

Contents

Foreword	9
Introduction	13
1. False Hope and Unreasonable Expectations	17
2. As Good as His Word	33
3. Jesus Disappoints Everyone	47
4. The Awkward Conversation of Prayer	61
5. Asleep at the Wheel	75
6. Great Expectations or Delusions of Grandeur?	89
7. Eat, Drink, and Be Hungry	103
8. Take This Job	117
9. The Trajectory of Worship	135
10. Happily Ever After	149
Acknowledgments	167
Notes	169

1

False Hope and Unreasonable Expectations

When Jesus Feels Too Far Away

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

— PSALM 139:7

My first major purchase was a submarine. I saw it on the back of a cereal box, which boasted of its prowess as a “real” diving submarine. The power of baking powder and this little vessel promised to make me master of the seas—or at least master of the bathtub. I had to have it, even though it cost me several weeks of my allowance.

The day it came in the mail, I carried it into the bathroom. Feeling the heart-pounding thrill that comes with a new purchase, I turned on the faucet. I tore open the box and realized that the submarine was smaller than I had imagined. No matter. I let the water run until it had nearly reached the top of the tub, loaded the special compartment at the bottom of the sub with baking soda, and launched it.

The sub went straight to the bottom. It did not dive. It sank.

Bubbles rose to the surface as the baking soda began to dissolve and then suddenly it bobbed back up to the surface. After a while it sank again. There was a kind of novelty in this but overall it was less than I had hoped for. A wave of disappointment washed over me and I realized that I had wasted my savings on a cheap plastic toy.

When I grew older I put such childish concerns behind me. But disappointment would not be put off so easily. Instead, it adapted to my changing tastes, attaching itself to the more complex toys of adulthood and insinuating itself into my vocation and my most cherished relationships. As a young pastor fresh out of seminary, I dove into my new job with all the hope and excitement I felt upon opening my new submarine. But it did not take long for me to realize that my lofty expectations as the shepherd of my own flock did not always match the mundane needs of my rural congregation.

Early in my tenure, when I attempted to present my long-term goals for worship, fellowship, evangelism, and discipleship to the elders, I expected them to be impressed. Instead, they looked at one another quizzically until someone finally said, “For the life of me, I can’t understand why you put evangelism on this list.” Well, at least I had my sermons. From the start, I felt most comfortable in the study and the pulpit. That is until one parishioner offered me advice for improving my messages. “If you can’t say it in twenty minutes, it doesn’t need to be said,” he told me as he shook my hand after the sermon.

My work, even though it was ministry, often seemed like toil. People I loved did not always love me back. I occasionally took those who did love me for granted or treated them unkindly. I set out to make something of myself and glorify God in the process. Yet after making every effort to “expect great things from God and attempt great things for God,” my accomplishments failed to reach the trajectory I expected.

Christianity without Scars

I should not have been surprised. We live in an age of unreasonable expectations. Ours is a world where promises are cheaply made, easily broken and where hyperbole is the *lingua franca*. Advertisers tell us that a different shampoo will make us more attractive to the opposite sex. Alcohol will lubricate our relationships. Purchasing the right car will be a gateway to adventure. These pitchmen promise to do far more than enhance our lives. They are peddling ultimate fulfillment.

“The problem with advertising isn’t that it creates artificial needs, but that it exploits our very real and human desires,” media critic Jean Kilbourne observes. “We are not stupid: we know that buying a certain brand of cereal won’t bring us one inch closer to that goal. But we are surrounded by advertising that yokes our needs with products and promises us that *things* will deliver what in fact they never can.”¹ Kilbourne notes that ads also have a tendency to promote narcissism while portraying our lives as dull and ordinary. They trade on natural desires but in a way that heightens our dissatisfaction and creates unrealistic expectations.

The church is not immune from this way of thinking. American popular theology combines the innate optimism of humanism with the work ethic of Pelagianism, resulting in a toxic brew of narcissistic spirituality that is pragmatic and insipidly positive. This is Christianity without scars. One in which all the sharp edges of our experience have been smoothed over. It offers a vision of what it means to follow Jesus, one that substitutes nostalgia in place of hard facts and replaces Jonathan Edwards’s notion of “religious affections” with cheap sentimentalism.

Such a view has more in common with positive thinking than with those who saw God’s promises and welcomed them from a

distance (Heb. 11:13). It depicts a world in which “not a shadow can rise, not a cloud in the skies, but his smile quickly drives it away” (as the words to the old hymn “Trust and Obey” say). There is no place on such a landscape for someone like Job, whose path has been blocked by God and whose experience is shrouded in darkness (Job 19:8). It has no vocabulary adequate enough to express Jeremiah’s complaint that he has been deceived and brutalized by God’s purpose (Jer. 20:7).

Brochures for Christian conferences claim that those who attend will “never be the same.” Church signs boast of being the

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“friendliest” church in town. In other contexts we would have no trouble recognizing such claims for what they are—the hyperbolic white noise of marketing. But when extravagant claims like these are taken up by the church, they are invested with an aura of divine authority. This is especially true when the language of biblical

promise is pressed into service to support such claims.

In the Scriptures, Jesus sometimes employs hyperbole. He also makes bold claims for Himself and for the gospel that are not hyperbolic. The difference between His claims and those we often hear in the church is that Jesus’ claims, while extreme, are not extravagant. The church cheapens these promises when it resorts to clichés and the rhetoric of spiritual marketing to describe its experience and its ministries.

The Language of Unsustainable Intimacy

One example of this is the language we commonly use to describe our relationships. In his book *The Search to Belong*, Joseph R. Myers uses the categories of physical space coined by anthropologist Edward T. Hall to describe levels of belonging in the church. Hall identified four kinds of space that define human interactions: public, social, personal, and intimate. According to Myers, the church commonly uses the language of intimacy to describe relationships which are at best close friendships. “The problem is that when I define my personal relationships as *intimate*,” Myers explains, “I dilute the meaning of those relationships I hold in truly intimate space.”²

Like the false promise of advertising, such labels exploit our natural desire for human intimacy and set us up for inevitable disappointment. It places an unreasonable burden on the small group, Sunday school, or worship service that is described this way. In reality, those contexts and relationships that can genuinely be described as “intimate” are few. Myers offers a needed reality check when he wonders whether we even want all our relationships to be intimate: “Think of all the relationships in your life, from bank teller to sister to coworker to spouse. Could we even adequately sustain all these relationships if they were intimate?”³

The same is true when it comes to the language the church uses to characterize the kind of relationship we can expect to have with Jesus Christ. Not long ago a former student of mine complained about the way youth leaders use what he called “the language of unsustainable intimacy” to describe our relationship with Jesus Christ.⁴ “It’s the sort of thing you hear when youth group leaders tell their students to ‘date’ Jesus,” he explained. When the church uses the language of unsustainable intimacy to describe our

experience with Christ, it substitutes cheap intimacy for the real thing and fails to do justice to divine transcendence.

We are like God, but God is different from us (Num. 23:19; Isa. 55:8–9). God is like us and yet He is not like us. “God is both further from us, and nearer to us, than any other being,” C. S. Lewis observes.⁵ We were made in God’s image (Gen. 1:26). We are like Him, but He is not like us. “He makes, we are made: He is original: we derivative. But at the same time, and for the same reason, the intimacy between God and even the meanest creature is closer than any that creatures can attain with one another.”⁶

Likewise, the Bible also affirms that in the Incarnation God the Son was “made like” us (Heb. 2:17). He was tempted in all things just like we are (Heb. 4:15). This commonality guarantees that we can look to Christ to find sympathy and help in temptation and opens the way for real relationship. However, the risen Christ is also a transcendent Christ. In his post-resurrection appearances, Jesus invited His disciples to “touch and see” that He was not a ghost (Luke 24:39; John 20:27). This was solid proof that the reality of Christ’s humanity continued after the resurrection. But it is equally clear from these appearances that the way those disciples related to Jesus changed radically after the resurrection. Mary was told not to cling to Jesus’ physical form because He must ascend to the Father (John 20:17). The same John who speaks so familiarly of seeing and touching Christ and who laid his head on the Savior’s breast falls at Jesus’ feet as one dead (Rev. 1:17).

Just as Jesus’ disciples did not relate to Christ the same way after the resurrection as they did prior to this event, our relationship with Jesus is not with Christ as we find Him in the Gospels. We worship an ascended and glorified Christ. In the resurrection, the veil that hid Christ’s divine glory from view was torn away. Jesus

is still like us but He is also unlike us. We will be glorified “like Him” but in a day that is still to come (1 John 3:2).

According to Jesus, no one knows the Son except the Father and no one knows the Father except the Son “and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him” (Matt. 11:27). This is a

revelation of the Father “without which every eye is dark, and by which any eye that He wills may be enlightened.”⁷ But it is not an ordinary relationship. We do not interact with the Father the way we interact with a parent, sister, or lover. It is true that Christian mystics like the sixteenth-century Spanish nun Teresa of Ávila have long used the language of intimacy to describe their experience of Christ. Teresa spoke of Christ as both a friend and a lover. But she also warned that in our experience with Christ we should expect desolation, pain, and suffering.

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Why We Can't Sense God's Presence

The Bible uses images of intimacy to characterize our relationship with Christ. We are compared to a bridegroom and bride, husband and wife, and a parent and child (Isa. 54:5; Rev. 21:2, 9; Matt. 7:11). The difference between these and the “language of unsustainable intimacy” is that the language we often use gives the false impression that intimacy with Christ can be experienced and maintained by the same mechanisms that sustain ordinary relationships: physical presence, touch, and conversation. Presence is an important element in our relationship with Christ. Jesus promised to be with us “until the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). But this is a spiritual and invisible presence that is mediated through the Holy

Spirit rather than a physical presence. John could say that he had seen and touched Christ, but we cannot (1 John 1:1). Our peculiar blessing is to be in intimate fellowship with One who is invisible to us (John 20:29). We are in a similar position when it comes to prayer. It is true that we enjoy a kind of conversation with Jesus through the exercise of prayer, but it often feels like a one-sided conversation. He responds to our prayers but remains audibly silent. What was said of the Jews with regard to the Father could be said of us with respect to Christ: “You have never heard his voice nor seen his form” (John 5:37).

There is a kind of hearing in our relationship with Christ. Jesus said, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). But for most, this hearing is not audible. Jesus does speak through Scriptures, but this is communication by means of inference. We extrapolate what Christ is saying to us through something that was either spoken or written to someone else. This is not like ordinary conversation.

God, of course, is never truly absent. There is no place that we can go to escape His presence (Ps. 139:7–12). But the fact that He is everywhere and always present does not guarantee that we will sense His presence. To the contrary, absence is as much a fact of our experience of God as the reality of His presence.

Why is this so? One reason God seems to be absent is because of sin’s intrusion into divine and human relationships. According to Genesis 3:7–8, as soon as Adam and Eve became aware of God “walking in the garden in the cool of the day” after they had eaten from the forbidden tree, their first instinct was to hide “among the trees of the garden.” It is not God who prefers to keep a distance but us. Our relationship with God and with one another was not entirely destroyed by sin, but it was distorted. We do not sense

God's presence because we are trapped in a compound of our own making, hiding from God and from one another behind walls of alienation (Col. 1:21; Titus 3:3).

However, sin is not the only reason we find it difficult to sense God's presence. Absence is a normal feature of all relationships. The late Anthony Bloom wrote: "The fact that God can make Himself present or can leave us with the sense of His absence is part of a live and real relationship."⁸ Bloom noted that a mechanical approach, where we try to compel God to manifest His presence simply by drawing near, has more in common with idol worship than Christian spirituality: "We can do that with an image, with the imagination, or with the various idols we put in front of us instead of God; we can do nothing of the sort with the living God, any more than we can do it with a living person."⁹

If there is an analog in our ordinary experience to the kind of mechanical spirituality Bloom condemned, it is to be found in pornography. Think about it. One appeal of pornography is that it offers sensuality without responsibility. The one who uses an image to stimulate lust craves an experience which simulates intimacy but without the obligations that comes with a real relationship. There is sensation and gratification but no mutuality. We treat God in a similar fashion when we turn to the mechanics of the spiritual disciplines hoping that they will generate a sense of His presence.

What Kind of Personality Did Jesus Have?

In Evangelicalism we often speak of our "personal" relationship with Jesus Christ. Yet we really know very little about Christ's personality. We know that Jesus possessed a personality. But we know virtually nothing about those aspects that would have made His

personality distinct from that of another. We do not know anything about His appearance, and next to nothing about the sound of His voice. We know that He was a carpenter, but we do not know what He liked to do in His spare time. We know that Jesus cried but do not know what made Him laugh—or even *if* He laughed. We cannot see the gleam in His eye or the way His forehead might have wrinkled when He thought deeply about something. Indeed, we have a much clearer notion of Simon Peter’s personality than we do of Christ’s.

Some try to resolve this dilemma by suggesting that Jesus had a perfectly balanced personality. They say that if Jesus had taken the Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory, He would have scored equally in every area. But isn’t this just a way of saying that Jesus had no personality at all? What is more, if Jesus was truly God in the flesh as the Bible declares, such a scenario seems extremely unlikely. If personality is the result of a combination of factors which includes both genetic makeup and experience, then as far as His human nature was concerned, Jesus must have had His own distinctive personality. Otherwise He would not have been human.

There are, of course, moments in the Bible when the clouds part and a ray of personality peeks through: Jesus looks around

• • • in anger or feels love for a young man
Our relationship who has rejected His call to follow
with Christ is one in (Mark 3:5; Mark 10:21). He speaks
which we are known tenderly to a shy woman (Luke 8:48).
more than we know. Yet even in these instances we learn

• • • more about Jesus’ character than
we do His personality. The Bible is mostly silent on this subject. However, our ignorance of the details of Christ’s human personality does not prevent us from having a personal relationship with

Him. Jesus' promise to come to the disciples after His departure is proof that physical absence does not mean a lack of presence (John 14:18). The ascension of Christ paved the way for the ministry of the Holy Spirit to the church (John 16:7). The advent of the Holy Spirit makes it possible for us to experience true intimacy with Christ.

This intimacy is unlike any other relationship with which we are familiar. Our relationship with Christ is one in which we are known more than we know (1 Cor. 13:12). The comfort we find in the conversation of prayer is the comfort of being heard more than of hearing (1 John 5:14–15). It is a relationship that is personal but reveals little about Jesus' personality. It is also a relationship where our greatest intimacy is to be experienced in the future rather than the present. This means that for the present we should not expect to find ultimate fulfillment in our experience of Christ. That is yet to come. We may even find on occasion that human relationships are more vivid and immediately satisfying to us. Perhaps this is implied in the earthly analogies the Bible uses when it speaks of our relationship to God. These concrete experiences “put a face” on our spiritual relationship and help us to relate to the invisible God in a personal way.

Building on the Ruins

Ultimately the roots of our disappointment are much deeper than the language we use to frame our expectations. The seeds of disappointment are sown in the fabric of the world itself. To the ancients the heavens look like a model of symmetry, order, and proportion. However, this was merely an illusion created by distance. Closer inspection revealed a more terrifying reality. The heavens are full of dark matter as well as light. The Earth is teem-

ing with life but the rest of the universe—at least the portion of it that we have been able to see—is barren. There is order, as the stars move in their courses each night and the cycles of seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night continue just as God promised (Gen. 8:22). But there is also chaos and destruction.

Albert Einstein once observed that God does not throw dice. Yet it often seems as if the universe does. Our treatment at the hands of creation frequently feels arbitrary and at times even cruel. When tremors deep beneath the Pacific Ocean sent 124-foot waves crashing against the Japanese coast in March 2011, they triggered a chain of disasters that killed thousands and displaced more than 280,000 people. Months later the worst tornadoes in a hundred years tore through the Alabama countryside, leaving bloody scars on the landscape. In October 2012, the United States held its breath as superstorm Sandy, downgraded from a hurricane, still wiped out entire sections of New York and New Jersey, leaving communities devastated, families homeless, children dead. Jesus said that the Father causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt. 5:45). Tragedies like these are equally indiscriminate. They afflict both the evil and the good.

Jesus' words beg the question, if the Father is responsible for causing the sun to shine and rain to fall, who is responsible for the tsunami and the tornado and the hurricane?

Disasters of both the natural and the man-made variety are not foreign to the Bible. The great flood, Sodom's destruction, the fall of Jerusalem, and the collapse of the tower of Siloam are just a few that come to mind. It is not without cause that this kind of devastation is often described as being of "biblical proportion."

The Scriptures explain such suffering with God's larger plan in view. Jesus warned His disciples, "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains" (Mark 13:8).

These are not glib words. Not when they are spoken by one who wept over the destruction of Jerusalem and who willingly bared His back to the scourge "for us and for our salvation." They are not glib but neither are they comforting. They were not meant to be. They were intended to be words of warning. They are Jesus' solemn assurance that things will get worse before they get better. These things "must happen," but the end is not yet (Mark 13:7).

The collateral damage of sin—and the Bible teaches that the natural world writhes in the throes of sin's effects as much as the human soul does—cannot be avoided. Creation has been "subjected to frustration" and is in "bondage to decay" (Rom. 8:20–21). The ground that once yielded its fruit willingly now does so only after a struggle and all who come after Adam have learned to eat the bread of sorrow like their first father. The full cup must be drunk, even to the dregs. Redemption is coming. The day draws near when the Earth's groaning will cease and creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. But that day is not today. Today we must live amidst the wreckage of the fall and build upon the ruins.

Worship Among the Ruins

The other day during my ride home from work I saw a church sign that read "Greater Works Ministries." I immediately recognized the allusion to Jesus' promise in John 14:12: "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He

will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.” It was not the usage of this Scripture phrase that caught my attention so much as the poor condition of the church sign. The lettering was cracked and faded, like the worn building upon which it was emblazoned. “*You would think a church that could do*

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***The construction
of the spiritual life
requires as much
tearing down
as building up.***

• • •

‘greater works’ could put up a better sign,”
I mused.

But there is no real incongruity between the sign’s bold promise and the drab reality of its setting. If anything, the inherent contradiction implied in this visual image is a more

accurate reflection of what most people experience when it comes to church than the overheated rhetoric that we use to describe it. But what are we to make of the wreckage we see around us? Is it symptomatic of our crumbling façade or proof that we are being rebuilt from the rubble? Perhaps it is both.

The construction of the spiritual life requires as much tearing down as there is building up. Sometimes the demolition is a result of God’s renovating work through the Holy Spirit. We “put off” in order to “put on” (Eph. 4:22, 25). At other times it is a result of our own self-destructive behavior. Not everyone who builds the church does so carefully or with the best material (1 Cor. 3:11–13).

What we can be sure of is that despite our worst effort (and sometimes despite our best) Christ will finish the work that He has begun. He will build His church. The powers of hell will not overcome it (Matt. 16:18).

Near the end of the war with Germany, as Allied bombs rained down on Stuttgart and the Nazi regime writhed in its final death throes, Lutheran pastor and theologian Helmut Thielicke preached

a remarkable series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer to his church. With the battered remnant of his congregation gathered for worship in the midst of their ruined church, Thielicke used Christ's words to trace a stunning map of spiritual reality. He located their experience at the intersection of two lines of activity.

"The first line is a descending one," Thielicke preached, "and it indicates that mankind is constantly living farther and farther away from God."¹⁰ The other line is the ascending line of Christ's dominion over our lives, which goes on simultaneously within the other process. Employing Luther's language of Christ's presence in the Sacraments, Thielicke declared: "In, with, and under the world's anguish and distress, in, with, and under the hail of bombs and mass murders, God is building his kingdom."¹¹

This is not hyperbole. It is not pastoral spin or church marketing. It is the language of spiritual reality.