

ABSTRACT

Anything But Boring

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Anything But Boring is a collection of stories, reflections, and musings culminating into the central argument that the Christian life is anything but boring. Drawing on the words of Jesus in John 10:10(NIV)—“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full”— this work of creative non-fiction is a rebellion of sorts against the dull, drab, and watered-down “Christianity” embraced by many in the American church today. Through personal stories, Biblical passages, and the works of well-known Christian writers, this thesis argues that understanding the grace and answering the call of Jesus Christ results in a life that is anything but boring. Written with a winsome and vulnerable voice, *Anything But Boring* is an open letter to Christian peers urging them to live in the fullness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

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ANYTHING BUT BORING

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Baylor University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Honors Program

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To Jesus Christ, the protagonist of this story

To Caroline, my companion on this journey

CHAPTER ONE

The Epidemic of Boredom

I never really took boredom seriously until I became a substitute teacher. I had seen boredom before then. Sudoku puzzles. Golf on television. Long car rides. I knew boredom was a thing, but I never thought much about it. That changed when I went back to middle school.

My grays didn't match. I walked into the middle school with light gray sweatpants and a heather gray hoodie. My brown slippers further clashed with my grays and just screamed college bum. I gave the middle school security guard a confident head nod, checked in at the office at 10:57 AM, and headed towards the stairwell.

The halls were choreographed chaos; the 12 and 13 year olds danced around in sloppily formed cliques like schools of fish. I hurried up to the room where I was supposed to be helping as a tutor, barely dodging a herd of jocks. After winding my way through the hall, I arrived at my destination. The door was closed. A yellow sticky note on the door read — *Mrs. Tibben is gone today. Report to Mrs. Houston's class.*

I went back down the flight of stairs and asked a very tardy kid in the hallway where Mrs. Houston's classroom was. He pointed down the hall.

“Bruh. It's right there.”

I opened the door to fifty middle schoolers in a cramped classroom. The air was thick with body odor, paper airplanes and four-letter words. Most of the students formed a mosh pit in the middle of the room. A group of ten played what looked like a game of freeze tag. The fluorescents in the ceiling flickered. No teacher was in sight. I tapped one

of the kids on the shoulder and asked where the teacher was. He nodded towards the front of the room.

I slithered through the mosh pit and saw a stooped figure at a large gray desk in the front of the classroom.

“Excuse me, Mrs.Houston?”

“That’s me.” Her voice was tired.

“I’m here to help Mrs. Tibben’s class with tutori---” Before I could finish explaining why I was there, Mrs. Houston cut me off.

“MRS. TIBBEN’S CLASS, THIS IS YOUR SUBSTITUTE TEACHER.” In her decades in the profession, Mrs. Houston hadn’t mastered classroom management but she had the “teacher’s voice” down. “FOLLOW HIM AND BE GOOD.”

Before I could say a word, she turned to me and said nonchalantly:

“Ladarius is gone, so you’re going to have one less than usual.”

“Umm...Who’s Ladarius?”

“Oh that’s right. You’re the sub. You don’t know the kids. Just know you’ll have one less.” She turned and waddled back to her desk.

I had a split-second window to do the responsible thing. I could hurry over to the very old, very tired Mrs. Houston and explain that I was not in fact the substitute teacher. But at this point, thirty kids had already packed up their bags and were staring at me like I was an exhibit in the zoo. I overheard one whisper to the other “This might be a cool sub.” There was only one way to satisfy the kids, the burnt-out teacher, and my nineteen-year-old thirst for adventure.

“CLASS, FOLLOW ME.” I tried my own teaching voice on for size. I led my flock out into the hallways and herded them up the staircase, a shepherd with a semester of college under my belt and no teaching certification to speak of.

The kids stormed into the classroom. I grabbed a stool near the front of the room and silently watched the students stake out their territory. First, the ringleader of the class went directly to the class hamster, got him out of his cage, and set him on the laptop cart for “morning exercises.” A couple nestled into what must be their spot—behind me right next to the classroom’s closet. The guy (who looked like he was at least 25 years old and could bench press me) draped his arm around the girl and just stared at me, waiting for a reaction. I waved. One very bold student in the class posted up next to the sink, propped his cellphone up on the counter, and started blasting a Jay-Z song from the phone’s speaker.

I went up to the whiteboard and wrote “Mr. Greenwald” with a blue dry-erase marker. My scrawl was barely legible, but the title gave me a perceived sense of authority.

Given that I didn’t have a lecture prepared, I figured it’d be a good idea to take on a discussion-based approach. It was time to ask a big existential question. I walked up to the whiteboard again and scrawled the question “What is middle school?” in huge block letters.

I sat on the teacher stool and surveyed the class, furrowing my brow, trying my hardest to look professorial. I asked the question out loud.

“Class, what is middle school?” A hand shot up. I pointed to the girl in the front row with pink beads in her hair.

“Middle school is lame.” She stretched out the last word—LAAAAAAME. The class murmured their approval. They were beginning to loosen up.

“Alright, great. Thanks for sharing. Let’s write that down.” I went to the board and wrote “lame” in big letters right under the original question.

“What else is middle school? I’m not a real teacher. Say whatever you want.”

A hand shot up over by the sink. It was the kid who was bumping his music. I pointed at him. He scooted off the desk and stood tall and proud like a presidential candidate on the campaign trail.

“Middle school is BORING!” he shouted.

The word reverberated off the wall. The class roared its approval. Heads bobbed up and down in agreement. High fives and fist bumps were exchanged. The class clearly shared his sentiment. I wrote “BORING” up on the white board in big block letters. This class was *bored*.

The final twenty minutes of class were fairly uneventful. We played a game of hangman, a girl threw a water balloon at me, the class hamster went missing, and then the bell rang. I walked out with the kids and went down to the front office. I explained to the office lady that I was not, in fact, a certified substitute teacher. I was a nineteen-year-old kid, and if she could get both a teacher and a janitor up to Mrs. Tibben’s room, that’d probably be a really good thing. She pointed me towards the door with the faintest hint of a smile on her face.

As I drove back to campus, I processed through the previous forty-five minutes. I thought back to Jay-Z kid posted up by the sink, Mrs. Houston (bless her heart) dodging paper airplanes every single day, and my impending jail sentence for impersonating a

teacher. But mostly I thought about that word. **Boring.** Those thirty kids in my classroom (Can I call it my classroom?) agreed with such gusto that they were bored. Questions ran through my mind. What was boredom? Why were those kids so bored?

* * *

In college, when you want to know about something, you look it up on Wikipedia. It gets you good grades as long as you don't cite it in the bibliography. When I got back to my dorm room, I looked up boredom on Wikipedia. It felt strange looking up an emotion. I felt like I was on that website WebMD, that site where you type in how you feel and it spits out possible diagnoses and treatments, but I was typing in an emotional state of the soul, not the strep throat virus.

In the article, I read that boredom was defined as an emotional state containing two specific components—*a disinterest in one's surroundings and a perceived absence of anything to do*. That makes sense, I thought. Those kids were bored because they weren't interested in middle school, and they didn't really feel like middle school gave them anything to do.

This wasn't altogether that surprising. When I was in middle school, I was bored, too. At lunch, my seven friends and I would sit around a round table and talk about fantasy football every single day of the year. If you're not familiar with fantasy football, it's a fake football game that you play on your computer. It's a last resort for most people on how to spend their time, but it had become our first resort, if that tells you anything about the type of lives we were living. Nothing exciting happened except for that one day

when our league commissioner discovered that I had traded three peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for my friend Bryan's star wide receiver. Bryan took the fall and had to go apologize to the whole school on the intercom for committing the "heinous act of fantasy football fraud." If you had a different middle school or junior high experience, one filled of purpose and meaning, you were the exception, not the rule.

I scrolled down the Wikipedia page. The page was longer than I was expecting. I kept reading and boredom started hitting closer to home. The more I read, the less I thought boredom was confined to middle school and office cubicles. Boredom was serious. All sorts of famous dead thinkers had weighed in on the topic in the past two hundred years.

Philosophers with big names—Soren Kierkegaard, Arthur Schopenhauer, Blaise Pascal, and Martin Heidegger—had all developed sophisticated ways of thinking about the phenomenon. Heidegger especially mentioned its severity— "Profound boredom, drifting here and there in the abysses of our existence like a muffling fog, removes all things and men and oneself along with it into a remarkable indifference." Psychologist Erich Fromm spoke of its consequences stating that boredom is "perhaps the most important source of aggression and destructiveness today." Kierkegaard was fairly blunt, arguing "boredom is the root of all evil." Boredom wasn't limited to the writings of dead philosophers, though. Green Day, Blink 182 and Iggy Pop wrote songs about boredom. Studies linked boredom to everything from drug abuse in teens to pathological gambling in adults. Close links had been found between boredom and the rise of clinical depression. Boredom wasn't touch football. Boredom was serious.

* * *

After that class, I ordered a book off of Amazon called *A Philosophy of Boredom* by Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen. It came in the mail a few days later, an unassuming book with a bland gray cover. It was the saddest book that I ever read—even sadder than Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, which is impressive because everyone dies in *Hamlet* but no one dies in *A Philosophy of Boredom*.

On the first page of this book, the author explains that he wrote the book after the boredom-related suicide of a friend. From that grim opening to the last page of the book, the author demonstrates that boredom is not a minor issue or an innocent affliction. Rather, boredom is portrayed as **devastating**. Svendsen writes: “That boredom has serious consequences for a society, not only for individuals, ought to be beyond all doubt” (Svendsen 17).

To establish this point, the author delves deeper into the meaning of the word boredom. The author argues that boredom is not just sitting at home on a Saturday night because plans fell through. Boredom, rather, is a deep existential problem where we search for meaning in our lives but cannot find it. Our lives are boring because our lives lack meaning. A rise of boredom is intimately linked with a decrease in personal and societal meaning. As our world gets worse at conveying meaning, the author demonstrates that our world becomes more and more bored.

In addition to being devastating, the author also shows that boredom is **nearly universal** in Western culture. Boredom is not something that a few people here or there are struggling with; boredom is something that has invaded our entire culture. Almost one

hundred percent of the population suffers from some form of boredom. In a summation of the times, the author states that, “We live in a culture of boredom”(Svendsen 7).

Finally, the author concludes his points with a rather bleak summation—**there is no solution.** There’s no hope. Boredom is something that must simply be endured. It cannot be overcome by any act of the will. There is no source of meaning and purpose that can solve our boredom problem. By fate, we are doomed to boredom. With the sense of finality, Svendsen writes: “Boredom has to be accepted as an unavoidable fact, as life’s own gravity. This is no grand solution, for the problem of boredom has none” (Svendsen 154).

See why it’s even sadder than *Hamlet*? Boredom, according to a boredom expert, is a devastating and nearly universal state of mind caused by the fact that our lives lack purpose and meaning. On top of all that, there’s no cure. This picture of boredom painted by this book is less like an innocent emotional state and more like a zombie apocalypse film. Boredom is not a minor affliction experienced by a few people in our world. Boredom is an epidemic. It is a wave of meaninglessness and purposelessness subtly sweeping over our world today, and there’s no vaccine to be found.

As I read the book, I found myself reluctantly nodding my head in agreement. Sure, maybe the author was being a tad dramatic in his summary, but I couldn’t disagree with his main point. Bored is a terrible thing to be. There’s seriousness about boredom that gets to me, the knowledge that I’ve been there and it’s not a good place to be. I’ve stayed up at night staring at the ceiling asking myself “what am I doing here?” Boredom slowly sedates, like a slow-acting anesthesia that puts the soul into a state of unconsciousness. I’d rather be angry, tired, or stressed than bored. Those other negative

emotional states can be attributed to a specific something. I'm angry because a car cut me off. I'm tired because I stayed up all night watching season four of *Seinfeld*. I'm stressed because of a twenty-page paper due tomorrow. But boredom is different.

Boredom is when you perceive that there's both nothing around you to capture your attention and also nothing to do. Boredom is when it feels like there's nothing interesting going on around you and nothing that's worth sweating or sacrificing for. Boredom is pervasive, hard to pin down, and often feels like impossible to get rid of. Boredom sucks the life out of you. It numbs and paralyzes and prevents movement or change or growth. Bored is a terrible thing to be. The book put it this way—"Boredom has to do with finitude and nothingness. It is a death within life, a non-life"(Svendsen 40). These are powerful words. They show the depth of boredom, the utter despair that profound boredom brings.

There's only one out, according to the book. If there were some grand story, some grand meaning outside of us in the universe, then boredom would not be inevitable. At one point, the author states that "Boredom is an expression of a profound despair at not finding anything that can satisfy the soul's boundless needs" (Svendsen 58). If something or maybe someone could fill the void of ultimate meaning, could provide capital-P Purpose or capital-M Meaning, then we wouldn't have to be bored.

The author dismisses this "out" abruptly, like it was hardly worth the mention. Because nothing in the universe is able to satisfy our soul's needs, we are doomed to boredom. Surely the universe does not cater to the boundless needs of our individual souls. Right?

In the book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis confronts the boundless needs of the soul and proposes an answer:

The Christian says, “Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists.” A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. (Lewis 136-137)

What if boredom is pointing us towards something? What if this deep boundless need that people feel is actually pointing towards an infinite and boundless God, a God who created this world, a God who offers purpose and meaning to those who submit to Him?

CHAPTER TWO

What *The Notebook* Taught Me About Boredom

I had an epiphany last summer while watching the blockbuster chick flick *The Notebook*. Please don't judge me. Chick flicks have a place in a man's movie collection. The epiphany came about halfway through. Let me recap the scene for those of you who aren't familiar.

The female lead of the film, Allie, goes on this date with a wealthy, boring guy who wears fancy suits and his hair slicked back like an auctioneer. And then this greaser guy decides to propose. He gets down on a knee and flips open this jewelry box with a massive diamond ring inside. Her parents want her to be with him. He's a nice enough guy. He'll provide for her, and they'll have an okay life together. So she says a reluctant yes. At this point in the movie, I wanted to throw my shoe through the TV.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING, ALLIE? YOU'RE GONNA TURN OUT LIKE YOUR MOM, TRAPPED IN A LOVELESS MARRIAGE.”

I was frustrated because Allie had another suitor who was much better than this gussied up pretty boy. For all the comfort and security that this first guy offered her, her heart was still with Noah. Noah was a rough and tumble guy who worked at the lumberyard. They had a fling a few years back until Allie's parents shut things down because Noah didn't have any money.

At the end of the day, I knew Allie wanted to be with Noah. Allie loves him. He's exciting and mysterious with a heart of gold that would do anything for her. She only said yes to the other guy because she wants security. The other guy was safe. Noah was

adventurous. Life with the other guy would be comfortable. Life with Noah would be dangerous, a wild goose chase full of romantic thrills and daring adventures and deep, enduring love.

After she gets engaged, Allie doesn't feel quite right. She remembers Noah and the love she had for him. She leaves her fiancé for a trip back to Noah. It's a little sketchy, seeing as she just promised to marry this guy and now she's going to see her ex, but Hollywood loves that stuff. Anyway, after visiting Noah and filling him in on the engagement, Allie tells Noah she needs to go back to the other guy. That's when Noah drops the line.

"You're bored." He shouts with conviction. *"You're bored and you know it."* He knows Allie. He knows she wants something more. But she fights him on that and calls him some words I can't print here. She's lashing out because she's afraid. Noah is risky. He makes pennies over at the lumberyard. He's better but he's not safe. She asks a few questions, clearly not excited about giving this a shot. Why? Because she's settling. She's settling for what's easier. She's settling for a lesser life because it's more inside her comfort zone, easier, more secure.

* * *

"You're bored. You're bored and you know it." Those words reverberated around my skull for a few moments. They did what all the great movie lines do—exited the screenplay and spoke to my soul. I was Allie. No, I wasn't a girl caught up in a hopeless

love triangle. But I was bored. *I was bored and I knew it.* Noah's diagnosis hit me straight between the eyes.

I wasn't bored in the way that we talked about last chapter, lamenting that there's no purpose or meaning in the universe, but I was bored nonetheless. Not every day but many days, I wasn't living the words that I said I believed. I would settle for this really safe version of Christianity. It was less of an existential boredom and more of a boredom that children complain of to their parents—*dad, this is boring...there's nothing to do...can we do something fun please?*

Like Allie, I was faced with two options. Each day that I woke up, I was given this choice between two things: live in cutesy, lukewarm, bumper sticker Christianity lite® or in the extravagant, ridiculous call of the vibrant, world-changing, earth-shattering good news of Jesus Christ.

And like Allie, most days I was settling. I would go the safe route, choosing comfort and security over risk and love and commitment. I was settling for the path of least resistance, for lots of talk but little walk, for small stories and small ambitions. Most days I was choosing the boring route like Allie, saying a reluctant yes to Christianity lite®, a Christianity where church was just an early Sunday matinee show, Jesus was just a distant savior figure, and the cross was just a pendant around my neck.

* * *

I was a full-time bored Christian once. I went to the 10:30 service every Sunday and doodled on my program throughout the sermon. I showed up every Wednesday night

at the youth gathering, centered around S'mores and sex talks and enticing summer vacations. I snuck into the college gathering on Thursday nights and tried to raise my hands at the right point in the final worship song. I went to all of it. I had the routine down pat—show up, get talked at, feel a tiny pang of guilt, get told to come back next week, and go home.

The circles that I ran in didn't look much like that first Christian community of Jesus's disciples or any current vibrant expressions of fellowship. The way I viewed church was more like a movie theatre—a place to go to sit quietly in air conditioning and watch a production, occasionally pulling out my phone to text friends during an especially dull moment. During the ride home, I would critique the music volume and the sermon length and ask the subtly me-centered question “Did you like the talk?”

My small group at the time felt more like a book club in the suburbs, a place where Christian comparison and petty gossip undermined half-hearted attempts to create a cohesive, authentic, and welcoming community. I'd love to blame my pastor or my church or my small group leader, but I can't. It wasn't the fault of these institutions or the well-meaning pastors and leaders behind them.

My boredom problem went way deeper than any person or institution. It went past these institutions and into my heart. I was the problem. I was bored because of me. Later on, you'll hear more of my story. For now, I'll just say this. *It is an unsettling feeling when our beliefs about the world don't shape the way we live or feel within the world.*

This is what it is to be a bored Christian. It is to live a life of contradiction—to live within a paradox. It is to profess faith in a God who loves deeply, forgives freely, and calls His children to live this abundant life for Him exclusively, and then completely

disregard these beliefs when it came to actual life. Pastor Mark Batterson, in his book *Wild Goose Chase*, echoes this sentiment: “Boredom isn’t just boring; boredom is wrong. You cannot simultaneously live by faith and be bored. Faith and boredom are antithetical” (Batterson 7).

For a lot of us, this is the Christian life. This isn’t an uncommon experience; this is the predominant experience. Monotony. Dullness. Going through the motions. For many Christians, boredom isn’t a rut that they fall into every once in a while. It is the road that they walk on, the very nature of their faith journey. For millions of churchgoers, boredom and Christianity aren’t oil and water, they are peanut butter and jelly. This is what we believe the Christian life to be.

* * *

Let’s go back to our working definition of boredom: an emotional state containing two specific components—a disinterest in one’s surroundings and an absence of anything in particular to do. Earlier, we saw these symptoms play out in a middle school classroom. When it came to the eighth grade, those eighth graders didn’t feel any **interest** and they didn’t sense any **purpose**. They were disinterested in what the eighth grade had to offer and they didn’t really feel like there was anything to do that was worth their time. In lieu of meaning and purpose, throwing water balloons and letting the class hamster out of its cage felt appealing.

In similar ways, those same **interest** and **purpose** problems that we identified earlier play out in our own lives. If Christians are bored, it is because those middle school

problems are also *our problems*. We also lack interest and purpose. When I look around at everyone who bears the title “Christian,” that’s what I often see—this sense of nothing to do and this perception that nothing interesting is going on around us. We’re disinterested in the God whom we claim to love. We’re disconnected from the life He has called us to live.

The first component of boredom is **a disinterest in one’s surroundings**. There are days when we watch the sun go down in a cascade of reds and purples and yet miss out on the immensity of it all—that the God of the cosmos is the same God who created us, who loves us, who sent His Son to die for us. There are days when we limp through our morning quiet times, so accustomed to good ole mind your manners “Christianity” that the crazy and radical news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ fails to move us. We have chosen, either consciously or unconsciously, to be unaware of the glory of God. When we, as Christians, are disinterested in our surroundings, we are halfway to boredom.

The second component of boredom is *an absence of anything in particular to do*. This is also a choice. When we walk by the school janitor without so much as a smile, when we choose bitterness and apathy at work rather than diligence and joy, when our X-box controller is more worn out than our Bible, then there is a problem. For the Christian who believes that we have been put into this world to be the hands and feet of Christ, there are plenty of things to do. On the days in which we feel that there isn’t anything to do, we are choosing to ignore the call of Jesus Christ. We are choosing not to walk in his footsteps. We are ignoring His commands.

* * *

At the end of the boredom scene in *The Notebook*, Noah hears Allie's objections to life with him. She calls him some naughty words and laments a few aspects of their relationship. Noah takes her criticism in stride and fires back some of the best words

Hollywood has ever given us:

It's not gonna be easy. It's gonna be really hard. We're gonna have to work at this every day, but I want to do that because I want you. I want all of you, forever, you and me, every day. Will you do something for me, please? Just picture your life for me? 30 years from now, 40 years from now? What's it look like? If it's with him, go. Go! I lost you once, I think I can do it again. If I thought that's what you really wanted. But don't you take the easy way out.

My friend Carter can recite this whole section. He whips it out of his back pocket on campus whenever there are pretty girls around and he's got the stage. They melt.

Literally. Puddles. Why? Because it's beautiful. It's romantic. Noah is telling Allie that he is deeply in love with her and will not let her take the easy way out. He will not passively sit back and let her settle for a lesser life.

If you've seen the movie, then you know that Allie doesn't end up settling. She gives the ring back to the rich, pretty boy, and she chooses Noah—adventurous, passionate, reckless Noah. She chooses him not out of fear or a desire from comfort and safety but out of *love*. She and Noah go on this wild goose chase together, this ridiculous romp through life that ends with her in a nursing home with dementia and him by her side daily, reading books and continuing to love her deeply and passionately. After that movie, I stared at the ceiling and realized that there was only one way out of this rut of boredom that I found myself in. If I was bored with my Jesus, my cross necklace, and my church, I had to let myself be romanced again. I had to fall back in love with the God of the universe who had made the audacious claim that He loved me.

It was not the first time I had fallen in love with Him, and it wasn't that I had fully fallen out of love with him. It was a reacquainting with an old friend, a renewal of vows said long ago. I don't know if you have ever fallen in love with the God that I have fallen in love with. But if you're bored because of a gaping hole of meaning in your worldview or bored of Christianity lite®, know that boredom is not inevitable. It doesn't have to be like that. You don't have to stay there.

CHAPTER THREE

Sweet Caroline

I love Sweet Caroline. I haven't told her yet, but she knows. I recently uprooted my life and moved to Nashville for her. I told her I was doing it for the trendy coffee shops to write this book in but she knows perfectly well why I am here. I love her deep. I don't want to be anywhere else.

I took Caroline up in a tower to ask her if she'd date me. It was a big tower with a spiral staircase, right along the Brazos River. After some small talk that had me fidgeting like a four-year-old in a car seat, I summoned the courage to state my case boldly—"Caroline, I like you. I want to date you. I want to pursue you. What do you think?" Her face lit up and she mouthed the word *yes*. We were off to the races.

On our first date, I took her to a little taqueria housed in a trailer and we sat outside at a picnic table. I sat across from her and she told me about her dreams. They were big dreams—dreams of teaching kids in inner city Nashville how to read, dreams of fixing up an old broken-down house and filling it with dinner guests, tired single moms and chic Nashville hipsters. I tried to contribute to the conversation but I couldn't think past her eyes. Sweet Caroline has the prettiest eyes. They are light brown, almost amber, with depth like a maze. I get lost in them often.

On our second date, I convinced two of my buddies to row us around in *Leaky Pete*, a broken down speedboat that my friend Carter found on Craigslist and turned into a functional canoe. We listened to fancy Italian music— the kind that you hear at Olive

Garden — on a little wireless speaker. They rowed us up the river to a swanky restaurant where they fold the napkins origami-style and charge \$25 for spaghetti.

Two months later, I skipped a few days of class and flew down to Haiti to visit Caroline. She was teaching there for a semester. I snagged a cheap flight with a discount airline that had me spending the night in a Fort Lauderdale airport. When I got to Haiti, I watched her teach and hug and love these precious Haitian kids. Over the weekend, we rode on motorcycles and climbed mountains and swam in the Caribbean Sea. It was magical.

I was running errands with Caroline the other night. We were holding hands and listening to Ed Sheeran. We drove by a diamond billboard with this picture of a ring and the words “Just Ask Her Already” written underneath. I am beginning to think along those lines.

Living in the same city this summer has been hard. We are at the point in our relationship where our deep sins and imperfections have become known. We can no longer pretend to be perfect people. We have ended the show and dropped our masks. Our scars have begun to show. We are beginning to see each other’s flaws. Within this process comes a question of whether or not we can do this love thing. Could we be completely found out by each other as dirty, broken, sinful people and then choose to love each other? I know my answer, and that is why I know that I love this girl. I see beauty in her wounds. I don’t want to ditch or bail or run. I just want to hold her hand while we pick up pieces. I just want to love.

I am certain that Caroline has a tougher love assignment during this summer, because I am certain that I am significantly more broken than she is. I could count

Caroline's flaws on one hand. I don't know how many hands Caroline would need to count my flaws. At least six. Maybe more. Sweet Caroline has the prettiest soul. I get lost in her soul even more than I get lost in her eyes. If love were water, she'd be this pitcher, a big two liter pitcher that was just constantly pouring out, filling everybody's glasses until they were full to the brim.

A few years back when the Aurora movie theatre shooting happened, I heard a story on the news about three men who died in that theatre because they used their own bodies to shield their girlfriends from the gunfire. All three of the men were shot and killed. All three women lived. That story makes more sense to me each day that I choose to love this girl. I would do whatever it takes to love her well. I would make any sacrifice. I would take bullets for Sweet Caroline.

I know deep inside of me that if I choose to love this girl forever, a part of me has to die. I will have to give up this me-centered world that I live in, this pesky selfishness that follows me around like a shadow. I will have to sacrifice for her. I will have to lay down my life for her. I will have to love her in spite of her sin, and I will have to let her love me in spite of my sin. I will have to give up deep hopes, desires, and dreams so that I can better love her. I will have to go to the feminine products aisle of Walgreens® for her.

This dying to myself is both scary and good. It is scary because I have never been to that aisle before. It is good because to make that choice is to take part in a love story. Choosing to die to myself and to love Caroline, to look past her deep flaws and grave sins and to promise to love her until death do us part, feels like choosing to live a story worth telling and retelling again.

I have never been bored in Caroline's presence. Our lives are busy. Most nights we end up on our laptops working side by side, saying words to each other every half hour or so. And yet I am never bored. How could I be bored? When I'm with Sweet Caroline, I could be doing the most monotonous, dull activity on the planet. Clipping my fingernails, filing taxes, washing the dishes. It doesn't matter. I'm still completely and utterly captivated by her.

I've also never been bored when I get to do things for Caroline. Little things, big things, it doesn't matter. Running errands makes me feel like Captain America. Buying flowers makes me feel like Noah from *The Notebook*. That Walgreens run, when it comes, will make me feel like Superman.

* * *

Love stories are the most powerful stories. This is larger than Noah and Allie or Vince and Caroline or any other typical romance. This is universally true. They are the timeless narratives, the ones that are read to children, the tales that are retold over and over and over again. The forgiveness shown after the Charleston church shooting, the truth and reconciliation committees after the Rwandan genocide, the priest in *Les Mis* letting Jean Valjean go, Sydney Carton taking Charles Darnay's place in *A Tale of Two Cities*... these are the stories that move us and shape us.

At the heart of Christianity is a love story. Let us start with that. Before really delving into Christianity and how Jesus frees us from boredom, let's be clear on what the Gospel really is. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a love story between the God of the

universe and His people. The word Gospel literally means “good news.” This love story is told through the Holy Bible. It is made up of all the things that make stories great. It begins with love, goes through strife and conflict and redemption and forgiveness and glory. This Gospel is to be celebrated, savored, and danced in. This good news is to be spoken, written, and lived.

If the Gospel is told primarily as advice—*do this to earn God’s love*—, then it is no longer a love story because love is not conditional. If the Gospel is told as dogma—*believe this or else...*—, then it is no longer a love story because love is not manipulative. If it is told as a prosperity Gospel—*believe this and your life will be easy and carefree*—, then it is no longer a love story because love stories are costly. The Gospel is not advice. The Gospel is not dogma. The Gospel is not a good luck charm. The Gospel is a love story. No, let’s rephrase that. The Gospel is *the* love story.

If it is true that the God of the Universe has gone to the greatest lengths to love us, then this is a love story of the highest order. Pastor Tim Keller puts it this way—“The gospel story of Jesus is not simply one more great story, pointing to the underlying Reality. Rather the gospel story of Jesus is the underlying Reality to which all other stories point”(Keller). The Gospel is *the* love story and Jesus Christ is the protagonist. He is the main character, the one who does the hard work of love to bring. Let me tell you the brief version of this love story.

It’s a ridiculous story, really. Beautiful. Glorious. Necessary. True. Ridiculous. The story is so ridiculous that anyone daring enough to believe it to be true could never live the same.

It starts in a garden. Humans rebelled against God. Sin entered the world and wreaked havoc on creation. Murder. War. Adultery. Natural disasters. Things go south quickly. And then the ridiculous happens. God became man. God came down to Earth and chose to enter into our world, to give up His throne in Heaven in order to live a perfect life of love. He was born at night in some sort of a keeping place for animals, humble beginnings for the God of the Universe's human debut. He worked as a carpenter for most of his adult years. Then He began to travel and teach and perform miracles. He began to call others to follow Him, ordinary people who traded their old life for a new life in Him. He walked among us. He taught. He healed. He loved. He called people to follow Him. From time to time, He would tell the people who were following Him what was going to happen. He told them He'd have to suffer, to die, and then He would rise again. And they said *no, that's too ridiculous. That's not how this is supposed to happen.* That's not how they had imagined God drawing it all up.

And then it happened. In the most tragically beautiful event in history, Jesus Christ, wholly God, wholly man, was put to death on a cross. He was executed in public. Nailed to a tree in front of cheering crowds. Why? Because it was the only way. It was the only way for you and me to be made right with God. Our sin—our rebellion against the very God who gave us life—ran deep. A perfect God could not overlook our deep sin without it costing someone. In order to tell *the love story*, the God of the universe had to come to Earth and die. This wasn't some freak accident or plan B. This was God's plan. The God of the Universe drew it up like this, that He would become man, come into this world, and *die* for us. The greatest love story involves the greatest sacrifice of all time.

The story does not end on a cross. Three days later, He rose again. He defeated death. He appeared to hundreds. They saw Him in the flesh, they felt His scars, and they were sent out by Him to share this love story. They went and boldly proclaimed this story. Many of them died because of the nature of the love story that they told. This love story spread like wildfire across the world. No story has been retold more times. No story has so ransomed the hearts of so many. No story has so completely changed the world.

He came to Earth, lived the perfect life that we couldn't live, died a horrific death on a tree for the sins of humanity, and then rose again, defeating death and creating a way for the restoration of our relationship with the God of the Universe in the process.

This is the Gospel. **This is *the* love story.**

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:4-6 NIV)

In the center of all of history is Jesus Christ hanging on a cross, bleeding out so that you and I and anyone else who believes this love story could be made right with God. The Gospel is a love story, and this story is anything but boring.

* * *

Love stories, the good ones like *The Notebook* and *Pride and Prejudice* and Taylor Swift songs, are only boring to the people who don't believe them. Before I started falling hard for Caroline, I didn't believe the chick flicks or Jane Austen novels. I dismissed the thought of laying down my life for another. Those stories bored me.

I'm not going to attempt to convince you that this story happened in any sort of systematic or deductive way. That Jesus is the Son of God and the redeemer of mankind, that Jesus is somebody who can free you and me from the epidemic of boredom is something that individuals assent to by faith—belief in things unseen.

I believe this Gospel—this love story—for three reasons. First, I believe because the Gospel answers the big questions that I can't dodge, the questions that everybody has to answer—Who am I? Where'd I come from? What on Earth am I here for? Where am I going? Second, I believe this Gospel because it is beautiful. It answers those big questions in this beautiful love story—this compelling cosmic story that makes emotional, relational, and even intellectual sense to my soul. Lastly, I believe this Gospel because it happened to me. Some way or another, I got caught up inside this story and now it is taking me somewhere. Many days it is hard. Most days it is confusing. Every day it is beautiful.

The rest of this book is a story about how this Gospel happened to me. It would be a shame, however, if you were to come away from it thinking that I was anything special. I am not the main character of my story. At some point in this life, I more or less disappeared into this story and Jesus became the protagonist.

When the Gospel of Jesus Christ is believed and lived within, it is anything but boring. The shackles of sin and shame and guilt fall off wrists. There are abundant gifts given—grace and freedom and purpose and more grace. The cosmic debt of our rebellion against the God that gave us life was paid for on that cross. How could it be boring? There is too much to be captivated by. There is too much to be invited into. Living inside of a cosmic love story means that every moment and every task is bursting with the

potential for joy and meaning. It is all taking place inside of this beautiful love story. We are being romanced.

If you grasp the grace of Jesus Christ and respond to His call to *actually live like Him*, I believe that you will find yourself in a similar place to me and countless others who believe this Gospel—swept up in the greatest love story of all-time. You will be romanced and wooed and redeemed and transformed. Your life will be tough, your life will be abundant, joyful, challenging, exciting, scary. Love stories contain all of those things. But it will not be boring. It will be anything but boring.

CHAPTER FOUR

Interrupting Jesus

Back in high school, I had heard the basic message of Jesus but hadn't yet found myself within it. I believed that Christianity was true. I just didn't think it was all that good. Jesus wasn't my treasure. He was an acquaintance. I hadn't grasped the love story in it all. I was in a church group with some friends at the time. We gathered over at my house on Sunday nights together under the umbrella term "Bible study." What did that mean? We had no idea.

My dad would grill burgers and my mom would bake brownies. Our leader Aaron would lead us through a passage of scripture and then give a short message. A few years prior, Aaron had played quarterback at Iowa State University.

If there was ever a person who possesses all the gifts necessary to lead a group of high school kids in a Bible study, Aaron was that guy. He was 6'3" and built like Hercules. His military crew cut put parents at ease, and his football prowess put him somewhere in between Peyton Manning and Tom Brady on our role model list. Not only that, but he lived the life. Genuine, devoted, funny, and relatable—Aaron perfected that balance between being your friend and your mentor.

He was more than just a cool guy, though. Aaron understood the good news. He grasped the love story and really wanted to teach us everything he knew about the God of the universe. He could have, too. Looking back to that Bible study, he could have taught us the full story, the explicit gospel, the one that he was living out in his own life. There was just one major problem—the interruptions.

“Guys, welcome to Bible study. Tonight we’re going to be talking about...”

Adam’s cell phone started buzzing right before Aaron could finish his sentence.

“Hey sorry, uh, it’s my girlfriend. I need to take this.” Adam stepped out to take the phone call while the rest of us heckled him loudly.

“Kiss her for us!”

“Yeah, smooch her through the phone!”

Aaron calmly waited for us to return to the lesson.

“As I was saying, tonight we’re going to be talking about Jesus, who He is, what He’s done for us, and how He’s called...”

Logan interrupted the sentence with a loud belch followed by a big smile. Two guys gave him fist bumps while Aaron patiently returned to the talk.

“...how He’s called us to follow Him. Guys, I believe that Jesus has called us into new life in Him. He wants your heart. He’s calling for you to put your trust in Him. He wants to forgive your sins and call the shots in your life.”

I looked around the room. Walter and Chris were giggling in the corner at a joke that Matt told them. Adam was still in the hallway talking to his girlfriend of two days. Logan was playing Tetris on his phone. Dean was pouring himself more Mountain Dew.

This was the Sunday night routine. Aaron would ask us to turn to a specific passage to read. Less than half of the group would bring a Bible to “Bible study.” Aaron would take us through a passage while our attention spans dwindled. We would catch certain sections of his words and the basic Gospel message, but we would miss most of it.

There was an underlying dullness in our group that was hard to shake. There was this sense that something about the faith that we were trying to live out wasn’t full—that

it was fragmented and diluted. At the time, I had no clue what the problem was. I just knew that the picture painted by Aaron as he described what it meant to follow Jesus looked way different from the picture painted by us as we drifted the halls of high school.

What Aaron talked about sounded exciting and rich and challenging. Our lives were directionless and boring. Our days consisted of playing video games, breaking our parents rules, and occasionally attempting to talk to girls. Looking back, our problem was a common one: we were *interrupting Jesus*. We had gleaned bits and pieces of the Gospel from Sunday nights with Aaron, but we didn't get the whole picture. It was like that first Bible study. Due to teenage ignorance or preconceived notions, we'd tune out and miss things—important truths needed to make full sense of the story. We had a fragmented faith—a piecemeal Gospel—and you could see it in each our individual lives.

Zach was one of those guys. I met Zach in elementary school. We played little league together. Zach was tall and athletic, with blue eyes that made every girl in the high school swoon. He grew up in a good Lutheran family with parents that went to church and wanted him to do the same. Zach was always the rebel child, though. He was the kid that you would find burning those green plastic army-men in the backyard and worry that he was going to turn out to be a felon.

Somehow Bible study became part of Zach's weekly routine. I think it was a bargaining chip in negotiating later curfews and reducing sentences of punishment from the parents. He spent most of our group time in the corner of the room staring at the ceiling.

After a few months of the Bible study, Zach started to grasp one crucial part of the Gospel message. After a particularly convicting night of Bible study, Zach was hit

with a wave of guilt for all his past misdeeds. His brokenness finally dawned on him. He realized the depths of his sins and the selfishness in his heart. It made sense to Zach that he was a sinner. When this hit him, suddenly he was in need of a solution to his guilt problem. Jesus as savior and forgiver made perfect sense.

The problem was that Zach stopped listening after the savior part. That's all Jesus was to 14-year-old Zach—a cosmic get-out-of-jail-free card like you would draw in Monopoly. Zach had no desire to live like Jesus or delight in Jesus or love like Jesus. Get-out-of-jail-free Jesus meant that Zach could be the life of the party on Saturday as long as he showed up for Bible study on Sunday. He could live like the heathen but spend eternity with the saints inside the pearly gates.

Life with Jesus meant fooling around with half the girls in the grade, cursing like a sailor, drinking like a fish, and then conveniently falling back onto a pillow of grace whenever necessary. There was no counting the cost, no taking up his cross, no change in lifestyle, and no desire to follow the God who had saved him. Zach gave Jesus full consent to save him from his sins but zero permission to direct his steps or guide his life. There was also no love story. The Jesus that Zach believed in left Zach right where he was. Love always transforms our hearts.

Logan was similar. I met Logan in middle school. He sat behind me in sixth grade, and we both had a crush on our teacher. Logan came from a completely different background than Zach. His parents divorced when he was young, and church was only a Christmas and Easter affair with both his mom and dad. One particular week of Bible study hit Logan hard. Afterwards, he stuck around and asked Aaron if he could talk for a minute. Logan broke down and shared everything—all the hurt from his parents'

separation, all the guilt from the party scene he had been involved in, and all the need for Jesus Christ in his life. That night, he prayed a simple prayer of repentance and got welcomed into the Christianity club.

I was elated. One of my best friends had just become a Christian. Nothing I had ever felt on the football field or basketball court compared to this kind of excitement and joy. The only person happier than myself was Logan. He was walking on the clouds. A cross necklace and bumper sticker were purchased. He was a changed man.

But after Logan's initial Jesus high faded away, some caution signs appeared. When Logan would talk about his hopes, his aspirations, and his prayer requests, everything was centered around his own desires—be it for good grades or a pretty girlfriend or greatness on the athletic field. Over time, it became apparent that for Logan, Jesus was less the Lord of His life and more a lucky rabbit's foot to rub before football games.

In a common case of interrupting Jesus, Logan heard Paul's words in Philippians 4:13—"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"—and assumed that it only applied to first dates, rivalry games and math tests. Jesus for Logan was something like a dog on a leash—there to be a source of comfort, provide companionship, and fetch a ball if need be. Logan had interrupted Jesus and fell into the lie that so many of us believe—that life is a story that revolves around ourselves. The problem is that rabbit's foot Jesus is boring. Rather than getting invited into this bigger and better story, we get sucked into a smaller, shallower story. Rather than getting lost in the depths of the love of God, Logan got stranded in the shallows of selfishness and ended up bored.

And then there was me. When I was in high school, I had problems. I was the religious guy. Want proof? My email address was vjesusfreak11@aol.com. On Sunday nights, I had no problem letting the whole group know exactly how much of the Bible I had read. I spoke Christianese fluently, tossing around lofty theological words and concepts that had leaked into my mind but not my life. I knew most of the answers and had no problem chiming in whenever there was a question on the table. But knowing facts about Jesus and cheering for Him from the bleachers didn't make me his disciple any more than memorizing the star quarterback's stat line made me his number one receiving target. Jesus's words to the Pharisees in Matthew 15:8 applied directly to me—"These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."

I saw Jesus as somebody who wanted distant fans, not intimate followers. Because of that, I became a distant fan. I knew a lot about Jesus, I tried to do lots of good things for Jesus. I even told other people about Jesus. I did all this from a distance, just like the avid fan with the body paint in the front row avoids actually going into the game. Because I've always been a nerd and I had some really awesome parents, I had heard or read most of what Jesus said by the time those Sunday night Bible studies started up. However, I missed the most important part.

Like so many busybodies in the church today, I believed in this distant God who didn't actually want anything to do with me. I missed that His grace was a free gift received by faith and I couldn't earn it by inviting enough friends to Bible study or memorizing enough of His words. Our relationship was a little bit like that of the hometown sports star and a distant admiring fan that waits after the game for his autograph. I believed in "Batman Jesus," this heroic figure that had swooped in and saved

me from the pits of hell but kept his mask on the whole time and disappeared as soon as the news station showed up. I knew Jesus's commands but I interrupted Him during the parts when He told me He loved me and wanted me to know Him like a close friend, not a dull textbook. The result of my religious games was boredom. The duty was there but the desire was absent.

Zach, Logan, and I all interrupted Jesus in distinctly different ways. As a result, our lives looked very different. Zach's conception of Jesus as strictly a get-out-of-jail-free card meant that he partied his way through high school. Logan's dog-on-a-leash Jesus meant that high school was completely centered on the superficial benefits that he hoped Jesus would bring him. My idea of a distant Superstar Jesus meant that high school was all about me trying to look religious rather than live out of the love story that God had written.

* * *

There was one common thread that ran through all of our stories. We were all missing out on the fullness of the Gospel. None of us had the complete picture. It was like we were taking a classic novel like *Pride and Prejudice* off the shelf and ripping a few chapters out of the binding. We could still read the book. We could still catch lots of plot details. But the beauty, the seamlessly knit narrative that blended romance and longing and intrigue, would be lost on us. We were reading a book with a chunk taken out of it, but we had done this with Jesus, not Jane Austen. It's no wonder that we were bored at the time. The incomplete story, the misunderstood Gospel, wasn't compelling or

moving. We were missing it. Jesus didn't want to just be our lucky rabbit's foot or get-out-of-hell free card or distant superstar. He wanted to be our everything.

Here's the crazy thing about this incomplete Gospel. The forgiveness, the prosperity, the religiosity—it seemed easier. You mean I can live it up on the weekends, call on God intermittently for good luck, keep my distance from the real Jesus . . . and still get forgiven? People will sign on the dotted line for that kind of deal. But the truth is that *this incomplete Gospel wasn't as good of news as the full gospel*. This incomplete Gospel left us bored.

It'd be easy to write this story off as a group of kids who didn't quite have their stuff figured out in high school. But the half-truths and partial heresies that our Bible study was falling for back in 2008 are the same ones that Christians of all ages struggle with. *The epidemic of boredom in our churches starts with fundamental misunderstandings of who God is and what He has done for us*. When we're interrupting Jesus, we misconceive the full message of the Gospel. When we misunderstand the Gospel, we miss out on the love story.

When our picture of the Gospel isn't complete—when we think Jesus is our get-out-of-jail-free card, our lucky rabbit's foot, or our masked and distant hero—we end up **bored**. We miss what He has actually done for us and what he actually calls us into. We end up bored by lesser versions of gospel. Our inadequate understanding of the Gospel causes us to miss it. We miss the romance. We miss the story. We miss the Gospel.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Ugandan Dream

Sweat beaded on my forehead while I played with the seat belt buckle. I sat awkwardly in the blue leather chair as the plane taxied down the runway. I was an eighteen-year-old full of nerves and idealism. A week earlier, I had walked the stage at high school graduation and thrown my pointy hat in the air. Now I was on a plane bound for Uganda, a tiny country in East Africa where I would be spending the next three weeks.

The leader of our trip was Mr. Mooney, a fiery but compassionate history teacher at the high school. Mooney had been going to Uganda ever since the military coup that ousted dictator Idi Amin from the country. The story of how Mooney originally went to Uganda is a special one worth digressing on. During Mooney's freshmen year of college, somebody came by his dorm room, knocked on his door, and asked him if he knew where he was going after he died. The way Mooney tells the story, he didn't even hesitate:

"I'm going to hell!" Mooney replied with enthusiasm as he cracked open a beer. The evangelist was surprised.

"Do you want to change that?"

"Nope! I'm having way too much fun getting there!"

"Umm...alright, I appreciate your honesty. Well, this is a long shot, but would you have any interest in reading through a book of the Bible this semester?"

To this day, Mooney has no idea why he said yes to that request. What he does know is that it changed everything. Week after week, this guy would come into

Mooney's crusty dorm room, stepping around empty beer cans and pizza boxes, and read a chapter of the gospel according to John. At some point during that semester, Mooney's heart was convicted and changed by the story of Jesus. Soon, his old pursuits of drinking beer and carousing with co-eds dissipated and Mooney began to pursue other things.

In 1988, Mooney graduated from Iowa State University. Shortly after, he boarded a plane for Uganda to start a Christian discipleship program on a university campus in the heart of Uganda's capital. When Mooney came back to the States and began to teach high school history, he never forgot about Uganda. He started a non-profit that builds primary schools in the country and then began to offer students the opportunity to join in on the work through an annual summer trip. I was on Mooney's trip. These were the circumstances under which I found myself on a Boeing 757 bound for Uganda.

* * *

Most guys start thinking for the first time when they turn eighteen. At least that's when I starting using my brain. My senior year, I joined this club at school called SHEPH (Students Helping Eliminate Poverty and Hunger). SHEPH was more than a bad acronym for me. It was the place where I started to learn about the way that most people around the world lived. That year, I entered this period of teenage angst against the "American Dream," this cultural ideal that we should all have five-bedroom houses in suburbia—black Tahoe out front, picket fence out back, 60-inch flat screen TV in the den.

I looked around and saw the consumerism and materialism of American society and thought it was all very silly. It seemed to me that most of the people I knew were

spending their lives accumulating the stuff of future garage sales and land fills. Of course, the irony was that I was currently living in a five-bedroom house in a comfortable neighborhood. There was a big TV in the den and an SUV out front. I realize that it was self-righteous and hypocritical of me to have been railing against the dream that I was very much living in. I don't deny either charge. Angry, ignorant, and idealistic, I signed up for Mooney's trip.

* * *

I think we were halfway across the Atlantic Ocean when I decided that I was going to write a book. I had started a personal blog six months prior—mostly typos and incomplete thoughts and rants against consumerism. The week prior, I had broken up with my ex-girlfriend and simply posted a YouTube music video of the Bob Dylan song “It Ain't Me Babe.” The leap from a terrible personal blog to a full-length book felt much more attainable flying at 35,000 feet. After the idea hit me, I scribbled fervently on a notepad for the remainder of the flight, charting out an outline for the next best seller, *The Ugandan Dream*.

What I knew about Uganda told me that the Ugandan dream was fundamentally different than the American dream. For starters, I knew that the country's Gross Domestic Product meant BMWs and granite kitchen countertops were very rare. Next, I had heard that Ugandans lived differently than Americans. I heard that they looked at their watches less, that they farmed small plots of land and were content with being materially poor if it meant being rich relationally. Lastly, I had heard in SHEPH class that Ugandans were

happier than Americans. I heard that they had this inner joy that shined through their outer poverty. I had my own Ugandan dream, where beautiful people with dark skin and exotic clothing toiled under the hot African sun offering deep belly laughs and perpetual smiles.

Based on this second-hand stereotype, I began working on *The Ugandan Dream*, sketching out chapter titles and big ideas. This book was going to change the world. It would masterfully display some sort of Ugandan utopia and teach my greedy American comrades that life was bigger than their 401k accounts. I even practiced my signature a few times for the book signings in my future. I would wear homemade clothes made out of recycled burlap sacks like Gandhi as some sort of a crusading prophet.

A week after our plane touched down at the Ugandan airport, *The Ugandan Dream* encountered a major roadblock. I was eating dinner with Abdul, our bus driver. Abdul matched my Ugandan dream stereotype perfectly. He only got paid to drive the bus, but most days he would still join us on the work site, shoveling cement and laying bricks side by side with a bunch of sunburned Americans. He did it all with a huge smile on his face, happy to help out.

This particular dinner, Abdul decided to share part of his story with me. Born and raised in a Muslim family, Abdul became a Christian a few years prior at a revival. Through broken English, he explained his conversion with refreshing simplicity: “I pray to Jesus now because he is the one who saves me.”

As this conversation went on, I was licking my literary chops. I thought Abdul was my big break. I would tell his story in my book and *The Ugandan Dream* would be coming soon to a Barnes & Noble near you.

“Abdul, what is your dream? Like not the kind you have at night, the kind that you hope for, that direct and define your life” I asked suddenly.

“Ehh yes yes, I know dreams, Vince.” He replied in his thick Ugandan accent.

“What is yours?”

“I want to be a person who sells houses.”

“You want to sell houses?”

“Yes, Vince, I want to sell houses.”

“Like a real estate agent?”

“Is that what they call them in the states? I saw an article in a magazine of a guy who got very, very rich selling houses, Vince. Now his face is on a billboard in Kampala, Vince. He has done very, very well. I want to be him someday.”

Just like that, Abdul sank my book hopes like it was a game of Battleship. Abdul was an incredible man, but the Ugandan dream felt an awful lot like its American counterpart. There isn't anything innately wrong with Abdul wanting to be a realtor with his face on a billboard in Kampala. It's not a bad dream. It's not a wrong dream. It just rings slightly hollow. There's nothing within that dream that makes our stories meaningful. No love, no redemption, just a hope for fame and riches. That story doesn't necessarily change people. It's not bad. It's just hollow.

In 2005, *60 Minutes* correspondent Steve Kroft interviewed quarterback Tom Brady after Brady won his third super bowl. At one point, Kroft asked Brady, a man who is the very image of worldly success, about what it had been like to accomplish his dreams. Brady's response was particularly telling:

“Why do I have three Super Bowl rings, and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, ‘Hey man, this is what is.’ I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me, I think: God, it's gotta be more than this. I mean this can't be what it's all cracked up to be. I mean I've done it. I'm 27. And what else is there for me?”

“What's the answer?” Kroft questioned.

“I wish I knew. I wish I knew.” Brady replied.

The emptiness of these dreams comes through in the way that they finish. When the lawyer finally becomes a partner in the firm, when the businessman completes the merger and sells the company, when the real estate agent's face goes up on the billboard, when the quarterback wins another trophy, the refrain is always the same—“is this it?” In the end, these dreams always show themselves for what they are—life-long distractions from a life of purpose and meaning.

* * *

My friend Houston is an actor. He's much better looking than me, to the point where I feel uncomfortable bringing Caroline around him. I don't want her to feel like she's getting shortchanged. One night, I went to a minor league baseball game with Houston and my other friend Clay. We were sitting out in left field, shooting the breeze and making small talk when Clay asked Houston a question.

“Houston, how do you decide which roles you'll say yes to?”

“A long time ago, I decided that I would only play roles in stories that are meaningful. If I don't think a show or film is a good story that contains sacrifice or redemption, then I don't take the part.”

I'll never forget Houston's reply. It made me think about my own story. I wondered if I was living out roles that Houston would accept. If they made a movie of my life, would anyone want to play my character?

I don't think anybody would want to play the role of that idealistic and arrogant kid who went off to Uganda. I was always distracted by the religious games that I played. I was a modern-day Pharisee, giving off this self-righteous vibe, shaming the people around me for drinking beers on Friday nights or buying \$40 t-shirts from a department store. Looking back, it was all very religious. I made myself so busy pointing fingers at others problems and covering up my own that I never really noticed how far away this mindset and lifestyle was from the grace and truth of the Gospel.

* * *

There's a verse in the book of Jeremiah that you'd miss if you weren't looking for it. Here's what it says:

My people have committed two sins:
They have forsaken me,
the spring of living water,
and have dug their own cisterns,
broken cisterns that cannot hold water (Jeremiah 2:13 NIV).

These broken cisterns refer to the things that we live for. They are the distractions—the things that take our gaze off of Jesus. We leave His spring of living water and instead search for something else to drink.

The American (or Ugandan) dream is an easy and common example of digging our own cisterns, but it's only the tip of the iceberg. Broken cisterns are anything we put

on a pedestal; anything that we decide is more worthy of our life than our God.

Addictions to pornography or alcohol or an abusive relationship—these are all broken cisterns. Even the good things can be broken cisterns— worshipping our families to the point of idolatry, placing so much emphasis on performance in school or at work that it becomes an obsession, saying yes to every request to satisfy our need to be needed.

These broken cisterns that distract us are all linked by one characteristic that they all share—they don't hold water. Whatever they are offering—wealth, prestige, sex, popularity—they don't satisfy. If you've ever tried to fill up a kiddie pool with a crack in the bottom, you know that it just doesn't work. It is never finished and it never fills up because it is broken. These cracked cisterns never fill up either. We can never get enough good grades or sex or money. We search for a different thing to live for, a different cistern, and they still don't hold water. C.S. Lewis describes our cistern-seeking problem well:

We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased (Lewis 3-4).

We're so distracted by our mud pies that we're missing out on an all-expenses paid permanent vacation in Jesus Christ. Our distractions draw us away from the love story, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The consequence is a dull, hollow and boring state of existence—a life where we repeat along with Tom Brady and the rest of those tired of broken cisterns—*“Is this it?”*

We miss out on the Gospel when we are distracted by living lesser stories. Our hollow dreams don't ultimately fulfill us or bring us joy. They leave us empty-handed, scraping and clawing for worldly success that won't satisfy our desire for purpose and

meaning. These distractions prevent us from stepping into the cosmic love story. We miss out on the excitement, the challenge, and the joy to be had in Jesus Christ. We end up **bored.**

CHAPTER SIX

Stuck in the Boat

There's an author I like who uses the analogy of a lifeboat to explain our fears. He says that most of us live like we're on a lifeboat that's over capacity. The boat can only hold ten but there are twelve or thirteen of us on there. A few people are going to have to go swimming, we're afraid for our life, so we try to show the other people why we belong on the lifeboat. The author says that we walk around life with this huge weight of insecurity, constantly trying to demonstrate to others why we deserve one of the spots, why we belong on the lifeboat. People will do all sorts of crazy things to show people that they belong.

I'm not sure if there is a more insecure place than college orientation. The drive from Ames, Iowa to Waco, Texas took me fourteen hours. This gave me fourteen hours to think through every scenario in which I could crash and burn at college. When I showed up at freshman orientation, I was terrified.

Those first few weeks of my freshman year put me on a new lifeboat. I had my spot on the high school lifeboat all staked out, but then I drove down to Texas to change boats. This boat was bigger, though, because there were a lot of us. The spots on the lifeboat were wide open, too. No one knew who was cool yet. No one knew who would be the big men on campus or who the "it" girls were going to be.

I was constantly vying for attention and approval. I was desperately trying to be liked, and I was so afraid that I wouldn't measure up. I was a slave to my fears and insecurities.

Fear is a cruel master. It cripples. If you've ever seen a child standing at the edge of a diving board and bawling his eyes out, you get this. If you've ever watched a little league game where a kid is so terrified of getting hit by the pitch that he refuses to swing the bat, you get this. If you've ever purchased a forty-year-old boat off of Craigslist only to be so afraid to put it in the water that it sits idle in your apartment's parking lot for a year, you get this.

* * *

Farm Road 1637 turned to gravel and the address that Carter and I were looking for was evading us. Carter was one of my best buddies, one of the genuine people I met at freshman orientation who helped me ditch the lifeboat approach. We were in the middle of nowhere, lured twenty miles west of Waco by the tantalizing potential of boat ownership. The opportunities of what we could do with a 1973 Starcraft speedboat were endless— fishing expeditions, cruises on the Brazos River, exploring every cove of Lake Waco. But before we could take our Baylor sweethearts out for sunset on the river, we had to find our craigslist associate. I gave him a call.

“Go on 1637 until you hit the gravel and then take your second left before you hit the county line.” He barked out instructions like John Wayne in *True Grit*. “Then you’re gonna see a red house with one of them swing sets out front. That ain’t it. Don’t turn there. Keep going for a quarter mile and look for the white house with some boat trailers in the side yard . . .”

“I’m not going to lie, sir. We’re a little lost.”

“Forget it, I’ll come to you.”

Carter pulled onto the shoulder of the road and we sat there nervously.

A few minutes later, a huge bearded man on a black Harley Davidson pulled out onto the road. He motioned for us to follow him. Carter and I glanced at each other, said a quick prayer, and then followed our business partner. After several turns, we found ourselves on a cramped lot with a tiny white shack, a beat-up motorhome, two old boats, a horse trailer, and a man who could kill us. We tiptoed out of the car and slowly approached the motorcyclist for introductions.

Todd was disarmingly friendly and more than a little eccentric. We shot the breeze for a few minutes before talking prices. Todd had inherited the boat from a dead relative in Montana. Just that year, he had gotten in a car accident where he was t-boned by a van that ran a red light. The accident had separated his shoulder, deflated a lung, and broken a few bones, but the personal injury lawsuit had gone in his favor and now he was sitting on nearly a million dollars. He was just trying to offload the old clunker to anyone who would take it.

“Let’s go take a look at the boat.” Todd walked us over to the corner of the property.

There she was in all her splendor. 16 feet long, seating for six, canary yellow hull, black trim with a white interior finish—the cherry on top was a 100 horse power Johnson motor on the back that apparently turned over but needed a new spark plug.

“How much do you want for it, Todd?”

“Umm, I’d say three hundred.”

“We’ll give you two hundred.” Carter and I both knew three hundred was a steal, but we were college kids with monthly rent to worry about.

“Alright, deal,” Todd’s hand engulfed my own as we shook on the deal.

We pulled out cash from our wallets like it was an episode of *Breaking Bad*. Todd handed over the titles to the boat and trailer, a broken wooden oar, and four orange life jackets. We fastened the trailer to Carter’s Chevrolet and prayed it would hold. For the half hour drive back to campus, the boat rode on an old rusty trailer, swaying and bouncing in every direction. Carter and I rode on the clouds, making elaborate plans for future fishing expeditions and double dates. We were boat owners.

When we got back from the transaction, we gathered up our friends and showed them our new purchase. They were initially excited just like us, but then they pointed out some flaws that we had glanced over earlier. There were loose wires scattered around the interior, the ignition switch was missing, and the engine looked like it hadn’t been started in ages. The worst part was when they drew our attention to a hole in the back of the boat. Water was dripping through the hole constantly.

“Hey guys, let’s name it Leaky Pete!” Somebody shouted.

Carter and I exchanged worried glances.

Months went by while Leaky Pete sat stoically in the parking lot of the L.L. Sams apartment building. Occasionally, Carter and I would talk about getting the boat checked out by a mechanic or just plugging the hole in the back and taking it down to the river for a float test. Our conversations always floundered when we encountered two major fears though. The first had to do with the boat. Leaky Pete was an old boat, almost twenty-five years older than us. We were afraid that he wasn’t seaworthy. More specifically, we were concerned that it would sink or blow up. We doubted whether it would ever be ready for

the water. Taking the boat out would be both risky and costly. Maybe it wasn't worth it. Maybe we should stay on land.

Our other fear had nothing to do with Leaky Pete. The boat was a project but we figured Leaky Pete could definitely become operable if somebody put some work into it. Our bigger fear had to do with us—we doubted whether two college kids could operate or maintain a boat like this. Because of our fears that Leaky Pete wasn't ready or that we were inadequate captains, the boat just sat there for more than a year. Idle. Stationary. Immobile.

* * *

So far, we've established two main reasons why Christians are so often consumed by boredom—two reasons why the Christian faith feels stagnant and dull for so many us. The first is that we *misunderstand who God is*. When we have a skewed view of who God is and what He has done for us, this results in missing out on the fullness of the Gospel. Missing out on the fullness of the cosmic love story means missing out on the exhilarating, challenging, scary, joyful, and abundant life that God has called us to.

The second reason is that *we're distracted*. Rather than following in the steps of Jesus, we get distracted by the things of this world—money, sex, power, popularity, etc. We seek fulfillment and pleasure in these things rather than in Jesus, who offers us everything and then calls us to follow Him. These distractions capture our attention, but they don't provide the purpose and meaning for which we thirst. They don't satisfy us. We become bored of the boring stories that we are living.

There's a third source of our boredom that we can't move on without addressing—*fear*. More than misconceptions or distractions, fear prevents us from living a life in Jesus that is anything but boring. Fear keeps us on the sidelines. It impedes our movement. It prevents us from stepping into the love story of the Gospel.

When fear takes over, *we don't move*. This crippling nature of fear isn't a big deal when it occurs on a diving board or after a Craigslist purchase. But when fear prevents us from stepping into the love story of the Gospel, it's a whole different story with a whole different set of consequences. That's where I was that first semester of college. I was on that diving board. I was up to the plate. And I was afraid.

When it comes to stepping into the cosmic love story of the Gospel, I think we primarily are afraid of two things. Our first fear is that our God can't handle the trials and storms that life throws at us. When a storm hits—a break-up or a death in the family—we're afraid that our God will fold like a dinghy in a hurricane. Paul's words in Romans—"If God is for us, who can be against us?"(Romans 8:31 ESV)—ring hollow to us when the whole world feels stacked against us and God feels as distant as Pluto. Often, Jesus seems big enough to forgive us but not bigger than the hardships of this life. When we don't think our God is stormproof, then we cower in the midst of conflicts and trials. We play a cosmic game of hide-and-seek, running from God and hiding in our former sources of comfort and pleasure and safety.

Our second fear has little to do with doubting our God. We're afraid of ourselves. Many of us are afraid that we aren't fit for the task—that God looks at us, sees our stains and flaws and limitations, and says "No thanks, that's not what I'm looking for." Deep down, we fear that we're not good enough. We're not holy enough or wise enough to be

used by the Lord. Deep down, most of us know that we're messy and sinful, scarred and broken. Because of our brokenness, we often overlook what God has done through Christ, and believe that our issues disqualify us from a vibrant relationship with God.

These fears mean that we often end up like Leaky Pete in the corner of the parking lot. Idle. Stationary. Immobile. We sit around at youth group, college group, or young adults group, collecting rust and dust, grounded and crippled by fear.

If that's us, if our pursuit of Jesus is best described by an old boat sitting in the corner of a parking lot, if we're paralyzed by fear, then it makes sense that we're bored. When fear is our master, we're missing out on life with Jesus. Someone once told me "God doesn't move parked cars." If we are "parked" by fear, then it makes sense that our Christianity would be marked by boredom. When our lives are ruled by fear, we miss out on Jesus. We may want to follow Him, we may want the life that he offers, but fear stops us right in our tracks.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ditching the Life Boat

Leaky Pete got his big break when we heard that ESPN College Gameday was coming to town for the next Baylor football game. ESPN College Gameday is a television program aired on Saturday mornings from the site of the best college football game in America. The Baylor Bears, ranked as the 6th best team in the country, were playing the Kansas State Wildcats (ranked 9th) for a conference championship, so College Gameday decided to come to Waco for the first time ever. The show airs for three hours and averages nearly two million viewers. It spotlights the university campus and game day atmosphere as much as possible, so if you have a bizarre sign or costume, you get some major television time. Some of those two million viewers watch the show for the sports coverage, but most people watch it just to see the fans and the atmosphere.

Baylor's McLane stadium is located right next to the Brazos River. Carter and I knew that if we got Leaky Pete out on the river, the ESPN TV cameras would find us. We weren't going to miss out on this opportunity to become famous and make our mothers proud, so Leaky Pete needed to get ready for action.

The first step was ditching the engine. Lacking the technical skills to fix that motor and the money to pay someone else to, we decided to remove the engine and paddle the boat like a functional canoe. The only problem was that the engine was practically welded to the boat hull. We didn't have the tools to get the engine off, so we called up a discount auto mechanic and asked if they would do it. For free. After the guy on the phone stopped laughing, he agreed. (He later told us that he thought it was a prank

call) We brought it there the next day and they used their power tools and hoist to remove the engine.

The night before Gameday, we plugged up the hole in the back and bought some wooden oars and a safety whistle. Late into the night, we worked on our masterpiece, painting “Leaky Pete” on the hull with stencils, patching up a few places with duck tape, and making a massive banner that read “Sink ‘em Bears,” a mildly entertaining and potentially prophetic spin off of Baylor’s chant “Sic ‘em Bears.” We went to bed at 2AM with an alarm set for 4AM.

The next morning, we hitched the boat’s trailer to our truck and drove to the nearest boat ramp. My friend Forrest backed the boat and trailer into the water with me on the boat. Another friend loosened the wench and Leaky Pete slid into the water.

“IT FLOATS!” I let out a yell.

The others hopped onboard and we began the three-mile journey down the river. I felt like Huckleberry Finn on that boat, rowing down the river by the light of the moon.

The speedboat wasn’t designed to be rowed, so progress was slow. A few hours passed until the sun peeked out at dawn. At one point, a passing pontoon boat took mercy on us and towed us for half a mile. Finally, at 7:30AM, we rowed up to the stadium, coated in gold body paint, displaying our “Sink ‘em Bears” banner, and dancing like lunatics on our glorified canoe.

An ESPN cameraman on the bridge over the river trained his camera on us. It was Leaky Pete’s time to shine. We showed off some horrendous dance moves and started some sort of “sink ‘em bears” chant. Five minutes into the show, texts started pouring in from friends and family who had seen us on the program.

After accomplishing our goal, we were thirsty for more screen time. We maneuvered around the Baylor Marina to get in the background of interviews with sports analysts. At one point, the camera showed us all jumping into the water at the same time and show host Kirk Herbstreit simply remarked—“Wow.” That Saturday morning on the Brazos, Leaky Pete was the guest-host of ESPN College Gameday.

Looking back, it’s a real shame that we left Leaky Pete stranded in that parking lot for an entire year out of fear that the boat or Carter and I weren’t ready for the open water. We had a lot of fun on that boat once we looked past our fears and got Leaky Pete in the water. We strung battery-powered Christmas lights around the frame and used it for date nights. We went on sunset cruises and grilled burgers by the light of tiki torches. That April, my friend Clayton proposed on Leaky Pete and the girl said yes.

Fears often look ridiculous in hindsight. Once a player is in the game, they don’t long for the sidelines. The sidelines look hopelessly boring from the field. The diving board doesn’t look nearly as daunting from the water below. Once the player swings the bat and gets a hit, they don’t fear the batter’s box anymore. A few months into college, those fears that I was dealing with on the lifeboat disappeared once I ditched the boat and dove into my freshman year.

* * *

There’s this beautiful passage in the book of Matthew that deals with fear. Jesus sends His disciples out on a boat trip but He stays back to pray for a while. It starts

getting windy, waves are beating against the boat, and then the incredible happens. Put yourself into this story.

Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and cried out in fear. (Matthew 14:25-26 NIV)

Imagine that you're out on a boat that's even more rickety than Leaky Pete. Other than the dim glow of a lantern, it's pitch black. No iPhone flashlight, just darkness. The wind is howling and the waves are crashing all around. All of the sudden, you see a figure walking across the water calmly like it's a Sunday morning stroll around the block. You were afraid before you saw this ghost walking on water. Now you're so terrified that you let out a shrill scream.

But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid."
(Matthew 14:27 NIV)

And then you realize something. It's Jesus. It's the one who you've been following. It's the one who fed the 5000, who healed the blind and the crippled, and who you've staked your whole life on. And here He is, seeking you out, walking across the water like it's a freshly paved sidewalk. He's speaking to you. He says, "It's me. Don't be scared." And you believe Him. You believe that there's no reason to fear because He's here now. He's greater than the storm. He's literally walking on it.

"Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water."
(Matthew 14:28 NIV)

Imagine that you're Peter here. You believe deep down in your soul that Jesus takes away any reason to fear this storm or anything else for that matter. You believe it so fully that

you want to join Him. You want to step out of the wobbly boat and go be with this Jesus. You don't want to miss out any longer. So you call out and ask Jesus if you can join Him.

“Come,” he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. (Matthew 14:29 NIV)

Jesus—the one who loves you, the one who you follow—says, “come.” You’ve just been invited to the walking on water party. You’ve been invited to tread on your former fears like they’re nothing. Sure, there is still a storm going on, but the reward of being with Jesus is greater than the risk of facing your fear. You accept the invitation. You hop over the side, hop down on the water, and stride confidently towards Jesus. You don’t look at the raging sea beneath your feet or the foreboding skies above; you look at Jesus. You’re doing it. You’re walking on water.

But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, “Lord, save me!” (Matthew 14:30 NIV)

Out of the corner of your eye, you see some whitecap waves coming towards you. You turn your head away from Jesus and appraise the situation. The voices in your head start soft and crescendo louder—*You can't walk on water. You can't tread over your fears like this. That's not how it works. Jesus isn't big enough for you to overcome your fears. Even if He were, He wouldn't pick you to come out here.* The fear comes rushing back. You slowly begin to sink into the thundering waves. You're so scared that all you can do is cry out—“Lord, save me!”

³¹Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. “You of little faith,” he said, “why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:31 NIV)

Jesus grabs you and pulls you up out of the water. He asks the question that you knew was coming—“Why did you doubt?” I had you. I was taking care of you. You were doing it. You were walking on water. Why did you let fear creep back in? Why did you doubt?

* * *

If you grew up in America, there’s a great chance that you’ve walked the aisle, prayed the prayer, or raised your hand at the end of a sermon. You heard the good news of the Gospel and then hopped over the edge of the boat to go follow Jesus. But if you’re anything like me, something happened along the road. You got scared. Fear crept in and you began to sink. Your life started be driven less by the love of Jesus and more by a myriad of different fears and insecurities. Am I in too deep? Is this stuff really true? Why is this life so hard? Does God really want to use *me*? You ditched walking on water for the lifeboat. If that’s where you’re at, deep in fear, is it any wonder why you’re bored? If fear prevents movement, then of course you’d miss out on life in Jesus when you’re stationary.

The Word of God has a lot to say about fear. The Bible is a book full of “fear not’s” and “don’t be afraid’s.” My favorite verse on fear shows up near the end of the Bible. Late in his life on a small island in the Mediterranean Sea, the Apostle John wrote these powerful words: “Perfect love drives out fear”(1 John 4:18b NIV). John was on that boat when Jesus called Peter out onto the waters. He saw the whole saga, the boldness, the initial success, and then the sinking. He heard that question that Jesus asked Peter: “Why did you doubt?” He knew exactly how crippling fear could be.

Peter and John started moving. They got over their fear. Peter and John, in spite of their fear, go on to follow Jesus boldly. All the things Jesus promises to his followers—abundant life, tremendous struggles, deep joy—we see in Peter and John’s lives. Why? Because perfect love drives out fear. At the end of his life, John is writing this letter and here’s what he’s saying—“We stop being paralyzed by fear when we start realizing how loved we are.” When the cosmic love story is too good to miss out on, we get off the sidelines.

This Christian life—it’s a divine romance. You don’t have to stay in the boat. You don’t have to be parked by fear. Your life doesn’t have to be boring. If you’re reading this book as a bored Christian, hear this truth loud and clear—You don’t have to settle for stories of fear. Leaky Pete didn’t have to stay in the parking lot. Peter didn’t have to stay in the boat. You don’t have to stay on the sidelines. I showed up at college as an insecure and fearful 18-year-old kid who didn’t get it. God came to that insecure and fearful 18-year old kid and drove out that fear with His perfect love.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Daddy

Most of what I know about grace I learned under a bridge. A few weeks into my freshman year, I started attending church underneath Interstate 35 overpass at the 5th street exit. I went mostly out of convenience. The Church under the Bridge service started at 11:00AM, half an hour later than the church that my friends attended. Also, the bridge was just a block away from my dorm room in Penland Hall. You can't beat that convenience.

Underneath the noisy overpass, the church gathers every week. Greasy haired men with bent backs and dignified chins, women in worn dresses, with tired eyes and tired smiles, college kids in t-shirts wiping the sleep from their eyes, families from the suburbs looking for a church congregation that has dropped all of its pretenses—these are the congregants who call this place their church home.

Addiction support groups huddle in circles of ten before the service starts—groups of men and women, huddled together, speaking softly and firmly, offering reminders of God's grace, urging each other out of the darkness of sin and shame. When the service starts, two hundred congregants file into crooked rows of stiff metal folding chairs that creak whenever you fidget.

Clyde makes the welcoming remarks followed by a slew of numbers. A mentally handicapped savant, Clyde has the ability to recall the score of every local or national sporting event from the previous week. The highlight of his week is going up on stage at

the Church Under the Bridge and letting everybody know the score of the Cowboys game.

Eugene, the associate pastor, makes some brief announcements followed by a lengthy prayer that bubbles up from his soul. A ragtag group of amateur musicians take the stage and lead the congregation in worship. Clyde's friend Terry helps out during worship. He ambles around the makeshift aisles with a pink guitar that doesn't have any strings, singing along with the band, giving out fist bumps and "God bless you's" and pieces of gum. When I first started attending the church, Terry distracted me. Now I think of him as the assistant worship pastor.

In the back of the center section, amidst the beautiful pandemonium of a Sunday morning under that overpass, stoops Gordy Hobby. He hunches over his walker like the leaning tower of Pisa. Gordy is 6'4" if he stands up straight, but he never does. Gordy would weigh in at 350 pounds if he stepped on a scale, but I don't think he does that either.

Decked out in black leather, his gray beard is an intentional kind of unkempt. The black Harley Davidson motorcycle parked behind the stage is Gordy's preferred mode of transportation and ministry. He's a proud member of the "Highway 2 Heaven" motorcycle club. As the pastor begins his sermon, Gordy is talking. Talking during the worship or sermon portion of the church service does not violate Gordy's conscience. He gives sermons of his own during the pastor's sermon. He's one of those guys who just can't shut up about God's grace.

* * *

There are people in this world whose lives have been so dramatically changed by the grace of Jesus that it shakes you. Their story is so beautiful and desirable that you can't walk away without wanting what they have. If you're a believer, you want more of the God that they have, to more tangibly be shaped and moved by God's grace. If you're a skeptic, you want to believe in the God they talk about. You want to look past your doubts and questions to a God who changes people. Gordy Hobby is one of those people.

I met Gordy a few months into college in Galveston, Texas. My buddies and I were tagging along on a mission trip with the Church Under the Bridge. Yes, Church Under the Bridge, the church that meets under the noisy freeway every week of the year, the church that sits on foldout chairs, the church with a majority of the membership receiving little to no income per month, has a missions program.

The six of us joined fifteen others from the church. Galveston is a beach city just south of Houston with a low-income population still reeling from Hurricane Ike in 2008. During first day introductions, we quickly found out that the Church Under the Bridge does not do the surface level introductions that we had grown accustomed to in college. As we went around the room, people were confessing felonies, declaring mental illnesses, sharing testimonies, etc. We were surrounded by people who had hit rock bottom and been rescued by the grace of Jesus. Now they wanted to tell us all about it.

After introductions and a meal, Gordy managed to corner my friends and I.

"Brothers." He greeted us all with bear hugs. "Thank y'all for joining us on the trip. Do you mind if I tell the story of how I met Daddy?"

"Uh, sure Gordy. Let's hear it."

Gordy told us the unabridged version of his story, which stretched thirty minutes with no pauses. Daddy meant God. Gordy met Daddy at the age of 47. Before his conversion, he lived out his days as a motorcycle gang member and methamphetamine junkie, riding from fix to fix and getting into plenty of trouble on his way. His life was straight out of the TV show *Sons of Anarchy*, complete with drugs, guns, motorcycle gangs, near-death experiences and unparalleled heartbreak.

Gordy told His testimony with this loving sense of boldness created when God's grace meets a person who has dropped all the religious games. His background had freed him from pretending he was a perfect person or he had it all together, because, well, his past had taught him that he was far from perfect and he didn't have it all together. The result is that once God grabbed ahold of Gordy's heart, Gordy leaked grace like a sieve. Near the end of our conversation Gordy asked us abruptly:

“Have I given you my card yet?”

“No, Gordy, you haven't.” I gave Jared a puzzled glance out of the corner of my eye. Then Gordy handed us what looked like a business card. It stated Gordy Hobby—Prayer Warrior with his phone number beneath.

“Call any time.” Gordy peered over his glasses. “And I mean that. Any time.”

Next, Gordy gave us each a firm handshake, slipping us a penny with a cross cut out of it as he did so. We admired the gifts and asked Gordy where he got them.

“I get them from a guy out of Texarkana. I'll typically give out around a thousand each month, so I know him pretty well by now.”

“They're awesome. Thanks so much, Gordy.” Jared replied.

“Here, take some more for your friends.” He dumped twenty-some pennies into Jared’s outstretched hand. “I’m getting a new shipment soon. I’m headed to bed brothers. Good night. Be blessed.” He wheeled his walker down the hallway into our lodging space.

Later that night, the six of us rested in our beds and talked through the day. We couldn’t get over that conversation with Gordy.

“He gives out 1000 pennies a month. That’s like thirty a day.”

“That guy made a business card that lists his occupation as Prayer Warrior!”

“But guys, did y’all hear what he called God?” I asked in an excited whisper. “He called him Daddy. Daddy did this, Daddy did that, I never thought I’d hear a 6’4” 350 pound man use the word Daddy in a sentence.”

“That’s a game-changer right there, you know?” Jared said. “Calling God Daddy . . . I feel like he gets grace in a way that I don’t.”

No one spoke after Jared said that, but you could hear the wheels turning in our heads. That night, I stared up at the metal bunk bed frame above me, and realized that Gordy Hobby was more able and willing to receive the grace of Jesus Christ than I was. While I dipped my toe in the pool of God’s grace, Gordy got down on all fours and lapped at the living water like a dog.

Gordy completely and exclusively called God “Daddy.” When telling his survival stories—“Daddy saved my life that day.” When explaining the cross pennies—“I just shake their hand, give them a smile, and tell them that their Daddy in heaven loves them.” When describing his prayer life—“I just ask Daddy, because Daddy takes care of me.”

I needed to become like Gordy, to identify myself with Gordy, to say his sins and my sins equally and infinitely distanced us from our Daddy. My religious games, my spiritual prowess, my good deeds—didn't land me a position in God's kingdom. Nothing that I had done earned his love or acceptance. The only thing that brought me in the Kingdom was the undeserved love of Daddy. The only thing that put me in the Kingdom was grace.

* * *

I used to think that the grace of Jesus Christ was something that I had graduated from. I thought grace was something that I had received at a young age, when I prayed a prayer with my parents. I thought that when I prayed that prayer, I had walked the stage and received this “grace diploma.” I framed it in a glass case, hung it on the wall for a year or two, and then stowed it away in a plastic bin like an outdated keepsake.

I thought of grace as something that just got me in the door with Jesus, like an entrance ticket. I needed it to get through the doors of salvation but then I didn't need to show it again. Once I got in the Christianity club, I was supposed to focus on more advanced Christian things. I had leveled up from the grace stuff. Now it was time to move on—discipleship, obedience, evangelism, filling out prayer journals and leading inductive Bible studies.

I don't think grace works that way anymore, mainly because I started listening to old people talk. If my idea of grace were right, then old people wouldn't talk about grace anymore. They would be further up the ladder, they would have graduated from grace

and moved on to the upper level courses. But when I started listening more to my elders, this is what I found: people in their 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s talked about grace way more than my high school and college friends did.

My 54-year-old dad talked more about his inability to change himself than my 20-year-old roommate. My 83-year-old grandpa spoke with more humility about the weight of his sin and the grace of his savior than my 24-year-old mentor. My other grandpa, at the age of 92, insisted that we sing the song “Count Your Blessings” every Thanksgiving and Christmas to remind us of God’s grace. 60-year-old Gordy called God “Daddy” and spoke from this position of helplessness, this childlike posture of dependence that was so rare in my college Bible study.

On top of all these grace veterans that I knew, I started noticing that the books I would read by old Christian authors contained the word grace twice as much as the books I read by young Christian authors. The old geezers who should be past the elementary concept of grace wouldn’t shut up about it, while young Christian authors predominantly focused on our doing of certain things—following, giving, serving, sacrificing. Brennan Manning, a now deceased author who should have graduated from my paradigm of grace long before he wrote these words, said this:

We are enamored and enchanted by God’s power. We stutter and stammer about God’s holiness. We tremble before God’s majesty . . . and yet we grow squeamish and skittish before God’s love. I am flabbergasted by the widespread refusal across this land to think big about a loving God. Like nervous thoroughbreds being guided to the starting gate at Churchill Downs, many Christians bray, bridle, and bolt at the revelation of God’s all-embracing love in Jesus Christ (Manning 35-36).

When I realized all my heroes over the age of 50 seemed more dependent on grace than my college friends, I connected the dots and realized that there was something very

wrong about the way I viewed the grace of God. I was that nervous thoroughbred, braying, bridling, and bolting at the unmerited love of my Savior. While all these actions and exhortations were great to read about and strive for, the catalyst of these actions—a God who loves and fathers those who believe in Him, was often missing.

* * *

When I first got to Baylor, I became involved in a pseudo-fraternity there called Zeta Zigga Zamma (ZZZ). After climbing the ranks of the group’s ridiculously unstructured leadership hierarchy, I became chaplain of the organization and started to lead “The Goods,” ZZZ’s Saturday morning Bible study. At The Goods, thirty or forty of us would gather in the living room of a house to read the Bible and munch on Shipley’s donuts.

When I first started leading the Goods, I would worry about focusing too much on the grace passages. The conversation in my head would go like this:

Don’t talk too much about grace or forgiveness, Vince. If you do, they might think they don’t need to do the sermon application. They might just ignore the harder parts of the gospel, like feeding the poor and sharing the gospel with their friends and loving their enemies.

I realize this may sound ridiculous, but you have to understand that this was all very real to me. I didn’t think I could emphasize grace without producing spiritual apathy. I figured that if I spent too much time stressing the unmerited love of Jesus, my friends would take grace and leave the rest of the Gospel.

After Gordy, I started to realize that as a leader trying to encourage my friends to love Jesus and live like Jesus, *grace was the only motivational tool I had*. There was nothing else I could use. Big words, trendy metaphors, brilliant illustrations—all of them were empty without grace. Trying to motivate myself and others to follow Jesus without grace was like boarding a life raft that hadn't been inflated and expecting it to float.

Here's the thing about grace. You can try other ways to follow Jesus. You can be motivated by the guilt of your past or the fear of Hell. You can be motivated by other people who want you to act moral and do the right thing, nagging mothers or condescending fathers or that friend who always wants to drag you to church. You can try to do it this way, but I'll just tell you from experience. *It won't work*.

Any motivation for loving or serving or following God must be initiated, fueled, and sustained by a God who loved you long before you made any of your pathetic attempts to love Him back. Anything else falls short. Use any other fuel and you'll sputter along for the journey for a couple miles and then crash and burn.

In Donald Miller's book *Father Fiction*, there's this beautiful section of dialogue between Don and his mentor John Macmurray. Donald's father left when he was young, and the idea of God as Daddy was foreign to him. So Donald asked John about what it means to be fathered by God. John answered:

Scripture says if we love God, we will obey him. It's cause and effect. Most people turn it around and think of it like a dysfunctional father-and-son relationship. We obey because we don't want to get in trouble. We obey because we want Dad's approval. We try to make obedience the cause and love the effect, but it doesn't work. We will eventually bag the whole thing. Love comes first (Miller 193).

Fathers who require their children to perform in order to earn their love inflict deep wounds on their children. Following a God whose love you are trying to earn is terribly

exhausting. I wouldn't recommend it to anyone. You'll get tired of climbing that ladder really quickly. Love comes first.

* * *

I've come to believe that the more I understand the grace of God, the less that I am bored. Boredom and grace have this inverse relationship. The more I understand grace, the more infinitely interesting this whole world becomes and the less that I am bored. The unmerited love that God has for all who place their trust in Him, the Gospel story of the perfect life and horrific death of Jesus Christ, the promise that God literally dwells inside of all believers through the Holy Spirit—all of it is grace.

Grace frees us from the first component of boredom. Disinterest in our surroundings dissipates as soon as we begin to grasp onto His grace, to shift our gaze from our messy, broken, and sinful lives onto his unmerited. The more that we understand grace, we become freed from those things that cause boredom, from the fears and distractions and misconceptions of the Gospel.

The Gospel story of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection begins to seep into our own life circumstances, and we see this world differently with grace-colored glasses.

Author Max Lucado puts it this way:

God's grace has a drenching about it. A wildness about it. A white-water, riptide, turn-you-upside-downness about it. Grace comes after you. It rewires you. From insecure to God secure. From regret-riddled to better-because-of-it. From afraid-to-die to ready-to-fly. Grace is the voice that calls us to change and then gives us the power to pull it off (Lucado 8).

When we understand the grace of God, our story starts to be shaped by our convictions of whom our Daddy is, what He's done for us, and how He's called us to live.

Trials become opportunities for growth and joy. Broken relationships become chances to pour out God's unconditional love. Exposed sins and weaknesses become opportunities to boast in the goodness of a God that loves us in spite of our sins and weaknesses. *Grace absolutely and utterly transforms us.* This world becomes infinitely more interesting when viewed through the lens of grace. When you believe in a God who knows you, loves you, and died for you, this life becomes *anything but boring.*

How different would your life look if you called God "Daddy" and believed that He matched that title? How different would your life look if you believed that the God of the universe had loved you enough to send His son to die for you? When you give up the attempts to save yourself and surrender to the unmerited love of God, His grace changes everything.

CHAPTER NINE

A Costly Bargain

In my first semester of college, I learned what a fraternity was. Other than gyros, I hadn't been exposed to Greek Life. Baylor taught me quickly. Guys and girls wore bright shirts emblazoned with letters from a different alphabet, and put on campus events nearly every weekend. There was the Kappa Omega Tau Christmas Tree Lighting, the Alpha Tau Omega bed races, the Chi Omega chili cook-off, and the Pi Beta Phi Howdy. The groups hosted extravagant date parties, raised money for different causes in the community, and tailgated at all the football games.

The freshman dorm was full of guys hoping to get a bid to join one of the fraternities on campus. For a lot of them, this would make or break their college experience. That entire first semester was all about getting in with the right group so that they could officially get accepted by the fraternity in the Spring. I wasn't sure if I wanted to join, but I thought it would at least be a good thing to check out. I asked around to figure out how I could join.

My friend Pearson explained all the jargon to me. "Rushing" was what you did to try to get noticed by fraternity, to make connections with the group that you hoped to join. There was an informal rush period in the fall where you just tried to get to know the guys, and then a formal rush period in the spring where you attended certain events with strict dress codes and participated in a final interview. This spring rush period was followed by a voting session where the guys in the fraternity voted on which guys they thought should get into the fraternity. Bid day happened a day or two after the decisions

were made. On bid day, guys from each fraternities went around, knocked on doors, and let the guys who had rushed know whether they had gotten a bid or not. If you got a bid, you were in. If you didn't get a bid, you were out.

After learning how the process worked and going to a few rush events, I made the decision to opt out of the rush process. I had met some great people, and I learned the fraternities did some really great things for the school and all, but it all seemed kind of exclusive. I felt like getting in was mostly a popularity contest, and I never particularly enjoyed (or won) those. Most of the fraternities were looking for a particular type of person, a certain mold that would jive well with the current group.

I eventually fell in with the pseudo-fraternity that I mentioned in the previous chapter, Zeta Zigma Zamma (*ZZZ*). Six guys in a dorm room dreamed the group up four years prior. By the time I joined, it was made up of a hundred guys. It wasn't as large or as prominent as the other groups, but there was one aspect of the group that I could really get behind: there was no bid day. Nobody got cut. Anyone who wanted to be a *ZZZ* could be a *ZZZ*. I liked that aspect of the group. It felt organic and inclusive. If you were attracted to what *ZZZ* was trying to do on campus and if you wanted to take part in that, you simply started showing up to things and participating.

The positive result of the all-inclusive policy meant that the group was made up of every type of person. Some of the guys were good-looking. Others were ugly as a mug. Some of us were fat and others were skinny. We had black guys, white guys, Asians and Indians. Some of us had people skills. Others couldn't hold a conversation to save their life. There were introverts and extroverts, intramural all-stars and honors students. There was no *ZZZ* mold that guys were forced into. It was refreshing to be a part of a group like

that — to let people in solely based on whether they wanted to participate, not anything else.

* * *

One of my favorite things about Jesus is the way that he went about picking His team once He started His earthly ministry. He didn't size people up. There was no pre-test. There wasn't a certain mold of person that he wanted on his team. No past failures came up in the interview. There was no evaluation period and no skills test. They didn't read a contract and sign on a dotted line. They didn't have to have people skills or have rich parents or look like Tommy Hilfiger models. Here's how Jesus did the new member joining process. He would just say, "Follow me." If they followed, they were in.

You want to be on my team? You don't have to walk the aisle. You don't have to fill out a membership card. You don't have to get your family photo taken at Walgreens for the church directory. You don't even have to get dunked in a tank in front of your family and friends in a white robe first, although let's get to that soon. You just have to *follow me*. His call is remarkably simple. Want to be on my team? *Follow me*.

Over and over again in the Gospels, we see Jesus calling people into a new life. Earnest fishermen, crippled beggars, promiscuous women, cheating tax collectors, Jesus offers His grace and His call to follow in the same conversation. Jesus softens hearts with his love and acceptance while simultaneously calling people to leave their old life for a new life in Him.

Others ignore the call. A rich young ruler, a Roman official, an early follower who sells his soul for thirty pieces of silver—the latter three reject Jesus as savior and Lord. They don't want to follow. They reject that call and, in so doing, they reject the grace. They're two sides of the same coin. A legitimate understanding of the grace of Jesus Christ is inseparable for Christ's call to follow Him.

* * *

One issue that ZZZ has struggled with is uncommitted members. Because the group is available to anyone who wants to join, there are a lot of people who join with no desire to actually be a part of the organization. Mostly they want to be able to say that they are in something. Lots of times, people will join without really understanding what the group was about. Once they found out, they weren't quite sure that it was for them. They don't come to things. They don't help out. And they don't really enjoy being a part of the group, because they don't contribute to or receive anything from the group. On paper, they're still members. But in actuality, they're just claiming the label.

The group ballooned in size my freshman year. Sixty guys joined that spring. That sounds like a great thing for a group. We doubled in size. There was a problem, though. The current members hadn't done a great job of explaining what the group was really about. A lot of the new members had joined because they had just heard that there were no admission requirements and no dues to pay like in a fraternity. While this was absolutely true, the intention was that the people who joined the group would do so

because they understood what the group was about and really wanted to be a part of things. Being a ZZZ was never about just claiming the label and wearing the t-shirts.

* * *

Sometimes when preachers present the Gospel, they try to sell Jesus in the same way that people on those late night infomercials try to sell blenders or steak knives. After a long, flashy, elaborate demonstration of how this particular Cutco® knife is so sharp that it can cut through the vaulted door of a Swiss Bank, a low narrator voice talking faster than an auctioneer gives a disclaimer that basically states that this knife isn't nearly as good as we just made it look.

This is how the Gospel is often presented. The speaker emphasizes parts of the good news, flashy and true stuff about forgiveness and a new start and a leg up in life. Then the speaker talks really fast, if at all, through the other parts of the Gospel. They hide the challenging parts of the gospel, parts where Jesus says, "take up your cross and follow me," "give up everything," "Lose your life for me and my gospel and find the only life worth living."

In addition to glossing over the tough stuff, they do everything possible to glitz up the presentation. They make sure the mood is just right, the lights are dimmed, and the guitarist is strumming chords in the background. They tell some sob stories and the tears start falling, emotions of guilt and shame start churning, and people start chomping at the bit to walk an aisle or pray a prayer or raise a hand.

It's like one of those internet pop-up ads saying you just won a free I-pad, and then you read the fine print at the bottom saying that the shipping and handling fee is \$400. The emboldened text that hooks you states: **GET OUT OF HELL FREE: JUST ONE ALTAR WALK REQUIRED.** The fine print at the bottom states **Oh yeah, and He actually wants your life, too. He wants you to live for Him. Submit to Him. Follow Him.*

The problem with this approach is that you end up with a whole lot of uncommitted members. People get in and say, "This isn't what I signed up for." I heard sins forgiven and fire insurance and I signed up. Follow Jesus? Live like Jesus? I didn't sign up for that. They didn't say anything about that at the informational meeting.

* * *

At some point, we got away from that simple phrase—*follow me*. We started thinking that the command was optional. We thought that there was this cozy middle-of-the-road option for people who believed in Jesus but didn't really want to live for Him. That phrase—*follow me*—was for the hardcore Christians, the really spiritual people who wanted to be pastors or priests.

Here's the crazy thing about this infomercial Gospel. It sounds like a bargain. The forgiveness, the freedom from guilt, shame, and insecurity—it sounds too good to be true. You mean I can be forgiven and go to heaven and my life doesn't have to change at all? People fill the sanctuary for that kind of deal. But the truth is that gospel isn't a

bargain, it's a rip-off. It's like that claw machine game that never picks up the stuffed animals. It's a Ponzi scheme. It's a Nigerian e-mail scam. It's worse than Enron.

In the book *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls this shallow type of grace *cheap grace*:

Instead of following Christ, let the Christian enjoy the consolations of his grace! . . . Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession...Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate (Bonhoeffer 44).

Here's the thing about the cheap grace that Bonhoeffer talks about. Cheap grace doesn't free us from the clutches of boredom. It changes how we see ourselves, it helps with our self-esteem issues, it holds our hand during the hard parts of life and tells us we're special little snowflakes, but cheap grace doesn't transform our lives. We can understand an elementary definition of grace as God's forgiveness of our sins and still be stuck living out a remarkably dull and boring life.

In the original accounts of the life of Jesus, it is made incredibly clear that Jesus does not provide a safe middle ground for people who simply wanted to be forgiven by a God who they didn't really want anything to do with. In the face of a gospel that is cheap, Jesus preached about a Gospel that was costly:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Matthew 13:44-46 ESV)

Bonhoeffer writes:

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he has . . . such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow *Jesus Christ*. It is costly because it costs a

man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life (Bonhoeffer 45).

Jesus calls people to follow Him, and their answer shows whether or not they understood grace in the first place. There's no way to honestly say: "God, you made me, you love me, you saved me, and you sustain me . . . but I'm still my own boss and I'm going to live as I please." If we grasp His grace, we earnestly desire to give Him our life.

In *The Prodigal God*, pastor Tim Keller tells a story about a conversation he had with a woman after a sermon.

I asked her what was so scary about unmerited free grace? She replied something like this: "If I was saved by my good works -- then there would be a limit to what God could ask of me or put me through. I would be like a taxpayer with rights. I would have done my duty and now I would deserve a certain quality of life. But if it is really true that I am a sinner saved by sheer grace -- at God's infinite cost -- then there's nothing he cannot ask of me (Keller 136).

If the Gospel is true, then we owe literally everything to the God who has saved us. His grace will change everything about us. This grace of God will, through the Holy Spirit, utterly transform the heart of the recipient.

If Jesus is savior, then He is also Lord. To the modern reader, this sounds like oppression. Being subject to a Lord? Isn't that feudalism? That sounds like peasantry. What about my rights and my autonomy? What is this, the Dark Ages? *No thank you, not making an altar walk to a sermon like that anytime soon.*

This reaction is understandable. Nothing is so subversive to people than to give up control of their own life. Even when the God of the Universe is the one calling someone to do this, it still comes as a challenge. But here is the remarkable thing about the explicit Gospel. In the parable of the man who discovers the treasure in the field, there is a tiny phrase in there that changes how we read and think about the cost of following Jesus.

After the man finds the treasure, “in his *joy* he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” Following Jesus is not a tiresome chore. The process of surrendering our lives to Jesus is followed by unimaginable joy and peace and hope.

When the full Gospel of both Jesus’s grace and Jesus’s call to follow is heard, we hate the sharpness of it. We come to Jesus looking for some consolation, some grace, some change. But the parables of the treasure and the pearl tell us that it doesn’t work like that. He offers far more. We come to Christ admitting our brokenness, our need, and our dependence. He welcomes us, renews us, and remakes us from the bottom up.

It’s not a tidying up or a minor tweaking of behavior. It’s a full-scale renovation of the heart, a completely different life that we’re called into. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” (2 Corinthians 5:17 ESV)

Here is the good news about this give-up-everything Gospel. It’s a bargain. Though the man in this story sells everything, he gains so much more than he’s giving up. He’s trading up, the emptiness and futility of his old life for the fullness of life in Christ. This is all or nothing. The disciple of Jesus must let go of everything, give up everything, surrender it all to gain so much more. Unlike the infomercial Gospel, the full Gospel that both saves us and calls us to follow Jesus is not a *rip-off*. The full Gospel is a **bargain**. People who are aware of the grace and call of Jesus give everything away. Author Dallas Willard provides clarity about the bargain: “Do you think the businessman who found the pearl was sweating over its cost? . . . No. Of course not. The only thing these people were sweating about was whether they would get the deal” (Willard 292).

* * *

His call comes to us today. Loud and clear. Just as it came to those first disciples. It comes side by side with his grace, because it is part of his grace. The second symptom of boredom, a perceived lack of something to do, dissipates when one begins to follow Jesus. This Gospel that I'm writing about, the one that frees us from boredom, is not a "give a little, get a little" Gospel. The message of the Gospel is "give up everything and I'll give you so much more."

This stuff is hard. I don't write this chapter as somebody who's arrived. Many days, I'm my own functional boss. I fail to go about my day as His apprentice, living and loving like my Savior. I ignore His call to follow. I act out of my own selfish desires. But when I do hear and submit to Jesus's gracious call to follow Him, when I give up my life and run towards Jesus, I leave boredom behind. That mind-numbing, soul-sucking emotion gets left behind when life is a constant pursuit of my Savior.

I think it's time for us to trade in those distractions and fears and misconceptions. It's time to trade in those religious games, to trade in the infomercial Gospel that we grew up with that claims to get us out of hell but leaves us stuck in boredom. Trade them in for the pearl of great price. Sell everything. Gain so much more.

CHAPTER TEN

The Full Life

Road trips have a certain way of cementing things in my mind. Something about the hum of the road and the quiet causes things to seep in past the surface. All this stuff about grace and discipleship started to come together when I took a trip out West with some friends from Baylor. A few days into our trip, we stopped for lunch in Page, Arizona, a dusty little town bordering Lake Powell. After burritos at Eduardo's Taco Shop, Carter and I ducked into the skate shop across the street. Carter had heard about the potential of cliff jumping at Lake Powell, and we figured the skateboarders working the skate shop would have some advice for us. The worker behind the counter greeted me casually.

“Bro, what’s up?”

“Not much, man. We were just wondering if there are some cliffs around here to jump off.”

“Broooooo . . . I don’t know. That lake is frigid until May. You sure you’re down to clown in that water, bro?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure...bro” I answered hesitantly.

At this point Skater Guy’s co-worker, Skater Guy #2, speaks up from across the tiny shop.

“Bro, I was like listening on the radio, and they said that water is like twenty degrees Fahrenheit. That’s like pretty cold bro.”

“Yeah, bro. Twenty degrees. I heard that too.” The original Skater Guy confirmed the suspicious water temperature and gave us a concerned look.

“But you’re going to want to go out east to Lower Antelope Canyon, bro. You’ll pass the big power plant on your left and keep going ‘til you find the massive parking lot with the houseboats and stuff. Head out there bro, and you’ll find some gnarly cliffs.”

“Thanks bros—I appreciate it.”

We set off for the cliffs with the hope that the skater guys’ directions were better than their understanding of water’s freezing point. After a quick twenty-minute drive, we had arrived. The massive parking lot was completely empty. The marina next door was full of dormant houseboats waiting for May. Snowmelt from the mountains meant cold water in the spring and kept the tourists off the lake for another two months.

We parked and hurried over to the cliffs. The canyon, a massive bowl carved from rock and filled with the bluest water, opened up before us. The sun’s rays bounced off the water and we stripped down to our boxers to soak them up. Red rock cliffs between twenty and fifty feet tall lined the lake on both sides as far as we could see. They begged us to jump.

We found a spot about twenty-five feet up where a bunch of teenagers had carved their initials into the sandstone. The water was plenty deep enough there, but we hovered on the cliff for a few minutes anyways gathering up the courage to jump. Finally, Carter started us off—launching into a back flip from the cliff’s edge and plunging beneath the surface of the blue. His head popped up quickly and he let out a primal howl of delight.

“Get in here, you goons!”

Two guys bounded off the rock immediately to join Carter, whooping and hollering. I was more cautious. I tiptoed up to the edge and then hesitated. I thought about the good reasons not to jump. I could stay dry. I wouldn't get cold. I would for sure live another day. After a few moments of fear, I stepped off of the rock and plummeted into the water below.

Spencer, the wildest of our crew, soon found a higher cliff over the bluff, around forty-five feet. He sprinted towards the edge and then leaped—hanging in the air like Michael Jordan in the closing scene of *Space Jam* before knifing into the deep blue water below. We had forgotten all about midterms and essays and ex-girlfriends, the typical maladies plaguing college-aged males. We were cliff jumping into one of the most beautiful lakes on Earth. The sun was shining. God was smiling. Nothing else mattered. This was the life. This was life to the full.

We had experienced plenty of adventures already on that trip, but nothing could touch cliff jumping at Lake Powell. There are a lot of reasons for this. First off, cliff jumping is the perfect amount of scary. The water could be just thirty feet below but as you teeter on the brim of the cliff, it feels like more like a mile. Your breaths get short as you peek over the edge. You're terrified by the idea of leaving the firmness of the rock beneath you for the water below. There's a second (or two, or twenty) when you want to get back in the car and drive home. That initial jump is hard to make. Every instinct in your body screams, "don't do it." The water looks as hard as cement from 30 feet up.

But you jump. You trust that the water is not cement. You trust that the thrill of free fall followed by a plunge into the depths of the lake will be worth the fear. It takes a

couple of swift strokes to rise to the surface. Once you're back on the surface, you swim back to the edge. The adrenaline rush sends your heart rate through the roof.

Cliff jumping is exhilarating. You're jumping off a gigantic rock into free-fall and then knifing into a substance in which you can't breathe. That Spring Break trip, we hiked up mountains, swam in pools at the foot of two-hundred foot waterfalls, and explored the strip of Las Vegas, but nothing came close to cliff jumping at Lake Powell. The feeling, the experience, the combination of risk and joy—it was unbeatable.

* * *

I wouldn't be shocked if the Apostle Paul went cliff jumping on the island of Malta. His ship crashed there on its way to Rome, and he was on the island for three whole months. Malta is a cliff jumping paradise in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, possibly the best place to cliff jump in the world—right up there with Santorini, Greece and Acapulco, Mexico. The cliffs are high, the waters are deep, and Crayola names crayons after the beautiful Mediterranean waters on the island's shoreline.

Recently I asked my friend Briana if she could paint a picture of Paul cliff jumping in Malta because I think the symbolism is powerful. She's one of those artsy people who see God in the things He's made—like trees and caterpillars and sunrises. I texted her this summer with a request:

"Bri, Carter and I were talking and we're convinced that life in Jesus is a lot like cliff jumping. Could you paint us a huge canvas of Paul jumping off a cliff in Malta? We'll cover the supplies. P.S. He actually went there. Check out Acts 28."

The passage in Acts 28 says the locals in Malta displayed “an unusual kindness” towards Paul. There’s a chance that means they went cliff jumping. Maybe they showed Paul to that spot where their initials were carved into the cliffs and started jumping. If they did, I bet Paul went first. He was that kind of guy. He probably would have took the plunge with no hesitation, surfacing quickly—heart pounding, gasping for air. Then he probably would’ve pulled himself up on the shore and asked his friends if there were any higher cliffs around.

Paul was that type of guy. He lived life to the full. Paul traveled all around Europe and Asia telling everyone he could about Jesus. When they threw him into jail, he’d go into his cell singing hymns, thrilled that he would have some time to write letters to his buddies. The guards soon would start asking each other why this guy was so happy, and some of them got saved because it was all so bizarre. This guy was in prison and yet he was way happier than them. Paul’s life was radical.

He got shipwrecked three times, bitten by snakes, pelted with stones, and lowered out of city walls in a basket. He also had a ridiculous amount of friends who he gave shout-outs to at the end of his letters, most of whom have names that I can't pronounce. If the writer of half the New Testament is any sort of example for us, life in Jesus looks less like a dull lecture and more like cross-country road trip. It's a page-turning thriller, not a crusty textbook.

Underneath all our fears and distractions and misconceptions is a question. What is the good life? Where are the cliffs, so to speak? What kind of life is going to free me from boredom, from a dull and meaningless existence? Jesus’s answer throughout the Bible is consistent—*The good life is here with me.* “I am the Good Shepherd.” “I am the

way, the truth, and the life.” “I have come that they may have life and *life to the full.*” Jesus promises a certain type of life for those who are in Him. He promises life to the full. When we understand who God is, what He has done for us, and give up our lives to Him, we discover life to the full.

* * *

A couple years ago, my dad took my brother and I out to Utah for a camping trip. My brother was marrying his college sweetheart the next week, so we took a bachelor’s trip the weekend prior. We stayed in Moab, a dusty town just south of Arches National Park. The area was famous for mountain biking, so we decided to sign up for a few days of biking with a guide. The first morning on the bike was difficult. After a morning of steep climbs, intense downhill sections, and plenty of obstacles to avoid, I was struggling to keep up with the group.

I kept running into things. I couldn’t stay on my bike for more than five minutes. The trail was narrow, and I kept hitting trees and boulders and other hard, unforgiving objects. The bike and my ego were both taking a beating. Our guide took me aside during a water break.

“Vince, when you’re on the bike, what are you looking at?”

“Umm, whatever is in front of me?” I responded.

“Be more specific, which part of what’s in front of you are you looking at?” He asked. I thought back to the previous couple hours on the trail.

“Well, I guess I’m looking at the stuff that I want to avoid. Rocks, stumps, cliffs, poisonous reptiles.”

“That’s your problem, man. You can’t look at that stuff. Wherever you look, that’s where your bike will naturally want to go. Look at the narrow path you want to take. Fixate on it. You’ll go where your eyes go.”

* * *

One of the most pervasive lies in our church today is that being a Christian is about looking at the obstacles and steering away from them. Sex. Drugs. Rap music. Their line of thinking goes like this—*There’s this Jesus guy, and He died on a tree for me, so now I should run away and hide from all these bad sinful things that God says not to do.* There’s a true and even Biblical component to the idea of running from sin. Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, tells them to literally flee from both sexual immorality (1 Cor. 6:18) and idolatry (1 Cor. 10:14). There are things that we, as Jesus people, are supposed to run from. This is 100% true, but Christianity cannot be reduced to a list of don’ts. Avoiding things is not the central pursuit of the Christian life. It’s a subplot, not the main idea. Author Shane Claiborne reflects on this in his book *The Irresistible Revolution*:

Preachers were telling me to lay my life at the foot of the cross and weren’t giving me anything to pick up. A lot of us were hearing “don’t smoke, don’t drink, don’t sleep around” and naturally started asking, “Okay, Well, that was pretty much my life, so what do I do now?” Where were the do’s? (Claiborne 38).

When we are so focused on the obstacles rather than the path, we lose the path and we miss out on life to the full.

There's usually a checklist of *doesn't's* that we go through when we're trying to figure out if somebody is a Christian or not. Doesn't get drunk, doesn't sleep with their girlfriend or boyfriend, doesn't use four-letter words, and doesn't spend time with anyone who does those things. And yet when you sit down and read through the Gospels, we notice that Jesus is significantly more concerned about the things that people do rather than the things that they don't do.

* * *

When I first started thinking about life to the full and do's and don'ts, I decided to read the book of Matthew and keep track of how many times Jesus tells people to do things compared to how many times he tells people *not* to do things. It took me just a few hours. Every time that he gave a command in the affirmative (do this), I would make a tally. Every time he gave a command in the negative (don't do this), I would make a check mark. After I finished the experiment, I counted up the marks.

The results were incredible. In the book of Matthew, Jesus gives eighty-three affirmative commands—telling his audience what to do—and only twenty-two negative commands—telling people what not to do. Jesus issued commands in the affirmative four times more than in the negative. Feed the poor, Love your neighbor, love your enemies, make disciples, take up your cross and follow Jesus, all these are commands coming straight out of the mouth of Jesus. These are the do's that Claiborne is talking about, the ones that we so often leave out. When our pursuit of Christ becomes centered on the list

of don'ts, when we're fixated on the obstacles rather than the goal, we miss out on life to the full.

* * *

Throughout the Bible, there are different metaphors that Jesus uses to describe himself. The metaphors that Jesus uses in Scripture— the living water, the bread of life— they're not meant to be admired as props. They're real. Practical. Actual. They're meant to be lived in.

These things that we've been talking about, the grace and the call of Jesus Christ, life to the full, they're not abstract. They're actual. Grace is not an aesthetically pleasing fountain to gaze at and take pictures next to. It's a swimming pool. Grace is not to be merely admired as an appealing idea or interesting notion. Grace is meant to be lived in. In the same way, following Jesus is not a Christianese concept or trendy phrase for hyper-spiritual people to throw around at small groups. It's a calling to literally be like Jesus— to live like Jesus, to serve like Jesus, to love like Jesus.

Maybe you've been swimming around in the shallow waters of cognitive acceptance and sin management for a long time. If that's the case, isn't it time to leave a life that merely recites the creeds and believes the major doctrine points? Isn't it time to leave a life that just believes certain things about Jesus for a life that believes certain things about Jesus and then enters into the cosmic love story?

You can leave the shallow waters. You can plunge into the depths of really living life like Jesus did. It is in the depths of Jesus's grace and his call—in the actions of

actually living the life that He has called us to live—that we leave boredom behind for life to the full.

I've gone cliff jumping a handful of times in my life. Never once have I peered over the cliff and been bored. That dreaded feeling of boredom never crosses your mind when you're leaping off rocks into water. It's too exciting. It's too challenging. Boredom isn't an option when you're jumping off cliffs. Boredom also isn't an option when you're living life to the full in Jesus Christ. When you are living in His promises. When you're living the best life, the life that He lived, you won't be bored. How could you be bored?

The God who created us, the one who made the stars and black holes and the platypus, has given us the *perfect example* of how to live in Jesus Christ. This is what they never told you in youth group. Jesus offers us the good life. Not the easy life, not the successful life, not the comfortable life, but the *good life*. The God of the Universe doesn't offer anything second-rate to His children. A life lived for Jesus—in His grace and in His call to follow—is the best life. Living life in relationship with the Creator of the universe is good. Life in Jesus is bursting with purpose and meaning. Life in Jesus offers joy and peace in the midst of anything that this life throws at us. Life in Jesus is abundant and joyful and exciting.

When you're living life to the full, boredom isn't a thing. Whoever you are, whatever your background is, I want to challenge you with this. If you take the Gospel seriously, if you grasp the grace and answer the call of Jesus Christ to follow Him, then your life is going to be a lot of things. It's going to be messy. It's going to be hard. It's going to be exhilarating and life giving, full of joy and freedom. But it won't be boring. It'll be **anything but boring**

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jesus in the Messes

You have to go looking for messes at Baylor. At a straight-laced Baptist school in the heart of the Bible belt, messes are well hidden. People throw on Church clothes for Sunday lunch whether they attended a service or not. The universal truth that we're broken and messy and imperfect people gets whitewashed by heavy doses of religiosity, small talk, and plastic smiles.

We went on that trip to escape Baylor—her comfort, safety, and coziness. Several days into our trip, we had found the messes we were looking for. After a ferocious blizzard in the Arizona Rockies, legal troubles in a Native American village at the bottom of a desolate canyon, and a night on the Las Vegas strip, we had escaped.

Part of escaping for us had to do with hitchhikers. There aren't many more dangerous things that you can do on a cross-country road trip than to pick up hitchhikers. Naturally, we resolved near the beginning of our journey that we would pick up any person we saw on the side of the road with a protruded thumb.

We were winding down a canyon-lined road in Zion National Park when we saw our first protruded thumb.

"Vince! Look!" Justin yelled like he had just seen Bigfoot. I looked down the road to my right and saw a young guy in a blue vest with his thumb up.

"We found one, boys!" I skidded to a stop on the road's shoulder and rolled down the window.

“Thanks for stopping, I’ve been waiting out here forever.” The guy opened the back right door and got in the car without asking where we were headed. “My van is down the road a few miles, if you don’t mind taking me back there.”

Right as he said that, I heard a sputtering noise start to come from Carter’s mouth.

“You..You...You’re the rock climber guy....” I looked back at Carter. His jaw was gone, like he had just met Michael Jordan. “You’re the free climber! You’re guy who climbed Half Dome with no ropes! I watched your videos to get psyched up for this trip! You’re Alex Honnold!”

“Yeah, uhh, that’s me.” Alex laughed nervously.

“You’re like the best rock climber in the world!” Carter went on listing statistics until Alex changed the subject.

“Hey I don’t want to rush y’all but could we, like, start driving towards my van?” He asked. I apologized and started back down the road again. Carter was still listing facts about this guy— where he did his grocery shopping, how many siblings he had, what the last 4 digits of his social security number were. He was on cloud nine, shaking Alex’s hand repeatedly and asking him all sorts of questions about his climbing escapades.

“What are you doing in Zion?” Carter asked.

“Just a little climbing. I just climbed that buttress over there.” Alex pointed to a massive rock face to our left. From where we were in the valley, you could see little blots of color inching their way up the rock face. He went on to tell us that he was in the park to do a free solo climb up the Moonlight Buttress.

“What’s a free solo climb?” I asked.

“It’s climbing with no ropes.” He replied nonchalantly.

“No ropes? What happened if you slip?” I asked

“I die.” He replied coolly.

In the ten-minute drive to the van, Alex answered all of our questions patiently. He must’ve been used to all the fanfare. We were all thrilled to get to drive a Carter’s version of Michael Jordan back to his van.

“Here’s my stop,” Alex said as we pulled up to a white van that looked like it was used for child abductions. I pulled off in front of the van and asked for a favor.

“Hey man, I know you get this a lot, but none of our friends are gonna believe we gave you a ride unless we get a picture. Would you mind?”

“Not at all.” He replied.

We took an awkward group photo and then all shook his hand. Carter held on for way too long during his handshake and I think it kind of spooked Alex. He thanked us for the ride and then disappeared inside the white van.

We got back into the car and just sat there, obviously starstruck. Carter had this glazed look on his face, like he had accomplished what he wanted to during his life on this Earth and now was ready to go home to the Good Lord. Spencer googled Alex Honnold and read his list of accolades to us. It turns out that we had just picked up arguably the best rock climber in the world. This was the hitchhiker find of the century.

* * *

Two days later, we spotted another hitchhiker. This time we were in Navajo country in Northern Arizona. We found him at the intersection of Indian Route 22 and

Highway 160 on our way to the final trip destination, the Grand Canyon. He wore a brown baseball cap and a blue flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His thumb protruded from a closed fist. I swerved over to the road's shoulder and put the car in park. John staggered over to the passenger window, each step stiff and laborious. He bent down to window level and searched our faces with a tired, sad eye.

This hitchhiker's shadowy, wrinkled face didn't have a left eye. It just wasn't there. Deep skin folds took its place. He must have been at least seventy. I rolled down the window and greeted him. He unfolded a couple of wadded-up one-dollar bills and mumbled something about a ride to Tuba City.

We didn't have the slightest idea who John was or if Tuba City was a real place. After a quick group discussion lasting thirty seconds at most, we made some room in the back seat and invited John into our motley crew.

That's when we smelled him. Whiskey breath, tobacco smoke, and body odor culminated into an eye-watering stench.

"Hey, what's your name?" I asked, trying to sound friendly.

"I'm John." John's accent was thick like there was peanut butter stuck on the roof of his mouth, emphases placed on all the wrong syllables. We went around and introduced ourselves, speaking cautiously, voices tiptoeing around our unfamiliar passenger. John just nodded and made affirmative hums. The noises were clumsy but friendly, and they put us at ease.

"You have girlfriend?" John asked. We answered with a collective and distraught "No." Then the lecture began.

“Just talk to them...it’s up to your...it’s your mouth. If you love them, just say it.”

We tried to laugh his speech off, but John seemed serious. Justin stepped in and tried to interpret.

“I think I understand, you’re saying I kind of need to take the initiative in that conversation and love and stuff?” Justin asked. John paused for a couple seconds, peered intently at Justin, and changed the topic.

“What are you?” he asked Justin.

Justin was caught off guard by the pointed question.

“Uhh, I’m half Hispanic, half white.”

“Oh... I don’t care what are you, you’re already...you’re Indian,” John made this statement without feeling any need to elaborate or explain upon his claim. Drool dripped from his thin, cracked lips.

John was messy. His poverty existed at every level. His physical health was degraded to the point where even talking was a chore (albeit one that he enjoyed). Spit flew out of his mouth when he spoke. He smelled.

We were uncomfortable. He was getting our car dirty and soaking our foreheads with his spittle. We had a twenty-hour car ride back to Waco. How long would the stench remain in the vehicle? Green road signs for Tuba City became more frequent, and an Exxon gas station sign ahead marked the outskirts of the small town. John first wanted to be dropped off at the gas station, but then asked if we could take him to his girlfriend Betty’s house. We reluctantly complied and followed John’s shaky pointer finger deeper into the dusty town.

We pulled into the parking lot of a small apartment complex painted an ugly shade of yellow. It looked like government housing. John grunted out a thank you and lingered for a moment while we said our goodbyes. He got out of the vehicle slowly and shut the car door. We watched as John limped up to the brown door and knocked. The door creaked opened and John shuffled inside.

As I drove off of the lot, we collectively let out a breath held in for the last hour. The car was mostly quiet. Hushed music came through the speakers, something by Springsteen. We chuckled softly when Carter grabbed a fast-food napkin from the seat pocket to wipe John's spittle off both his forehead and the dashboard. I rolled down the windows and turned up the AC, trying to get John's stench out of the car. We were trying to clean up the messes. We drove on towards the Grand Canyon and joked about the two different hitchhikers we had picked up. On one, we hit the jackpot. On the other, we struck out looking.

Carter suggested that we pray for John. His prayer was more desperate plea than ho-hum request. Stripped of the fancy language and typical adages that we had grown so accustomed to hearing and using, it was a plea that John would know God, that his broken and messy narrative would be mended, redeemed, and put back together.

I crawled into my hammock to sleep that night and looked up at the stars. I was convicted by my unwillingness to get messy. A few days prior, I had picked up Alex Honnold and fan-girled the whole time that he was in the car. I would've driven him to Salt Lake City if he asked. I was absolutely thrilled to give a ride to a famous person. A few hours prior, I had picked up John. I had held my breath the whole time he was in the car—hoping he wouldn't be in the car any longer than he needed to be, hoping he

wouldn't stain the vehicle's upholstery. Alex and John were both strangers, but I was uncomfortable with John. He was messier, and I didn't like to enter into messes.

* * *

There was nothing picturesque about the birth of Jesus. No Christmas lights. No inflatable Santa Claus. No snowmen. No snow at all. Mary and Joseph were confused (albeit faithful) teenagers. The hotel was booked, so they settled for a room fit for animals. They laid Jesus in a feeding trough that animals had used earlier that day. The straw was scratchy and uncomfortable. Shepherds were the only ones who showed up at the baby shower. It wasn't cute, it wasn't pretty, and it would make for a disastrous Christmas card photo-shoot.

Questions must have been running through Mary's mind.

“Did something go wrong God?”

Did the inn reservations fall through?

Isn't this kid important?”

If God is sovereign over this vast cosmos, if He paints the sunsets and crafts the snowflakes and spun the Earth into motion, then **He set it up like this**. He went rugged and primitive as he chose the venue for our Savior's birth. He chose the dumpy town of Bethlehem as the setting. He chose the odd assembly of Bethlehem's blue-collar workers and distant royalty figures for the part-time roles.

Jesus entered into our world by the fringes. He entered into the mess, the muck, the filth. He got his hands dirty. Our rescuer and our redeemer, the protagonist of the

cosmic love story, was born in a food trough for animals. It wasn't pretty or cute. It was messy. No other beginning would do, not for the life that He was about to live.

And that was just the start of things. Jesus worked as a carpenter. Blisters calloused on his palms and his handshake felt like sandpaper. When his earthly ministry began, he traveled like a vagabond, couch-surfing through Galilee: "*Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.*" (Luke 9:58 *ESV*)

In His ministry, He seemed to prioritize people who were . . . dirty.

People with terrible diseases and disabilities, the wrong racial group, the wrong profession, He dove into their lives and encountered them where they were. Zaccheus, the tax collector, was the con man of his day. Jesus ate with him and offered grace to him. The woman at the well was both in the wrong racial group and had been married five times. Jesus offered her grace as well. Women with hemorrhages, men with infectious skin diseases, blind and crippled beggars with their Styrofoam cups on the street corners, Jesus offered presence, healing, and grace.

And then His death, nowhere is the willingness of our Savior to get messy more visible than in the Passion of Christ. The thirty-nine lashes of the whip left his black bloodied and bruised. The crown of thorns was forced on His head. The nails, driven one by one into his body, one through his right hand, one through his left hand, one through his ankles. Not to mention the weight of the sins of humanity on his shoulders, the scene is unfathomable. The birth, life, and death of Jesus was unimaginably messy.

* * *

This world that we live in is unimaginably messy. It always has been. This truth is undeniable. Whether you're looking at cold hard statistics, scanning the newspaper, reading a history book, or watching the 10 o'clock news, you can't miss this truth. Everywhere you look, there are messes. War. Destruction. Genocide. Starvation. Political unrest. Natural disasters. If you grew up in middle class America, those words may sound too abstract. Let's try these ones. Divorce. Child Abuse. Suicide. Abortion. Sex Trafficking. Disease. Drug addiction. It doesn't matter if you live in inner city Chicago or the suburbs of Dallas, Texas. You are surrounded by messes. This world is full of sin and death.

Deep down, most of us know that it is rude to completely ignore messes. We know that it is a good thing to reach out to a friend who just lost a parent. We send a card. We know that there are homeless people in our communities. On a good day, we drop a few coins in their Styrofoam cup. We know that our co-workers marriage is falling apart, so we cover for them at work for a day. But we don't really want to enter in. We don't want the messes—spiritual, emotional, physical—to get on us.

And yet here is the thing: Jesus was always doing this. He was always entering into messes. He made a point to prioritize the messiest people in his society. That's one of the reasons that people could tell he was different. Here was this brilliant religious teacher who was entering into the messes. He was healing the ill. He was dining with prostitutes and tax collectors. He was getting messy.

Christians are supposed to be like Jesus. This isn't anything revolutionary, this is Sunday School 101 stuff. We're supposed to love like Him and serve like Him, talk like

Him and act like Him. If there is an area where Christians most ignore to enter into life to the full—the life that Jesus lived—it is in our unwillingness to dive into the messiness of the world.

We meet in clean sanctuaries in the suburbs. We form airtight communities of people who look like us and talk like us and make a similar amount of money as us. We stay on the surface in our relationships with other people, even family members or spouses, because we don't really want to get into their messes. We don't get messy like Him.

In Ephesians 5, Paul writes a simple sentence that clearly and unmistakably calls us to follow Jesus into the mess.

Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 5:1-2 ESV)

So often, we see the word *love* in that passage and think of Hallmark cards and Valentine's day, rather than images of Jesus laying in a trough for animal feed, Jesus touching lepers and cripples, Jesus bleeding out on the cross. But when Paul calls us to love like Christ loved us, those should be the images that come up. That is the example of love that God has given us, not some warm and fuzzy Hallmark® definition but the messy, costly love of Jesus. The messiness of the birth, life, and death of Jesus Christ is something that followers of Jesus are called to enter into. His story is not one to simply admire. His story is one to emulate.

A life lived in reckless pursuit of Jesus rolls up its sleeves and gets its hands dirty. It doesn't dwell in the clouds, in abstract concepts of grace or discipleship or obedience.

It dives into the messes of this life. It gives money until it hurts. It welcomes refugees, it feeds the homeless, it visits the prisons. It gives loans that won't be paid back. It enters into the story of Jesus, loving those who are hard to love, giving to those without expecting anything in return.

* * *

Around the same time that I went out West for Spring Break, my friend Jared approached me with a radical idea.

“Hey Vince, do you want to give up our beds for the season of Lent?” He asked whimsically one day as we strolled to class.

“Jared, what does that even mean? Where would we sleep?” I was used to talking ideas with Jared. We're both dreamers.

“We'd sleep outside.”

“Why would we sleep outside, Jared?”

“I don't know man, I think it would just be kinda tight to like, you know, sleep where homeless people sleep, get a glimpse into that lifestyle, you know?”

“That sounds completely ridiculous, Jared.”

“I know, man! It'd be nuts! So you're in?”

“I'm in.”

We started on February 13th in the big oak tree next to the Student Union Building. We curled up in camping hammocks and sleeping bags and tried to hide from the security guards who whizzed by on golf carts. We didn't think we would make it through the

night without getting told to leave, but our camouflage tactics worked and we made it through the night.

We did it the night after that and the night after that. All in all, we spent forty some nights out there leading up to Easter. Some nights we got rained on. Some nights the campus sprinklers made it feel like we got rained on. Other nights we were so cold we couldn't sleep. Eventually, we moved out of the big tree in the middle of campus and started sleeping over by the tennis courts. 8AM tennis class was the perfect alarm clock. One morning, the tennis instructor woke me up with a question.

“Hey man, are you doing this for, like, starving children or anything?”

“Nah man, just kind of trying to get a taste of life out here. But that's a good idea. We'll think about it.

Eventually, word started to get around about the guys who slept outside. About halfway through, Jared had the idea that we take up donations for Mission Waco's homeless ministry. A whole bunch of college kids told their parents and money started flowing in. As word spread, people started to join us. Friends, strangers, people just started to come sleep beside us out on campus.

That last night before Easter break, we had a small army of people out there. A friend brought his guitar and led us in a worship session. We prayed bold prayers that we would enter into the injustice in our world, that we'd be messy but redeemed people who would enter into the messiness of the world. That night when I laid under that tree with thirty friends and strangers, I realized that God does some really incredible things even when we make small, feeble attempts to enter into the kind of messes that He entered into.

I've come to know that we find **life to the full** in the messes, the life that Jesus lived and offers to us. We find a life that is challenging and yet so life-giving. When we enter into the messes of this world, we're all of the sudden interested in that hobo on the corner, interested in the genocide in the Congo, interested in people groups around the world who don't know the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This immense sense of both interest and purpose hits us simultaneously. Understanding Jesus's heart for restoration and reconciliation means a lifelong call to enter into the messiness, to run towards the fire with the living water of Jesus rather than run away from hard things for fear or convenience. When we're willing to get messy, the word *boring* disappears from our vocabulary. When we're aware of both the messiness of the world and the call of Christ to enter into that messiness, our lives become *anything but boring*.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Just a Carpenter

I don't really struggle very much with following Jesus into the messes. I think it's partially just a personality thing. I thirst for the adventure of picking up hitchhikers and caring for grieving friends and rubbing shoulders with people who are different than me. My friend Mitchell is really into this spiritual tool called the Enneagram. He is a bit of a hippie, with long brown hair that goes down past his shoulders.

The Enneagram is little like a Christian version of the Meyers-Briggs personality test. Instead of getting letters, everyone gets a number from one to nine. Mitchell tells me that I'm a two on the Enneagram scale. He says this means that I love solving people's problems, the bigger the better, even if they don't want me to solve them. I think this is why entering into messes is easy for me. I'm a two. I love solving a person's hunger or homelessness or grief problem.

Mitchell says that there are good things and bad things about every number. One of the negative aspects of my "two-ness" is that I'm lousy at doing normal things, like sitting still for long enough to read my Bible or sticking with projects long after they've ceased to be interesting. I have a harder time doing the ordinary, jobs and long-term relationships and tax forms.

There are a few people in this world who are able to go into work every day, invigorated and excited to be giving out loans or flipping burgers or teaching children. Others open God's word and read it like it's fresh and exciting and new every day. I've

always envied those people, the ones who aren't bored by routine, who live extraordinarily in the ordinary.

* * *

In 1977, author and speaker Josh McDowell released a book titled *More Than A Carpenter*. It went on to sell fifteen million copies. Thirty-seven years later, you'll still find the book at most Barnes and Noble bookstores. When I was just coming into junior high, I came across one of those fifteen million copies. I had picked the dusty book with a catchy title from my parent's bookshelf, and it was terrific. The book presented a convincing argument that Jesus was more than a carpenter; Jesus was the Son of God.

With all due respect to Josh McDowell and his terrific book, I'm going to go ahead and write a chapter loosely based around the fact that Jesus Christ, the Son of God was most likely a carpenter for more than half of his years on this planet. Sure, He was and is so much more than a carpenter. But for the vast majority of his adult life, we can presume that Jesus, occupationally speaking, was *just a carpenter*. Mark chapter six catalogues Jesus's return to his hometown of Nazareth where he most likely practiced this craft. When He begins to teach at the synagogue there, the response gives away his former profession: "*Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?*" *And they took offense at him*" (Mark 6:2-3a ESV).

So the Son of God most likely worked a manual labor job for eighteen years. Twelve was the age when boys would learn their craft, typically from their father. Jesus didn't begin his ministry until the age of thirty. After He began His ministry, Jesus spent

approximately three years traveling around, performing miracles, and telling people what God was like.

Think about that for a moment—Jesus likely constructed tables and chairs and benches for eighteen years while he healed people, told parables, and led disciples for three years. That means that for every year that Jesus spent doing what we could consider “ministry,” He spent six years in a manual labor job working carpentry.

If you’re anything like me, this wrecks a lot of the Christian paradigms that you’ve grown up with. The idea that some occupations are sacred while others are secular doesn’t hold its water if the Son of God is manning a saw in the shed out back for a living. The idea that God only calls us to live out big and elaborate stories that can be turned into memoirs that sell seems to be mistaken if Jesus was a carpenter for eighteen years.

We have a hard time with carpenter Jesus, because this aspect of His life is an outlier. It doesn’t fit onto one of those cutesy Hobby Lobby® posters with all the different names of Jesus—Light of the World, Prince of Peace, Lord of Lords, Alpha and Omega, *Carpenter*. I have no problem believing that the Son of God healed people of their physical ailments, that he cured the blind and raised the dead and healed lepers. I have no problem believing that He told others about the Kingdom of God, that He called people to follow Him, or attracted great crowds when He spoke. I can even, by the grace of God, believe that the Son of God gave up His life in a painful, horrific way so that broken and messy people like you and me could be made right with the God of the Universe.

But the idea that Jesus likely spent more than half his life on earth making furniture? That's so dull. Simple. Drab. Ordinary. I have the hardest time picturing it, that the perfect and blameless life of Jesus involved eighteen years of carpentry. Was He trying out the Sermon on the Mount on the wood first? Did he exclusively construct pews for the local synagogue? Surely the life agenda of the Son of God would be more intentional and purpose-driven than woodworking. From the outside, it looks like such an insignificant way for the Son of God to spend eighteen years. It seems like He should've been teaching or preaching—like He should've been doing more “Son of God” stuff.

But what if the ordinary nature of carpentry was the point? Jesus lived a completely blameless and perfect life in a profession that doesn't sound particularly exciting or even spiritual. He didn't set aside his deity so that He could run a small carpentry operation out of Nazareth for a while. He was still Jesus—God in the flesh—and still maintained a perfect and vibrant relationship with the God of the Universe in the midst of a life that most of us would consider perfectly ordinary.

If our lives are truly going to be *anything but boring*, if they're going to be joyful and abundant and challenging, if Jesus really promises us *life to the full*, then He is going to transform the ordinary things that He has called us to. What do I mean by ordinary callings? I'm talking about the things that fill up our daily schedules and therefore the things that we get tired of—our jobs, our spouses, our friends, even spiritual disciplines like praying and reading Scripture. *Jesus is going to breathe life into the things that we are called to do so consistently for so long that they have become stale and crusty.* Consider the two examples of work and marriage.

Work

I talk to a lot of college friends who wrestle with the idea that they're supposed to enter the workforce someday. There's something so ordinary and dull and basic about the idea of living so much of our life in a cubicle. *God, you've wired me for adventure and relationships and danger. You've given me this crazy call to go and make disciples, to show radical love to my neighbors and my enemies. So why the cubicle? How am I supposed to worship you here?*

If I were to tell you that following Jesus was this crazy, life-changing, revolutionary pursuit, and yet that pursuit had nothing to do with your work—the place where most people spend half of their waking hours and expend most of their energy, you'd probably tell me that I was a liar. Any sort of relationship with God that doesn't touch our work lives is woefully incomplete. Most of us know that if this Jesus is who He says He is, then following Him should affect our work. But how? What does this look like?

We don't have to look far for an example of how we can ordinary work in an extraordinary way. Carpenter Jesus is the perfect example. Dallas Willard, in his book *The Divine Conspiracy*, writes of Jesus:

If he were to come today as he did then, he could carry out his mission through most any decent and useful occupation. He could be a clerk or accountant in a hardware store, a computer repairman, a banker, an editor, doctor, waiter, teacher, farmhand, lab technician, or construction worker. He could run a housecleaning service or repair automobiles. In other words, if he were to come today, he could very well do what you do. He could very well live in your apartment or house, hold down your job, have your education and life prospects, and live within your family, surroundings, and time. None of this would be the least hindrance to the eternal kind of life that was his by nature and becomes available to us through him (Willard 14).

When God calls us to Himself—when we believe and follow Jesus, the subsequent renovation doesn't require a change in careers. It isn't dependent on a change in

profession and it doesn't particularly compel us to join one specific profession. Our circumstances don't change but our heart beats for Jesus now. The news that Jesus loves us and changes our hearts right where we are at changes everything. The Gospel brings importance to the ordinary or even unfavorable circumstances that we find ourselves in.

Marriage

The Hollywood portrayal of marriage, with a few notable exceptions, is that marriage is a death trap where all good things go to die. Passions flame out, people grow apart, hobbies and friends must be given up—all because someone made the inexplicable choice to wake up next to the same person every day for the rest of their life. Where's the fun in that? Where's the adventure, the chase, the variety? Marriage is presented as some sort of a last resort in Hollywood.

I'm twenty-one and I know way more about the thrill of the chase than I know about marriage. I spent lots of years chasing girls around and trying to trick them into chasing me back. High school Vince was all about the chase. I played a game of catch and release and only posed long enough with the catch to post an Instagram. When I was in "chase" mode, marriage looked boring. It looked like a sell-out. It looked safe, like something people did when they were tired of taking risks so they decide to trade in excitement for consistency, freedom for familiarity.

But the whole time I was in "chase" mode, I would feel guilty after letting girls go. I didn't like that my adrenaline fix hurt girl's hearts. I also didn't like the loneliness and the emptiness that the game left me with. The game was selfish. It was hollow. It was empty. After a really hard break-up, I finally decided to quit the chase on my way into high school.

My freshman year, I told my close friends the horribly cheesy line “I’m just gonna date Jesus this year. No girls. No dates. No chase. I’m taking a break” During that year, I got far enough from my habit to see what it really was. I stopped seeing “the chase” as a game that 18-year-olds play and started seeing it for what it was—cowardice, laziness, selfishness, and sin. The chase is easy. It’s non-committal, distance is kept, and there’s always an easy exit—the next person.

After a year off from the chase, I finally realized at my brother’s wedding that the real risk wasn’t in the chase but in commitment. The real risk, the real adventure and pursuit was in loving somebody when they’re hard to love. Ultimately, the real risk was bound up in the vows I heard my brother recite to my sister-in-law on a sunny day in Valparaiso, Indiana.

I, Miles Fletcher Greenwald, take you Emily Claire Cole, to be my wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish; from this day forward until death do us part.

I stood up next to my brother in a grey tuxedo, heard those words, and realized that the supposed drudgery of marriage that Miles was entering into was the real adventure. Waking up next to Emily every day with the mission and call to love her and serve her—that was the real challenge. Tears streamed down my face as I thought about Miles and Emily pledging to lay down their lives for each other and live out the Gospel day after day after day.

Committing to another in marriage is a lot of things—challenging, taxing, and scary to name a few—but it’s not boring. There’s nothing boring about being called into a

relationship that seeks to emulate the Gospel so fully in its everyday, no-holds-barred, 24/7 type of love. Waking up to that call every day is challenging, taxing, and scary, but getting a chance to so tangibly emulate the love that Jesus has shown us for someone else is one of the most beautiful stories that somebody can tell with their life. Within the mundane of marriage is a call to do something completely extraordinary. To repeat and to live the marriage vows is to enter into a sacrament that so visibly emulates the love of Jesus.

Hollywood has it wrong. Marriage isn't a lifeless drudgery. It's an everyday call to extend the grace of Jesus to an imperfect person. Marriage is saying "Hey, you, imperfect and sinful person, I am vowing to love you the way that Jesus has loved me. Fully. Recklessly. Unconditionally. Why? Because Jesus has loved me fully, recklessly, and unconditionally." That's a risk, that's a calling, and that's a pursuit. And that's anything but boring.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Leaving

I left. I got in my car on a Friday night and headed towards a state park where I heard there was a waterfall. I stopped at a convenience store for a jug of water and a coffee. I drank it black because it seemed more masculine—something you're supposed to drink before you go into the woods alone. That was my plan—leaving my world at Baylor for a weekend and going into the woods alone, like a 21st century Henry David Thoreau.

I was missing something. I could sense it. Each day, I felt like I was trapped in an office cubicle. Life felt stale and dull and boring for reasons I didn't quite understand. It wasn't really a crisis of faith, because I still very much believed that God loved me and called me to follow Him. I believed the good news, I really did. It was more of a crisis of action—I believed in a big God and I wanted to follow Him too, but I was still bored.

How could I not believe? I attended multiple Bible studies and community groups and worship sessions per week. I fielded deep spiritual questions from friends—*How's your Bible reading plan going? What has God been teaching you lately?* In fact, a lot of my social standing was based on being the Jesus guy who had a blog. Girls fawned over the words I wrote and liked me more if I talked about Christian stuff. Friends listened when I gave advice. I would talk to them about Gordy's pennies, about treasures in a field and pearls of great price. I listened to enough Tim Keller sermon podcasts that I could consistently regurgitate his words for any situation. I'd sit across from a friend in a coffee

shop and they'd tell me about their problems. I'd ask myself silently—"What would Tim say?" and then say it.

At Baylor, I was in the heart of the Bible belt. Christian culture was the air that we breathed and Christianese was the language that we spoke. After a few weeks of thinking that I was back in Eden, I realized that this cultural Christian-y vibe was in many ways a mirage. I could believe everything we want about God's grace and the call of Christ to follow. I could hear it preached until my ears bled. I could go to chapel every Monday and Wednesday and church every Sunday, sit in the front row and scribble notes until my hand cramped. But at some point, I had to *leave* the coziness of merely believing in these nice ideas and live in the fullness of the Gospel.

At that time, I felt this tension deep in my soul, like God had given me this extravagant grace and life-defining calling to follow Him and I was doing nothing with it—floating through the sea of college like driftwood. If life was a book, I had been stuck staring at the same page for too long. My tires were spinning but they weren't gaining any traction. Looking back, the building blocks of boredom were present. The disinterest in my surroundings, the perceived lack of meaningful work, both were weighing down my soul.

* * *

Without doing much deep thinking about what was at the root of my problem, I just packed up my things and went. I drove south on the I-35 corridor past cornfields and truck stops and little Texas towns. After an hour on the interstate, I drove past the

information booth of a state park. It was one in the morning, and the park ranger had long since abandoned his post. I weaved through the narrow and windy state park roads until I reached a trailhead. My heart pounded through my chest as I threw my hammock, Bible, and a box of frosted mini-wheats into my backpack. I tossed my phone in the glove compartment, locked up the car, and set off down a dirt trail.

I wandered out under the brilliance of the Texas starlight. The wind murmured through the trees. My feet padded softly on the dirt beneath me. I began to pray, talking out loud to God, asking Him if I was crazy to go out there alone. I walked for about an hour before I came to some bluffs. I set up my hammock, crawled inside, and munched on my mini-wheats. They made my mouth dry and my tongue feel like sandpaper. I carried on a full-length conversation with myself on why I was out in the woods alone on a Friday night. No consensus was reached. I eventually fell asleep thinking about what actor would play me in the movie about my expedition.

I woke up sweaty from the Texas heat, an obvious sign that I had slept in until noon again. I don't know how I slept ten hours in a hammock strung over a cliff, but I managed. I struggled out of the hammock and swung myself back onto the cliff's edge. I then packed up my stuff and began to traverse my way down the ravine that I had slept over. After bushwhacking downhill for a few hundred yards, I found a river. I was considering swimming but the river was a putrid shade of green that wasn't very inviting. I wandered along the bank for what must have been an hour, dodging thorn bushes and poison ivy, searching for either a trail or the meaning of life.

After a while, I found a trail and followed faint voices until I came out in a campground. I made my way over to park rangers in brown uniforms and asked for a

map. I asked the one who looked like John Wayne where the waterfall was, and he pointed a massive finger towards the northeast. I thanked him with a handshake and took off with more enthusiasm in my step.

A mile down the trail, I started hearing the faint sound of water tumbling off of a cliff. It was muffled and subdued, though, so I figured I was still pretty far away. I walked for another minute and then came into a clearing in the trees. A metal plaque caught my eye. It read “Upper Pedernales Falls.” I looked up and saw water trickling down an eight-foot ledge. It reminded me of one of those statues that they put out front of fancy Italian restaurants—the nude little boy peeing into a birdbath. *You’re kidding me*, I thought. *These are the Falls? I drove 110 miles and hiked seven miles to see this thing?*

Dejected, I headed back towards the trailhead. I walked along the asphalt park road for what felt like ages. Families in minivans whizzed past. My trip was coming to a close. There had been no epiphanies. There were no fireworks. God had not spoken audibly to me.

In the middle of my walk back, I sat down and opened up my Bible to a random page and began to read. I opened to 1 John and saw a verse highlighted in blue:

“And this is His commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He has commanded us.” (1 John 3:23 ESV)

I read the verse a few more times and then slammed the Bible shut, annoyed with myself for taking this silly trip.

I went to Pedernales Falls looking for an experience. This is what I had grown up with in this evangelical sub-culture. When I had grown weary or lackluster in my faith in the past, I thought it was because I was past due for a trip to church camp. I wanted this

mystical experience with God, and that's why I felt like I needed to go to this campground. But what needed to happen in my soul had nothing to do with leaving for camping or wilderness or waterfalls.

This wasn't a complex multi-faceted problem that I needed a contrived camping trip to deal with. I had the first part of that verse down. The passive verb, to *believe* in the name of Jesus, I was doing that. I had practically memorized Jesus. I believed most of the right things about Him. I understood his grace and his call, and I signed on the dotted line to live my life for Him. But in that period of life when I was so desperate for change that I went into the woods with just a hammock and a box of mini-wheats, I was ignoring the second part. I had left out the *active* verb, the part about putting those beliefs into practice and actually loving others. I needed to leave Christianity lite® for the real thing.

* * *

On that road trip out West, I was driving the graveyard shift, and Jared was in the passenger seat. We were listening to an audiobook—*Through Painted Deserts*—a story of two guys who take off on a trip from Houston to Portland in a Volkswagen van.

Every person has to leave, has to change like seasons. They have to or they die . . . A mind was made to figure things out, not read the same page recurrently. Only the good stories have the characters different at the end than they were at the beginning. . . Leave. Roll the word around on your tongue for a bit. It is a beautiful word, isn't it? (Miller x)

I remember hearing those words and feeling deep in my soul that they were for me. I needed to leave. I needed to leave the fears and the distractions and the interrupting Jesus. I needed to step into the cosmic love story, to live in His grace and to follow His call.

The word *leave* echoes through our stories. We don't wake up one morning on a different page. We don't go to bed jaded and burnt-out and bored and wake up in an adventure-filled existence full of wonder and joy. When Jesus has spoken to me, changed me, turned my world upside-down, or led me places I didn't think I could go, it nearly always involves leaving. To *leave* is a powerful verb, maybe the most powerful verb. Whether for a job or a girl or God, leaving a place or lifestyle to go live somewhere else or simply live differently is powerful.

We're coming towards the end of this book and it's time to offer an invitation. I believe that The God of the universe is calling you to leave. He is inviting you into the love story. He's inviting you into His grace and His call. He's inviting you to leave the fears, leave the distractions, and leave the misconceptions. It'll be hard. It'll be scary. It'll be full. And it will be anything but boring. Roll the word around your tongue for a moment. Leave.

EPILOGUE

To Live is Christ

“To the best trip I’ve ever been on that I never want to do again.” Pat raised his glass for a toast. My friend Patrick and I were celebrating inside a lively tapas bar, eating miniature sandwiches, drinking Spanish wine, and practicing our broken Spanish on the locals. After nine days and over 160 miles on the road, we had successfully completed the trek from Porto, Portugal to Santiago de Compostela, Spain.

We went on the hike after a study abroad trip in the Netherlands. There was plenty to reminisce about that night over tapas. One night, we lost the path and ended up in a family-owned Portuguese bar. After our best attempts at speaking Portuguese were rebuffed, this Portuguese family of four decided to bring us into their house, feed us dinner, and set up makeshift beds for us in their garage. The next morning, we woke up to the smell of café con leche and toast. We ate a home-cooked breakfast, got a tour of the chicken coop in the back, and then took off down the road again. Another night, we found ourselves jumping off of bridges into the ocean with Portuguese teenagers. Finally, we showed up on the cobble-stoned streets of Santiago de Compostela. After some churros and a Catholic Mass in a massive cathedral, we found ourselves a tapas bar with Wi-Fi.

After eight days with no communication with the outside world, we were anxious to touch base with our people. We asked our server for the Wi-Fi password and connected through our I-phones. I checked the screen and saw a text from my dad flash across the screen. My breathing went short and quick all of the sudden. It read “Call me

immediately.” I dialed the numbers and pressed the green call button. The phone rang twice and then he picked up.

“Vince,” His voice was raspy and weak. “Your cousin Will was killed in a car accident early this morning.” Everything went cold, blank, and numb. A lump formed in my throat. My lips quivered. Tears dripped onto the wooden table. Will was gone.

The tears streamed down as the memory film began to roll. I thought about Will’s role in my life while we overlapped in Ames. I was an awkward, gangly 13-year-old boy who didn’t know who he was. Will was a man’s man who made go-karts from scraps, had enough intramural champion shirts for every day of the week, and went out of his way to love on an awkward pre-teen like me. While most college kids were tapping kegs and chasing tail, Will was taking me to Chinese restaurants, ordering sesame chicken for both of us, and asking me about my relationship with Jesus.

Will showed me that life in Jesus wasn’t a dull, lifeless routine but a vibrant and adventurous lifestyle that was exciting, challenging, and abundant. Will was one of my heroes. And now he was gone.

* * *

My father is a man who speaks clarity and love and truth into hard situations. The day after I heard the news, I was scrambling to adjust my return trip plans so I could get back for the funeral. I called him from a restaurant on the verge of a breakdown. I needed to hear truth in that phone call.

“Vince, we just stumble around this life in a stupor until something like this happens and wakes us up.”

“Yeah, we all do that. I do that. And then it’s too late.” Tears burned my cheeks.

“Here’s what I’m finding comfort in right now,” Dad continued, his voice strained but clear. “In the Scriptures, Paul tells the Galatians that ‘to live is Christ, and to die is gain.’ He paused. “Vince, you and I either believe those words or we don’t . . . and if we believe those words, then this is all going to be OK.”

My cousin Will believed those beautiful, life-altering, words, that living was all about Christ, and that death was gain because it meant going home. He had grasped the fullness of the Gospel. That set my cousin Will free to spend his days here on Earth doing the things that matter once our days run out—living life to the full, loving fiercely, and pursuing Jesus recklessly.

Will didn’t spend his time on Earth distracted by selfish dreams that would wither away when his time here expired. He didn’t let fear and doubt cut his legs out from under him. He didn’t interrupt Jesus and settle for a partial, truncated Gospel. Will understood that life in Jesus was the farthest thing from boring. He lived life like it was a race, running in the grace and call of His Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

* * *

This past Christmas, our extended family—cousins, aunts, and uncles—decided to break routine when we gathered for the holiday. The typical Christmas routine of turkey

and naps didn't fit in with the grief that our family met just four months prior, so we relocated our Christmas lunch to Will's cabin.

Will built the Cabin during his senior year of high school on a small plot of Iowa farmland. He spent weeks out there with his friends building the dream that many eighteen-year-old guys have but few live out. They used salvaged wood from a barn fire and recycled telephone poles to construct a two-story cabin complete with a porch and second-story balcony that overlooked a small farm pond.

We huddled around the wood burning stove and told Will stories in the cabin that Will built. Memories were shared and tears were shed. We grabbed hands and prayed, the forty of us, telling our God how much we missed our Will. After a few moments of silence, Will's father stood up. Uncle Dick's face was weary with a grief that only comes from burying a child.

"Family. I'd like to say some words." Dick was a farm insurance adjustor, not an orator, but the words from his heavy chest carried weight. "I spent some time with the chainsaw this morning. I wanted to make something to share with the people who love and miss Will the most." He held up a piece of scrap wood with a word carved in it.

"It says 'live.'" He took a deep breath and glanced into Aunt Cindy's eyes for strength. "As bad as we hurt right now, as hard as this is, I feel like we need to take challenges from my son." He glanced at Cindy again. She nodded back at him.

"Will *lived*." Dick's voice picked up strength. "He lived short but he lived so well. And that's my challenge to us—that in the wake of this death and grief and pain, we would *live*."

Uncle Dick tucked the piece of wood under his elbow and grabbed his wife's hand. It was a Holy moment, a moment where grief and hope were held together in beautiful tension. We circled up as a family and grabbed the hand next to us. We prayed big, deep, honest prayers. We prayed that the God who conquered death would heal our broken hearts. We prayed for the hope of the God who conquered death to infiltrate our lives. We prayed that this encounter with death would encourage us to *live*.

* * *

I'm an ugly crier. Encountering death brings me to my knees. It makes me sob deep, horrible, ugly sobs until my crying muscles get so exhausted that I can't sob anymore. Death tells me that my life on this Earth is temporary. It tells me that someday these lungs will breathe their last breath and then they will breathe no more. This truth brings me to my knees. *Nothing makes us think more deeply about the life that we are living than an encounter with death.* Nothing changes how we live more than a realization of the unavoidable truth that we are going to die.

There's a cemetery off of La Salle Avenue in Waco that I walk through when my soul aches. I walk on the cracked cement underneath oak trees that have seen too many funerals. I walk through the cemetery and it feels like the tombstones are talking to me. They ask me the big questions, the questions that nobody ever asks because we're too busy talking about the weather.

How are you going to live? How are you going to use your limited days here? What are they going to say about you at your funeral? What are you going to do with the

*person of Jesus Christ? Are you going to live in the grace of Jesus Christ? Are you going to live in the call of Jesus Christ? Are you going to live life to the full? Are you going to recognize that living is only **living** if it's done in and through Him?*

* * *

Some day we're all going to die. Our bodies will turn back to dust. Our life narratives, our individual stories—they're going to be lost. I couldn't tell you the slightest thing about my great-grandparents, and they were alive just a few decades ago. Everyone is eventually going to forget who we were and what we did—how much money we made, where we went to college, your résumé, your diploma, your annual salary, it's all going to be forgotten.

At that point, all that's going to matter is Jesus. Our legacy and our eternal destination will depend on whether we believed and followed, whether we shared His love and told His truth. All that's going to matter is whether we participated in the radical life that He calls us into, a cosmic love story—the story of an all-powerful, infinite God who inexplicably loved a broken world so much that He sent His son to die, and that by the life and death and the resurrection of His Son, His children would be redeemed and His world would be restored.

You don't know my Uncle Dick and you didn't know my cousin Will, but you just read a book all about the love of a Father, the death of His Son, and a challenge from the God of the universe to live. I don't know about you, but I want to be a part of that cosmic story. I want to go along for that ride. I want to live life to the full. I want to be shaped and chiseled and prodded by the God of the Universe. That sounds challenging

and weighty and more than a little bit scary. That sounds abundant, joy-filled, adventurous, and full. That sounds *anything but boring*. What are you waiting for? Live.

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