture dinners with fellow writing prodigies to be a fugue state of despair that catalyzed her suicide attempt. She couldn't adapt to civil culture. Peter and John could no more adapt to the conformists than Mrs. Plath. They were instructed to keep their mouth shut and fit in lest they get thrown back in prison, but they went back into the temple and kept blabbering on about their rebellious message!

Dostoyevsky's *Double* went so insane working in a cubicle behind Russia's iron curtain that the story ends with our hero getting carted off to a loony bin. Paul was accused of being beside himself and was told by a government official that his much learning had made him mad.

These antiestablishment books have helped shape my thinking.

But! Here's where the Bible takes a sharp turn from Salinger and his cronies. It doesn't burn the system to leave behind a pile of smoking ruins.

It doesn't end with the postmodernism of the Simpsons and ugly mustaches and the cynicism of the Lost Generation, all of which were sparked by World War 1.

The Bible doesn't end with nihilism and despair and LSD.

The point of the Bible is not that life has none.

Yes, it *does* tear down the system, but it doesn't stop at deconstruction. In place of empire, Jesus works to destroy anything that *isn't* heaven on earth and builds outposts and pockets of heaven on earth.

Where some rebel-authors write toward the abyss, the biblical authors write toward hope. Where the Kesseys and the Huxleys write about characters who are often beaten or killed by the system, the Bible's hero is killed by the establishment...but then he rises. Where rebel literature often leaves us with a world in ruin, the Bible ends with a garden and a city of pearl.

Chapter 15

The Great Unwashed Masses of Coach Class

Apparently, Alexander the Great always smelled wonderful.

When you win the war, you can convince Ptolemy to stretch the story and give you the glory.

If you beat the Persians and conquer much of the known world by thirty-two, you can cut Gordian knots and birds and snakes will guide you in the desert and Zeus can be your dad and Apollo talks to you in Egypt.

Such things were said to have happened in Alexander's life. But it is impossible to decipher how much of his story is historicity because he won the war, so he gets to determine how his biography is written! That's the best part about winning: you control the narrative.

History is written by winners.

This is why the Bible is unique.

It was written by the *losers*.

In this sense the Bible is as rebellious as e.e. cummings (he didn't even capitalize his name because, in the words of Margo Roth Spiegelman, "The rules of capitalization are so unfair to words in the middle of a sentence"²¹). The Bible broke rules like Kerouac broke rules. of grAMmar.

The Bible writers spoke *poorly* of their own! They trolled kings and patriots.

This is odd.

Usually the conqueror is deified. His faults are reduced to mere euphemism (i.e., Alexander emerging sweaty from battle smelling of roses).

While the best historians recognize their biases, the most subjective ones apparently like to grandstand and parade their heroes in hyperbolic pomp and circumstance. But the ancient Hebrews featured protagonists with flaws displayed in all their unbridled embarrassment:

David—Israel’s most beloved king—slaughtered his trusty friend by isolating him on the battlefield.

The great reformer-king Manasseh flooded the streets of Jerusalem with innocent blood and practiced witchcraft. *Expecto Patronum!*

The Hebrew kings were called out on the carpet by Hebrew prophets.

Gideon—an Israeli hero and “mighty man of valor”—hid from the enemy in a wine press!

Solomon, the wisest king of them all, built the temple using slave labor.

The Israelites did not gloss over the hamartias of their main characters but painted them warts-and-all like Cromwell.

To read the Bible as a paint-by-number manual on how best to toe the party line is a hermeneutical butchering of the text and is in fact missing the point of the culture, writing style, and time in which it was written. The Bible was about a group of oppressed people living under the heel of Babylon, Caesar, Assyria, Persia, and Egypt: down-and-out marginalized subjects hoping for political rescue.

We Americans hardly have a category or frame of reference for such things.

Ready for a gut punch?

As Americans, we *are* the Romans. The Jews were like modern-day Mexican immigrants. Scripture is a history of the *defeated*, not the winners. It’s a book written by

oppressed slaves and horizon-gazers who looked for a brighter tomorrow. Under the predatorial watch of the eagle, they looked for a champion to overthrow the Empire.

Enter Jesus.

He championed the cause of the great unwashed masses of coach class. His revolutionary symbol was downward mobility: a cross. This was the emblem of a peasant slaughtered by empire. It was an archetype of iconography. And yet somehow, it's hoisted in concert with the flag by WASP, rich men.

Christians used to be known as do-gooders.

Now they are known as Republicans.

Go figure.

Originally, Jesus' message was "Blessed are the poor and woe to the rich." He stood in solidarity with the have-nots. If you're oppressed, crushed by the underbelly of the system, pushed to the margins, or part of a minority, take heart.

The Bible was written to and for people like us.

Walking Each Other Home

Some people think of the Bible as narrow and judgmental, but it is actually an all-inclusive invite to come home. On its pages we find a place of belonging. It's a story of welcome, of hearth and of home.

The Bible is far more inclusive than it gets credit for. Think back to the Jews and Gentiles. Remember how much they hated one another? Jews thought Gentiles were kindling. Greeks thought anyone who wasn't their kind were barbarians. And yet the book of Ephesians is

about how God made them *one*. Likewise, the Bible encourages *everyone*—not just Jews or Christians or chosen people—to enter the city on a hill, and to fly up to the city suspended between heaven and earth. Whomever wants to come into the Presence has an open invite.

This welcome and love are not just a New Testament idea. Look back at the Old! When Isaiah spoke of the conversion of the Gentiles, he said they shall “fly as a cloud” and rush into the windows (Isaiah 60:8 KJV).

The people of Tyre had a hand in building the *Jewish* temple.

The molten sea stood on twelve oxen, which looked toward the east, west, north, and south.

Jether was an Ishmaelite, but the Bible called him an Israelite!

David made war upon the Jebusites, yet the prophet Gad told him to erect an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah...who was a *Jebusite*.

This unity bleeds over into the New Testament.

Jesus’ garments were divided into four parts, as if to summon all those from the four corners of the world who were naked to come hither and be clothed.

The New Jerusalem has twelve gates to show that there is every way access for all the various sorts and kinds of people into the city.²²

These are the promises, precepts, pictures, parables, and poems that are strewn throughout the pages of the Bible.

It’s little surprise, then, that the protagonist of the Bible is a blue-collar worker who grew up in a home as small as a stall where you’d park your car. Naturally—as if his environment injected steroids into his empathic muscle—Jesus was a heroic champion for the poor, widow, needy, and oppressed. He didn’t jive too well with religious authority. He didn’t exactly kiss the

tushes of puppet kings. He seemed to intuit how sideways things could go if the church got too involved with the empire.

One of my favorite things Jesus ever did was how he handled the threat of the authority figures killing him. They wanted to stone him. Jesus didn't get scared. Instead...

He cracked a joke. "For which of those [good] works do you stone Me?" (John 10:32).

They're about to *kill* him!

And he pulled out a punch line?

Yessir.

He was in on the joke. And he definitely knew how to stick it to the Man. After all, he had a double-edged sword coming out of his mouth! He wasn't afraid to challenge the powers that be.

Once, Jesus called Herod a fox. He called the *king* a fox, which was one of the biggest slams in the ancient world.

And, of course, Rome's symbol was an eagle.

So Jesus said, "*Foxes* have holes and *birds* of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58, emphasis mine).

Foxes: the Herodian dynasty

Birds: the Caesars

What's the subtext?

I'm not running my empire like the Jewish kings (Herod the fox) or the Roman kings (Caesar the eagle), which is all about acquiring more land and more power. My kingdom is about selling all you have to give it to the poor and laying down your life for a friend.

This is a different way of ordering the world.

This kingdom is not from this world, but it is for this world, just as we are not of this world but we are in this world, and this kingdom is coming to this world just as it is in heaven.

So don't worry about foxes and birds—or donkeys and elephants! The lion and the lamb got this.

Hermeneutical Hyperlink

Often people think their sickness comes from God. They believe that God is trying to teach them a lesson. But I've never once read a story in the Bible about Jesus making a person sick.

On the contrary, he healed every single person who requested it.

Let me build for you a hermeneutical hyperlink as a case in point.

David attacked and overcame the city of Jebus and rebranded it, naming it Jerusalem. At first the inhabitants mocked him, saying even the lame and the blind could stop him. Ancient trash talk. Nevertheless, David conquered it.

When Jesus, the son of David, came into the city of David—Jerusalem—he did only two miracles before his Passion. He healed the lame (at the pool of Bethesda) and the blind (at the pool of Siloam). Just as the lame and the blind could not stop David's conquering military, the lame and the blind could not stop the son of David's healing ministry!

Why did Jesus specifically choose to do those two miracles?

He was proving that he was heir to David's throne. He was the rightful King of the Jews.

Let's tabernacle at Jesus' healing of the lame. This happened at the pool of Bethesda. Bethesda means "house of grace." But there was little grace to be had there. Crippled people

were not allowed *inside* the temple. They were only allowed to sit *outside* the temple. Along came Jesus. He called his body a temple, and he tabernacled among those excommunicated from the temple. As John the apostle said, he came and tabernacled among us (John 1)! The temple was the place where the Jews believed the glory of God dwelt. The word “glory”—*shekinah*—means “dwelling.” Jesus dwells among and gives his grace to those who have no access to the temple, those who are tossed outside the camp, pushed to the fringes, and shoved aside to the margins.

If the health care system has pushed you aside or your church has judged you or religion has failed you, you’re just the right candidate for a miracle.

Many GenZennials today have only heard the Bible touted by old, rich white guys. It’s understandable that they would think this book is not for them. But as you can see, an oppressed Jewish Palestinian, who could not have been further from upper class, is the hero of this tale. He is at the center of its spinning miracles and vast wisdom and depth, and the audience of his message was clear: the pushed aside and the forgotten.

Chapter 16

Spoudazontes

In the year AD 251, five thousand people a day were dying in Rome alone. The emperor died. The pagan priests fled. You had a better chance of surviving if you knew a member of the sect of the Nazarene because it was followers of the Way who brought bread and water. I'm not a fan of the Salem witch trials and holy wars often associated with the word *Christian*, what with all the political partisanship and religious posturing and judgy vibes, but *this* is a Christianity I'm a fan of. At its best, it brings healing to the diseased, food to the hungry, compassion to the hurting, water to the thirsty, and hope to the weary.

This is a concrete example of how Christians, historically, have been healing agents and unifying with their fellow man on a broken planet. The onus of responsibility is on *us* to bring healing and hope.

My goal with any room I walk into is to leave that group of people with more hope than before I entered it. All too often I fail spectacularly. Especially during my hangrier moments. But I know, in some deep and visceral place inside me, that I was born to be hope to the world...and to empower others to be hope dealers as well! I want to be a healing presence.

Jesus was a healer. He was all about it; excluding didactic sermon texts, 38.5 percent of narrative text in the Gospels is healing stories. Now before you brush healing miracles aside as so much woo, consider this:

In the Cartesian age—“I doubt, therefore I think, therefore I am”—we try to assimilate and filter everything through logic. Reason. The only type of *knowing* must be in the brain, right?

But there are other kinds of knowing. There is the knowing of intuition. There is the knowing of *spirit*.

We've projected western goggles onto the rest of the world with such viral frequency that we often do so unawares. Today's generation thinks conclusions can be reached only through data, numbers, and control groups.

But it's also possible to know things in your bones.

While I'm ecstatic we are going to Mars—and you're not going to get there by fudging the numbers or being lax with math—sometimes we forget that science tells us *how*, but spirit tells us *why*.

Jesus wasn't a Pythagorean, a logician, or a western philosopher. He didn't treat people like carbon containers teeming with neurobiochemicals. He wasn't subjugated by a scientism exacerbated by a postmodernist Enlightenment. He was not a clinician or a poster child for an orange spiral dynamic. Jesus was a transrational, psychospiritual rabbi of the ancient Near East. He walked around imaging Jehovah Rapha and liberally applying the healing balm of Gilead. There was *no one* he refused to heal. He saw people as integrated beings and removed sickness from body and soul.

And by the way, Jesus never gave sickness to people to “teach them a lesson.”

In the same way, I want to heal and not to hurt. To show compassion rather than blaming the poor for their life choices. I want to mend the breaches and piece together broken hearts. What if the Christ Dimension that unites us is greater than the differences that divide us? What if we didn't define one another by political opinion? What if we didn't ostracize one another over hot-button issues? What if we stopped screeching at one another on social media? What if

pastors didn't use their microphone to make passive aggressive swipes at other pastors? What if we put an end to the judgment and started a *lovement*?

We might just build a world people would want to live in.

Paul once told his readers that they should be “endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). Notice that Paul said we endeavor to *keep* this unity, not *create* it. God has already created it by his Spirit. Our duty is to recognize what God is up to in the world, participate in the healing that is our only reality, and keep it up.

This unity and healing are dynamic and electric and kinetic, not static or homogenous or North Korean socialist. As I've underscored many a time, we don't need uniformity of facsimile but unity in diversity. It's essential that we are a healing presence in the world, especially as dissolution is the daughter of dissension. By making division, the devil will endeavor to get dominion, so Paul argued it is our calling to be *eager* to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

The Greek word Paul used for “eager” is *spoudazontes*, and it is emphatic. We must spare *no* effort. The present participle implies continuous, diligent activity. The imperative mood leaves no room for passivity.

This is *passion*!

No sickness will kill the human heart faster than hate. So if it's the last thing we do, with our dying breath, we will *eagerly* fight for unity, be chained with the bonds of peace, and heal the world.

Chapter 17

Dark Kingdom

To refresh your feed on social media, you pull your fingers down along the screen. Those who developed this function were mimicking the movement of pulling a slot machine handle at a casino. This hand maneuver triggers the same dopamine loop that gambling induces. As you pull your hand down, it provokes a Pavlovian dog response—we are unconsciously performing the same addictive hand movement. Because we don't know if we're going to win or if we're going to lose, we have to go back for another hit: is it a thumbs up or thumbs down? Is it a nice comment or a mean comment? It's a gamble. Nothing is certain. And we're addicted.

Not to mention bankrupt.

With the advent of social media, many people are longing for spiritual depth in a superficial age, and for happy deeps in a depressed culture stuck playing in the shallows. Rather than digital addiction to entertainment, we long for spiritual enrichment.

So let's put on our thinking caps and swim in hidden pools.

No more being held captive to our phone! Let's find a much happier captivity.

In Ephesians, the apostle Paul wrote, “Therefore He says: ‘When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.’ (Now this, ‘He ascended’—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things)” (Ephesians 4:8–10).

Here Paul was quoting the Old Testament. But if you read closely, you'll notice he tinkered with the text. He was referencing Psalm 68:18, which says, “You have ascended on

high, You have led captive Your captives; You have received gifts among men, even among the rebellious also, that the LORD God may dwell there” (NASB).

The psalmist said the Conqueror received *from* men.

Paul said the Conqueror gives gifts *to* men.

Was the misquotation deliberate?

Paul’s imagery in this text bears a striking resemblance to a parade celebrated by Rome: the famed triumph. When a Roman victor won a battle against thousands, he would ascend to the Capitol itself, mounting a chariot of state (à la the Hunger Games). The parade included a train of captives following on foot with their hands bound behind them. Enriched by the spoils of war, the Victor would have certain pieces of coin thrown abroad to be picked up by the commoners.

Likewise, the conquering Christ-King throws gifts around like confetti! He gives gifts to men.

The Roman emperor Augustus also gave gifts in solemn feasts. To some he gave gold. To others he gave trifles. But gifts he bore!

Isn’t it interesting how the New Testament authors compared Jesus with Caesar and all the politics of Rome? It’s like they were deliberately putting Jesus in place of Caesar.

The emperor Domitian had a choir follow him around singing, “You are worthy our Lord and God to receive all glory and honor and power.” And in Revelation John used that exact song, only the lyrics refer to God on his *throne*. Caesar was believed to have ascended to sit at the right hand of the gods, and Jesus ascended and sat at the *right hand* of God. Augustus’s image was imprinted on coins with the Latin phrase “*Divi Filius*,” which means “Son of God,” the title given to Jesus by the authors of the Bible. The very word *gospel* was political propaganda used

as a slogan for the Roman Empire. It meant “peace through victory.” What’s Jesus’ message called? The gospel.

No wonder Jesus and the New Testament writers kept getting themselves killed by Rome.

Now Paul placed Jesus at the head of the Roman triumph, leading a train of captives, throwing out gifts like the Roman conquerors!

Quite the politically subversive message. But it’s not all festivities and parades—Paul also said Jesus *descended*.

What is the meaning of these things? Paul didn’t just paint Jesus in the glorious pomp and circumstance of the Caesars but also said Jesus descended into the lower parts of the earth.

Three suggestions.

First, he could be referring to *Mary’s womb*. Jesus descended into Mary’s womb. In Psalm 139:15, David wrote, “I was curiously wrought in the *lowest parts of the earth*” (KJV emphasis mine). He was talking about the womb, where he was formed and perfected in privacy and then, like a work of art, featured and brought forth into the light of day for men to gaze at. Paul said Jesus descended to *the lowest parts of the earth*. That’s a synonym for “womb.”

Second, this phrase could refer to *Hades* (if you’re more mystically minded). The early church fathers thought up a lot of wild, wacky, and wonderful things, including this: Jesus descended into Hades, preached to spirits in prison, raiding and spoiling hell, then gave us the boons of war and the gifts that once belonged to the *dark kingdom*. Not bad for a day’s work!

Third, it could mean “the cross.” The depths of humiliation Jesus experienced when he came to earth were so debasing; a Roman citizen wasn’t even *allowed* to be crucified, unless guilty of high treason! Once Romans tried to whip Paul, he pulled out the good ole Roman citizen card, and the authorities were frightened at their mistake. Yet Jesus was whipped and

crucified. What a base way to die. Though he “thought it not robbery to be equal with God...he made himself of no reputation” and took on the form of a slave to the point of death on a cross, and *now* has the name above all names (Philippians 2:6–9 KJV). In this view, it’s not about a spatial descent and subsequent ascent but a humiliation that results in exaltation.

Whether it’s the womb, Hades, or the cross, Paul said Jesus descended. The word for “descend” in Greek is *katabaino*. It means “to come down” as from the temple at Jerusalem, from the city of Jerusalem, which Jesus did when he cleansed the temple in Jerusalem and then was crucified outside the city!

But *katabaino* can also be used of celestial beings coming down to earth.

THE TITANS HAVE DESCENDED FROM MOUNT OLYMPUS AND WALK
AMONG US!

Sorry, got carried away there for a second.

Does sound a lot like incarnation and “sons of God” language to me!

At any rate, Paul got his point across clearly enough. His quotation of Psalm 68:18 was quite carefully done. That verse also described the hero ascending, the return of the king—not to be confused with Aragorn! The conquering king returned and ascended on high. This was a poetical way of saying he climbed the steep road of Mount Zion into the streets of the Holy City. But he wasn’t alone. The king brought his POWs. He marched through the streets followed by captives in chains. This was a show of power.

I really want you to see what’s happening here, so quick refresher:

This was where Paul went rogue.

The Psalm speaks next about the conqueror *receiving* gifts. Paul spoke about the conqueror *giving* gifts.

Isn't this really the difference between the Old and New Testaments? In the Old, the King *demand*ed tribute. In the New, the Christ-King *gave dorea* and *charismata*. In the Old, the King *received* gifts from men and made demands upon them. In the New, the Christ-King *offered* gifts and poured out love to men.

Music to my ears.

This ain't blues, friends. This is gospel. And now for the crescendo!

Paul had a magnificent thought: the same Jesus who descended into the world as a penniless teacher from Nazareth is *the same person* who ascended as the Christ in glory!

Many picture the poor, peace-loving Jew in the Gospels as quite different from the King riding a white horse in Revelation. But Paul didn't see it that way. The Jesus who descended is one and the same with the Christ who ascended.

The great conquering, steed-riding King of might is *compassionate*, the same Jesus who was with the leper and the blind man and the hemorrhaging woman and the hunchback. Jesus has scars on his body post-resurrection. And in Revelation, he's still a Lamb that's just been slain, slain before the foundations of the earth. Pick your poetic poison! He's not just a conquering King but a sympathetic High Priest who relates to our suffering.

What does this mean for us practically?

In one of my favorite theological statements, Jesus said, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father" (John 14:9, my paraphrase). In other words, he showed us a God who is both *strong* and *sympathetic*.

Many strong people don't show sympathy. "If I overcame this, why can't you? What's your problem?" Many sympathetic people aren't strong. They throw pity parties with others who hurt just like them. But it's basically a partnership between Eeyore and Puddleglum.

God, however, sympathizes with our sadness *and* is strong enough to do something about it. Doesn't that make you want to pray a heaven-of-a-lot more?

But Paul wasn't finished!

He then said something striking: "He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things" (Ephesians 4:10).

Jesus descended into the lower parts of the earth and ascended on high far above the heavens, not because he was done with the world and therefore deserted it. Paul said he ascended to "fill all things" (Ephesians 4:10). On earth he was limited by his body to being in one place at one time. After death, those limitations were gone. Jesus told his followers it was to their advantage that he went away, so the *Spirit-Helper* could come!

Telemachus the monk left the solitude of his contemplations and saved the Roman Empire from the evils of the gladiatorial games by forfeiting his life in the arena. Just as he was more useful in death than in life, so Jesus is more efficacious absent than present. To Paul, the ascending meant not a Christ-deserted but a God-filled world. He ascended that he might *fill all things*.

We have a King who is triumphant and filling everything. Why do I live my life gleeful and triumphant, celebrating the gaiety of battle? Because I'm part and parcel of a victorious and glorious tradition! We have a history of winning.

In Psalm 68, we saw a military leader returning to Jerusalem at the head of his followers, after putting to route an army, taking prisoners, and taking names!

But in Ephesians 4, instead of taking gifts, Jesus was giving gifts to men. Either Paul altered holy Writ on purpose (like a boss) or he was quoting an ancient translation called a

Targum. So, the question remains, Who was right? Paul or the psalmist? Did the king receive gifts from or give gifts to men?

The answer is...yes!

In the ancient world there was both an accepting of tribute and a bestowing of largesse. Historically, what conquerors spoiled from their captives they *gave* away to their own people!

Our King is powerful enough to loot the enemy, demand tribute from the conquered, spoil Hades and give us the boon, but generous enough to throw coin abroad and give gifts to men!

He's both a conqueror and a benefactor.

If God looks like Jesus, then that means the Creator—who is called the King over all the earth—is both *triumphant* and *generous*.

Now that's a King I'd want beside me in battle.

That's a King I could trust with my life.

Which begs the question, what are *you* captive to? It would appear that our generation is addicted to the dopamine loop social media produces in our brains. We've become zombie prisoners to our digital addiction. We've fallen prey to iDolatry. Is your phone your god and king, leading you into captivity, and utterly conquering you?

Think I'm being overly dramatic?

Americans spend up to five hours a day on their phones, which adds up to 150 hours a month, which amounts to approximately fourteen years in a lifetime!²³

Those stats sound pretty apocalyptic to me.

I prefer the *other* captivity.

Zombies, awake!

Chapter 18

The Bible as Metaphor

The goal of every mystic, as our friend Mr. Barclay noted, is for the Seer and the Seen to become one.

In classical stage theory, the *three ways* consist of Purgation, Illumination, and Union. Jesus purged himself from the need for food while in the desert, achieved illumination when he turned down the archetypal “money, sex, power” from the devil, and experienced union with his Father when he returned to society as a hero with a thousand faces, with a box of treasures, and with the ability to do miracles.

When Jesus spoke of union, he talked in *metaphor*. We introduced this idea at the beginning of the book, but let’s peel back the onion one layer further to see what we may see.

People often ask, Is the Bible literal or is it metaphor? Like Jesus, I’m going to answer with a question. (Jesus was asked 307 questions, and he only directly answered 3! He himself asked 187 questions.)

Is Jesus a plant?

Is he a literal vine? Does he sprout grapes? Does his Father walk through fields with physical shears, pruning? After all, Jesus *did* say, “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser” (John 15:1).

I think we can agree, however, that Jesus was not being literal. He was not saying he was an actual plant. In fact, he used metaphor more than anyone else in the Bible.

When he called himself the light of the world, he wasn’t saying he was just a collection of photons.

Or when he called himself a shepherd, he wasn't saying he was constantly surrounded by fuzzy critters full of wool.

When he called himself the bread of life, he wasn't saying he was gluten free. He was making that claim in a culture in which bread was very much a staple in their diet. It's a metaphorical way of saying Jesus is the means wherein satiating properties can be found.

In fact, the Bible says he did not speak to the people *except* in parables. Jesus was a master of metaphor. When people say, "Do you read the Bible stories as conservatively literal or as liberally metaphorical?" My contention is that the question itself is silly. As silly as, "Is Jesus a plant?"

I'd like to remind everyone Jesus was obviously a pretty big fan of metaphor. Rebecca McLaughlin has pointed out how people frequently misunderstood Jesus because they took him literally.

So back to the true vine. In the Old Testament, Israel was a vine. But Jesus is the *true* vine. He's using a metaphor from the Hebrew Scriptures.

The goal is union, wherein the *seer* and the *seen* are one. The question isn't, "Is Jesus a plant?" We should instead achieve such union with God that the question becomes, "Where does the branch end and the vine begin?"

I've found in my own life that God speaks to me so intimately that it's hard to tell the difference between my own thoughts and his voice. What's more, I often don't need to delineate between the two. I have the mind of Christ, so naturally our thoughts are one. And even when I don't understand, sometimes he speaks through lack of clarity, sending me out like the seventy with no purse or extra staff, relying on a providential care that is the only voice I need.

Sometimes he speaks through lack of clarity because it's when I give up my understanding that I

learn to trust with all my heart. (Maybe the only way to get a peace that passes understanding is to sacrifice my understanding to get that peace).

There is nothing like being ensconced in the Presence. He gets me. He understands. He sees.

The first time God was nicknamed by a character in the Bible, it was by an Egyptian immigrant slave girl named Hagar. She was dying in a desert. God rescued her. She nicknamed God El Roi: the God who sees.

As we saw in the last chapter, Jesus said, “If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen the Father,” and the Father is the God who sees me! After purgation happens in the desert, and illumination comes when I know God’s name, there is so much union I don’t know if God’s eyes are more for looking out at the world or more for looking into. And when such oneness happens, the voice of God and my own thoughts become blissfully indistinguishable.

I have secondhand dreams where I’m breathing in the thought bubbles from the mind of Christ, whose thoughts are for a future and a hope, and my dreamology comes from the plans he’s already concocted for my life. Our wills are one and the same. Two are one.

Where does the branch end and the vine begin?

In the splendid lack of clarity—and in the absence of a clear answer to this question—union begins at the end of my understanding. As Aaron Rogers said the other day about his future as quarterback of the Green Bay Packers, “It’s a beautiful mystery.”²⁴

Chapter 19

What If Jesus Doesn't Want You to Follow Him?

Long ago, in pleasanter times, there was a demon-possessed guy living in a graveyard. He slashed himself. Wore chains. Roamed among the tombs. Along came Jesus, who cast the demons out of the guy and into pigs. The pigs stampeded down a cliff and drowned in the lake.

Ah, such a quaint tale.

Another day in the life of Jesus.

The pig owners were livid they lost all that bacon, but the madman *loved* Jesus for, of course, helping him get clothed and in his right mind. Naturally he wanted to be with Jesus. He *begged* Jesus to let him tag along.

Jesus told him no.

The guy is *begging* to follow Jesus, and Jesus won't let him. Which begs a question...

What if Jesus *doesn't* want you to follow him?

Instead, he told the madman, "Go home to your own people. Tell them your story" (Mark 5:19, my paraphrase). There's a takeaway to be mined from this text.

Perhaps your path isn't the normal "Christian" one. What if, instead of being a typical disciple, you're supposed to go on a mission of your own? Maybe being in the sanctuary every day isn't your calling. Like John Wesley, it might be that the *world* is your pulpit. Is it possible that your story about brokenness and healing isn't supposed to be confined to church walls or Christian labels? It's been said that if there were one thing Jesus would *not* be today, he wouldn't be a Christian. It could be that your message isn't meant for the churchy crowd, but for pubs and your neighbor's house and television and AA meetings.

Tell your story. Tell people where you came from. Show them the parts of you that have been broken, and how the Master had mercy on you and pieced you back together. People are impressed by our accomplishments, but they connect with our weaknesses. Go into the thick of it and spread your story around the world. Hiding in church isn't going to do that.

I envision *huge* things for our generation. Just as all eyes were upon Saul—who was head and shoulders taller than the rest of the people—so Jesus called *us* a city on a hill! In Saul, like a picture you're seeing through a dirty glass window, every little blemish is soon seen. As in celestial bodies every small aberration is noted and noticed, so, too, the city on a hill is scrutinized because we are made much of, and we are on full display. So, my goal is that we would be conceptually what Absalom was physiologically: “there was no blemish [on him] from head to foot.”²⁵ As the tree of life was sweet to the taste and fair to the eye, so it should be with us.

I envision our generation rising to our call to be a city on a hill, returning to—and building upon—the foundations of the golden age of the Renaissance.

After Bloody Mary tried to undo the reformation, Queen Elizabeth unified the city on a hill. Under her watch the Church of England entered its heyday, which *thought* Protestant but *looked* Catholic. Brilliant move. She was the Queen of the Renaissance.

Back in the golden age, the church was not a subculture but was rather pioneering in the arts! The greatest creators were working for and employed by the church. Michelangelo painted “The Creation of Adam” in the Sistine Chapel. Da Vinci painted Jesus’ “Last Supper.” Raphael and his “Sistine Madonna” were commissioned in 1512 by Pope Julius II for the church of San Sisto.

Not to mention that Thomas Aquinas, the founder of scholasticism—who taught about the Unmoved Mover and how his essence is his existence—was a *monk*!

The Renaissance gave rise to Gutenberg's printing press, which spread Luther's message (and then took away from the universality of painting because words are polarizing by nature, defining *this* from *that*...but that's a whole other story. Originally it was a time of greatness).

Like the titans of old, in these halcyon days of yore, let's dream large, build upon the Renaissance, and destroy the subculture that has become our shame!

Christians used to lead in science and the arts. Roger Bacon and William of Ockham *invented* science, and they were Franciscan friars! They laid the foundations for the methodical and empirical approach to science. It makes no sense when Christianity is seen as being at war with science; Christianity invented science!

As if that wasn't enough...

Christians were the first to found hospitals.

Christians have done more to alleviate suffering around the world than any other movement.

Christianity is the greatest intellectual movement of all time.

When Christians deny science, oppress women, and fail in the arts, this is a study in how far the mighty have fallen. This isn't remaining true to our heritage. So, my wildly hopeful companions, let's be a shining city on a hill, luminescent with lights—which T. S. Elliot called the visible reminder of Invisible Light—shimmering in the night for all the land to see! Let's rise to our high and heavenly calling. Let's go back to Renaissance...and expect a double portion of Michelangelo's spirit!

Part 3

Finding Holy Happiness When Life on Earth Rears Its Ugly Head

Chapter 20

Forged by Adversity

The Bible encourages us to fan into flames the gift that is in us.

The world needs our gifts, *all* our gifts, to collectively outshine the fiery tribulations that have stolen all the attention and ravaged our culture. We've got to have a plan – and be *smart* – and pool our respective and luminous talents to beat this thing.

We are certainly not lacking in the “fiery trials” department.

As I write this currently, our culture is scourged by adversity. We are in a legitimate crisis. More people have died during the COVID-19 pandemic in these last four months than in any other four-month period in American history. There is civil unrest due to police officers killing Black people. There are thirty-six wildfires raging through Oregon, bathing us as if in the very suburbs of hell. Outside my window is a seascape of smoke. There were masked looters at Walmart in my hometown, Medford, which is making national news because it's up in flames. Our governor, Kate Brown, said this is the greatest loss of life and property caused by wildfires in Oregon's history.

One of my neighbors texted me asking, How much can we possibly go through in a single year?

Wildfires.

Plagues.

Murders.

The world has become an apocalypse of Hades, race wars, and rampant disease.

I was doing an interview this week for a New Mexico radio station, and right before I went live the newscaster *just so happened* to be talking about my small hometown of Medford being destroyed by a conflagration! It looks like Mordor outside. Right now my home church is housing people displaced from the terror that has been wrought by the inferno.

But, unlike these flames, the Bible says *our* God is an all-consuming fire. Only he never burns what we are. He only burns what we are not. There is ash everywhere. But God gives us beauty for ashes. There are blazes everywhere. But the fire does not burn us. It forges us.

As it is written in Psalm 66:12, “We went through fire and through water, but You brought us out to rich fulfillment.”

We survive because the fire inside us burns brighter than the fire around us.

So rather than being surprised by the fiery tribulation that tries us, as though some strange thing were happening, let’s focus on fanning into flame the *gift* that is within us, and use that gift to heal the world.

Paul told Timothy to fan into flame the gift of God (2 Timothy 1:6). This encouragement was not unique to Timothy. In Ephesians 4:7, Paul said, “to *each one of us* grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (emphasis mine). God saw fit to give each one of us a talent and a mina or two in proportion as he saw fit to dole out from the riches of his glory and the troves of his grace. We can stoke the creative fire and stir up the gift within us to soothe a world scourged by dramas and traumas, crosses and losses, or we can let the fires of our tribulation lick our wounds until we are just a scintilla of our previous glory, reduced to ashes and dust.

The choice is ours.

I, for one, choose the former. I want to fan my gift into flame!

Remember, in the Old Testament the conquering king demanded and received gifts *from* men. In the New Testament the conquering Christ-King offered and gave gifts *to* men.

Jesus was a King even more benevolent than the Persians. The Persians conquered kingdoms and let the kings keep their kingdoms if they pledged allegiance and paid taxes to the Persian king. Thus, he was called the *king of kings*, a term that the Bible hijacked and applied to Jesus. Rather than demanding a tax from us, he gives free gifts to us.

The word Paul used for “gift” in the aforementioned passage is *dorea* in Greek. It means “freely, for naught, gratis, gratuitously.” This gift has no hidden barb. There’s no secret fee in the fine print. It’s all yours at no cost.

This gift runs counter to our cultural paradigm. In America we live in a free enterprise, consumeristic, capitalistic society of upward mobility where you have to pull yourself up by your bootstraps and earn your keep. There are no free lunches.

This is why it’s so difficult for us to understand a gift given with no strings attached.

But is it too good to be true? Or so good it’s got to be true?

In Ephesians 4:6, Paul was talking about *all* of us, but then in verse 7, he was talking about *each* of us. *Each* of us has a gift. A quest. A call to destiny.

This means you have personhood. This means the “I” exists. This means we don’t have to become doppelgängers of socialist North Korea.

Last night I was watching Kim Jong-Un speeches to fall asleep (I must be the only who falls asleep to speeches from foreign dictators who pal around with Rodman). The people in the massive crowd watching the Supreme Leader looked the same, clapped the same, postured the same. The hive mind, the herd instinct, the swallowing of the individual was painted in stark juxtaposition against the neon lights of its neighbor nation, South Korea.

We are not faceless cogs, clones, drones, bots, or stormtroopers. We have individuality. Personhood. We each bear the image of God in a unique way that our neighbor cannot because uniqueness is baked into our very fingerprints. Everything we touch in the world is left with a different imprint from anyone else's.

Here's my novel idea.

In Hebrews, God made a new agreement with his people. He said that no man need teach his neighbor to know the Lord, for "*all* shall know [the LORD], from the least of them to the greatest of them" (8:10 emphasis mine). God then told them he would write his laws, not on stone, but on the *tablet of their hearts*. No more worshipping holy Writ or trying to follow sacred writings like some Puritan. Instead, the seat of God's law was *the individual!* The hive mind is eradicated. The herd mentality? Over. Finished. Done! You needn't go to a priest to know God. You don't need a pastor to know God. You needn't genuflect to a supreme leader to learn the secrets about God. But notice how in the Old Testament God wanted to speak to his Israelite kids, but they said, "No, speak to Moses and *he* will tell us what you said" (Exodus 20:19, paraphrase). It's scarier hearing from God directly; it's easier to lean on a human mediator. But when you truly live from your own center, you won't need to look to your neighbor for direction.

In the New Covenant, we create our own code of ethics based on what God is writing on our hearts as opposed to what religion demands. No one can tell us what to do. We are rebels! And the New Testament is not the New Law and Paul is not the neo-Moses 2.0. We don't live by an updated set of shiny new rules. God writes stuff on the inside of each of us, and that's our new holy Writ!

We *each* have a unique relationship to God.

We *all* have something to give.

What a contrast Paul drew! He turned from *all* of us to *each* of us between verses 6 and 7. He wasn't *just* about unity! He qualified it, clarifying that we are not to be warped into a lifeless uniformity from which all color has been leeches. We are not mass-produced facsimiles in a celestial factory. We're not subsumed by a boring monotony but lifted up to an exciting diversity!

What's interesting is Paul measured our grace-to-gift ratio, and although he used the word *dorea* here, the other word for gift in Greek is *charismata*. Remember, the word for grace is *charis*. See the play on words? We each have *charis* in proportion to our *charismata*. Unity is due to *charis*. Diversity is due to *charismata*. We can all unify under saving grace, but we diversify under serving grace.

"Charismatic" isn't just a denomination with a strong emphasis on spiritual gifts (and waving the occasional hankie or treeing the occasional devil). It refers to the whole of us!

Every good thing a person has is the gift and grace of God.

But as John Trapp said, "Those of greater gifts are put upon hotter service." There will be smoke. At times we'll be tried by and even burn in our own creative fire. But...

We jump face-first into the flames.

We are forged by adversity. We are forged by diversity.

Chapter 21

Why Is the Bible So Gory?

The Bible isn't just about joy and gladness and narwhals (i.e., unicorns of the sea)! It plunges into the very worst kinds of pain. It puts on full display a God who doesn't wink his eye at suffering. He stands in solidarity with us and plunges face-first into the fire alongside us.

The book of Judges tells the story of a concubine being chopped into twelve pieces, of men stealing dancing girls in fields, and infanticide. Maybe the Bible has these gnarly, bloody stories not because it's an anachronistic book about tribalism but because it reflects how life must be lived in this fallen world.

It's been said that good dystopian novels are not a prediction of the future as much as an interpretation of the present. Like all good literature, the Bible reflects *our* times. And the truth is, this world can cause whole other levels of hurt. And this pain is splattered all over the pages of Scripture because pain is splattered all over life.

As John Green said, "Pain demands to be felt."²⁶

But here's the good news. Paul said that tribulation produces perseverance. There's something magnificent about agony. You know, pain itself can be a drug. There are few things as glorious as bathing yourself in the fire. Daily. Empowering yourself to do something that hurts every single day—and to actually *enjoy* the agony—is wildly fulfilling.

Before you mistake this parlance for masochism, remember Jesus suffered so badly he said, "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death" (Matthew 26:38 KJV). And guess what? He was joyful about it.

When Hebrews 12 says we are to run with endurance the race that is set before us, it gives the example of Jesus, who for the *joy* that was set before him endured the pain of the *cross*. Joy and pain go together.

Very good research seems to indicate that experiencing moments of heartache and struggle and pain is deeply involved in our ability to experience joy.

It might not be sparkly-glamorous to talk about the Victorian stoicism of a stiff upper lip, self-control, and perseverance. But these characteristics appear to be key predictors of flourishing across a range of indexes. The psychologist Angela Duckworth suggested that the quality of grit, which means “passion and perseverance for very long-term goals,” can be more predictive of a person’s success than social intelligence, good looks, health, or IQ.

Perseverance—*not giving up*—is at the center of everything.

Let me share a personal story of what helps me foster the I-Will-Die-Before-I-Quit attitude:

The Seal Ethos

Gentleman, welcome to not being able to breathe.

Navy SEAL training has saved my life and calloused my mind so I feel invincible, like I can handle *anything*.

One of the great warriors of our country, Chad Williams from Seal Team 1 and 7, has been Navy SEAL training me over the past year. This week’s session? Drownproofing. At a pool in Huntington Beach, Chad had my hands and feet tied and I went under.

“Don’t panic.”

That's what Drownproofing is all about. Eponymously true to its name, Drownproofing simulates drowning. You drop into the deep end of the pool and must touch the bottom.

Here's where it gets interesting. Naturally our bodies take a deep breath before we go underwater. But in Drownproofing you have to *exhale* before you go under. Otherwise your body has too much oxygen, you can't sink to the bottom, and you flunk out. Deprived of air and going against all survival instincts, you bob over and over again in the water, up and down to the floor of the pool, until you're drowning in a hazy dream. And then you must grab the goggles at the bottom.

Because your hands are tied, you must grab the goggles with your teeth. Sinking on a negative breath hold (an exhale) is supposed to produce high levels of stress. This makes your amygdala panic. In exhaling *before* you go under, you fall to the bottom then push to the top to try to breathe through your teeth, water, and the rubber goggles in your mouth before you let out air again...and sink. The gasping and wheezing continue until you no longer care.

Maybe this is partly why in recent years more SEALS die in training than in combat.

For fun, Chad instructed me to swim laps—with my hands and feet still tied—to make me comfortable with not being able to breathe, along with walking a fifty-pound medicine ball across the length of the pool, as well as attempting to hoist it up to the surface victoriously. Drownproofing is all about teaching your brain not to panic, which has taught me to beat the panic attacks that once plagued me.

So often in life, our brains tell us to panic. But the Bible tells us to seek and pursue peace. Even in the midst of extreme stress, when you feel like you're about to pass out and you have no breath in your lungs, and you're sinking on a negative breath hold, you can learn to get

comfortable being miserable. The Spirit is called the Comforter, but why would we need the Comforter if we never get uncomfortable? Don't panic.

You are forged by adversity. The only easy day was yesterday.

Yessir.

No easy days.

Be a warrior.

Rest in the stress.

Exodus 30:8 tells us that Aaron lit the sanctuary lamps at twilight.²⁷ The high priest teaches us something here. Most people lose heart when the darkness approaches and encroaches. Like Aaron, we are a kingdom of priests who can flip the script: when eventide is upon us, *that* is the time to light the candle.

Rewind to Genesis. At Jabbok, the angel of the Lord came to Jacob when?

Once the sun set.

We often think of darkness as the domain of demons. But in this story, the fall of night brings the advent of angels.

When we retrain our brain and reframe our pain, we'll not only discover lamps and angels for ourselves, but light the way forever and run with feet beautified by good news and shoes turbo-boosted by angel wings.

Isaiah 58:14 talks about riding on the heights of the land. Just as planes learned flight from birds—namely, that oppositional wind gives them lift—so when the headwinds are against us, they take us to new heights.

Speaking of flight, we not only ride on the heights of the land like birds but are also *arrows* in God's shaft. Isaiah 49:2 says, "In the shadow of His hand He has hidden me, and made me a polished shaft; in His quiver He has hidden me."

Is it dark for you? Are you hiding in shadows? You're a polished shaft in the shadow of his hand. God has not only got your back, you're *on his* back; you're an arrow in his quiver. You'll be dispatched soon enough. You'll fly upon the enemy. You're hidden in his hand now, but your time will come to do a dent in the enemy platoon.

We are plumbing happy depths here. The hope I write about is not all about pretending this world is an airy-fairy, happy-clappy place to live, so let's think about mythical creatures and puppies and triple rainbows. I write about a hope that is *buoyant*. The hope we speak of can batten down the hatches and survive the night. My hope is about finding angels at sunset and lighting lamps at twilight. Where others complain of headwinds, we use those winds as wings to ride upon the heights of the land. Where others fear being hidden in darkness, we know God will soon let us fly because we are the arrows of his quiver. Where others see catastrophe, we see opportunity.

I dare not lie to you and say your life will be pain-free. But it can be *pain-proof*.

This is why I do regular Navy SEAL training. Physical pain removes the cobwebs from my mind. In addition to Drownproofing, Chad has introduced me to surf torture, jackhammering in the cold, carrying 130 pounds up a mountain, and doing pull-ups with chains around my body. There are few things that heal me like endorphins, sweat, and pushing through pain.

The warrior loves being miserable.

Warriors don't ask for peace...they ask for glory.

Warriors do not get discouraged.

Paul said, “I ask that you do not lose heart at my tribulations for you, which is your glory” (Ephesians 3:13). Suffering and glory are coupled in the New Testament. If you fellowship with Christ’s suffering, you will share in his glory (1 Peter 4:13). But this verse is different. Paul’s suffering brought *them* glory. Paul was persecuted for his Gentile inclusion into the new society. He was menaced by the Jews for the sake of the Gentiles he brought into the fold! Now that the champion of the Gentiles was in prison, it’s easy to imagine them losing heart.

Paul begged them not to get down. This form of begging was akin to asking for alms (as demonstrated by the beggar at the gate Beautiful in Acts 3). He was beseeching them not to get discouraged.

I never say, “I’m discouraged.” “Discouraged” means you’re dissing courage. If you have no courage, you’re a coward. And being a coward is my greatest fear. No discouragement allowed!

In my vocabulary, the D word is a cuss word.

Chapter 22

How Do I Stop Worrying?

A good leader is close enough to relate, but far enough away to motivate. Mark 10:32 says Jesus walked a little way ahead of his disciples. He was sufficiently in his head so as to be mysterious (the disciples even got scared to ask him questions) but so close John could lean on his bosom.

The Oriental shepherd was always *ahead* of his sheep. He was down in front. Any assault on the lambs had to take *him* into account.

The Lord is my Shepherd, and he is down in front. *He is in the tomorrows*. This is comforting because where does anxiety come from? From whence comes dread? Tomorrow! Worry always traces the genesis of its origin back to *tomorrow*. As George MacDonald said, it's never the cares of today...but the cares of tomorrow that weigh a man down. MacDonald rightly said that worry fetches tomorrow with our thoughts and redoubles our vexation.

There's a reason Jesus said "do not worry" five times in Matthew 6! If Jesus had to say something five times in one chapter, we should probably listen! When he said, "Take no thought for the morrow," the word for "thought" is *merimnan*. It's an anxious, worrisome foreboding about the future. It can mean to tear apart or tear in pieces. Worry leaves us all torn up inside. It rips our confidence to shreds and has us pulling out our hair!

Tomorrow need not fill us with dread. God is there already. All the tomorrows of our life have to pass through him before they get to us.

Here's a thought: What if the very thing you're worried about—the thing you most complain about—is the *very* thing protecting you from something that would be a legitimate cause for worry?

Job is a case in point.

The story goes that Satan complained that Job loved God only because nothing bad ever happened to him. In Job 1:10, Satan told God, “Have You not made a *hedge* around him, around his household, and around all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land” (emphasis mine).

The word *devil* is a judicial term in the court of law. It's used of a prosecuting attorney. True to form, the Satan in this story accused Job before the throne, just as he did the brethren, day and night, in the last book of the Bible, Revelation.

Job is not only the oldest book in the Bible, but also perhaps the oldest book *in the world*. I find this particularly compelling because I read dead people. If the author is long dead, I'm much more inclined to read his book. This ancient book written by the dead still has something to teach us today.

In this morality play, Satan complained that God put a *hedge* around Job to protect him. Get this! Two chapters later Job said, “Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden, and whom God has hedged in?” (Job 3:23).

Job was complaining about the very hedge God was using to protect him!

Food for thought:

Maybe you're complaining about the same thing Satan's complaining about.

Guilty as charged.

In my life, the things I worried about the most—the things that caused me the most dread and pain—actually forged my soul into iron and protected me from outcomes that would've proved noxious.

You know it to be true. Remember the girl you were in love with when you were seventeen, and she broke your heart? Fifteen years later you find out she's gained three hundred pounds and is hooked on meth.

Okay, maybe that's hyperbolic. But you get the idea: not only was God protecting you from a bad outcome but he used the heartbreak to *fortify* you so you're worthy of a better outcome.

Job revolves around the question, "Why do we suffer?" The conclusion I've drawn after laborious study (and personal experience with my old friend Pain) lies in what is called *the soul-making theodicy*.

John Hick is the brains behind the recent development of this concept. Irenaeus, the Greek bishop who lived c. AD 200 laid the foundation for Hick's idea, who in turn developed a theory called the "vale of soul-making." Hick actually believed that humans were created *imperfect* from the start to grow into the likeness of God.

This he dubs "Irenaean theodicy" or the "Soul-Making Defense." In this view, suffering exists as a means of spiritual development. God allows suffering so that human souls might grow towards maturation.

How was Jesus made perfect?

Hebrews 2:10 gives us the answer: "In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered" (NIV).

Jesus was made perfect *through what he suffered*.

Vicki Medvec, a professor at Northwestern University, studied Olympic medalists and chanced upon a strange finding. Bronze medalists were happier than silver medalists. Medvec found that silver medalists tended to focus on how close they came to winning gold, so they weren't satisfied with silver. Whereas bronze medalists tended to focus on how close they came to not winning *any* medal, so they were just happy to be on the stand *at all!*²⁸

Maybe Jesus was onto something when he said the last shall be first.

Medvec's study shows that what we think is a curse—our suffering—may actually be a blessing.

As I noted in my last book, around the turn of the twentieth century, psychologist Alfred Adler proposed the counterintuitive theory of compensation. Adler believed that what we think of as disadvantages often prove to be advantages because they force us to cultivate compensatory attitudes and abilities that might've otherwise lain dormant.

As we compensate for those disadvantages, we frequently discover our greatest giftings. For example, 70 percent of the art students that Adler studied had optical anomalies. Some of history's greatest composers, such as Mozart and Beethoven, had degenerative conditions in their ears. Adler cited numerous examples of other people who eventually became successful in the area of their greatest weakness. He believed that birth defects, poverty, illness, and negative circumstances often prove to be the springboard of success.

Agony steels my nerve and empowers me to carry out God's mission to the world. Here is the simplicity after all the complexity. Suffering makes me *strong*.

Pain makes me a great warrior.

The hedge I worry about is the very hedge the enemy fears.

Why worry then? Don't complain about the same things Satan complains about.

Chapter 23

Voldemort Must Be Named

Yesterday I was interviewed by a rabbi.

Things got psychospiritual really quick!

I'm in the middle of a book tour and doing press for my newest release, *Flirting with Darkness*. I have an interview with *Psychology Today* right before my flight tomorrow, and an interview on a nationally syndicated radio show less than an hour from now, so I'd better write quick!

I shared contents from my book with the rabbi, namely that in certain Polynesian tribes they don't have a word for grief, so when someone dies, they say they experience *fatigue*. Psychologists tell us that you can only be conscious of that for which you have a label. Our consciousness is shaped by labels, which in turn give a frame of reference and categorical lenses through which we see the world.

The Greeks didn't have a word for blue so they couldn't see blue. Instead Homer wrote of the "wine-dark sea." To the Greeks, the sea was purple or grey. Blue didn't exist.

The need to label experience is why toddlers are always asking, with wide eyes, "*What's that?*" as they peer at everything. They are trying to shape their consciousness of the world by labeling it!

Jesus understood just how inextricably intertwined labels and consciousness are. In one story he convinced a demon to tell him his name. The demon replied, "We are Legion." Then Jesus cast him out. We have power only over that which has a name.

Which is why the rabbi told me God has no name.

The ineffable Tetragrammaton. This is just fancy language for “The Unspeakable Name of God.”

But everything else has a name! The only boy who dared speak the Unspeakable Name of Voldemort was Harry Potter, the only boy who’d had victory over the Dark Lord. Every other Hogwarts student called him He Who Must Not Be Named. No wonder none of them stood a chance against Voldemort.

Jesus asked Legion his name.

And he defeated the demon.

By the way, the name Legion has an interesting history. Legions were units of six thousand troops that occupied Palestine to remind Israel that they were a defeated foe. The legionaries were Israel’s great shame. By casting out Legion, Jesus was also casting out Israel’s shame! Note: the story says Jesus put Legion into the *pigs*! Wow. Jesus cast their shame into pigs, which were non-kosher to Jews. That’s what Jesus does—he calls our shame non-kosher!

This was quite the compelling subtext for any Jew hearing this story in the first century.

The demon must be named.

The rabbi then told me I was talking about the dominion mandate. In Genesis, Adam named the animals because he was exercising dominion over the world to subdue it. In Jewish culture, to name something is to have ownership over it. This is a theological way of saying that Adam was exerting his power over the world. He was fulfilling his destiny and doing what God told him to do.

This is where things got interesting. The rabbi told me that, unlike Legion, there was one demon that the disciples *couldn’t* cast out. It was the “deaf and dumb” spirit. It couldn’t speak.

And without a name, the sons of Adam could not exercise their dominion and exorcise the demon.

In a poetical sense, we all have inner demons. But it's not until we name them, label them, and drag them out of the shadows and into the light that we can be healed. When I was diagnosed with complex PTSD and given the label, I had something to fight. I knew exactly what I needed to conquer. I bent all my weight to the overcoming of that demon.

And guess what?

I've had dominion over it.

Through the help of my wonderful therapist, Megan, I've had to learn to *name* my Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Only when I see the magnitude of the demon I'm fighting do I realize just how much I have to prepare to become a champion who overcomes it. At eighteen years old, after reading C. S. Lewis's book *A Grief Observed*, I wrote in my journal about my clinical depression. I'm no longer afraid to name my OCD, either. Not so I can live with it, but because I learned that I don't have to fight blind. By naming it, I see what I have to fight. No more shadow boxing.

Don't be afraid to name it.

Chapter 24

Growling Like Bears and Moaning Like Doves

Just because this book is all about hope doesn't mean we are going to wink our eye at suffering. We're not going to gloss over the pain. In order to heal, we need to grieve.

Isaiah 59:11 says, "We all growl like bears; we moan mournfully like doves. We look for justice, but find none; for deliverance, but it is far away" (NIV). Contextually, this represents the force of Israel's discontent and the mournful tenor of their despondency. One of the reasons for their grieving was that they looked for justice, but there was no sign of it. How pertinent this is today, with the Black community longing for justice after the senseless killing of victims of color, like our brother Ahmaud Arbery. Will justice ever be meted out? The same cry is being heard today.

What a model for healthy grieving. Moaning mournfully like doves and growling like bears! There are no suits and ties, stiff upper lips, or single-tear-sexy shots here. Maybe it's high time we make room for the runny makeup, messed-up hair, ugly crying.

Grieving is not only okay; it is necessary. In Middle Eastern countries people grieve for forty days, dress in black, and wail at funerals. This may seem barbaric to us in the West. At funerals we "civilized people" try to hold it together and apologize when our eyes water and we get choked up. We don't give our traumas a voice. We shove them down in our subconscious.

Ever wonder why celebrities' deaths hit you so hard? You don't even *know* Robin Williams, but when he dies, it hits home in an intimate way.

Maybe one reason why the masses mourn extravagantly when a celebrity like Kobe or Princess Diana dies is because we have all this pent-up grief to which we never gave catharsis.

We are surprised their deaths hit us so hard. But it's because we subconsciously use the deaths of icons as an excuse to channel the sadness we never therapeutically released. We have so much unmourned sorrow. We have so many bottled up emotions. Their death is an excuse to let it all out.

Maybe we in the West are the ones behind the curve. Perhaps pain was not meant to be *suppressed* but *expressed*. Do not be afraid to grieve. David cried so much that he soaked his pillow with his tears.

Psalm 84:6 says, "As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a spring; the rain also covers it with pools." The Hebrew word *baca* means "weeping." Every time we cry in the desert, our tears fill the wells, so next time we pass by there will be pools of refreshment in which we can swim. In other words, the tears you cry now will be of great help to you later on in your journey.

Our crying turn deserts into springs, and the rain also covers it with pools!

Have you ever smelled petrichor? It's that distinctive scent—earthy and rich—produced by rain falling on dry ground after a long spell of drought. It's the pleasantest of smells. Petrichor often accompanies the first rain after a bout of warm and dry weather. Of course, rain itself has no scent. But as the ground moistens, the musky and fresh earthy smell permeates the air, giving off the most magical and delightful smell in the world.

Ancient and poetical as this word sounds, petrichor is of fairly modern vintage. The scientific journal *Nature* first saw the term coined back in 1964. Yet its metaphorical resonance feels ancient as the bones of the earth.

We like sunshine and smiles. But remember, you can't have petrichor without rain. You can't swim in the *baca* pools unless they are brimming with tears.

Our weeping refills the springs with water. When we cry in the drought-ridden desert, we give the Vale of Tears pools of refreshment that will cool us off one day. Next time we find ourselves in the arid wasteland, we can swim in the sweet-smelling pools our very weeping created!

Why regret your tears?

Do rocks regret waterfalls?

Do not despise your heartache. Your present tears will prove to be of great benefit to you later on in your quest.

I've found this in my own life. The most impactful message I've ever shared was the hardest sermon I ever had to give, after my heart was shattered following an eight-year romantic relationship. It was pain beyond pain. Incidentally, this is also the message I've gotten the most feedback from. The message I most dreaded sharing, because it was so vulnerable, has helped more people heal more deeply than any other teaching I ever gave. Saying "hear my words" can be powerful. Saying "touch my wounds..." well that's something else. My tears have brought others refreshment, which in turn has been an uplift for me. He who waters others will himself be watered.

The tears you cry in Baca—the Valley of Weeping—as well as the smell of petrichor when heaven waters the earth with her tears, will become for you pools of refreshment in which you can swim next time you find yourself parched in the desert.

Chapter 25

The Stigma of Depression

It drives me bonkers that Christians sometimes *judge* those who are depressed. A lot of church people say, “The joy of the Lord is your strength, brother! If you’re depressed, it means there’s some secret sin in your life.”

That’s just bad theology.

First of all, that’s why God chided Job’s friends. They were miserable comforters who blamed Job’s suffering on some imaginary sin.

Fact is, some of the greatest Bible characters suffered from depression.

Let’s use Elijah as a case study. First, let’s hang some backdrop.

Elijah was something of an emotional rollercoaster. He went up to Mount Carmel to pick a fight with the prophets of Baal and the groves. Whoever rains fire from heaven is the true god. You know the story. Mount Carmel was a high ridge next to the Mediterranean Sea, where the effects of the drought wouldn’t be so conspicuous and Baal’s power to nurture sustainable life would seem most potent.

Baal was a fertility god. As the son of Dagon, he was supposed to give fertility to womb and life-giving rain to soil. Baal means “lord,” so this one hit close to the bone. Both the Lord and Baal were said to have lightning/fire as their weapon (Psalm 18:14), thunder as their voice (Psalm 29:3–9), and the thunderstorm as their divine chariot (Psalm 104:3). This would’ve been quite the rivalry.

The prophets of Baal did an ecstatic cult dance as part of their pagan ritual. Elijah trash-talked them, and while doing so, he showed knowledge of the Baal myths. Elijah then drenched

the installation in water to prove he was using no tricks. It is conceivable that the people were using their own water supply. What a sacrifice! There was a drought, and they gave up their own water.

But there's another suggestion.

Elijah used four barrels of water filled three times, equaling twelve barrels (one for each tribe). Remember how Mount Carmel overlooks the Mediterranean Sea? The water *could* have been taken from the sea. If so, it would've been *salt* water. According to Leviticus 2:13, no sacrifice was to be made without salt. Here's salt water being poured upon the sacrifice!

The fire consumes the sacrifice and the alter itself, and Jehovah is declared the winner. But even though Elijah could face down 850 prophets of Baal and the groves when he defeated the Syrophoenician fertility god in a firefight on Mount Carmel, one angry woman sent him running!

Jezebel was the Israeli queen who painted her face like Stephen King's female It clown and was eaten by dogs after falling out a window—except for her palms and skull and feet (who says the Bible isn't colorfully entertaining, if a bit macabre?). She vowed to kill Elijah, who “ran for his life” into the wilderness where he sat under a juniper tree and asked God to take his life (1Kings 19:4). He said he was no better than his fathers. So he prayed for death.

The great prophet was possessed of the death drive.

Let's look at six more biblical characters who struggled with depression:

1. MOSES wanted to die. He was so overwhelmed by caring for the Israelites that he asked God to kill him. The people were so burdensome to Moses that he prayed, “If You treat me like this, please kill me here and now...!” (Numbers 11:15).

2. PAUL synthesized this depression-synopsis quite well when he said, “we despaired even of life” (2 Corinthians 1:8).

3. JOB hated himself. He was the godliest man of the East, yet he said he wished he was stillborn. Not only did he curse the day he was born, but he even said he *abhorred* himself (Job 3). Not great self-esteem.

4. DAVID was borderline, if not bipolar. One minute he was dancing in his linen ephod before the ark of the covenant, the next minute he said, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1).

5. JONAH entertained suicidal ideation. He led the greatest spiritual awakening in Assyrian history (even the animals repented!), but when his gourd died, he asked God to kill him. God asked Jonah why. He replied that he wanted to die because a worm ate his plant. Suicidal people don’t exactly think clearly.

6. JESUS was the Man of Sorrows. He didn’t just get the blues. In the garden of Gethsemane he said, “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death” (Matthew 26:38).

When the church judges people who struggle with deathly sorrow, suicidal thoughts, depression, or bipolar disorder, they’re also casting shame on Moses, Elijah, Job, David, Jonah, and Jesus.

Umm, I think I’ve made my point.

Let’s remove the stigma from depression.

Chapter 26

White Stones, Hidden Manna, and Complex PTSD

Since the Bible characters overcame by “the word of their testimony” (Revelation 12:11), I suppose a man with an argument will always be at the mercy of a man with an experience.

The characters I speak of are written about in the book of Revelation. This is the book where John pulled back the veil—which is what the word *revelation* literally means. In this final book of the Bible, John heard Jesus say, “To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it” (Revelation 2:17).

Not only do we feed on honeydew and drink the milk of paradise, but we are given a bowl of hidden manna and a white stone with a new name. In the ancient Near East, a name represented someone’s character. In the Old Testament there’s a character named Nabal, which means “fool.” A person’s name was a one-word biography. This makes the dating process a whole lot easier (you get introduced to a person and immediately know why they’re single). And Nabal was, in fact, an idiot.

But the Lord has a way of giving us new names and white stones and hidden manna. I’ve experienced such power in my life. I used to be known as an emo/depressing pastor, and now I have a new nickname: *the hope dealer*! Like those Revelation heroes, the word of my testimony has helped me overcome. Now it’s my turn to pull back the veil.

So take a peek behind the curtain.

My sister died.

My brother died.

My dad's first wife died.

I went through over a decade of clinical depression.

I almost killed myself three times.

I got heartbroken romantically after an eight-year relationship.

My pastor-friend killed himself with a gun.

I have a stalker who protests me in the streets (a couple weeks ago he caused a car accident because he was so boisterous).

I used to be so depressed I was bedridden. I couldn't even rise! Depression had gotten the best of me.

It wasn't always this way. In high school I was happy. I was one of basketball's leading scorers in Orange County. Won the homecoming crown. Was elected student body president. And had hundreds of people come to my Bible study my junior year of high school. I gave my first sermon in third grade (I was around nine years old) and at age sixteen began traveling regularly to speak at events. I became a teaching pastor at a megachurch at eighteen, teaching people three times my age.

But then the doggie poo hit the fan. My bout with depression began when I was eighteen years old and lasted till I was twenty-eight. I got better, then relapsed again due to traumatic events. I went through another year and a half where I was plagued by panic attacks and severe depression after my brother died. I was heartbroken and burned out from living nonstop on airplanes for years on end. (It's no surprise I am currently writing this on an airplane.)

My counselor said, "You have one of the most difficult cases of depression I've ever had to treat." She diagnosed me with complex PTSD.

But guess what? God healed me. And if God could heal me, he can heal *anybody*.

God has given me claws. He taught me how to *claw* my way out of the pit. He brought me out of the miry clay and into the sunbeams.

Here's how this happened. God taught me how to be a SEAL. As I noted in chapter 21, SEAL training saved my life. It taught me that I'm in control of my pain. That's why I do regular training: surf torture and pull-ups with chains around my body and carrying weights up dirt mountains and suffering day after day.

Training with two SEALS (I can't disclose the identity of the second one because he is still active) has taught me the glorious truth that the only easy day was yesterday. How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time. We focus only ever on the task present at hand and being present to the moment. The SEAL rule of seven is true: when you hit your limits, you can go seven times further than that. My SEAL friends have taught me how to be a warrior. To fight. To callous my mind. To *die* before I quit.

I totally get Paul when he said he had *weapons* of righteousness on his right hand and his left (2 Corinthians 6:7).

This is war.

And Revelation says that to one who *overcomes*, the Kyrios will give the power to rule nations, and will give him the morning star, make him a pillar in the temple, and write the name of God and the city of God upon him (Revelation 2:26–28; 3:12).

Not bad!

Overcome we must, then, my fellow brothers and sisters in arms!

Like Paul—who was delivered out of the mouth of a lion and fought with beasts at Ephesus and bore the marks of Jesus on his body, filling up in his body the wounds of Christ—I will not be disobedient to the heavenly vision because my calling is worth fighting for.

God taught me how to visioneer and dreamcast. When I was seventeen, he told me that I'd be a national leader one day, on TV and everything. When I shared my dream, some people thought I was crazy. After all, I lived in a tiny town in Oregon.

But guess what?

I practiced the art of becoming an author and speaker for 11,073 hours in five years, and my dreams happened. I didn't take a single day off for five years straight. When Michael Phelps trained for the Olympics, he didn't take a single day off for five years. He was in the pool every day. I believed in this philosophy. So I literally used timers and clocked myself every single day: my time writing, studying, and public speaking. And guess what? It worked!

My TV show is on twenty-three networks in 180 countries. My radio show airs on more than five hundred stations nationally. My YouTube videos have acquired millions of views. I've written two bestselling books. I've been featured on *Psychology Today* and *Good Morning America*. I've been on ABC, Fox, Freeform, TBN (multiple times every week), the Hallmark Channel, and other mainstream media outlets. I travel the world every few days, speaking and filming and book touring. I speak in stadiums and arenas.

But I didn't get here without help. The family I'm in was integral to getting me here.

I'm the result of a healthy dose of nepotism. My dad is a pastor, my uncle is a pastor, my other uncle is a pastor, my brother was a pastor, and so on. And I'm not afraid to milk my last name for all it's worth! The same is true of the great ones.

Alexander the Great became king of Macedon because of nepotism. His dad, Philip, was a successful king. When his son tamed the wild horse Bucephalus when the king's men could not, Philip said all the borders of Macedon could not contain the glory that would be Alexander.

True to this fatherly blessing, the boy and his faithful steed would go on to take the glory of Greece far beyond Macedonia.

The New Testament was written in Greek because of the Hellenization Alexander wrought in his path. The gospel spread rapidly beyond language barriers because the world spoke Greek, thanks to Alexander. In fact, when Paul tried to go to Asia and Bithynia, the Holy Spirit forbade him and gave him a vision of a *Macedonian* man—which could've been (as one scholar suggested) none other than Alexander of Macedon! Paul took the same territory Alexander did, following his path to conquest, *and* the “Macedonian Man” bid the apostle to go to Philippi, the same name as Alexander's father. Of course, Alexander could've rested on his father's laurels and settled in his lees. But he had a dream to create the brotherhood of man. Alexander was not satisfied with his father's kingdom. He needed to defeat Persia and hunt Darius and get *nine* battle wounds on his body and go to India and take his men on a wonder march through a desert!

Alexander once pouted to his men because they wanted to turn back from India after years of being away from their respective families. He wanted to keep conquering. In one of the finest speeches of history, Alexander bid his men to strip down and show their wounds, and he would show them his. He said he had scars all over his body—except on his back. He always looked an army in the face, he never beat a hasty retreat. He told his army he'd taken them further than his father ever dreamed.

While we may get our jobs because of our dads, we sure as Hades need to prove we deserve it.

Beware the lazy sluggard. The opportunities our family gives us should not make us phone it in, make excuses, or catastrophize about imaginary tigers that just aren't there. Like Alexander and Paul, it's time to conquer more territory!

Of course, COVID-19 has become an excuse for many to slow down. A global plague seems like a justifiable alibi to make a lot of excuses as to why we should mothball our callings and destinies.

But that's not how conquerors think.

What if what others see as obstacles to work are actually opportunities for work?

At seventy-eight, Bob Dylan released the first number one song of his career that he both wrote *and* performed—*during* the COVID pandemic. Paul wrote Ephesians and Philippians and Colossians and Philemon all in one bout while imprisoned. In 1606, when Shakespeare had to quarantine due to a plague spreading through England, he wrote *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Not bad. What's your excuse?

At any rate, I'm on a mission. Like Paul!

Paul asked his friends at Thessalonica to pray that the word of the Lord would *run swiftly* and be glorified. That's why I zip around on airplanes and don't take any days off, because I want to see the Hope message God gave me *run swiftly*. Like Paul saving the Philippian jailer from suicide, I know there's nothing like hearing stories about how my message has saved people from suicide.

Kylo wrote me, saying: "Strongly considering driving off the side of the road, I thought I'd turn on the radio for a final 'going away' song when I heard your voice instead. I put my foot on the brakes. Pulling over, I cried and decided to give God whatever was left of me instead.

That was five months ago. I now ingest everything you've got daily. God used Hope Generation to stop me from ending my life. So, understatement of the year, thank you."

That's why I do what I do. The fact that I get to give people hope and save them from suicide, just like God saved me, gets me out of bed each morning.

Like our old friend the madman, Paul told his story. He told in detail what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry (Acts 21:18–20).

That's my story. At least the *Reader's Digest* version.

If God could save me from my nightmares and make my dreams come true, he can do the same for you. If he could heal *me*, he can heal you too. He can take your name, with all the hurts and wounds and traumas attached to it, and give you a white stone with a *new identity*...if you soldier on and overcome.

And just as dolphins name themselves at birth, a name that the other dolphins then respond to (true story!), so we will have a new name after our second birth. This *new label* will shape our consciousness and be a fresh lens through which we'll behold a new heaven and a new earth.

Chapter 27

Biblical Tips for Overcoming Depressive Thoughts

Maybe things aren't as binary as "good" and "bad." Perhaps everything that happens to us is to intensify our intestinal fortitude until our soul is forged into iron and our spirit tempered into steel.

But what if we've gone in search of a sunbeam and have been found wanting? What if we cannot see the light? We know that no one ever injured their eyesight by looking on the bright side, but sometimes it's hard to see any silver lining limning the ominous clouds.

Remember our friend Elijah? We did a detailed exposé on the moody prophet earlier because he could've used a little Hope Gone Wild! Remember when he sat under the broom tree praying for death?

How did God heal him?

He made Elijah eat and take a nap. Seriously.

There are few things a good prayer time, a nice meal, and a power nap won't help.

The Bible says a broken spirit rots the bones (Proverbs 17:22). The pneuma affects the soma. What happens in the spirit directly affects the body. Emotions and their biological components establish the crucial link between the mind and the body. For instance, if you've been repeatedly abused by someone at work or if you were sexually abused as a kid, all the thoughts associated with those experiences release negative chemicals. These chemicals travel through your body and can change the shape of the receptors in cells lining your heart, thereby increasing your susceptibility to cardiovascular illness!

Oftentimes depression emerges from physical deprivation—when we are *tired* (like Elijah after his chariot run), *hungry* (Elijah needed some angels to feed him. Angel food cake, anyone?) and *isolated* (hence the wilderness).

When you're tired, hungry, and isolated, that is *not* the time to overthink. You'll catastrophize! Instead, talk to God, eat some food, take a nap.

Why Cynicism Doesn't Work

I'm returning to Good Morning America this week as I've been doing many press junkets during a book tour. I effectively live on airplanes. And the message I'm excited to spread is that depression is not something you have to live with. Depression is something that can be cured.

This is why I teach people about Dr. Amen and his eighty-three thousand brain scans over a twenty-two year career. He's done more brain scans than anyone in history! The single most important discovery he and his colleagues have made is that the brain *can* change. You are not stuck with your psychological equipment!

Your cranial package, cerebral three-pound grey matter, and psychological constitution are malleable, pliable, and bendable. Your brain is plastic, which is why neuroplasticity works through rote and repetitive thinking—driving our thoughts toward the light over and over—and being transformed by the renewing of our mind, just like Paul said. Paul told the Ephesians they could be renewed in the spirit of the mind (Ephesians 4:23), and we can jolt our shadow thoughts out of unhealthy grooves through practice. As a man “thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7 KJV). Through such modern-day scientific studies, I believe we can replace depression with hope.

We've already done the Simpsons, ugly mustaches, roll-your-eyes-and-move-to-Brooklyn, jaded postmodernism. We tried cynicism.

It didn't work.

You know, the Simpsons are the result of World War 1. That's when the romanticism of war got lost. Now man didn't merely test his brawn and courage against his fellow man.

He could get mowed down by machines. And literally lose his man parts.

Hemingway and the Lost Generation emphasized this, and so dulled the magic of warrior-wonder.

We haven't been able to recover our Sense of the Possible and our childlike joy, or our fight-the-windmills chivalrous spirit as a culture, since then. And people are tired of all this world-weariness. It's time for hope, awe, and wonder.

This is one of the reasons I love animals and sunsets and, as Chesterton said, stars fixed like fireworks in an everlasting fall.²⁹ God's creation makes me wide-eyed all over again.

It's easy to lose your awe and wonder when greedy politicians have you in the palm of their iron fist.

It's easy to grow jaded when you're reading the news.

But cynicism is lazy. Any adult can do it. It takes strength—and you have to have some *fight* in you—to keep your inner child alive.

We would do well to learn the art of hopeology.

Genesis 1:21 says, "God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed after their kind...and God saw that it was good."

Let's fill up our wonder-tank by dipping into the waters of Hawaii!

The Hawaiian bobtail squid looks like a character plucked out of Pixar. It is big-eyed and colorful. This squid welcomes a species of bioluminescent bacterium to live in a special cavity in its underbelly. This is quite a creative defense against a serious threat to its life! You see, in the Hawaiian bobtail squid's light organ, the bacteria (*Aliivibrio fischeri*) convert food into *light*! Thus, when viewed from beneath...

The squid *glows*! This obscures the squid's silhouette against the moonlit surface of the ocean, camouflaging it from predators encroaching from below! Yes, it actually glows from the POV of a predator, so the Hawaiian bobtail squid can blend into the surface of moonlit water!

And God saw that it was good.

If you're going through hell, perhaps it's time to press Pause on your political junkie predispositions, put down the newspaper for just a moment, and consider the wonder in the world all around you.

While your curiosity sleeps with the fishes because the news is blaring in the background, in the sea swims a miracle awaiting your consideration. As the next wave of crises hits the twenty-four-hour news cycle, all the while there's something in the waters:

A glowing squid says, "Hello there."

Ikigai

My counselor once gave me some life-saving advice.

During my bout with complex PTSD, I couldn't find joy. It was elusive. The more I chased it, the more it evaded my grasp. So, she told me to stop looking for *happiness* and instead start looking for *meaning*.

The Japanese call this *ikigai*. “Ikigai” is a Japanese word that translates as “a reason for being.” Ikigai is your reason for getting out of bed in the morning, or as the French would say, *raison d’être*.

Sometimes we find our ikigai by what angers us.

When you get upset at some injustice in the world and say, “Someone should do something about that!” That someone might be you. The very thing that makes you sick and tired might just heal and wake the world.

The Bible character of Nehemiah is a prime example of this kind of ikigai.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were just one book for hundreds of years. They were separated into two books during the Middle Ages. Together they’re a story about restoring and reconstructing the city of Jerusalem. We think Nehemiah 1 takes place about thirteen years after the end of the book of Ezra. Ezra was about rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem; Nehemiah was about rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was more than a city. It was a symbol. But its walls were dilapidated. That’s like a country today having no defense system, no air force, or no army. When Nehemiah heard of the plight of the city, he wept for four months! And here’s the kicker. Jerusalem was destroyed 140 *years* before Nehemiah 1! That’s like a student in 2020 asking about how things are going in DC. When told that Lincoln got assassinated, the student mourns and weeps and cries for *four months*—even though the event happened in 1865!

That Nehemiah was so grieved over something that had happened so long ago indicates God was working on him. God was tapping *him* on the shoulder—it was Nehemiah who was supposed to fix this problem and build the walls. Nehemiah found what he should do through what saddened him.

What grieves and outrages me is that suicide is killing off my generation. We have medical scientists trying to cure cancer and social activists trying to cure AIDS, and Russians hawking Sputnik 5 as the vaccine to coronavirus, but where are the sacred optimists who are going to cure suicide?!

That's what makes me sad and angry.

And that's why my calling is to give hope to the world.

What cultural tragedy causes you to think, *Someone should do something about that?* That someone might be you. What craft can you hone to curate the hope of your calling into a project that you project into the world?

Sometimes the thing that angers and grieves you leads you to your ikigai.

The Japanese have another word—*kaizen*—which means “resisting the plateau of arrested development.” It means to never be satisfied with the status quo. Kaizen is literally translated, “continuous improvement.”

Don't settle with the way things are.

Don't be okay with broken-down walls and a ruined defense force.

Make things better.

Find *your* ikigai and inject it with a big, piping hot dose of kaizen and let your hope run wild!

Apostolos

Paul's life was hard. It wasn't exactly happy. And he didn't seem to have a great sense of humor. But he was a man of vision, driven by meaning and purpose. The reason he was a more

successful apostle than the twelve is because he *outworked* them. In a humble flex, Paul said by the grace of God he worked harder than them all (1 Corinthians 15:10). Paul didn't seek ease; he chased greatness.

Following the vision of the Macedonian man (à la Alexander) he literally followed in the same geographical footsteps of Alexander the Great, not to Hellenize the world and spread the culture of Greece but to heavenize the world into the kingdom of God.

When Agabus removed Paul's belt and bound him with it, prophesying that if Paul went on to Jerusalem he would be bound and arrested, the guy didn't so much as blink. He shaved his head like a recruit and braved the nefarious dangers that would beset him on all sides (Acts 21:11; 26).

He fought with beasts, was delivered out of the mouth of a lion...and was a meaning-monger. He was a poster child for visioneering and dreamcasting.

Paul called himself an "apostle." The word is *apostolos* in Greek, which comes from the verb *apostellein*, which means "to send out." This word could be used of a naval squadron *sent* out on an expedition. Paul personified and anthropomorphized the *send!*

Larry Enticer—the mullet-wearing, snowmobile-riding Canadian legend who popularized the saying, "Are you silly? I'm still gonna send it!" before proceeding to jump and crash his snowmobile and perform an elegant faceplant—would be quite proud of the apostle.

Maybe that's why, during the storm Euroclydon, some of Paul's fellow prisoners traveled to land on boards. They were floating on flotsam and jetsam from the broken-up ship! I guess the squad was just sending it (insert shrug emoji here). Ancient surfing!

Paul was a *sent* man, a man on a mission. He was laser-focused on his objective.

He said, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision" (Acts 26:19).

What was this vision? That he must speak to Gentiles, their kings, and to the children of Israel—and that he must suffer a great many things.

He was heaven bent on speaking to Jews *and* the rest of the globe, not to mention world leaders. Maybe *that's* how he survived the great things he had to suffer.

We survive the suffering by focusing on the kings.

You see, Paul was given a vision that he would both speak to kings *and* suffer great things. So which was it? The answer is...yes! Little did Paul know, it was his suffering in the prison that got his message to the palace! He said that *because* of his chains—*halusis* in Greek—the good news went to Caesar's court. There was a rotation of the Imperial guard—nine thousand powerful, elite soldiers!—during the two years Paul was imprisoned. He was actually chained to a soldier on four-hour shifts (he had a captive audience)! Sure enough, Paul's message made it to the palace guard—the Praetorian Kingmakers—who historians speculate were responsible for the assassination of Caligula and putting Claudius on the throne!

Through the great things Paul suffered in prison, the palace guard got wind of his message, and indeed his message was heard by the king, just as God promised.

Don't focus on your languishing in prison. Focus on your impact in the palace!

Don't focus on the suffering. Focus on the kings.

Don't chase happiness. Chase purpose. And joy will follow.

Lazybones

My final advice for dealing with thoughts of depression? Don't be a lazybones. I didn't get this from myself. I got it from the Bible.

Lamentations 3:27 says it's good for a man to bear the yoke in his youth.

Paul told Timothy to work to the point of exhaustion (2 Timothy 2:6).

I figured this was good advice. I spent my twenties working my fingers to the bone. I didn't have a life. All my time was spent with my hand glued to the proverbial plough. (I'm even timing this as I write. Kaizen, anyone?).

I'd do anything not to be like the lazy sloth from Proverbs! Solomon *trolls* the sloth, and trolls him ruthlessly: "The slothful man saith, There is a lion in the way; a lion is in the streets. As the door turneth upon his hinges, so doth the slothful upon his bed. The slothful hideth his hand in his bosom; it grieveth him to bring it again to his mouth. The sluggard is wiser in his own conceit than seven men that can render a reason" (Proverbs 26:13–16 KJV).

Let's consider the four slams Solomon levies against the lazy man, who seems to entertain four irrational fears. They are quite funny:

1. *The sloth is afraid of tigers.*

Imagine a guy works at a boba shop in downtown San Diego. He calls his boss and says he cannot come to work today.

"Why not?" the boss asks.

"Because what if I meet a lion in the streets and it eats me?"

Now lions are not to be sneezed at. They can run up to thirty-five miles per hour. They can leap thirty feet in a single bound. They'd be happy to make a manwich out of you. But the chances of you getting eaten in the road is highly unlikely, and not just in San Diego! In the topography of the ancient Near East, most probably a lion would *not* be roaming the streets of an Israelite town.

Lazy people make up excuses—even imaginary excuses—to avoid doing their work.

2. *The sloth is afraid of his alarm clock.*

The lazybones turns on his bed like a door on the hinges. We've all done this before: hitting the snooze button and then rolling away in retreat, hitting the snooze button and then rolling away in retreat, ad infinitum. The lazybones is a dreamer by night, not by day.

3. *The sloth is afraid of pie.*

The loafer puts his fork in a pie (yum!) but is too lazy to lift it up to his mouth. The effort it takes to scoop the pie into his eponymously named pie-hole is *just too much*. Proverbs 12:27 says the lazy man will hunt his game but is too lazy to cook it. Back then, I suppose building a fire was a mission. But today we have microwaves, and we still burn our mouths on Hot Pockets because we haven't got the willpower to wait the two-minutes requisite for them to cool down! I'd say we're all guilty as charged on this count.

4. *The sloth is scared of books.*

The sluggard is wiser in his own conceit than seven men who can render a reason. Evidently, he thinks he's got the monopoly on truth even if he's never read a book. He imagines he's smarter than a whole college faculty. Interesting fact: 50 percent of high school graduates never finish reading another book for the rest of their lives.

The shiftless sluggard is still alive and well today.

Don't be the butt of Solomon's joke. Getting roasted by the king, the wisest man in all the land, is no fun!

Contrast the sloth with the lamb.

Jesus isn't afraid of the devil who prowls about *like* a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). The Bible doesn't say the devil *is* a roaring lion, but that he prowls *like* a

roaring lion. He pawns himself off as one with paws. Jesus, on the other hand, is the real lion in town. He's the *Lion of the tribe of Judah*, roaring forth the oracles of God.

Jesus isn't afraid of the alarm clock. He rose *a great while before the day* (Mark 1:35).

Jesus isn't afraid of feeding himself. After all, he fed five thousand men—with a lunchbox (Matthew 14:13–21)!

Jesus isn't afraid of studying. He was so precocious at twelve years old that he wowed the scribes and scholars in the temple with his questions and answers. He must've put the *dying* back in *studying* (Luke 2:47).

I suggest we follow the Lamb and not the sloth.

When we're depressed, hard work is often the cure. Paul said that he “despaired of life itself” (2 Corinthians 1:8 NIV). But as I noted before, he also said he outworked all the other apostles.

Like Paul for the kingdom of heaven and Alexander the Great for the kingdom of Macedon—who walked in the mountains seized by a longing—go conquer the world!

When you're tormented by nightmares, start chipping away at your dreams. Hone your craft. Ply your trade. Invest your sweat. Outwork everyone. Let God train your hands for war and your fingers for battle. Get callouses. Train hard. Work till exhaustion swallows you in a haze.

That's how longings get fulfilled.

And what's more, you'll avoid getting trolled by the sage! Feeling depressed?

Go for a swim among the sea creatures.

Practice neuroplasticity.

Talk to God.

Eat a good meal.

Take a nap.

Seek purpose, not happiness.

Work hard.

And for goodness' sake, when you're tired, hungry, and isolated, please just stop thinking.

Chapter 28

Hot Cocoa and Antifreeze

Click on the news and you'll find nothing new: it's cheerless and joyless and it'll inspire you to perspire like Mike Tyson in a spelling bee. Doesn't make you want to skip around. Doesn't make you want to frolic about.

The same can be true of church culture. Sadly, many people think the more miserable we are, the more holy we are.

The book of Philippians begs to differ. Nineteen times in 104 verses Paul talked about joy and its verb form: rejoicing! It takes less than fifteen minutes to read Philippians. So you have two choices: you can change your car insurance with Geico, or you can change your joy with Philippians—either one in fifteen minutes or less.

Philippians is but a microcosm of a whole strain strewn throughout Scripture:

The Bible is filled with joy. Twenty-seven hundred times your Bible uses words like “joy,” “rejoicing,” “gladness,” “feasting,” “celebrating,” “happy,” etc.³⁰

And for Paul to contribute to this sacred optimism by writing Philippians is nothing to be sneezed at, seeing as how he's like Billy Graham garbed in an orange jumpsuit saying, “This is such a good day!”

Paul was a prisoner!

My mom reads Philippians every single day. It's far and away her favorite book. No wonder she's the epitome of California sunlight. She's the most joyful person I've ever met. She's a lump of sunshine.

If her life verse was “smite him,” that might be a different story.

Paul told the Philippians things like, “in every prayer of mine making request for you all with *joy*” and “I *rejoice*, yes, and will *rejoice*” and called them his “*joy and crown*” (1:4, 18; 4:1 emphasis mine).

Let us allow Paul’s joy to rub off on us!

Paul said the kingdom of God was, among other things, “joy in the Holy Ghost” (Romans 14:17 KJV). Jesus said to enter the kingdom we must become as children (Matthew 18:3).

The average child laughs four hundred times a day. The average adult laughs fifteen times a day.

Umm...looks like I need to up my daily mirth quota!

I don’t want to be like grumpy Jonah who wouldn’t go to Mosul and its ISIS caliphate—ancient day Nineveh—unless a whale dragged him there. I want to be joyful!

Care to join me on my joy quest?

Don’t accept Puddleglum into your heart. Don’t be a disciple of Eeyore.

Be a sacred optimist instead!

Mark Driscoll insightfully pointed out the difference between an Optimist and a Pessimist: The optimist says, “The glass is half full with hot chocolate. I’m going to drink it all!” The pessimist says, “The glass is half empty with antifreeze. I’m going to drink it all!”

It’s easy for people to think that when God made them, he made a mistake, not a miracle. Look at the Declaration of Independence! It promises us life. It promises us liberty. But when it comes to happiness, best of luck! It only promises we are free to embark on the pursuit of happiness. The best that our most cherished document can do is basically declare, “Happiness is elusive and the secret to getting it is anyone’s guess, but you’re welcome to pursue it!”

That’s why I love Philippians.

It's an introduction to *joy*!

Sin is not mentioned once in the book. This is written to a *healthy* church. Paul's relationship with the Philippians was warm and fantastic, with loads of reciprocal love (unlike the Corinthians, who thought Mardi Gras was how you grow in the Lord). Philippians makes you feel all fuzzy and warm and toasty inside. Like Goshen, which was an enclave in Egypt, Philippi was a colony in Rome. Likewise, we create outposts for the kingdom of heaven on earth, not to Romanize the region like Philippi but to heavenize the world as denizens of the kingdom of God!

Joy is the dominant theme running through the book of Philippians, and how this letter is needed today. I'll reiterate the above in a moment because it is germane to our praxis, but first some context for the book where Paul talked about *joy* and its cognate *rejoice* sixteen-plus times, and he talked about the mind or mindset eleven times.

Philippians gives us a whole new way of thinking. This joy is not for us to hoard, but for us to disseminate!

A little background will be helpful here.

Philippi was in a hot Mediterranean valley, right on the tip of Greece, a few miles inland from the Aegean Sea. The city was abuzz and teeming with life. Tens of thousands of Romans were moving there from all over the empire. It's been called a Rome away from Rome.

Ghost town it was not.

The city was eight miles in from the sea. It had a hot, dry climate. It had rocks and flowers and olive trees. There were Roman soldiers all over the place. Even though Philippi is in Greece, Latin inscriptions were on all the buildings. You would see statues of Caesar and the Greco-Roman pantheon. In the center of the city was a temple dedicated to the imperial cult of Caesar.

The Roman Empire ruled the world from England to India. Rome had only a few colonies, which helped it maintain rule so much longer than most conquering nations. A colony like Philippi would spread Roman law and justice and art and theater and dance and culture to the city and the region around it. This keeps things nice and Roman even from far distances.

In Paul's day the word *gospel* was already in circulation; it was a royal announcement about a king coming to power. Yay, Constantine or Aurelius or Trajan is in power! Let's celebrate the good news. Let's celebrate the gospel!

Paul frequently talked about "gospel" in Philippians, stealing the term from Rome. But Paul was preaching an alternative gospel, and an alternative colony!

In Philippians 1:27, as the main proposition plugged into the grid of Roman rhetoric, he said, "live as citizens of heaven" (NLT). In Greek, "live as citizens" is the verb form of the noun "colony."

Philippi is in Greece. It's one of the subject states, but a colony was granted the exact same legal status as Rome, even though it was eight hundred miles away!³¹ Philippi was populated, for the most part, by veterans from the Roman wars. They had Roman citizenship. There was a deep and fierce loyalty to the emperor. (Have you ever met vets? They're patriotic to the core.) Your job as a citizen of Rome in Philippi was to bring Roman culture to bear on the region in and around Philippi. That was the function of a colony: to Romanize the world.

When Paul said, "live as citizens of the gospel of the King," that was Caesar language. Philippians were citizens of Rome celebrating the good news about Caesar! But Paul said we are citizens of a different kingdom (*Christos* means "king"), an alternative gospel, and another colony: an outpost for the kingdom of God.

Why all that history?

The whole point of Philippi was to Romanize the world, but we are a colony of *God's* kingdom and are to heavenize the world. The book of Philippians is not just about how you can have joy, but how you can spread joy! When we are so filled with sacred optimism that we can't contain it, our hope gone wild will start catching fire and become a chain reaction.

No wonder Paul used the word "gospel" more times per verse in Philippians than it's used in any other book in the Bible. It's good news! This letter is chock full of joy and rejoicing!

From prison.

That detail—the fact Paul wrote Philippians while chained up in an ancient dungeon—is important. Here's why.

SEAL trainer Chad likes to take me to the desert, flash a wicked little grin, and say, "I wonder how much we can suffer in the next hour and a half?" We proceed to do farmer carries up a mountain surrounded by horses or doing sprints and things. He has us pull sleds. We do Atlas tosses and surf torture and row out to the ocean oil rigs and get tossed and pummeled by waves.

He reminds me how much *fun* suffering can be! It's a blast doing miserable things.

Chad, sleep-deprived and hypothermic during SEAL training's Hell Week, had even experienced hallucinations that Ninja Turtles were popping out of the water to attack him! He bopped them with his paddle. That sounds so exciting to me. He once told me, and he wrote this in his fascinating book *SEAL of God*, that the guy who everyone thought would graduate BUD/S—an athlete in a league of his own—quit at the beginning of Hell Week. Whereas a slightly overweight video-game addict, who seemed doomed to fail, thrived so much he actually helped Chad during a moment of need.

The people you think will make it through Hell Week don't.

The people you think will not succeed are the ones who graduate.

You may feel like you'll never make it through...

Just remember the last are first. The prisoners have joy. The city Paul never intended to visit, which was really a rebound, became arguably the healthiest church he started.

Philippians is a case study of joy through disappointment, persecution, and suffering.

Mega Joy And Grumpy Goggusmos

Lo, a litany of fun facts! During the holidays:

The average couple has *seven* arguments.

Eighty-eight percent of people feel stressed.

Fifty-six percent of people bite their lip with family. (It's either that or *bite* your family during the holidays.)

Forty-two percent of people unbutton their pants after a holiday meal (I'm guessing the other 58 percent have their button fly off automatically!)³² In other words, the glittery lights on houses don't always reflect what's going on inside. I'm writing this during the Christmas season, and let me tell you, the world has bad news, but the Word has good news for the holidays! To announce the birth of Jesus is *good news of great joy!* That's what the Bible says. In Greek, *charan megalēn* literally mean "mega joy!"

Dr. Karl Pillemer is a professor of Human Development at Cornell University. He has met with twelve hundred senior citizens to discuss the meaning of life. He was "shocked" to learn that most people near the end of their lives have the same regret: "I wish I hadn't spent so much of my lifetime worrying."

Are you going to choose worry or mega joy?

It comes down to your mindset.

So many believers look like they got baptized in lemon juice (or prune juice). They wear a facial expression that indicates they ate bad Chinese food. But why would we settle for stress and anxiety, worrying and arguing during the holidays, when God offers us *mega joy*?

Why settle for *seven* arguments when we can opt for complete peace?

Paul told the Philippians—our letter acting as a textbook on joy—to do all things without complaining and arguing. The word translated “complaining” or “murmurings” is an unusual word in Greek: *goggusmos*. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, it has an intriguing backstory. It’s actually the word used of the children of Israel in their desert journeyings! In Exodus 15:24, Exodus 16:2, and Numbers 16:41, we are told the story of how the Israelites *murmured* against their leadership. Moses got so annoyed at them he lost his temper and whacked a rock with his staff.

Goggusmos is pronounced “gongusomos”—it’s onomatopoeic. It phonetically *sounds* like its actual meaning. It describes the low, discontented, and threatening muttering of a mob who distrusts the leaders, people on the brink of revolt.

So many arguments come back to people grumbling about their leaders.

Say the word *Biden* or *Trump* in any given room and just see what happens.

Bombs away!

Pastor Mark Driscoll, in his sermon series on “Joy To The World,” reported a study revealing that the top three subjects to be avoided during the holidays are *politics*, personal matters, and religion.

That means you can’t really talk about anything of substance.

Sally: “How’s the weather?”

Steve: “Sometimes it’s hot, sometimes it’s cold.”

Sally: “Yes, it does that.”

Steve: “Okay, nice talking, Aunt Sally. See you next Christmas.”

Or this:

“How are you doing?”

“None of your business.”

“I’m your mom.”

We can’t talk about politics because the partisan divide is more polarizing than it’s been since Vietnam and maybe even since the Civil War.

We forget that our church leaders and political leaders are human, and we objectify them and grumble against them just like the children of Israel did in their day.

Do all things without *goggusmos*! (Try saying that from the back of your throat)!

Then Paul went on to say we should do all things without disputing, or without questionings. This word—*dialogismos*—kills any attempt at healthy dialogue. It describes useless, and in some cases ill-natured, debating and doubting. In the life of a hope dealer there needn’t be endless quarreling and questioning. There can be perfect godfidence and placid trust!

So rather than arguing, debating, and being stressed out during the holidays, trying to bite your lip, mumbling, and grumbling, why not lay hold of the mega joy God offers you?

Dostoevsky gave a wonderful insight on how to practically lay hold of all this good cheer. Reading him on the plane the other day, I came across this great line to illustrate my point: “Man is fond of reckoning up his troubles but does not count his joys. If he counted them up as he ought, he would see that every lot has enough happiness provided for it.”³³

We would find happiness if we spent less time reckoning up our troubles and more time counting up our joys.

Joy to the world!

Let's throw sacred optimism around like so much Christmas confetti and show the world a Holiday Hope Gone Wild!

And do not soon forget, my fellow happy elves and mischievous creatures, that this is not relegated to once a year. All 365 days we are called to spread the Christmas cheer!

Judgment Day

If you're still not convinced that one of the Bible's main "rules" for us is to have joy, consider this written in the Talmud: "A person will be called to account on Judgment Day for every permissible thing he might have enjoyed but did not."

Wow!

Now that's the ancient wisdom! (And yes, that's really in there.)

God's going to judge you for not having more fun?!

Before you write off the Talmud as legend, remember that Jesus himself was anointed with the oil of gladness above all his fellows. Unlike John the Baptist with his funeral lyre, Jesus played pipes in the marketplace that the children might dance.

Of the ninety times that Jesus was addressed in the Bible, sixty times he was called Teacher. And what was Rabbi Jesus' favorite subject? The kingdom of God. When one enters the kingdom, Jesus defined it as coming "into the joy of the Lord" (Matthew 25:23).

One of Paul's definitions of the kingdom of God was "joy in the Holy Ghost" (Romans 14:17 KJV).

All too often we forget to have fun. We are too stressed. We are so anxious, worried, and overwrought that we have no time to pursue enjoyment, explore joy, and live buoyantly.

Why catastrophize? Why be dominated by the tyranny of the urgent. *Rest* into God's goodness. Embark on funventures!

David wrote, "You have put gladness in my heart, more than when their grain and new wine abound" (Psalm 4:7 NASB).

I'm with the psalmist on this one.

Chapter 29

Paul: ESPN Analyst Extraordinaire

It wasn't all sainthood and cherries though for Paul. He and his Philippian friends were undergoing major oppression. He told them they needn't be terrified of their enemies—a metaphor from horses when they tremble and get sorely frightened. As with the horse in Job 39:22, they could mock at fear and not turn back from the sword!

Their high honor was not just being saints and servants but being oppressed for the sake of the King. Paul said of suffering, “for unto you it is given” (Philippians 1:29 KJV), as if it's a gift! As Careless the martyr said (if you're looking for baby names, might I suggest “Careless”?), “Such an honour it is, as the greatest angel in heaven is not permitted to have, God forgive me mine unthankfulness.”

The words of a martyr!

Paul, likewise, gloried in tribulations. The Philippians, too, should have seen suffering as a *gift*. To illuminate this thesis, we will need to flip the channel to ESPN.

In this short letter to the Philippians, you can see Paul's love of a good sports metaphor. In every Greek city the gymnasium was much more than a place to train your body. It was where Socrates talked about the metaphysical, where philosophers and sophists and their ilk found an audience. The Greek cities were often at war, but when it came time for the Olympic Games, a month's truce was declared. The athletes came, but so did historians and poets to give readings of their latest works, and so did sculptors (whose names are not in water writ) to make statues of the winners.

In Corinth and Ephesus, where there were the Isthmian Games and Pan-Ionian Games

respectively, Paul had probably been a spectator. Something about these sports resonated with the apostle. In his various letters he talked about boxers and about the most famous contest, the footrace. He talked about pressing on toward the goal and the judge awarding the prize at the end of the race, the victor's laurel crown, and wrestling for the mastery! He knew all about the rigorous training of the athletes, and Paul beat his own body into submission like a sporting star.

When you study the Greek of Philippians, you'll find that Paul talked oodles about sports. He said the Philippians were his *stephanos*—a crown given by Caesar to the victor of a sport, similar to our gold medal today. Picture Nadal biting the trophy. Paul also said, “having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear is in me” (Philippians 1:30). *Conflict* is an athletic term. The Greek word is *agôn*, which means “contest” or “agony,” suggestive of an athletic arena. It was initially used for gladiators in competition (there was even an arena in Philippi). Paul experienced this athletic agony! In Philippi he'd been scourged and imprisoned. But he redeemed his conflict into an honor and his training into a potential trophy, a chance to achieve something fine for the kingdom of the heavens.

Paul also told the Philippians that he “presses on for the prize” (Philippians 3:14), another athletic term picturing a runner going hard out for the finish tape, where you see him collapse in exhaustion. And he also wrote of his desire not to have “run in vain or labored in vain” (Philippians 2:16).

The word “labor” Paul used is *kopian* in Greek, which can mean “to labor to the point of utter exhaustion.” It can also describe the toil of the athlete's training. His prayer was that his training hadn't been for naught. It would do us well to remember what Paul understood: faith is hard, but it's not for nothing.

The Lord is our prize and our exceedingly great reward. He is that gift (John 4:10), the

desire of all nations (Haggai 2:7), the benefit (1 Timothy 6:2), the good tidings of great joy to all people (Luke 2:10). This is better than the best of trophies.

Just as the shortest chapter in the Bible (Psalm 117) is in Latin called *De Beneficiis Messiae*, telling us to praise the Lord with violence, the benefit of our great reward galvanizes us to train violently like boxers and run as athletes do, but we strain for eternal prizes. Laurel leaves on crowns fade and wither away, but Psalm 117 says God's truth endures forever.

The Jewish doctors say that the word *emeth*—here used for “truth”—consists of the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *aleph*, the middle letter, *mem*, and the last letter, *tau*, proving that God is alpha and omega! God starts the work fast off the blocks, and he finishes that work when we get crowns and trophies and obtain the exceeding great reward which is to know even as we are known (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Who would've thought ESPN would've held the secrets of the cosmos? And who knew sports were such a major part of Philippians? So, run and sweat and train, following in the sandal-prints of its disciplined disciple of the King.

You and I are utterly incapable of anything other than ultimate winning and maximum sending! In the deep and little-known places of Scripture, we have found troves of sacred optimism and riches of glory. We are called to a high and heavenly hope gone wild. We will work our fingers to the bone even in the face of lions. Our *ikigai* and *kaizen* will be our stay as we rebuild the city.

You may not find letters like *tau* or pictures of a molten sea standing upon twelve oxen on your pillow embroidery, but haven't these passages proven to be pillows upon which we can rest our tired souls? Even brutal stories like the Great and Terrible Flood show a God who lays

down his arms—his *rainbow*—in the sky and promises peace to men. We trust in a God who made the whole universe a song, from cosmic singing stars to microscopic vibrating strings, and called us to be guardians of all this sacred space (shoes are illegal because everywhere I step is holy ground!). He makes sacred rooftop trances and spinning sky-wheels and altered states of mind, speaking to us in all sorts of amazing and amusing ways. He speaks, and all we have to do is have ears to hear.

So, my fellow hope dealer, incline your ear to the ancient words: “Do not let your heart be troubled” (John 14:1). In Greek it is literally, “Do not let your heart shutter.” Don’t have a heartquake. You are watched by angels. You’re a permanent (not temporary *paroikos*) home for the Creator who animates the cosmos! He speaks to *you*.

Who would’ve thought words translated from the Leningrad Codex, a manuscript 1,014 years old, could offer us such wild hope today? It dispenses upon us not only ivory tower Sophia—lofty wisdom—but pragmatical *phronesis* so we can know how to buoyantly negotiate everyday life.

The Bible tells us of hedges and shepherds that protect us, lamps that ward off the night, and a captivity far greater than digital addiction, for we are servants of a King who doesn’t just demand gifts from men but gives gifts to men, leading captive his captives!

The Bible is a book that encourages us to name our demons, to growl like bears and moan like doves, to never sweep our grief under the rug. The Bible is honest about how awful and hideous and gory life can be (à la raped concubines cut into twelve pieces and sent to the twelve tribes of Israel). But it also offers us a God who gives us sleep and food and grace and peace. It offers us the hope that the tears we cry now will be of great help to us later on in our journey.

The Scripture promises us not sickness but health, white stones and morning stars, fountains of life and hidden bowls of manna, if we overcome. So, overcome we shall! We will best all manner of goblins and noontday demons like spiritual SEALS. And sealed we are: we came from God and return to God. As we venture toward a city of pearl and a throne of rainbow, we will overcome by telling our story, just as the Bible in turn is not a rule book but a storybook!

We've explored an ancient tome that tells of a God who invites us into such union that we can no longer decipher between where the branch ends and the vine begins. A God who calls us *hagios*—saints—and helps us live up to the full stature of Christ. He saves us from grumpy *goggusmos* and helps us to love even the most difficult people, and he turns us into radical fundies when it comes to *love*. After all, we are all just walking one another home. This high and huge and happy mindset rescues us from our own grouchiness and smallness. With the royal announcement of the King resounds the words: *mega joy*. Remember, we shall be called to account on judgment day for every permissible thing we might have enjoyed but did not!

The world might sip on a half-empty glass of antifreeze, but we prefer a cup that “runneth over” with hot cocoa. We will be wildly and *rebelliously* hopeful. We are, like my mother, lumps of sunshine in a culture gone dark.

The Bible is a book that tells us of a God who destined us to partner in his mission to heavenize the world. Even when it feels like we are weathering hell on earth, we take heart knowing we are forged by adversity. Because in God's world, even the darkness proves not to be the domain of devils but the advent of angels.

About The Author

Ben has a simple goal to reach the world with the message of hope. His TV show has aired in 180 countries on over 20 networks and his radio show has aired on over 400 stations nationwide. Ben has been featured on Fox, ABC, Good Morning America, Freeform, Hallmark Channel, Psychology Today, and many other national platforms. He has written 2 bestselling books—“Optimisfits” and “Flirting with Darkness.” Ben has spoken across the globe, including Angel Stadium to 34,000 attendees in one night.

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¹⁹ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 1993), 1469.

²⁰ Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), chap. 10.

²¹ John Green, *Paper Towns* (New York: Dutton Books, 2018), 32.

²² John Trapp, *Matthew*, John Trapp Complete Commentary (London, 1647), s.v. “Matthew 8:11,” accessed on StudyLight.org, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/jtc/matthew-8.html>.

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³⁰ Mark Driscoll, “Joy To The World #1—Find Joy Even When You Are Lonely,” published by Real Faith by Mark Driscoll, YouTube video, 1:09:25, December 2, 2019, <https://youtu.be/bcoyaOCELxo>.

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³² Driscoll, “Joy To The World #1.”

³³ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (repr.; 1864, Edinburgh: Canongate, 2020), chap. 11.