

INTRODUCTION

I was raised in a mainline Protestant church, but in college I went through personal and spiritual crises that led me to question my most fundamental beliefs about God, the world, and myself.

During those years I fell in with some Christians who were active in small-group Bible studies. In these groups the leader would not take the role of teacher or instructor; instead he or she would facilitate the entire group's reading and interpretation of the chosen Bible text. The ground rules were simple but crucial for the integrity of the exercise. The Bible was to be given the benefit of the doubt—the text was to be treated as reliable and its authors as competent. No one person's interpretation was to be imposed on the passage; we were to come to conclusions as a group. We sought to mine the riches of the material as a community, assuming that together we would see far more than any individual could.

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Before I was even sure where I stood in my own faith, I was asked to lead a group and was provided with a set of Bible studies entitled *Conversations with Jesus Christ from the Gospel of John* by Marilyn Kunz and Catherine Schell. It covered thirteen passages in the book of John where Jesus had conversations with individuals. Those studies helped my group uncover layers of meaning and insight that astonished us all. Moving through these accounts of Jesus' life, I began to sense more than ever before that the Bible was not an ordinary book. Yes, it carried the strange beauty of literature from the remote past; but there was something else. It was through these studies of encounters with Jesus that I began to sense an inexplicable life and power in the text. These conversations from centuries ago were uncannily relevant and incisive *to me—right now*. I began to search the Scriptures not just for intellectual stimulation but in order to find God.

I was taught that patience and thoughtfulness were keys to insight. At one point I went to a conference for Bible study leaders. I'll never forget one of the exercises. The instructor gave us one verse, Mark 1:17 (ESV): "And Jesus said to them, 'Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.'" She asked us to spend thirty minutes studying the verse (which, naturally, was taken from an encounter with Jesus). She warned us that after five or ten minutes we would think we had seen all there was to see, but she challenged us to keep going. "Write down at least thirty things you see in or learn from the

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verse.” Ten minutes into the exercise I was finished (or so I thought) and bored. But I dutifully pushed on and kept looking. To my surprise there was more. When we all returned she asked us to look at our list and circle the most penetrating, moving, and personally helpful insight. Then she asked us a question: “How many of you discovered your best insight in the first five minutes? Raise your hands.” No hands. “How many after ten minutes?” One or two hands. “Fifteen?” More. “Twenty?” A large number now raised their hands. “Twenty-five?” Many of us now raised our hands, smiling and shaking our heads.

Those initial experiences with patient, inductive study of the Biblical text changed my spiritual life. I discovered that if I spent the time and assumed the proper attitude of openness and trust, God spoke to me through his Word. They also set me on my vocational course by giving me the tools to help other people hear God’s Word through the Bible. For nearly forty years I’ve been teaching and preaching the Bible for people, but the basis for every talk, lecture, or sermon has always been what I learned in college about how to sit with a text and carefully plumb its depths.

I still accept the authority of all of the Bible, and love learning and teaching from all of it. But I first felt the personal weight of the Bible’s spiritual authority in the Gospels, particularly in those conversations Jesus had with individuals—the skeptical student Nathanael, Jesus’ bewildered mother at the

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wedding feast, the religion professor who came at night, the woman at the well, the bereaved sisters Mary and Martha, and many others.

I suppose you could say that many of my own formative encounters with Jesus came from studying his encounters with individuals in the Gospels.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I wrote a book called *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. As a pastor in New York City for many years, I've always appreciated skeptics' arguments and the invaluable role they play in defining and clarifying what is unique about Christianity. It bothers me when Christians dismiss these questions glibly or condescendingly. I remember very clearly the doubts and questions I brought to those Bible study groups back in college and how grateful I was to have them taken seriously. I've seen that taking the time and effort to answer hard questions gives believers the opportunity to deepen their own faith while creating the possibility that doubtful people may become open to the joy of Christianity.

So I was delighted to be asked to speak for five nights to students—most of them skeptics—in Oxford Town Hall in Oxford, England, in 2012. We agreed that I would explore encounters that individuals had with Jesus Christ in the Gospel of John. I felt this was a good choice for the setting because the accounts of these encounters reveal the core teachings and

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personality of Jesus in a particularly compelling way, as I had discovered personally so many years before. As I prepared to give the talks, it struck me that these encounters were apropos for another reason. In many of them we see Jesus addressing the big, universal, “meaning of life” questions: What is the world for? What’s wrong with it? What (if anything) can make it right, and how? How can we be a part of making it right? And where should we look for answers to these questions in the first place? These were the big questions that everyone must ask—and that honest skeptics are particularly keen to explore.

Everyone has a working theory about the answers to these questions. If you try to live without them, you will soon be overwhelmed by how meaningless life seems. We live at a time when some insist that we don’t need any such answers, that we should admit that life is just meaningless busywork in the grand scheme of the universe and leave it at that. While you are alive, they say, just try to enjoy yourself as much as you can, and when you are dead, you won’t be around to worry about it. So why bother trying to find the meaning of life?

However, the French philosopher Luc Ferry (who, by the way, is in no way a Christian himself), in his book *A Brief History of Thought*, says that such statements are “too brutal to be honest.” He means that people who make them cannot really believe them all the way down in their hearts. People cannot

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live without any hope or meaning or without a conviction that some things are more worth doing with our lives than others. And so we know we *do* have to have answers to these big questions in order, as Ferry puts it, “to live well and therefore freely, capable of joy, generosity, and love.”

Ferry goes on to argue that almost all our possible answers to those big philosophical issues come from five or six major systems of thought. And today so many of the most common answers come from one system in particular. For example: Do you think it’s generally a good idea to be kind to your enemies and reach out to them rather than kill them? Ferry says this idea—that you should love your enemies—came from Christianity and nowhere else. And as we will see, there are plenty of other ideas we would consider valid, or noble, or even beautiful, that came solely from Christianity.

Therefore, if you want to be sure that you are developing sound, thoughtful answers to the fundamental questions, you need at the very least to become acquainted with the teachings of Christianity. The best way to do that is to see how Jesus explained himself and his purposes to people he met—and how their lives were changed by his answers to their questions. That was the premise of the Oxford talks, which became the basis for the first five chapters of this book.

Yet I had to continue on, because once you have studied these accounts of life-changing encounters with Jesus in the

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flesh, and have seen the beauty of his character and his purpose, and have heard his answers to the big questions, you are still left with another question: How can *I* encounter Jesus all these centuries later? Can I be changed just as these eyewitnesses were changed?

The Christian gospel says that we are saved—changed forever—not by what we do, and not even by what Jesus says to people he meets, but by what he has done for us. And so we can best discover the life-changing grace and power of Jesus if we look at what he has accomplished in the main events of his life: his birth, his sufferings in the wilderness and the garden of Gethsemane, his last hours with the disciples, his death on the cross, and his resurrection and ascension. It is through his actions in these moments that Jesus accomplishes a salvation in our place that we could never have achieved ourselves. Seeing this can move you from an acquaintance with Jesus as a teacher and historical figure to a life-changing encounter with him as redeemer and savior.

So the second half of the book will look at some of these pivotal events in Jesus' life. The basis for these chapters was a series of talks I gave at the Harvard Club of New York City, where I spoke at regular breakfast meetings to business, government, and cultural leaders over a period of several years. As with the Oxford talks, many of those in the room were highly educated and accomplished people who helpfully shared their

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own doubts and questions with me. And in both sets of talks, I was going back—as I have again and again through the decades—to these Gospel texts where I first felt the “alive and active” character of the Scriptures (Hebrews 4:12). Just as my instructor had taught me, every time I discovered more and more within them, and every time I was more excited to share what I had learned.

There is one more reason I wanted to write this book. When my granddaughter Lucy was eighteen months old, it was clear that she could perceive far more than she could express. She would point at something or pick up something and then stare at me in deep frustration. She wanted to communicate something, but she was too young to do it. All people feel this kind of frustration at various points throughout their lives. You experience something profound and then you come down off the mountaintop or out of the concert hall or wherever you were and you try to convey it to somebody else. But your words can't begin to do it justice.

Certainly all Christians will feel like that when they want to describe their experiences of God. As a teacher and preacher, it is my job and greatest desire to help other people see the sheer beauty of who Christ is and what he has done. But the inadequacy of my words (or perhaps any words) to fully convey this beauty is a constant frustration and grief to me. Yet there is no place in the world that helps us more in this difficult

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project than these accounts of Jesus' encounters with people in the Gospels.

I hope that whether you are looking at these accounts for the first time or the hundredth, you will be struck again by the person of Christ and what he has done for us.