
Contents

FOREWORD	9
INTRODUCTION	
What's in It for Me?	11
PART 1: SEEING HIM BIG	
1. Who Is Worthy of My Life?	15
2. Living in the Great Story	27
3. The Work of One Who Lives	41
PART 2: BEING THE GUEST	
4. Relaxing in Him	59
5. The Passing of the Eclipse	77
6. The Great Dilemma	93
7. Keeping in Step	105
PART 3: MAKING HIS GLORY KNOWN	
8. The Reconciling Things	117
9. The Eyes of Jesus	131
10. The Dawn of an Expected Day	145
11. How Not to Miss Jesus	157
AFTERWORD	
The End—and the Beginning	173
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	175

Who Is Worthy of My Life?

The scent of curry wafted out of Mr. Gupta's restaurant, saris filled the shop next door, and down the road we could just see the corner of a Hindu temple. It might have been Calcutta except for the red double-decker buses passing by. We were in London on a short-term mission trip with about forty other people. The first few days we'd walked around this South Asian neighborhood, imbibing the culture, occasionally gathering to pray, but now it was time to move on to the hard stuff, to hand out tracts and start some conversations. We had come here to share the good news of God's redemption—to shine the light of the cross. The glory of that vision had packed our bags and walked us on to the plane, but now that we were here, it had somehow shrunk down and then—poof—disappeared. The drizzle was hastening the footsteps of the people passing by. No one seemed inclined to talk. All we could see was the God-excluding world going about its business and we were left wondering what in the world we were doing out on a sidewalk five thousand miles from home.

That's what happens when we lose sight of Jesus. Life gets small. The horizons of our hearts close in, the world shrinks down, and the glory departs. I (Charles) speak five days a week on the radio about Jesus,

and Janet helps write the programs. You'd think two people like us who spend so many hours studying and talking and writing about Jesus would be filled with his glory all the time but . . . no. We can miss Jesus.

Before I arrived as the fourth host for this eighty-year-old Christian radio program, Janet and I were living our dream life. I've worked a lot of jobs—reporter, press secretary, bureau chief for United Press International—but at this point I was a freelance consultant for several Christian ministries. My life included plenty of airports but much of the time I could work from home, sipping fresh-ground coffee in our mountain home nine thousand feet above sea level. The seasons would change from aspen gold to a snow-clad winter. A purple lupine-decked spring would usher in a perfect Rocky Mountain summer. We live in a culture that tells us to pursue our dreams and for us this was it. And yet, it felt a little stale, a little insulated and isolated—a little small. We wanted the excitement of living all-out for Jesus and one day we made it a prayer. We told the Lord we were willing to go anywhere he wanted us to go—with one small stipulation. “Please, Lord. Don't send us to

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Southern California.” I can remember telling Janet, “We've moved to a lot of different places over the years but at least I've never asked you to move to Southern California.” We pictured it as a hot, overcrowded, smog-choked, twelve-lane freeway built right on top the San Andreas Fault. “Africa maybe, Lord, but not Southern California.”

A few days later the call came from Haven Ministries asking me to become the new host, and no, I couldn't do it from the Rocky Mountains; we had to relocate.

You guessed it. Six months later we were driving down that twelve-lane freeway pulling a U-Haul.

Thirteen years later we've become typical Southern Californians who brag about the weather and enjoy the thrill of a little tremor now and then, but at the time it felt a little like we were dying for Jesus. I thought it would lock him into my heart for life but I soon found out it doesn't work that way. I can talk every day on the radio and still lose sight of Jesus. I can get caught up in the regret of not having a fat 401(k). I can find myself coveting my friend's fully restored British-racing-green MGB convertible. There's that jealousy I feel when I hear a better preacher on the radio, the longing for trips I may never get to take, the worry over my health, the newest electronic toy I can't live without. My life can even shrink down to the next slice of cherry pie I'm going to eat or whether or not tonight's *NCIS* is one I've seen before.

I can live small—and when I do I reduce Jesus. An author we read recently called Jesus her “little glow light” and I can start to treat the crucified Son of God like it's all about me, and he's just an accessory who adds a little glow to my existence. I can consign him to the margins of my life while I pursue my own agenda. The shadows can block my heart so I don't comprehend the magnitude of his love or the absolute completeness of his grace. I need to see his glory—again and again. We all do. We need him to break into our hearts and fill us with a fresh realization of who he is and what he's done for us so we can live large, liberated lives.

We needed Jesus to break into our hearts the day we were out on that rainy sidewalk in London and he did, right then and there, in a way we didn't expect. A young West Asian woman slowed down, took one of our tracts, and paused as she read the title, “Have You Ever Wanted a New Life?”

Janet said, “It's about Jesus. Do you know about Jesus?”

“Not much,” she said, “but I've been looking for someone who's worthy of my life.”

“Well, that would definitely be Jesus,” Janet told her.

She nodded her thanks and began reading as she went on her way, leaving us to marvel that someone who didn't even know him would use that biblical word *worthy*. We rolled it around in our hearts. Who is worthy of our lives? Who but Jesus? According to the Bible, the entire universe is singing "worthy" to him and that young woman's comment made it real to us again. He is the only one who is worthy, not only of our lives, but of everything in all of creation. It was like waking from a trance.

We need to wake from that trance. We need his glory to keep on breaking into our hearts and waking us up, because when we see his glory it changings everything.

I suspect the apostle John needed Jesus to break in on him again. He'd been exiled to the island of Patmos for refusing to worship the Roman emperor. I can imagine him sitting there all alone, an old man, listening to the crash of the waves and the cry of the gulls, needing to see Jesus. Suddenly it happened. An angel appeared in that unrelenting blue expanse of Mediterranean sky and John saw a door opened wide to reveal the heartbeat truth of the universe—a Lamb standing in the middle of a throne, looking as if it had been slain, with everything in all creation worshipping and crying out, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

That revelation broke right into John's world, into the apparent dominance of Roman power, into the seeming weakness of Christ's church, into his own lonely isolation, and it showed him what was true—that the Father has lifted up the crucified Lamb, the one who was lifted up for us, and placed him on the throne of the world. Anyone who wants to know what life is all about can just look through that door and see the answer—it's all about Jesus. He has all the mass, all the gravity, all the authority, and all the right to all the worship from all of creation for all eternity—all because he offered himself

as a sacrificial lamb for the redemption of the world. That's what we need to see. We need the Lamb on the throne to break through to us again and again and deliver us out of our small way of life.

That wet day in London he possibly broke through to a young West Asian woman, because who else could have planted such high expectations and such an intentional quest in her heart but Jesus? To this day Janet and I marvel at the wisdom of her words, because who understands that we're meant to give our lives away? Our culture is constantly telling us "it's all about you" and sending us headlong after our own self-centered pursuits. Our grasping and griping fuels the fallen world. We're all trying to make lives for ourselves and yet we end up giving our lives away in the process. I suspect most of the people hurrying down the sidewalk that day were giving themselves away without realizing they were doing it. They were squandering themselves on goals and desires that have no more ultimate value than those little Hindu statuettes down the road that were so clearly unworthy of the devotion they were receiving.

We'd visited that Hindu temple the day before and it seemed incredible that people—living, breathing images of God—would offer themselves up to dead images staring lifelessly out of eyes that can't see, with mouths that can't speak. We even saw a father gently remove his little daughter's shoes and give her a bunch of flowers to carry in and offer to the gilded things lined up against the wall. It was heart wrenching.

But the idols aren't just in the temples; there's a vast array of unworthy gods making a claim on our lives. We each have our own

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personal collection and the media is always offering up a fresh supply. Living in Southern California is like living in a state of denial where the good life is always on display, the sun always shines, no one gets old, the roses bloom in January, and the malls are full of sparkling new possibilities you can bring home in a bag. The world is presenting this illusion to us all the time regardless of where we live. The idols are always making promises and then failing to deliver.

The Lamb is different. The idols require our sacrifices and still withhold their blessings, but the Lamb, he doesn't make demands; he fulfills them. He doesn't squeeze out our lifeblood; he pours his out for us. He gave himself so we could be liberated and enriched beyond our comprehension, so the floodgates of blessing could be opened up wide. As believers we need to realize this again and again. We need to see the glory of the One we were created to worship. We need an ongoing Copernican revolution in our hearts.

As Janet and I pondered how to convey the difference it makes in our lives to see the glory of Jesus, we thought of Copernicus. In the sixteenth century the prevailing assumption was that the earth was the center of the cosmos and that the sun revolved around the earth. Then Copernicus came along and demonstrated that, despite appearances, it's actually the other way around. It's the earth that revolves around the sun.

We need to see this. From our terra firma point of view we naturally live as if we're the dead center of everything and everything revolves around us. We get trapped in this "all about me" mentality, this effort to pull in the good things we think we want. We end up spinning in circles, exhausting ourselves with the sheer effort of managing our own existence. We need a Copernican revolution, a simple but profound shift in our worldview that comes from seeing the crucified, resurrected Jesus on the throne of the cosmos and realizing that he is at the center of creation and that he is everything we could

possibly ever want or need. It's a simple shift in perspective but it changes everything. It transforms our small, self-centered world into the glorious "all about Jesus" universe where he reigns in the glory of his grace.

Eugene Peterson says that "Failure to worship consigns us to a life of spasms and jerks, at the mercy of every advertisement, every seduction, every siren. . . . People who do not worship are swept into a vast restlessness, epidemic in the world, with no steady direction and no sustaining purpose."¹ Even as believers we can live that way, with no steady direction and no sustaining purpose. We need a regular shift away from ourselves to the One who truly is at the center of everything so we can live a life of unfettered, worshipful joy. We need him to draw us out of our self-circling way of life and orient us to himself and to his glory.

A few years back, our friend Darrell Johnson told us about the personal Copernican revolution he had as a college student. He'd been a rising star, a brain, a promising physicist with a potential scholarship to study in Europe and a professor/mentor who was helping him chart his course. He'd been a believer for most of his young life but a fresh new love for Jesus had come pouring into his heart and with it came a call to preach the gospel. How do you switch paths when you're being carried along by all kinds of bright prospects and gifts you feel compelled to use? How do you face the people who won't understand and will surely be disappointed? When Darrell sat in his professor's office and told him what he was thinking of doing, the response was exactly what you'd expect it to be, "Why would you throw your brains and your promising future away to preach Jesus?"

This was back in the late sixties when *Jesus Christ Superstar* was the big hit. The title song was being played constantly on the radio. "Jesus Christ, Superstar, do you think you're who they say you are?" As Darrell listened to those lyrics it came to him that this was the crucial question—who does Jesus say he is? If Jesus was going to

outweigh everything else in life, it wasn't enough to know what other people had to say about him. Darrell needed him to speak his glory directly and personally into his heart. So he asked him—"Jesus, who do you say you are?"

He started reading the gospel of John for an answer and when he came to chapter 8 he slowed down as if he was treading on holy ground. Right there on the pages of his Bible was the very same question he'd been asking. The buzz about Jesus had reached a high pitch. Everyone was speculating and arguing about who this new rabbi might actually be. The people of his own day were asking Jesus, "Who are you?" Without any fanfare, Jesus spoke words that startled everyone. "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I AM." "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I AM."

He said those words during the Feast of the Tabernacles when the people had come to Jerusalem filled with expectation that the Messiah was going to arrive at any moment and usher in a new age. The temple courts had been lit up every night with great lights symbolizing the brilliant supernatural light they believed was about to dawn on the world. It was in that context that Jesus told them, "I AM the Light of the World," not just one of many lights, but the only light, the only way out of darkness for the entire world. Needless to say he raised some hackles but what made his statement even more outrageous to his Jewish listeners were those words, "I AM," in Greek "ego eimi," which literally mean, "I, I am" or "I am who I am." They come straight out of God's revelation to Moses in the wilderness. Moses asked the Lord what to tell the Israelites when they wanted to know his name and the answer came back, "Tell them, 'I Am Who I AM.'" Was Jesus actually claiming to be not just the Messiah, not just the light of the world, but the Lord of the burning bush?

That's what the religious leaders wanted to know. They wanted him to either back down or condemn himself so they pressed him hard with more questions. Jesus didn't back down. He told them

plainly that they would die in their sins unless they believed that he was the One he claimed to be. The leaders understood the implications and they were ready to kill him for it.

The world we live in is not much different. John wrote his gospel in the midst of a pagan world where gaining “light” was a universal spiritual concern. It’s the same today. People are groping in the darkness and our Western world has turned East for spiritual answers. Buddha supposedly once said, “If you see the Buddha in the road, shoot him.” A Buddhist-leaning friend of ours explained that this is a warning not to let anyone intrude himself into your search for spiritual light. Everything has to be cleared away, every thought, every person, every preconceived notion, so you can find your own way. We’re being told this in one form or another all the time. This same spiritual message is being woven all through our culture and it never challenges our centrality; it only reinforces it.

Jesus does just the opposite. He puts himself squarely in our road and points to himself and says, “Look to me. I am the light of the world.” The world is telling us we have a divine spark within us; that we just need to be true to ourselves. It’s flattering but we need to be clear that Jesus is flatly contradicting this assertion and all the spiritual systems that teach it. He says that, to the contrary, we’re actually filled with deep darkness. We need the light to shine into our hearts and bring us to life and he is that light. The pluralistic world doesn’t want to hear this message but there wasn’t a hateful bone in Jesus’ body when he said it, only love willing to affront our pride so we could be saved.

Jesus is not one of many lights. Jesus is the Sun. When we see his cosmic significance it reorders our world. The weight of his glory starts to outweigh everything else. It delivers us out of our small way of life into a wide and joyous orbit of worship.

You've no doubt guessed the road Darrell decided to take. He knew Jesus had answered his question. The weight of Jesus' words gave him the sheer chutzpah he needed to change his course. His professor friend was worried he was wasting his life but Darrell knew better. He'd heard Jesus say, "I AM." He'd watched him go to the cross and rise again. He knew Jesus was on the throne of the world, that he was worthy, and that there was nothing to fear and everything to gain if he gave his life for him.

We heard Darrell tell this story in a sermon he preached many decades later where he actually sang "Jesus Christ Superstar" from the pulpit. We've also taken a two-week course he taught on the gospel of John where he showed how John states his theme right up front in his gospel when he says, "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son," and then starts unfolding the glory of Jesus so we can see it too. We see him turn water into wine, heal a crippled man, feed a huge throng of hungry people, even walk on water. We hear his brilliant repartee with the religious leaders and his compassionate love for those who come to him in need. His personality emerges right out of the pages of the Bible but as Darrell pointed out, none of these things fully communicates the glory of Jesus. The turning point comes in chapter 12 when he cries out, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." It was a gut-wrenching cry that must have come from the depths of his heart because the hour he was talking about was the hour of his sacrifice. He knew that he was about to go to the cross and that it would be right there in those hours of suffering and shame, in that singular act of love, that his glory would be fully revealed.

We have a tendency to miss the cross once we come to faith. We can treat it like the key that gets us in the door and then gets tossed aside as we go on to other things. If Jesus has lost his central place in our lives it's probably because we've left the cross behind. We need to continually fill up on the glory of his death, to keep taking in the

sheer breathtaking wonder of the Son of God stretched out in love and nailed onto those rough wooden beams.

The cross is not a little thing we wear around our necks; it's the glory of God revealed, the glory of his love, the centerpiece of all creation. Jesus said that when he was lifted up he would draw all men to himself. It's the cross that draws us when we first come to faith and it's meant to keep on drawing us. We need it to preach the gospel to our hearts again and again because one of the reasons we live small is that we feel guilty. The Bible says people "repress the knowledge of God," but it's not just unbelievers who do that. We can do it ourselves. We know we're meant to live all-out for Jesus and when we don't our guilt sends us into God-avoidance. We think he's keeping us at arm's length and making demands that we can't keep. He feels a million miles away and the cross is the only thing that can draw us back into his gravitational field. That's where we see him as he truly is, not the way our darkened hearts imagine him to be. That's where he opens up the very depths of his own heart so we can understand that he's not trying to keep us away; he's drawing us in. He let his body be broken and his blood be shed so he could have us close to him.

We need to take this in every day. There's nothing keeping us away from Jesus because his death tore through the barriers. All the dark clouds of anger have disappeared. We don't have to stay in our lonely planet way of life because Jesus removed every shred of our guilt forever. He's drawing us into a fellowship of love where he gives us everything, grace upon grace, all wrapped up in himself, and we can just take it—and then give ourselves to him in return. That's how it's meant to work. Paul summed it up in 2 Corinthians 5:15: "He died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again."

Note

1. Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 60.