

Rick Lawrence

Jesus-Centered
Daily

see | hear | touch | smell | taste

365 DEVOTIONS



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See. Hear. Touch. Smell. Taste.

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Introduction

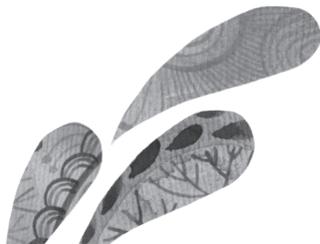


The great 17th-century philosopher and scientist Blaise Pascal said we are all born with a “God-shaped” hole in our soul. Put another way, we’re all born heart-hungry. We wander through our lives famished, scouring the world’s food-truck menu for the *one thing* that will finally fill us up. The *one thing* that will satisfy our heart’s craving. But we eat and eat and eat, and we’re never satisfied... We want more, but when we find what we think is more, it turns out to be less...

It is no coincidence that Jesus reveals the answer to our “one thing craving” after he accepts a *dinner invitation* from Martha and Mary of Bethany. After a tired, hungry, and thirsty Jesus arrives at their home, Martha launches into hospitable hyper-drive. And she is frustrated and bitter that her distracted sister has ceded all the work to her. Mary is “seated at the Lord’s feet, listening to what he’s teaching.” And Martha’s anger bubbles over: “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone? Then tell her to help me.”

Martha’s hospitality looks like a gift, but it’s really a demand. Mary, in contrast, has chosen a different form of soul-food. Jesus points out the difference with a rebuke that is both gentle and invitational: “*Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only a few things are necessary, really only one, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her*” (Luke 10:38-42).

The *one thing* Martha is looking for is standing right in front of her. But she has settled for *duty and responsibility* in her relationship with Jesus, which keeps him at a respectable distance. What a relief that Jesus will not settle for a rote relationship defined by service and discipline—he’s after our heart, and he’s determined to capture it. Our path forward with



him leads us to intimacy. Intimacy is scary; duty is predictable. It's safer to follow orders than follow our heart.

Jesus is the most substantial person in the universe, because he's the only one capable of filling the hole in our soul. As you move through these pages, lay down your lesser pursuits—the temporary fixes and food-truck appetizers—and find the rich, satisfying meal you've been looking for...

Immerse yourself in these upending expeditions into the heart of the *real* Jesus.

Experience what it means to follow him, through micro-adventures that engage all five senses.

Wrestle with the “wonder” of his unmatched character and personality.

And pray, in response to his movement in your heart.

Together, let's feast a little on Jesus every day, until our thirst and our hunger are satisfied, and the hole in our soul is filled with the joy—“Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life”

(Philippians 4:7, *Message*). 

The Jesus Re-Set



Read: Luke 7:36-50

Early in the year we do something counter to our natural inclinations—we *actively pursue change*. Whether it's health and wellness, finances and career, or marriage and family—the calendar gives us the leverage we need to reconfigure the chaos of our reality. We buy a new planner, scribble a new bucket list, and declare new vows that certainly seem certain.

On New Year's Day I see two middle-aged women speed-walking in matching jogging suits. They are not running, but they seem convinced they have the capacity for it, like a memory they're trying to recover. And so they sputter forward into an awkward scuffle that quickly degenerates back into a labored walk after fifty feet. This is what makes us human—our vows are both courageous and ridiculous. And I'm reminded that we're captive to our broken best-intentions...Maybe the status quo (our first love) isn't so bad after all.

But those who are transformed by Jesus share a common trait: We have given up our quest to summit, on our own, the Everest of deep change. Instead, we push our way forward to Jesus and pour our precious perfume over his feet, bowing and weeping and worshipping. We shift from self-reliance to Jesus-dependence. “Your faith has saved you,” he tells the weeping, kissing, perfuming woman. It's in our surrender, not our resolution, that we finally find the immovable force that changes us.

Wonder

What if you simply asked Jesus for the desire to change?

Jesus

“You cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me” (John 15:4).

Do

Big changes start tiny—fold your hands; switch the underneath thumb to the top.

Pray: Jesus, I'm trading self-reliance for self-surrender.

Pearls Before Swine



Read: Matthew 7:6-7

What's the most valuable thing you have with you right now? Now pause to think about the “standard” you’ve just used to determine that thing’s relative value—is it universal, or would others value it differently?

Early in his ministry, Jesus attracts a huge crowd, so he climbs the side of mountain and sits down to teach (Matthew 5-7). What comes out of his mouth is “shock and awe”—a blast of what he stands for, and what the culture of the Kingdom of God is like.

- Anger is pretty much the same as murder
- Adultery is pretty much the same as lust
- Divorce is pretty much the same as adultery
- Don't make vows or promises...none
- Don't take revenge, and give your enemy more than asked for
- Actually, love your enemies
- Don't pray or fast or do anything spiritual to be praised
- Forgive, or you won't be forgiven
- Don't worry about basic needs
- And, finally: “Don't throw your pearls to pigs! They will trample the pearls, then turn and attack you.”

Here, Jesus is revealing the way he values things. And above all, he values the heart. He's telling us to honor and respect the “treasure” of our vulnerability. We don't show our “treasure” to people who can't understand the value of it. Honor our boundaries. Simple. Clear. And brave.

Wonder

Are you more, or less, vulnerable than you would like to be? Why?

Jesus

“Don't waste what is holy on people who are unholy” (Matthew 7:6).

Do

Give your pet a bit of your favorite snack—your “pearl”—and see what happens.

Pray: Jesus, convict me when I devalue my heart.

Self-Help



Read: John 14:1-10

A self-help website recommends following a celebrity's morning routine... *Wake up at 5:45 a.m. Sip lukewarm water with fresh lemon and grated ginger. Then yoga followed by ten minutes of meditation. Wake up your skin with a fresh spritzer of chilled cucumber and lemon water. Wake up your mind by listening to a podcast. Wake up your mouth by spending one minute brushing each tooth. Wake your children gently, then talk with each one for a few minutes. Make their breakfast and a smoothie. Get them to school and yourself to work...*

It is a happy reality for successful people that work and school don't enter the picture until, well, noon-ish... The promise of self-help is, of course, dependent on self-strength—following the right formulas produces the right results. But this is the very mentality Jesus lambastes in the Pharisees, who “crush people with unbearable religious demands...” Ultimately, self-help formulas keep us from depending on Jesus, and therefore divert us from our true hope...

In *Man's Search for Meaning*, concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl writes: “When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.” Yes, self-renovation gives us a sense of control over the uncontrollable—we prefer to be the foreman on all our personal construction projects. But Paul reminds his protégé Timothy that desperate dependence is the doorway into real freedom: “A true widow... has placed her hope in God...” (1 Timothy 5:5).

Wonder

What is your track record with self-help strategies?

Jesus

“I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

Do

Taste dependence—with a friend, fold a paper airplane, each using one hand.

Pray: Jesus, give me a profound revulsion for my addiction to control.

Jesus Redefines Love



Read: John 6:53-69

Jesus re-defines “true love” using two metrics—intensity and capacity. He ratchets the *intensity* of love with: “All your heart, soul, mind, and strength” (Mark 12:30). And he expands the *capacity* of love with: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:33-34). The broader, deeper love he’s describing is native to the Kingdom of God, and invites us to escape the prison of our caution...

At the world-renowned French Laundry restaurant in Napa Valley, one member of the waitstaff every year earns its highest honor—a T-shirt with the slogan “Be the Pig.” It references the difference between pigs and chickens: a chicken offers up an egg for the meal, but the pig gives its life for it. Likewise, people who give themselves to Jesus with a trusting abandon are pigs, not chickens.

After the crowds have abandoned him and Jesus wonders aloud if his closest friends will do the same, Peter answers: “Lord, to whom would we go? [Only] you have words of eternal life.” This is a “pig” abandoning himself to the heart of Jesus. Caution gives way to unreasonable passion. Leonardo da Vinci painted the face of his enemy as Judas in his masterpiece, *The Last Supper*. But he simply couldn’t paint the face of Jesus until, finally under conviction, he re-painted Judas and let his enemy off the hook. If we refuse to love our enemies, our eyes grow scales. When he is in us, and we are in him, we love like pigs...

Wonder

Jesus says true love is defined by its response to enemies—why?

Jesus

“Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life...” (John 6:54).

Do

Drink in your environment like a pig—close your eyes and identify five sounds.

Pray: Jesus, I need you to love my enemies through me.

Still Angry



Read: John 11:1-44

All of history orbits around Jesus’ execution. He’s born in a Bethlehem stable to die on a Golgotha cross. Death is his mission—he intends to embrace it and then conquer it.

On his way to the tomb of his close friend Lazarus (dead for four days because Jesus, inexplicably, shows up too late to heal him) Jesus is fuming: “When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping and saw other people wailing with her, a deep anger welled up within him...” And later: “Jesus was still angry as he arrived at the tomb...”

And why is he still angry? This is mystery stacked on mystery. Sherlock Holmes reminds us: “Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.” We know Jesus is not angry over the shock of his friend’s death, so here’s what must be true—*death is at war with Life itself, and any concession to it stirs his anger*. The death of his friend is a necessary prelude—he must demonstrate to the world that he gives life to everything (John 1:4) and eternal life to those who believe (John 3:15) because he is Life itself (John 14:6). And when we eat the “bread of life” (John 6:35) he promises us a “rich and satisfying life” (John 10:10).

Death and Life are like oil and water—they do not mix. So when an angry sun rises in the morning, the lurking darkness must give way.

Wonder

Jesus is intent on proving his authority over death—but why do it *this way*?

Jesus

“Didn’t I tell you that you would see God’s glory if you believe?” (John 11:40)

Do

Lick some pepper (death), then lemon juice (life)—life wins, and lingers.

Pray: Jesus, stir my own anger over death in all its forms.

What's Good and What's Not



Read: Luke 18:18-23

My Kryptonite looks suspiciously like a chocolate donut—what about you? Candy? Frappuccino? Pie? Pastry? Thin Mint? We all have our own definition of irresistibly *good*. A band you'd kill to see live is the same band you'd have to *pay me* to see. A film you revere is the same I wish I could un-watch. Why do we have so many competing standards for *good*? Well, our definitions of “good” may seem contrary, but in truth they're more like a thousand streams fed by the Amazon river of *Good*.

When a rich religious leader asks Jesus what he must do to “inherit eternal life,” he calls him “Good Teacher”... Before Jesus answers the man's loaded question, he performs a little surgery on “good” with this: “Only God is truly good.” *Yes, yes, yes Jesus... But what about my question?*

How do we really know what's good and what's not? Well, the preening young man lays his cards on the table: “I've obeyed all [the] commandments since I was young.” And Jesus, like a surgeon, decides to cut the cancer of self-sufficient goodness out of his heart. “There is still one thing you haven't done...” *His one thing* turns out to be everything: *Sell your possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow me*. When we trade all our sources of “false goodness” for the True Source of goodness, we follow our little stream back to the Amazon.

Wonder

What one word describes your experience of Jesus' goodness?

Jesus

“Apart from me [the Amazon of goodness] you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

Do

Start a “Kryptonite” thread on social media: “What's better than (*candy*)?”

Pray: Jesus, remind me of you whenever I use the word “good.”

A Deeper Taste



Read: 2 Timothy 1:3-12

My daughter, home from college, asked me to wake her at 8:45 for a friend's visit at 9:15. At 9:10 I remembered what I was suppose to do. She had five panicked minutes to get herself together before the doorbell rang. Her eyes spilled disappointment. After a lifetime of faithfulness, can our trust be so fragile that even a small failure can diminish it? A proverb reminds us: *We gain trust in drops, but we lose it in buckets*.

The brutal Roman emperor Nero condemns an aging Paul to be chained like a criminal in a dank, forlorn dungeon. Scores of his friends have already betrayed and deserted him. Loneliness pierces his soul, and he knows “the time of my death is near” (2 Timothy 4:6). Is this how the One who “broke the power of death” rewards his friends? Paul confides in Timothy: “I am not ashamed of [my imprisonment], for I know the one in whom I trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until the day of his return.” And what has Paul entrusted to Jesus? Only his heart—*his everything*.

Yes, someday we'll feel let down and abandoned by Jesus. We, like Paul, will feel lonely and forgotten and forlorn. Our circumstances will obliterate our entitlements, leaving only the depth of our trust. Mere circumstantial trust is too shallow to survive disappointment. And so we “eat his body and drink his blood” (John 6) because that feast will carry us through the wilderness...

Wonder

Which of your five senses do you trust the most, and why?

Jesus

“Do you finally believe?” (John 16:31)

Do

Make a meal wearing oven mitts—how does diminished touch impact your trust?

Pray: Jesus, I do trust you, but help my lack of trust.

Into the Dark



Read: Matthew 23:1-12

In his iconic horror story “A Descent Into the Maelstrom,” Edgar Allen Poe narrates the story of three fishermen brothers struggling to survive after their schooner is dragged into the gaping mouth of a massive ocean whirlpool. The older and younger brothers panic and are lost—only the middle brother survives. He notices the casks that slide off the ship’s deck into the abyss are dragged down into the chaos, but then pop to the surface. So he lashes himself to a cask and throws himself overboard, saving his life.

The middle brother defeats certain death because he’s convinced a buoyant cask is capable of delivering him from the darkness of the abyss. He trusts the cask because he has studied what it can do, and so gives himself with abandon to it...

Jesus is not peddling a new set of values; he’s offering *himself* as our “buoyant cask”—he invites us to give over control of our fate and tie ourselves to him. But we do not easily relinquish control. We must first admit our weakness, our obvious limitations in the face of our challenges, before we gain his strength. “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.” When we lash ourselves to Jesus—binding ourselves to him over and over in ever-growing intimacy—he delivers us from our darkness.

Wonder

What’s a “maelstrom” in your life, and what would rescue you from it?

Jesus

“Practice... whatever [the Pharisees] tell you, but don’t follow their example” (Matthew 23:3).

Do

With a black marker mark a “maelstrom” dot on your palm—offer it to Jesus.

Pray: Jesus, tie me to you so that we can go overboard together.

The Widow’s Mite



Read: Mark 12:41-44

It’s more important to understand and trust the heart of Jesus than it is to apply his “principles.” No matter how hard we try to follow his “good person” cookbook, the souffle always collapses when we pull it out of the oven. But the *heart* of Jesus never fails us.

Surrounded by the conspiratorial “teachers of the law” in the Temple, Jesus fights his way through their traps, escaping to a lonely corner near the collection box. There he watches a parade of rich people showboating their large donations. These people bore him. But the poor widow who slides past the box unnoticed, dropping in “two small coins,” rivets his attention. “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has given more than all the others... They gave a tiny part of their surplus, but she...has given everything...”

The woman offers two *lepta*, which together add up to a *quadrans*, or 1/64th of a day’s wage. In today’s currency, she’s dropping \$1.10 into the box, and this is all she has. Jesus trumpets the overlooked courage of those who go all-in because all-in defines his heart, and therefore defines Kingdom-of-God culture. While the rich may obey the biblical principle of tithing, Jesus celebrates the *heart* behind the widow’s all-in. She empties herself, the same way he will soon empty himself on the cross. Jesus loves it when we have nearly nothing to contribute, but give it all anyway.

Wonder

When you give, do you feel more like a rich donor or the poor widow?

Jesus

“You are not far from the Kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34).

Do

Tape a penny (or a dime) to this page—a symbol of your all-in.

Pray: Jesus, I offer you my *nothing* so that you may make it *something*.

The Jesus Push-Back



Read: Matthew 5:21-47

In a culture of competing “truths,” how do we discern what’s false? For example...

- *Which is more likely to cause hyper behavior—a donut or a piece of fruit?* There is no link between sugar and hyperactivity, but there is for pesticide residue.
- *At home, are you more likely to be harmed by a tornado or by a violent assault?* You have the same one in 100,000 chance of experiencing either.
- *Are you more likely to die in an airplane accident or a bathtub?* In an airplane you have a one in two million chance of dying; in a bathtub it’s a one in one million.

It’s difficult for us to parse fiction and nonfiction in a culture plagued by deception. Jesus lives in this same tension. In his “Sermon on the Mount,” he repeats the same rhythmic challenge over and over: *“You have heard it said... But I say...”* Here he’s debunking conventional wisdom and inviting us to live as “strangers in a foreign land.” We are a people longing for home while we sojourn in a broken world. And so we cling to truth by abiding in Truth itself, practicing the “Jesus Push-Back” in our everyday life. Whenever we hear a “given” in the culture (“You have heard it said”) we wonder how Jesus would counter it (“But I say...”) Then we commit ourselves to live in the Kingdom we can’t see, not the kingdom we can.

Wonder

Jesus’ “But I say...” statements seem impossible—why set the bar so high?

Jesus

“You are to be perfect, even as your Father... is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

Do

Notice the “cultural givens” in newstand magazines—ask Jesus for “push-backs.”

Pray: Jesus, teach me to push back against the “givens” in my culture.

The Culture of God’s Kingdom



Read: Matthew 13:10-17

It’s customary to bow instead of shake hands in Asian culture. It’s a habit rooted in the past. In India, people once used a jug and their left palm instead of toilet paper. And in Indonesian culture a long fingernail on the left hand served the same purpose. To Western sensibilities, these customs seem disgusting—diverse cultural practices breed comparison and judgment. For example, if you crook your finger to signal “Come here!” in Japan it’s considered obscene. In Serbia, Vietnam, and Malaysia the same motion is used to call animals—that’s why it’s insulting.

Jesus understands that the customs of the Kingdom of God often seem foreign to us—that makes sense, because sin got us kicked out of the Garden, our “home country.” So, Jesus translates the values and practices of his spiritual home into something we can understand—he tells “cultural translation” stories we call parables.

We learn what’s most important to Jesus by paying attention to his parables. After reeling off a string of them (in Matthew 13), he tells his disciples: “Every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.” We won’t have treasure to give others unless we embrace the customs and values in Jesus’ “treasure house”—the Kingdom of God.

Wonder

What’s one “foreign” custom in God’s Kingdom that’s hard to follow?

Jesus

“Blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear” (Matthew 13:16).

Do

Dab cologne or perfume *here*—intimacy with Jesus transfers his “smell” to us.

Pray: Jesus, make your “kingdom customs” native to me.

Jesus On the Job



Read: Luke 4

The first few days at a new job can be...hairsty. Unspoken expectations, unfamiliar faces, and a fresh herd of sacred cows. But it'd be hard to beat Jesus' first few weeks as the Messiah...

His "pre-employment training" is a solo 40-day fast in the desert, where he's repeatedly tempted by the father of the holocausts, Lucifer. Fresh out of desert boot camp, his first business trip is to his hometown Nazareth, where he promptly infuriates everyone by announcing that God's love extends to all people, not just the Jews. And then his neighbors—the people he grew up with—try to push him off a cliff. Soon after, he's confronted by a man possessed by a demon and scores of people desperate for healing.

All of this before he invites the first disciple to join him.

Jesus' "workday" reflects the brutal reality of a Navy SEAL job description: "I have come to set captives free" (Luke 4:18). In "You Will Go Free," singer/songwriter Tonio K channels the passion of Jesus' mission in our lives: *You've been a prisoner—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... 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.*

Wonder

No job is more stressful than the one Jesus has—how does he cope?

Jesus

"The time of the Lord's favor has come" (Luke 4:19).

Do

Roll this page into the binding and close the book—feel the impact of stress.

Pray: Jesus, give me the training I need to join you on Your mission.

Being With



Read: John 21:1-17

Jesus offers us a blunt invitation into paradise: "Remain in me, and I will remain in you." Here, everything depends on "remain," but what does that really mean?

In the strange days after the resurrection of Jesus, his disciples are scared and uncertain about what to do. And so Peter decides to go back to the thing he knows best—commercial fishing. He invites his friends to join him, and they spend all night on the Sea of Galilee, catching nothing. At dawn they see the figure of a man on the beach, beckoning them: "Throw out your net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you'll get some!" When they do, they catch so many fish they can't haul in their net. This bizarre and playful miracle reminds John of another just like it, three years before. "It's the Lord!" he cries.

Peter quickly ties his tunic around his naked body and jumps into the water, thrashing his way to shore, where he sees Jesus already cooking breakfast. "Bring some of the fish you've just caught," he says. And he serves them bread and fish, inhabiting his friends' fears with his presence. His invitation is as simple as a child's: *Will you be with me?* And when we are *with him*, our confusion and fear and worry slide into the background.

Wonder

Peter betrays Jesus before the cross—why does he rush to be with him?

Jesus

"Do you love me? Then feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

Do

Slowly savor a salty chip—like salt, a little bit of Jesus changes everything.

Pray: Jesus, will you be *with* me?

Beautiful Things



Read: John 17

Gil Zamora is a forensic artist who worked for a West Coast police department for twenty years, recreating the facial features of criminals based on victim descriptions of their perpetrator. In a widely viewed advertising campaign for the beauty brand Dove, Zamora tells a succession of women he's going to draw their face based only on their own descriptions. He remains hidden from them as he asks questions about their hair, chin, jaw, and "most prominent feature." As they talk, he draws. Then he asks each woman to describe *another* woman she met in the waiting room. From this, he produces two portraits for each woman—one self-described, the other from the perspective of a stranger.

In the startling "reveal," the women discover that the "me" they've narrated looks significantly worse than the "me" a stranger has described. Some weep when they realize how much they've allowed inside/outside insinuations to define their beauty. Then Zamora asks a penetrating question: "Do you think you're more beautiful than you say?" We're formed and shaped by the voices we pay attention to... It's that simple. We must decide if we believe in the "me" Jesus is revealing in us or the "me" our interior narrative insinuates. Our aching hope is captured in the refrain from Michael Gungor's song "Beautiful Things":

You make beautiful things,

You make beautiful things out of the dust.

You make beautiful things.

You make beautiful things out of us.

Wonder

Why is it hard to believe that Jesus "makes beautiful things out of us"?

Jesus

"I have given them the glory you gave me..." (John 17:22).

Do

Draw what your face looks like, then ask someone to do the same. Compare.

Pray: Jesus, describe the "me" you see in me.

Jesus Christ Supernatural



Read: John 5:1-15

Stand facing a partner (roughly your size) two feet away and hold your arm straight in front of you, hovering it over your friend's extended arm, then try to push down against your friend's stiff upward resistance as he/she repeats "My name is (His/Her Name)" over and over—it'll be difficult to push that arm down. But if you try this again, with your partner repeating "My name is Kermit the Frog" instead, you'll discover he/she can't resist your pressure. The effect seems, well, supernatural—but is it? Well, no... Turns out, *we experience a physiological reaction when we lie about who we are*. Our dissonance saps the physical strength we need to resist that downward pressure. So it's science, not supernatural. And that makes sense, we tell ourselves, because we *should* be able to explain everything, even the inexplicable...

Likewise, we know Jesus amazed people with his supernatural abilities, but so did Superman. These stories are entertaining, but we don't treat them as *real*. Writer Annie Dillard observes: "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it?"

We know Superman will never step off the screen into our living room. And we expect the miracle-working Jesus to stay safely confined to the Bible. But an edited Jesus is no Jesus at all.

Wonder

What's a "supernatural" experience you've had—why think of it that way?

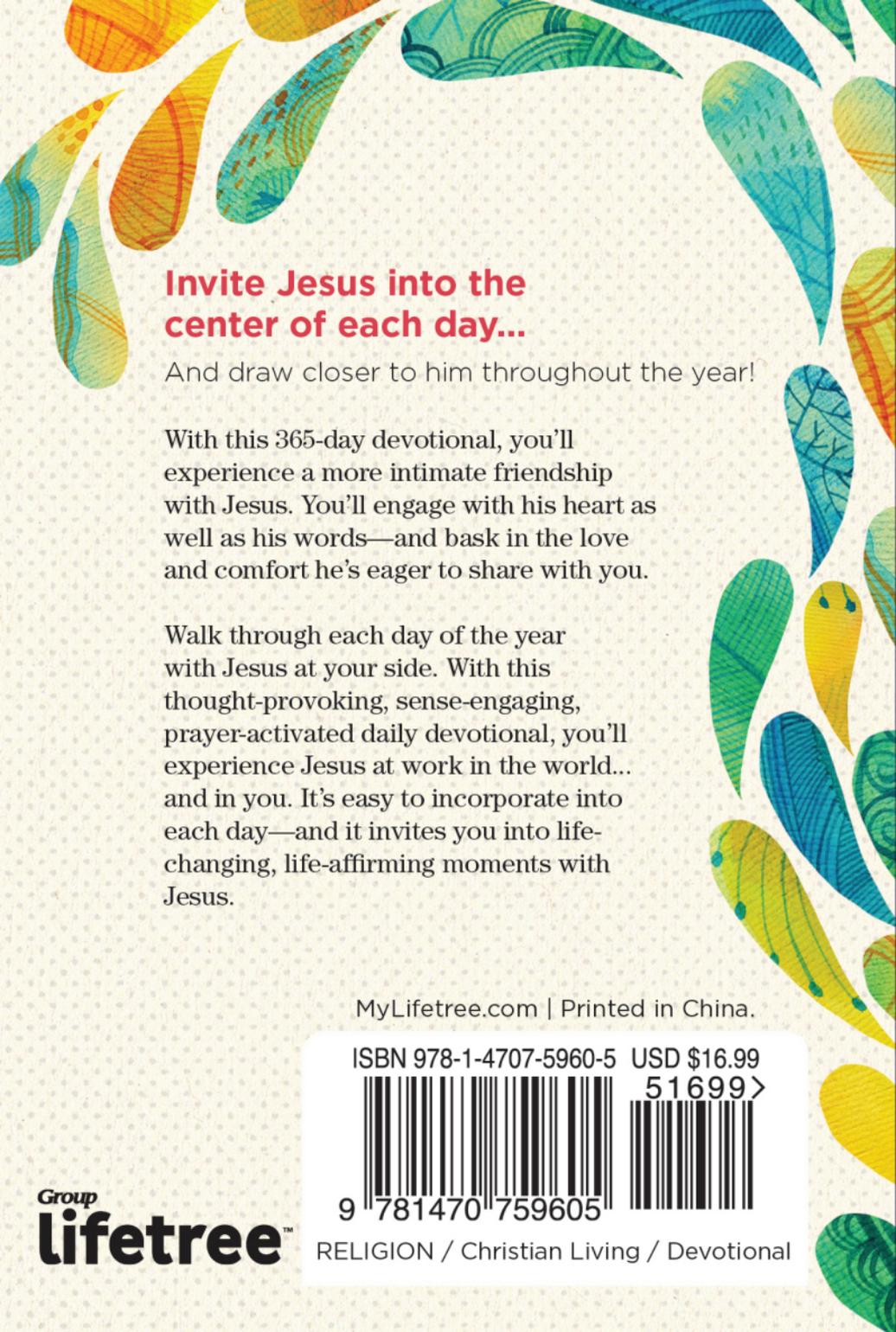
Jesus

"You will see greater things than this" (John 1:50).

Do

Find a partner and try the "Kermit the Frog" experience.

Pray: Jesus, open my eyes to your supernatural presence in my life.



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