

sample chapter

Group
Real. Bold. Love.

THE JESUS-CENTERED LIFE



The life you didn't think was possible,
with the Jesus you never knew

RICK LAWRENCE

sample chapter

The Jesus-Centered Life

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ISBN 978-1-4707-2827-4

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lawrence, Rick, 1961- author.

Title: The Jesus-centered life : the life you didn't think was possible, with the Jesus you never knew / Rick Lawrence.

Description: First American paperback [edition]. | Loveland, Colorado : Group Pub., Inc., 2016. | Includes bibliographical references. | Description based on print version record and CIP data provided by publisher; resource not viewed.

Identifiers: LCCN 2015045623 (print) | LCCN 2015044874 (ebook) | ISBN 9781470728281 (ePub) | ISBN 9781470728274 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Christian life.

Classification: LCC BV4501.3 (print) | LCC BV4501.3 .L3938 2016 (ebook) | DDC 248.4--dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015045623>

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Dedication

To the thousands of ministry people who've experienced my eight-hour "Jesus-Centered Ministry" training, and who've urged me for years to write something that's focused on all of life, not just ministry settings.

Acknowledgments

In this season of my life, I'm indebted to so many who have fueled both my passion for Jesus and the completion of this work. I'm first grateful for Andy Brazelton, who was determined to make "Jesus-centered" our defining mission as we engaged ministry people with resources and events, and who offers me inexplicable belief every day. For Thom and Joani Schultz, who not only went to the mat in support of this book but also have been evangelists for its message for a long time. For Tim Gilmour, my longtime boss, for looking out for the readers of this book by highlighting words in the manuscript that perplexed him. For Carl Medearis, who has been a kindred spirit and a prophetic presence in my life at just the right time. For Tom Melton, who continues to be the most catalytic person in my life, apart from my wife. For Bev, who knows me better and loves me more deeply than anyone in my life. For my beloved girls, Lucy and Emma, for making me an insufferable homebody. For Jeff Storm, who designed the J. logo, which was first used on *Jesus-Centered Youth Ministry* and then the *Jesus-Centered Bible*—brilliant. For Rob Cunningham, whose last official responsibility was to edit this manuscript before he left for the choppy waters of a freelance life. For my community of co-workers at Group Publishing, who have fueled my own growth in too many ways to count. For the community represented by the Simply Jesus Gathering, who have generously offered their own personal "beeline practices" throughout this book.

Introduction

Human beings are pretty good at lots of things. There's that whole invention-of-the-light-bulb thing, and sometimes people bowl a strike in every frame, and a few of us know how to throw people in the air and catch them again while we're ice skating. But, universally, maybe the best thing we do as humans is worship. We're hard-wired for it. In fact, we can't stop ourselves from worshipping the people and things that surround us, because worship is as autonomic as breathing. All of us worship a god of some kind—it's just a question of whether the "g" is uppercase or lowercase. Celebrated writer David Foster Wallace says it well: "In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship."¹

Some of us worship God-alone, and some of us worship something else (the something-elses are bottomless possibilities). And a *whole lot of us* live in the vast middle of this bell curve—we worship "God-plus." I mean, we mostly say we believe in or think highly of the big-G God, but we like to add a little something-something to our God-worship, such as...

- God-plus-the-American-Dream or...
- God-plus-social-media or...
- God-plus-family-values or...
- God-plus-high-achievement or...
- God-plus-hip-hop-culture or...
- God-plus-sexual-fulfillment or...
- God-plus-the-NFL/NASCAR/Golf-Channel or...
- God-plus self-improvement or...
- God-plus-Starbucks or...
- God-plus-year-round-sports-leagues or...
- God-plus-shopping...

You get the idea. The overwhelming majority of us are God-plus people, because God-only people often seem *extreme*. I mean, they can come off creepy and intense and something-other-than-normal. So we like our God-worship diluted with other kinds of worship, just to take the creepy edge off

of it. Another way to describe the God-plus life is the compartmentalized life—we generally like God to stay where he belongs, in the spiritual/religious compartment we’ve built just for him. It would be rude and awkward for him to wander away from his compartment and camp out on the couch in, for example, our girls/guys-night-out compartment. We love all our compartments and want those walls to stay up. So, broadly speaking, we feel more comfortable telling people we *believe in God* than telling them we *follow Jesus*. And we certainly wouldn’t feel relaxed describing our relationship with Jesus using extreme language: People who say things like *I’m ruined for Jesus*, for example, tend to make people back up a step. That kind of description seems awkward, vaguely negative, and (certainly) overly intense. So it’s out of the question for all of us, except for the creepy ones...

Now my soul has what you might call an open floor plan. Jesus has permission to walk around in my de-compartmentalized life, messing with my stuff and showing up at all hours of the day, in all situations.

But about a decade ago I had a tipping-point experience that signaled a deep shift in me—it profoundly changed the way I describe myself and redirected my purpose in life. I was like a passenger on a train, crossing a country’s border at night while I slept. When I awoke, I discovered that I’d traveled a great distance from the God-plus territory I’d always known and entered into the Jesus-only, *ruined-for-him* landscape where I now live. The country around me was littered with debris—a hurricane named Yeshua had leveled my compartment walls. Now my soul has what you might call an open floor plan. Jesus has permission to walk around in my de-compartmentalized life, messing with my stuff and showing up at all hours of the day, in all situations. And because this de-compartmentalization feels deeply congruent with who I really am, I rarely come off creepy. I’m sticking with that self-assessment.

Here’s what happened to me...

The Beauty of Boredom

I'm a Christian ministry leader and a writer and editor and speaker, so I get invited to lead workshops and deliver keynotes at conferences. Ten years ago I was asked by the organizers of a large ministry conference in the Midwest to lead a two-hour session for leaders—they wanted me to do something a little experimental with this group. At the time, I was toying with a way of engaging people that focused every aspect of life and ministry on a deepening relational attachment to Jesus. It was an attempt to explore what life would look like if it was “Jesus-only” instead of “Jesus-plus.” I started calling this way of living life and impacting others “Jesus-centered.” I'd been speaking around the country for years, drawing from a broad menu of what I'd call the “tips-and-techniques” of ministry. But slowly, subtly, I'd lost my enthusiasm for all of that stuff—people liked hearing something practical that they could write down in their notes, but I realized that my own freedom from captivity had nothing to do with tips-and-techniques. I had experienced transformation through a deepening relationship with and dependence on the person of Jesus, not by trying harder to be a better Christian.

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So as I led this small group of ministry leaders through my half-conceived, seat-of-the-pants spiritual adventure, the room crackled with electricity. We all thought we were merely learning how to morph conventional ways of studying the Bible and praying and serving others into practices that more intentionally focused on Jesus. But what happened, in fact, was that a roomful of people unconsciously moved into a closer orbit around the most magnetic person in the universe.

By the end of those two hours, that little band of 30 or so leaders had barreled into a runaway worship-train. We were crying and laughing and

hungry for more of Jesus. And some people in the room, with many years of Christian ministry on their résumés, waited in a long line after the session to tell me a startling revelation: They'd never really tasted this deeply of Jesus before, and had never appreciated his height and depth and breadth. I understood exactly what they were trying to say.

When I emerged from this catalyzing experience, my appetite for knowing Jesus more deeply was voracious. And with my leadership responsibilities completed, I was free to roam the rest of the conference, popping into as many workshops and general sessions as I could cram in. I listened to many of the best ministry experts in the country that day—all of them brilliant, and many of them longtime friends. But by the end of the day, I felt a growing restlessness, even an anxiety. My experience in and out of workshops all day, listening to succeeding lists of spiritual imperatives—the perfectly reasonable tips-and-techniques of the conventional Christian life—had *deadened* my soul.

As evening crept up on me, that deadness spread into a kind of depression. I wandered around the vast, crowded atrium of the conference center in a daze, finally sinking into an overstuffed chair that sat like an island in the middle of a rushing river of people. I needed to pray, to retreat into myself, and it wasn't hard to get lost in the throng. In my little cone of silence, I pleaded with Jesus: "Why, why, why am I feeling this way?" Tears streamed down my cheeks, and my face contorted with pain. I sat quietly weeping, gripped by an inexplicable despair. And then, in one of those moments when the voice of Jesus is clear enough that it's nearly audible, these words cut through my fog:

“You’re bored by everything but me now.”

Startled, I knew Jesus was telling me the truth as soon as I heard it—his words had the same impact that a sunburst has after a rainy day. My eyes brightened and the weight I felt on my shoulders was suddenly gone. Jesus had explained the mystery of my sadness perfectly, releasing me from my dulling captivity. The “try harder to get better” strategies for spiritual growth I'd been working at my whole adult life now seemed like annoying

background noise. As I'd been tasting the intoxicating presence of Jesus more deeply, my conventional God-plus habits seemed worse than bland in comparison. If you showed up at a cooking class that promised a mystery celebrity chef and then discovered Oprah was teaching it, you'd probably be less impressed with her recipes and more interested in *her*.

I'd always defined discipleship as a progression that looked a lot like doing well in school—studying hard, growing in knowledge, doing well on tests. But those things, I realized, now paled in comparison to the undeniable truth: True disciples, people who follow Jesus and live out his mission, are captured and carried away by him. They are so stuck on him that the natural outcome of their attachment to him is a perpetual willingness to give over their lives to him. They can't help themselves anymore—their path of retreat away from Jesus now seems blocked by their driving fascination with him, and their undeniable passion for him. The old building they once called *home*—constructed by the do's and don'ts of the normal Christian life—has been demolished by a wrecking ball forged in Nazareth. And now...*They are ruined by Jesus and ruined for Jesus.*

And they are bored by everything but him...

Everyday Awe

In his excellent book *Jesus Mean and Wild*, author Mark Galli describes what happened when a group of Laotian refugees asked if they could become members of the church he was pastoring. Since these Laotians had little knowledge of Jesus or the Bible, Galli offered to lead them through a study of Mark's Gospel. When Galli got to the passage in Mark 4 where Jesus calms the storm, he asked the refugees to talk about the "storms" in their lives—their problems, worries, and struggles. The people looked confused and puzzled. Finally, one of the Laotian men asked, "Do you mean that Jesus actually calmed the wind and sea in the middle of a storm?" Galli thought the man was struggling to accept this over-the-top story, so he said: "Yes, but we should not get hung up on the details of the miracle. We should remember that Jesus can calm the storms in our lives." After another uncomfortable silence, another man spoke up: "Well, if Jesus calmed the wind and the waves, he must be a very powerful man!" The Laotians buzzed with

excitement and worship. And while these newbie Christian refugees were having a transcendent experience with a Jesus they'd only just met, Galli realized he'd so taken Jesus for granted that he'd missed him altogether.²

As I've been living my new reality for more than a decade now, I've accidentally discovered this truth: When the living, breathing Jesus is the center of everything in our lives, fruit happens. That's just the way things work. Good things grow in our soul, and we can give to others out of our abundance. We don't have to spend all our energy trying to produce that fruit anymore than a shriveled, neglected tree—dying from thirst—has to work to produce fruit once its roots have been watered and fertilized. Jesus promised “living water” for a reason—he knows we are created by God to live fruitful lives, but we can't grow a thing if we don't know how to abide in him. Abiding in him means drinking deeply from his well of living water, and that water is like Miracle-Gro® for the soul.

I've accidentally discovered this truth: When the living, breathing Jesus is the center of everything in our lives, fruit happens.

“Apart from me, you can do nothing,” Jesus says, delivering a blunt diagnosis and an unbelievable invitation in the same breath. *The implication is that when we abide in him, we can do anything.*

We are meant to live in everyday awe with Jesus. As he becomes the consuming focus of our worship, we discover the last number on our life's combination lock, and we taste true freedom and purpose for the first time. Jesus' life and energy flows through us, transforming our life into a “moveable feast” that nourishes the hungry people who enter our orbit. I met David, a vibrant 70-year-old man with eager eyes, at a friend's party, and discovered he'd lived an incredible life. In his spare time, for example, he'd climbed Denali, the tallest mountain in North America, and all 53 of Colorado's “14ers.” When I learned he'd been a passionate follower of Jesus all his life, I asked what the key to his “long obedience in the same direction” was. And he didn't miss a beat: “It's all about worship.” I waited for more...but he said no more.

We are meant to live in everyday awe with Jesus. As he becomes the consuming focus of our worship, we discover the last number on our life's combination lock, and we taste true freedom and purpose for the first time.

Do you long to find the well of living water David drinks from?

Do you hear a quiet voice inside you asking: "Is this all there is?"

Has the "normal Christian life" left you discontent and bored?

Do you gravitate toward God-plus pursuits because he often doesn't seem big enough to handle all the problems and challenges you face in life? Or, simply, he's not as compelling as all those other pluses?

Well, what if you discovered that a life of everyday awe is possible and sustainable for everyday people who will never climb Denali? What if the small, manageable, comfortable, and dulling God you've been disciplining yourself to follow is actually bigger, more beautiful, and more thrilling than the normal Christian life has led you to believe? What if Jesus seems so familiar to you that you've stopped experiencing him as he really is? It doesn't matter, really, what your current reality is. The only thing that matters is your curiosity—the desire to walk a little further into the "deep magic," as the *Chronicles of Narnia* author C.S. Lewis calls it.³

You're already worshipping something(s) in your life—that's a given. And one of those somethings is probably some version of God, along with your own stockpile of pluses. What if, instead, you gathered all your worship-chips into one big pile and shoved them into the middle of the table, to the spot marked "Jesus"? What if you decided to go all-in with him—to take the biggest risk of your life on the safest bet in the universe? Well, I don't think you should do that just because I think it's a good idea, or because the church says you should. No, I think you'll end up shoving all your chips onto that Jesus-spot when you discover, maybe for the first time, that you can't help yourself.

Endnotes

1 David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, About Living a Compassionate Life* (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2009), 96-101.

2 Mark Galli, *Jesus Mean and Wild: The Unexpected Love of an Untamable God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 112.

3 C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2008), 83.



—*Part One*—

The Stockdale Way

Vice Admiral Jim Stockdale was one of the most highly decorated officers in U.S. Navy history. At the outset of the Vietnam War, he piloted an F-8 Crusader during the aerial attack of three North Vietnamese torpedo boats in what was later called the Gulf of Tonkin Incident. Later, in 1965, his fighter was hit by enemy fire and he was forced to eject. He parachuted into an enemy village, where he was captured and severely beaten. Dragging a shattered leg from the beating, he was taken to the infamous “Hanoi Hilton,” where he was imprisoned for nearly eight years—the highest-ranking prisoner of war in the U.S. Navy. While there, he led a prisoner resistance movement and created a secret code of conduct that all prisoners pledged to uphold, including the proper response to torture. Because of his rank and his involvement in the resistance, he was relentlessly and ruthlessly tortured. Eventually, he and nearly a dozen other prisoners were taken to a nearby holding facility dubbed “Alcatraz,” where Stockdale lived in a 3-foot-by-9-foot cell with a light bulb that burned around the clock. He and the other prisoners at Alcatraz were locked in leg irons every night.

Remarkably, Stockdale survived this horrific experience. He was released in February 1973—his body so broken that he could barely walk. After he’d recovered from his injuries enough to live a more active life, he finished his naval career as president of the Naval War College. He went on to a distinguished career in public service and politics: He was Ross Perot’s 1992 vice presidential running mate when Perot won 19 percent of the popular

vote—the best showing by an independent ticket in modern U.S. electoral history. When bestselling author Jim Collins was later introduced to Stockdale at a social gathering, he was quickly mesmerized by the war hero's story. Collins asked Stockdale how he managed to not only make it out of the Hanoi Hilton with an unbroken spirit, but how he'd been able to live a productive, vigorous life after he was released. Stockdale responded: "I never lost faith in the end of the story, I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade."¹

Stockdale's response was so profound that Collins made it the center of one of the most popular business-leadership books of all time: *Good to Great*. Collins translated the vice admiral's key to surviving and thriving in the midst of unendurable circumstances into something he dubbed the "Stockdale Paradox":

“You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”²

As a P.S. to this paradox, Collins later asked Stockdale about those who didn't make it out of the Hanoi Hilton alive, as he had. Collins wanted to know what was different about those who didn't survive. "Oh, that's easy," replied Stockdale, "[they were] optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.' And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart."³

Optimism offers false hope because it is not married to brutal reality. *To experience true freedom, it's necessary for us to embrace both our brutal realities and our prevailing hope at the same time.* Jesus, it turns out, operates all of the time in the tension of the Stockdale Paradox. He is always and everywhere exposing brutal realities while pressing forward into prevailing hopes. He

blows the lid off the scandalous and humiliating secret life of the woman at the well and then offers her the living water her soul is desperately thirsty for (John 4:7-29). He responds to the Canaanite woman, desperate for Jesus to release her daughter from demonic bondage, by calling her a “dog” and refusing to help, but then quickly gives her what she wants when she rises to his challenge (Matthew 15:21-28). After his resurrection, he asks his closest friend Peter three times if he really loves him; he follows each painful question with a life-giving invitation: “Feed my sheep” (John 21:15-18, NLT).

Following Jesus wholeheartedly means facing the “most brutal facts of our current reality, whatever they might be” while holding onto our absolute certainty that we will “prevail in the end” through his love and grace. Many are familiar with the preamble to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr’s famous “Serenity Prayer,” but few know well the payload portion of the prayer that follows. Here’s how it begins...

*God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.*

A pithy quote that reads well taped to the refrigerator door, no doubt. But Niebuhr, one of the great intellectuals in Christian history, is no lightweight. He’s exploring deeper territory—Stockdale Paradox territory—in the conclusion of his prayer...

*Living one day at a time;
 enjoying one moment at a time;
 accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
 taking, as He did, this sinful world
 as it is, not as I would have it;
 trusting that He will make all things right
 if I surrender to His Will;
 that I may be reasonably happy in this life
 and supremely happy with Him
 forever in the next.
 Amen.⁴*

Do you sense the tension in Niebuhr’s confluence of brutal reality and prevailing hope? True serenity, we learn, lives in the liminal space of this tension. We cup our hands to hold both truths—the truth of how things really are, and the truth of how things really will be—and drink deeply. This is the living water Jesus offers us.

And so, in the first section of this book, we’ll lean into some brutal realities while simultaneously embracing some prevailing hopes that will fuel our journey.

And so, in the first section of this book, we’ll lean into some brutal realities while simultaneously embracing some prevailing hopes that will fuel our journey.

In the second section, we’ll explore the everyday rhythms and simple practices that will draw us into a deeper relationship with Jesus, who is the embodiment of our prevailing hope. We’ll discover that the Stockdale Paradox is so much more than a survival technique or a foundation for great leadership—it’s God’s circadian rhythm.

Endnotes

1 Quoted from a keynote address by Jim Collins at the “Drucker Centennial” event on September 1, 2010, in Claremont, California.

2 Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 13.

3 Ibid, 83-85.

4 From the “Queries and Answers” column in *The New York Times Book Review* (July 2, 1950), 23.





Embracing Our Brutal Realities

“I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love.”

—Jesus

Jesus is the most-known, least-known person in human history.

There has never been a more widely recognizable name on earth. But, in turn, there has never been a more widely misunderstood, misquoted, mischaracterized, miseverything-ed person than the homeless rabbi from Nazareth.

Every year since 1927 *Time Magazine* has named a “Person of the Year” on its January cover. In 2013 *Time’s* editors decided to one-up themselves and name the most significant person in history. So, after an exhaustive analysis that ranked historical figures just as Google ranks Web pages, Jesus won out—it wasn’t even close.

Of course, Jesus is the single most influential person in history—it doesn’t matter whether you worship him as God or mark your birthday by the year of his death or repeat something he said without even realizing he said it (“Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you” or “He sends rain on the just and the unjust” or “Tomorrow will bring its own worries,” for example). His words and his deeds have done more to shape our world, and our everyday lives, than any other single force.

So it’s a little ironic that just before *Time* put Jesus on its “Most Significant Person in History” cover, editors at *Newsweek* recruited the University of North Carolina’s resident Jesus-skeptic Bart Ehrman to write an article titled “What Do We Really Know About Jesus?” In it, the religious studies

professor skewers a handful of contradictory details surrounding Jesus' birth and soft-peddles the historical reality of Jesus with this summation of the Gospel accounts of his life, death, and resurrection: "These are books that meant to declare religious truths, not historical facts."¹

Sure, we know Jesus. But the way we're still wrangling over the details of his existence exposes a blunt reality: We don't *know* Jesus. And I wish I was merely describing a dynamic that exists outside the church, the place where we often *assume* everybody knows and believes in Jesus. But those who identify themselves as Christians seem just as confused. Well over a third of church people (39 percent) believe there's a good possibility that Jesus sinned when he walked the earth. More than half (58 percent) say the Holy Spirit, who's identified in Scripture as "the Spirit of Jesus" (Acts 16:7; Philippians 1:9) is merely a symbol, not a living entity.² A Jesus who sins, and a Jesus who concocts elaborate lies about the Spirit, is a scam artist, not the Son of God, worthy of worship. Posers and fakers and liars do not meet the stringent job requirements for "God."

In one way or another, a lot of us believe in a Jesus who's not Jesus at all.

No More Mr. Nice Guy

I was talking with a junior high girl who'd just served as a leader in a church-wide worship experience during Holy Week. She'd spent several days leading people from her congregation into a deeper relationship with Jesus through an interactive devotional experience. The girl was giddy with excitement about the whole thing. I told her I like to ask people to describe Jesus to me—just because I'm curious about how they see him.

"So," I asked, "what are some words you'd use to describe Jesus to someone who's never heard of him?"

She scrunched her forehead and tried to wrestle that question to the ground. Finally, she offered this hopeful response: "Well, I'd have to say he's really, really nice."

She was ready to leave it right there, so I asked: "Remember that time Jesus made a whip and chased all the money changers out of the Temple? Does that story change the way you'd describe Jesus?"

She scrunched her forehead again. The smile disappeared from her face. I'd created a kind of intolerable dissonance in her. Finally, with a tone of desperation, she landed on this: "Well, I know Jesus is nice, so what he did must have been nice." I nodded politely and thanked her for thinking through her response. And then I got an idea. What if I asked people all over the country the same question? Maybe I could find some common threads in their responses. So I recruited videographers in five major metropolitan areas to stop young people randomly on the street and ask them a simple question: "How would you describe Jesus?"

When I got all the raw footage back, I quickly discovered my experience with the junior high girl wasn't an aberration. Without fail, the first and favorite descriptive word Millennials choose for Jesus is always *nice*.³ And, it turns out, people of *all ages* use similar words to describe him. Search online list-surveys and you'll find these one-word descriptions of Jesus popping up most often: loving, peaceful, forgiving, peacemaker, meek, forgiving, revitalizing, pure, gentle, and humble.⁴ "Nice" is a perfect umbrella for these sweet descriptions.

There's nothing wrong with "nice," except it completely misses the ferocious and disruptive impact Jesus had on almost everyone he met.

There's nothing wrong with "nice," except it completely misses the ferocious and disruptive impact Jesus had on almost everyone he met. He's the original bull in a china shop. Is Jesus nice? Yes, of course, but when he is, he's *scandalously nice*. He's nice to all the wrong people, and he's offensive to all the wrong people. Jesus is nice to the people he heals or feeds or rescues. But he'd never be voted Mr. Congeniality. He's definitely un-nice when he's blasting (over and over) religious leaders or calling his lead disciple "Satan" or an innocent Canaanite woman a "dog" or telling the rich young ruler to sell all his possessions and follow him if he intends to inherit eternal life. In Matthew 23 (The Message), Jesus tells the Pharisees they are "hopeless"—not once, but *seven times* in a row—and then he plants three exclamation marks at the end of that diatribe, calling them "manicured

grave plots,” “total frauds,” and “snakes.” The good doctor Luke describes Jesus as the social equivalent of a live grenade:

When Jesus had finished speaking, a Pharisee invited him to eat with him; so he went in and reclined at the table. But the Pharisee, noticing that Jesus did not first wash before the meal, was surprised. Then the Lord said to him, “Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? But give what is inside the dish to the poor, and everything will be clean for you. Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone. Woe to you Pharisees, because you love the most important seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces. Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which men walk over without knowing it.” One of the experts in the law answered him, “Teacher, when you say these things, you insult us also” (Luke 11:37-45, NIV).

This awkward, scandalous scene barrels toward disaster after verse 45, with Jesus essentially responding, “Yes, I’m aware I’m insulting you, and I’m just getting started.” Wow, someone get Jesus a plate of pasta and a glass of red wine—quick! I’m guessing word spread quickly and the A-listers in the Pharisee’s social set scratched Mr. Woe off their dinner-party lists.

Rejecting Lesser Gods

The point here is that a *merely* nice Jesus is *no Jesus at all*—and it’s impossible to have an intimate relationship with a person who doesn’t really exist, with a *fake* Jesus. In his foreword to *Jesus Mean and Wild*, Eugene Peterson writes: “Every omitted detail of Jesus, so carefully conveyed to us by the Gospel writers, reduces Jesus. We need the whole Jesus. The complete Jesus. Everything he said. Every detail of what he did.”⁵ And the reason we

need the “complete Jesus” is that our false caricatures have relegated him to the wallpaper of our lives. Because we have nice-ified him, he’s not all that interesting to us. We habitually diminish Jesus from *shocking* to *average*. Philosophy professor and C.S. Lewis scholar Dr. Peter Kreeft once told his class of Boston University students:

Christ changed every human being he ever met.... If anyone claims to have met him without being changed, he has not met him at all. When you touch him, you touch lightning.... The Greek word used to describe everyone’s reaction to him in the Gospels is “thauma”—wonder. This was true of his enemies, who killed him. Of his disciples, who worshipped him. And even of agnostics, who went away shaking their heads and muttering “No man ever spoke like this man” and knowing that if he didn’t stop being what he was and saying what he said that eventually they would have to side with either his killers or his worshippers. For “Jesus shock” breaks your heart in two and forces you to choose which half of your heart you will follow...⁶

We habitually diminish Jesus from *shocking* to *average*.

If the Jesus you’re trying to know and follow is more like an adult version of Barney, the cuddly children’s show dinosaur, than “the lion of the tribe of Judah” or the shocking person that Kreeft is describing, your connection to him will devolve into a compartmentalized, Jesus-plus transaction, not a real relationship with a real person. The false Jesus of our conventional narratives—our Fifty-Shades-of-Nice Jesus—arouses no passion in us. Our latent passivity toward him is a natural result of the milquetoast descriptions we’ve embraced about him and the tips-and-techniques bastardizations of the things he said and did. It’s as if, again, we’ve become fixated on Oprah’s recipes, waxing poetic (and on and on) about them while neglecting to

pursue an intimate friendship with the fascinating person who created the recipes in the first place.

And a declawed Jesus doesn't seem strong and fierce and *big* enough to walk with us into the fiery furnaces of everyday life. We're all facing big challenges and struggles, and we're looking for someone or something to help us overcome or give us the courage we need to survive the blows we've endured and the difficult situations we must find our way through. *The Tonight Show's* Jimmy Fallon is a nice, likeable, relentlessly upbeat guy—he'd be No. 1 on your dream birthday-party list. But you wouldn't choose him as your "wingman" if you were walking into a dark alley in a bad part of town. Nice Jesus isn't hard enough or tough enough or fierce enough to journey with us into our own dark alleys of life—and that's exactly why we need to have a deeper, more real experience of him. If the only Jesus we've experienced in the church is a cardigan-wearing, lullaby-loving Mr. Rogers knockoff, then we'll naturally go all-in with lesser gods that promise better results in the real world.

A declawed Jesus doesn't seem strong and fierce and *big* enough to walk with us into the fiery furnaces of everyday life.

The documentary *The Armstrong Lie* explores the Lance Armstrong doping scandal from an unusual perspective. Instead of rehashing the facts of Armstrong's long and persistent deception—the legendary cyclist who denied using performance-enhancing drugs was later exposed as a serial cheater and stripped of his seven Tour de France victories—the film explores why people for so long refused to accept the bitter truth about him. In the face of overwhelming evidence of his guilt, many refused to believe his accusers and defended him as a hero who'd overcome testicular cancer to power his way to the top of the cycling world. Armstrong was a "lesser god" to many, and it's very hard to give up on those in whom we invest our hope and belief. The film is really about our relentless pursuit of lesser gods and our passionate enmeshment with them. We've always preferred more approachable, more tangible gods to Jesus, and our "Lance

Armstrong’s” promise that we can have a more concrete connection with a god who will give us hope while requiring almost nothing of us but our trust and belief.⁷

We don’t have to dig too deeply to find evidence that proves this uncomfortable reality. In the aftermath of Nelson Mandela’s funeral, for example, a young South African spoken-word artist named Thabiso Mohare wrote a poem in honor of the great anti-apartheid leader. Here’s a portion of “An Ordinary Man”:

*And we watched the world weep
For a giant bigger than myths
A life owned by many
Now free as the gods⁸*

“Worshipful” is the best way to describe the tone that infuses this poem, and all the other tributes that framed Mandela’s death and funeral. And that makes sense, because Mandela was an amazing man who sacrificed his life, over and over, to win his people their freedom. Our hearts long for heroes to worship. And it’s simply easier, and more socially acceptable, to worship lesser gods like Nelson Mandela (or Mother Teresa or Bill Gates or Lady Gaga or Warren Buffett) than it is to worship the rock of offense—the one called “Scandalon”—who is Jesus. We like our lions to be transcendent and bigger-than-life, but also fully human. The “fully God” aspect of Jesus is what unnerves us.

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Our Mid-Marriage Malaise

We have all the evidence we need that our fragile cultural commitment to churchgoing, dragged down by the relentless way we’ve diminished the

real Jesus into an exceptionally well-behaved Middle Eastern philosopher, may not survive the next decade. According to a landmark Pew Research Center survey of 35,000 Americans, the percentage of people who identify as Christian has dropped a whopping 8 percentage points (from 78.4 to 70.6) in just seven years, from 2007 to 2014. This steep dive is over-represented by young adults in the massive Millennial generation (18- to 34-year-olds). Mainline Protestant churches and Catholic churches are also over-represented in the decline. Meanwhile, during the same time frame, the percentage of people who identify as atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular” rocketed up by almost 7 points, from 16.1 to 22.8. Pew’s associate director of religion research, Greg Smith, who was also the lead researcher on the new study, says: “We’ve known that the religiously unaffiliated has been growing for decades. But the pace at which they’ve continued to grow is really astounding.”⁹

Yes, the U.S. church is in trouble—more than 200,000 congregations are in decline. Every year, more than 4,000 of them close their doors for good. The people who’ve managed to stick with the church have a higher average age than the general population; and if you backtrack through the generations you’ll find that the younger we are, the less likely we are to be connected with a church. Of course, the U.S. continues to be a religious nation—95 percent of Americans believe in God. But the weekly church attendance figure hovers around 15 percent (the number pegged by researchers who actually count Sunday attenders).¹⁰

Those who name themselves “Christian” just aren’t getting who Jesus really is.

It’s clear that despite the best intentions of the Western church—all of our Bible studies, our men’s prayer breakfasts, our women’s candlelight dinners, our Christian living books, our three-point sermons that load a half-dozen new imperatives onto our backs, our “positive, encouraging” Christian music, and our accountability relationships—those who name themselves “Christian” just aren’t getting who Jesus really is. Or we’re not getting *enough* of who he really is, or we’re getting, literally, a fake Jesus.

And a half-hearted commitment to a Jesus who doesn't really exist won't fuel a lasting connection to the body of Christ. If we were feasting on the real Jesus, as he implored us to do over and over in the sixth chapter of John's Gospel, we'd have the same problems we've always had with the institutional church, but we'd feel compelled by our ruined-for-Jesus love to stick it out together—to live together under the umbrella of our passion for him and to change the things that don't reflect the true goal of the church, which is fueling a growing intimacy with Jesus. "Ruined for" means you stay, even when you'd like to go.

Here's what this dynamic looks like. The Barna Research Group says that 6 out of 10 young-adult Millennials (born between 1984 and 2002) who've been raised in the church will leave it sometime during the first decade of their adult lives. The cultural commitment to the church that has characterized American society from the beginning has fizzled, like a pop-bottle rocket reaching its zenith. A mere one-in-five Millennials believes "going to church is important." But those who affirm that they're actually growing spiritually point to their relationship with Jesus as one of their top-five drivers. And those who've bucked the generational trend and have stayed connected to church say there's one overriding factor in their ongoing commitment: "Jesus speaks to me in a personal and relevant way."¹¹ When Rachel Held Evans, one of the top 10 Christian bloggers online and a *New York Times* bestselling author, wrote "Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church" in July 2013, the piece sparked more than 100,000 social media reactions in its first week. The crux of her commentary is simple: "We're not leaving the church because we don't find the cool factor there; we're leaving the church because we don't find Jesus there. Like every generation before ours and every generation after, deep down, we long for Jesus."¹²

A deep, ongoing, intimate relationship with Jesus changes everything.

But when we are caught in the slow downward spiral of a tips-and-techniques mentality, a passionate relationship with Jesus is reduced to something a lot more transactional—something like a mid-marriage malaise.

We all know couples just like this—the current that flows through their union is carrying them, inexorably, into the Dead Sea:

- They eat together, but they chew in silence and stare off into space.
- Their eyes are no longer fixed on each other—the little screen in their hand is more fascinating.
- They're pleasant to each other, most of the time, but seem quick on the trigger when one or the other does that irritating thing they've been told a million times not to do.
- When one of them starts to tell a funny story, one that's been told one too many times, the other is quick to shoot the “not again” look.
- They sigh a lot around each other, and hardly ever touch each other.
- He heads down to his man-cave for poker or pay-per-view with the guys; she finds new and creative reasons to go shopping or drink wine at a watercolor painting party with the girls.
- They'd never admit it openly, but they believe there's nothing really new to learn about each other.
- The age of wonder is over, replaced by the age of resignation and disappointment: *“Darling, I want you to know that I'm committed to continue pacing the perimeter of the holding tank that is our relationship.”*

We'd never *say* all we want out of our relationship with Jesus is a comfortable, predictable, unobtrusive way to live more happily, but we sure *act* like we do.

And with Jesus we say: “You have your space and I have mine—let's keep our relationship...manageable.” We read the Bible, sometimes, but only when we feel guilty that we haven't read the Bible for a while. We feel a little better after we volunteer to serve meals at the homeless shelter for our church's “Service Saturday” outreach, but we quickly settle back into benign disinterest with Jesus a week or so later. Something the pastor says during his sermon blows on the embers of our relationship and we pray for the first time in weeks, but that emotional moment is quickly overshadowed by the argument we have with our teenage daughter on

the way home from church, the bills we just remembered that we forgot to pay, and the season finale of our favorite reality show. Our “marriage” to Jesus is stuck in the rut of rote—we’re just going through the motions. And, unconsciously, we’re resigned to settle for our mid-marriage malaise with him. We’d never *say* all we want out of our relationship with Jesus is a comfortable, predictable, unobtrusive way to live more happily, but we sure *act* like we do.

But the Spirit of Jesus who lives in our hearts will not settle for this. He doesn’t want the kind of relationship that slowly descends into tolerance, rote politeness, and comfortable deadness; he wants an epic romance that’s full of daring risks, remarkable sacrifices, permeating joy, and long stretches of soul-satisfying intimacy. And that explains the unsettled feeling most of us have—something in the soul longs for the intimacy it was created to enjoy, and it is unwilling to acquiesce to a *transactional* relationship with God. We were created for something more, and Jesus’ eccentric, passionate, and sometimes mystifying behavior points to it:

- He tells us that we must “eat his body and drink his blood” if we want “any part of him” (John 6).
- He describes the relationship he wants with us, metaphorically, like a branch abiding in a vine, like a groom’s intimate relationship with his bride, like a sheep’s desperate and dependent relationship with its shepherd, like two lovers who can’t take their eyes off of each other.
- He has no problem asking his followers to give up everything for him, including their very lives.
- He expects many people will outright reject him—that’s why he’s ecstatic over those who go all-in with him. But he *can’t stand* playing it safe; when people go halfway with him, he metaphorically spits them out of his mouth (Revelation 3:14-16).

Like any passionate lover, Jesus speaks the language of epic romance—a kind of raw intimacy that’s embarrassing to talk about in polite company. When Christian songwriter John Mark McMillan wrote “How He Loves,” one of the most popular worship songs of the last decade, he included this eye-opening stanza:

*So heaven meets earth like a sloppy wet kiss
 And my heart turns violently inside of my chest,
 I don't have time to maintain these regrets,
 When I think about the way...
 He loves us
 Oh! How He loves us...*

Of course, if you've ever sung this song in church, that first line in the stanza may take you aback. It's in McMillan's original, but not in the version that's popular in most churches today. McMillan gave his permission to David Crowder, the renowned and respected singer/songwriter, to cover his song with this replacement line: "*So heaven meets earth like an unforeseen kiss...*"—and Crowder's edited version is now the one most people have heard. The reason he requested the lyric change, Crowder told McMillan, was "because he knew that there are literally thousands of people who would never hear the song the way it was." McMillan admits: "I knew it was only a matter of time before someone recorded a version with a different line." The reason, of course, is that "sloppy wet kiss" is a description that seems way too *sexual* for a worship song. McMillan wrote the song the day after his close friend was killed in a car accident—that's why his lyrics are so raw and intimate. Great pain produced a line in a worship song that frames our "heaven meets earth" relationship with God with a metaphor that suggests raw intimacy, and it made a lot of people uncomfortable.¹³

Switching genres and eras, an old Frank Sinatra song perfectly describes the cadence inside the heart of Jesus:

*All or nothin' at all
 Half a love never appealed to me
 If your heart, it never could yield to me
 Then I'd rather, rather have nothin' at all¹⁴*

It is not how *we* describe the relationship that matters—what really matters is how *Jesus* describes it.

The Bible is many things: historical record, poetry, an ongoing narrative of redemption, and even a handbook for life. But what it is, centrally, is a firsthand account of an epic romance between God and his creation. In *Love and War*, authors John and Stasi Eldredge condense the meaning of life into one sentence: “We live in a great love story, set in the midst of war.”¹⁵ This romance, the way Jesus described it and lived it out, is far closer to a sloppy wet kiss reality than our church-ified standards typically allow. But it is not how *we* describe the relationship that matters—what really matters is how *Jesus* describes it.

You Will Go Free

Clearly, Jesus has ambitions for his relationship with us that obliterate our nice, pleasant descriptions of him. He wants it all—rather, *he wants us all, down to the grime under our dirty fingernails*. And when we respond to his longing by living a life that is more and more centered around him, we find release from the prison of our malaise and an invitation into an epic life that orbits around him the same way our attention stays fixed when we see for the first time Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon or the Eagle Nebula or the inviting flutter of our beloved’s eyelashes. Jesus’ intentions fit well in the bedroom, not in a Rotary Club meeting. He’s the *reality* behind the mythic poet/warrior our hearts have always longed for. And rebel singer/songwriter Tonio K’s song “You Will Go Free” captures the missional purpose of that original Poet/Warrior, its message drilling down to the bedrock of our hearts:

*You've been a prisoner, baby,
Been a prisoner all your life,
Held captive in an alien world where they hold your need for love to your
throat, like a knife,
And they make you jump,
And they make you do tricks,
They take what started off such an innocent heart, and they break it, and break
it, and break it until it almost can't be fixed.
Well, I don't know when and I don't know how,
I don't know how long it's gonna take,
I don't know how hard it will be, but I know you will go free.
Now you can call it the devil, call it the big lie,
Call it a fallen world, whatever it is, it ruins almost everything we try,
It's the sins of the fathers, yeah, and it's the choices we make,
It's people screaming without making a sound, from prison cells in paradise
where we're chained to our mistakes.
And I don't know when, and I don't know how,
I don't know how much it's gonna cost you, probably everything,
I know you will go free.
You can't see a jailer, you can't see the bar,
You can't turn your head around fast enough, but it's everywhere you are,
It's all around you,
Everywhere you walk, these prison walls surround you.
But in the midst of all this darkness, yeah, in the middle of this night,
I see the truth cut through this curtain like a laser, like a pure and holy light,
And I know I can't touch you now, yeah, and I don't want to speak too soon,
But when we get sprung from out these cages, baby, God knows what
we might do.
But I don't know when and I don't know how, yeah,
I don't know if you'll be leaving alone or you'll be leaving with me,
But I know you will go free,
I know the truth will set you free,
The truth about who you are,
Truth about who you were always meant to be,
Yeah,
You will go free.¹⁶*

We are all captives—some of us have made peace with our jailers, sprucing up our cells as best we can and distracting ourselves from our sometimes bleak or boring reality by using media, money, and momentum to self-medicate. But some of us can't stop hungering and thirsting for freedom. Some of us have been yearning to discover what life could look like if we "get sprung from out these cages," because "God knows what we might do." Some of us feel like sheep in desperate need of a shepherd, or broken branches pining for the life of the Vine, or lovers who stay awake into the heart of the night, longing to see the familiar outline of our beloved walking through the darkened doorway.

It's not possible to understand and embrace the heart of Jesus if our approach to knowing him is characterized by casual interest or benign pursuit. The only practical way to understand and love Jesus is to go all-in with him. I can describe what water feels like until I'm as blue-in-the-face as a swimming pool, but you won't truly *understand* it until you take the plunge. True understanding is always experiential. And, in the case of Jesus, a little *doesn't* go a long way. In fact, a whole lot of Jesus doesn't even scratch the surface. He's the most fascinating, unpredictable, remarkable person who ever walked the earth. It's going to take time—a glorious lifetime—to probe his depths. But that's what we do when we're invited into relationship with fascinating people.

The conventional understanding of Jesus as a mystery that we're not meant to know in full is hogwash.

The conventional understanding of Jesus as a mystery that we're not meant to know in full is hogwash. Jesus came to be known, and to reveal the heart of his Father. In John's Gospel, the "disciple Jesus loved" makes this declaration: "No one has ever seen God. But the unique One, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart. He has revealed God to us" (John 1:18, NLT). Jesus' intention is to invite us into knowing him at the deepest, most intimate levels we humans can achieve. He's not hiding from us. But he's also not throwing himself at us. He pursues us with passion, and

he longs to be pursued with similar passion—it’s that kind of pursuit that unlocks his mysteries. Wholehearted pursuit is intrinsic to all great loves. We don’t make epic films about people who make measured commitments to pursue their milquetoast lover with halfhearted caution.

In a life that is centered on Jesus, the gravitational pull of his orbit, at some point, feels like a tractor beam.

In a life that is centered on Jesus, the gravitational pull of his orbit, at some point, feels like a tractor beam—we can’t escape it, or him. If, as the Apostle Paul asserts, everything in the created world is a metaphor for “His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature” (Romans 1:20), then maybe black holes exist to help us understand the magnetic effect of drawing near to Jesus. Just as a black hole’s overwhelming mass creates a gravitational pull so strong that even light cannot escape it, the passionate pursuit of the real Jesus is our “event horizon”—as we draw nearer and nearer to him, we will cross an invisible boundary of his black-hole presence, from which no escape will be possible. We will be like Peter before us, who answered Jesus’ plaintive question to his disciples: “You do not want to go away also, do you?” with his own black-hole response: “Lord, to whom shall we go?” (John 6:67-68).

Endnotes

1 “What Do We Really Know About Jesus?” by Bart D. Ehrman in the December 17, 2012, issue of *Newsweek*.

2 From a survey report by the Barna Group titled “Most American Christians Do Not Believe That Satan or the Holy Spirit Exist,” published April 10, 2009.

3 From the raw footage of videotaped interviews of young adults across America, commissioned for a segment in the Group Magazine Live workshop tour.

4 You can get a good cross-section of these synonyms for “nice” in the entry “Famous People Describe Jesus,” posted on JesusCentral.com—jesuscentral.com/ji/life-of-jesus-modern/jesus-famous.php.

5 Eugene Peterson, from the foreword for *Jesus Mean and Wild: The Unexpected Love of an Untamable God* by Mark Galli (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), 11.

6 From my own transcription of Peter Kreeft’s lecture “The Shocking Beauty of Jesus,” given at Gordon-Conwell Seminary on September 20, 2007, and later expanded upon in his book *Jesus-Shock* (St. Augustine’s Press, 2008).

7 *The Armstrong Lie* is a film directed by Alex Gibney, distributed by Sony Pictures Classics and released in 2013.

8 The entire text of “An Ordinary Man,” by Thabiso Mohare, is reprinted as part of an “All Things Considered” report on December 13, 2013 (National Public Radio).

9 Results from the Pew Research Center’s second U.S. Religious Landscape Study (released on May 12, 2015), a follow-up to its first comprehensive study of religion in America, conducted in 2007. Quote from CNN.com post “Millennials Leaving Church in Droves, Study Finds,” by Daniel Burke (posted on May 12, 2015).

10 Scott Thumma, “A Health Checkup for U.S. Churches” by Hartford Institute for Religion Research (from a presentation at the Future of the Church Summit at Group Publishing, Loveland, CO, October 22, 2012).

11 From the Barna Research Group report “5 Reasons Millennials Stay Connected to the Church,” released on September 27, 2013 (barna.org).

12 Rachel Held Evans, “Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church” blog entry posted on CNN.com’s Belief Blog on July 27, 2013.

13 John Mark McMillan describes this story on his blog *The Promenade*, in a post titled “How He Loves, David Crowder, and Sloppy Wet Kisses,” posted on September 14, 2009.

14 “All or Nothing at All” lyrics written by Dennis Matkosky, Jack Lawrence, Arthur Altman, Bobby Caldwell, and Dennis Matkosky. Copyright: Universal-MCA Music Publishing, a Division of Universal Music Corp., Matkosky Music, Geffen Music, MCA Music Publishing A.D.O. Universal S.

15 John and Stasi Eldredge, *Love and War* (Doubleday Religion, 2009), 39.

16 Tonio K., “You Will Go Free,” from the *Romeo Unchained* album (Gadfly Records, 1996), full song lyrics reprinted with permission.