

Praise for *What If It's True?*

“What if it’s true for you? Answering the most important question of life is often a journey people are afraid to take because they don’t think they have the right tools or the right guide. This book is both. It is a tool the Holy Spirit will use to bring freedom to the soul, and it is a guide to hold your hand as He leads you into the places you need to go. Inside these pages, you will find the compassion of Jesus, the Father heart of God, and the endearing call of the Holy Spirit. Each chapter is a journey in and of itself, each prayer a healing balm to the wounded or wandering heart. If, indeed, God’s Word is true, then it is true for you—and Charles Martin has painted a picture of the hope this world desperately needs.”

—RYAN BRITT, EXECUTIVE MINISTRIES PASTOR, THE CHURCH OF ELEVEN²²

“I’m so glad my friend Charles Martin has written this book! It’s a book like none other I’ve read. He shares some of the deepest truths of the gospel, rooted solidly in Scripture, through an honest and hopeful glimpse into his personal life and faith. You can hear his voice, heart, conviction, passion, and creativity on every page. Sometimes you read a book, and sometimes a book reads you. Sometimes you work your way through a book, and sometimes a book works on you. In the best possible way, this book definitely does the latter. Charles’s authenticity, boldness, and humility in these pages causes me to want to grow in my faith in and affections for Jesus.”

—ADAM FLYNT, PASTOR OF MULTIPLICATION, THE CHURCH OF ELEVEN²²

“If you ever wanted an honest glimpse into the heart and mind of this gifted author, then look no further. Or, far better yet, if you have ever longed for a greater understanding of your own heart, and of God’s heart for you, then this book is a must-read. Every chapter places an incandescent spotlight on the only One who can provide the answers and freedom each of us were created to crave.”

— JONATHAN CHRISTIAN, DISCIPLESHIP PASTOR, THE CHURCH OF ELEVEN²²

“We are encouraged by the apostle Paul to let the word of Christ dwell in us *richly*. In this book, Charles Martin leads us to where deep biblical understanding and the redeemed imagination meet to help us accomplish just that. In *What If It's True?*, Charles helps us experience the living and active Word of God in a way that only a gifted novelist can. My relationship with Jesus is better for having read it.”

—MICHAEL OLSON, DIRECTOR OF WORSHIP
GATHERINGS, THE CHURCH OF ELEVEN22

“*What If It's True?* paints a strikingly vivid picture of what it must have been like to personally experience the unfolding of God's redemptive plan for the sins of all mankind. Purposefully written, undoubtedly prayed over, and Holy Spirit empowered, Martin's latest prose left me in tears with my soul yearning for a deeper relationship with our risen Lord.”

—KELLY ADCOX, FACILITIES DIRECTOR, THE CHURCH OF ELEVEN22

“When Charles Martin gave me his new book *What If It's True?* to read, my first thought was that it would be a cross between *More Than a Carpenter* and *The Case for Christ*. It isn't. It's so much more! Martin's beautiful depictions of familiar stories from Scripture bring so much life to those stories that it almost felt like I was reading fiction. Far from it. The richness that Martin's creativity provides only deepens—if that's possible—the tangible love and grace of our wonderful Savior. Martin's transparency about his own life and need for that grace and loving-kindness is disarming and inviting. This is a book I will give to everyone I know.”

—LEE ANN RUMMEL, CHAIR OF THE BOARD, CHRISTIAN HEALING MINISTRIES

*Note from Charles: The guys below are the guys
I “do life” with in our small group.*

“The Lord has used these words—by the power of His Spirit—to set me free from generational sin, curse, and bondage. Through them, Jesus has cared for me as Father and brought dramatic and deep change in me, in my heart, and in my identity in Him. This book is a roadmap for the trenches we have walked, the warfare we have encountered, and the victory Jesus has bought. It has brought lasting life change here and on to eternity with Jesus.”

—HANK BRINK

“When I first heard the gospel preached, I said to myself, “If this is true, it changes everything.” It is true, and it did change everything. My brother in Christ Charles Martin has battled with me through some of the hardest moments of my life. This book is a refreshing and anointed reminder that the gospel is true and does change everything.”

—RICK CROWLEY

“*What If It's True?* offers a clarity to the truth of the gospel unlike anything I've experienced. Charles Martin's detail of the Word of God combined with his ability to put you in the midst of a setting provides a unique understanding of the real healing and freedom Jesus made available to us on this side of the cross.”

—GREG FARAH

“These chapters are the intersection of Charles's heart for proclaiming the truth of Christ's sacrificial rescue mission and his inspired gift for telling the story in a way that makes it real, simple, applicable, and entertaining. This book is not just something to read. Other than Scripture itself, this is as close to “being there” and walking through the events and implications of the cross and tomb as one can get. It convinces us that none of our “stuff”—no matter how messy—is beyond His reach.”

—JOHNNY SARBER

“*What If It's True?* is an incredible life examination for every believer. If you read this and allow the Holy Spirit access to work in your heart, you will be transformed! I especially believe every men's group should walk through this spiritually impactful literary journey and see what God can do in each person.”

—MIKE HOHMAN

“This book speaks directly to the heart, specifically to the places that need it most. Charles has taken the biblical stories I've heard hundreds of times and given them new life. His gift of storytelling mixed with the Word is powerful. This book should be in the hands of everyone, including believers and the soon-to-be believers. The chapter on blessings and curses, ‘Choose This Day,’ is a game-changer for all God's people.”

—JASON WATSON

“The lessons in *What If It's True?* bypass your mind and heart and strike directly at your soul. Charles Martin's teaching provides a gut check for your faith while showing you the path to strengthen it. Drink from the cup of this book and ignite your covenant with Jesus.”

—BRIAN COOK

“These are the words I need to hear. Over and over. Tears accompanied most of them, but the freedom they provide is life-changing. I'm indebted to Charles for so faithfully walking me through God's Word. *What If It's True?* has pierced my heart and placed me face-to-face with Jesus.”

—JON LIVINGSTON

“Charles Martin took me on an intimate, behind-the-scenes guided tour of the life and death of Jesus Christ. His uniquely descriptive stops along the way allowed me to feel I was personally seeing, feeling, hearing, smelling, and experiencing each moment. Martin's willingness to be personal, raw, vulnerable, and honest in his words guided me into self-examination, where I glanced in a mirror the reflection of my heart. And his prayers at the end of each chapter poured into me and carried out of me the kind of emotion, passion, intimacy, and unconditional love only choosing a relationship with Christ allows. This book forced the removal of my neat, easy, comfortable view of the story of Jesus and demanded I face the raw, emotional, and uncomfortable truth of Jesus's life, further deepening my love and appreciation for Him and His sacrifice of love.”

—JOE VEGERANO

What If It's True?

What If It's True?

A Storyteller's Journey with Jesus

CHARLES MARTIN



W PUBLISHING GROUP

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For Charlie, John T., and Rives

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Introduction

WHAT IF?

He is stumbling now. A trail of blood marks His serpentine path on the narrow street out of the city. The wood is heavy but that's not what's crushing Him. Three-inch thorns are pressing into His skull. Much of the flesh has been removed from His back, neck, and sides. The local rulers want to make an example of Him. A public deterrent. A public execution on a well-traveled road just outside of town. They also want to shame Him, and they have. He's completely naked.

By 9 a.m. He's outside the gate. On the outskirts. Out where they burn the trash. Somebody from the crowd spits on Him. Another plucks out a handful of His beard and reminds Him of all the ridiculous things He said leading up to this moment. A third suggests that if He really is who He says He is, then He should be able to do something about it. All talk. No action.

A group of fishermen watch from a distance. Pained faces. Breaking hearts. The road rises, and the bleeding carpenter stumbles to His knees. He tries to stand, falls again, and one of the soldiers comments how this could take all day. The soldier eyes a North African man in the crowd, points a sharp sword at the heavy wood and commands, "Carry that."

Simon steps onto the road, kneels, and black hands lift a bloody cross. Face to face with the condemned, he's never seen anyone so marred. So

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grotesque. The two whisper words no one can hear as they slowly trudge forward.

Behind them the town is readying for a feast. The place is packed. A few hundred yards away in the temple, the high priest is preparing the sacrifice. Sharpening his knife on a stone. The morning incense wafts heavenward. Fresh showbread has replaced yesterday's display. Simon carries the wood until the soldier tells him to drop it. When he does, soldiers slam the condemned Man onto the wood and stretch wide His arms. Two men hold His hand in place, one swings a hammer. The nail pierces His wrist, separating the bones. His screams echo off the enormous rocks that make up the city walls.

Out of respect for His nakedness, the women have gathered at a distance. His mother is inconsolable. A second woman stands nearby. Nobody really knows her name. All we know is that for the last twelve years, she has bled constantly. Making her an outcast. Defiled. Unable to enter the temple. She spent her life savings on a cure with no relief. Then she met the condemned. Clung to the "wings" of His shirt. Now she doesn't bleed anymore.

The soldiers drive skinny spikes through the Man's other hand and both feet; they lift the wood. Like Moses lifting the serpent in the wilderness. Gravity tears the flesh as they unceremoniously drop it into a hole. A sign above Him, written in Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, reads, "KING OF THE JEWS." He is flanked by two common and dying men.

The crowd is larger than usual for a morning execution. A fact not unnoticed by the soldiers. A beggar named Bartimaeus watches through tears. Having heard of the trial and the invented charges, he walked the road up from Jericho. Some twenty miles through the night. The two met a few years back at the city gate. Bartimaeus had been begging because he was blind. Then he met the Man. Told Him, "I want to see." Ever since, Bartimaeus has had perfect vision—but now he doesn't like what he sees.

Nicodemus is here, as is a man named Lazarus who stands quietly with his sisters. He's rather well known north of here. His story is of some renown because he died and had been decaying four days when the

criminal called him out of the cave. Even he has a tough time believing his own story. A local boy, a former paralytic whose friends had lowered him through the roof of a crowded house where the criminal was staying, paces nervously nearby. A centurion stands quietly off to one side. Respectful. He's not with this garrison. A man under authority, he's come to pay his respects. Standing in the shadows, an angry fisherman waits impatiently. One hand on the hilt of his sword. As the hours pass, the other fishermen grow more vocal. Barabbas is here too. He is a murderer. Released just this morning from a death sentence. He stands in the shadows, in utter disbelief.

Fights break out in the crowd. The soldiers grow nervous. Reinforcements are summoned and sent.

Last week, the criminal claimed that zeal for His Father's house consumed Him. Now He's consumed by torment. Painted in His own blood. It trails down His body and drips into the dirt where the earth silently swallows the crimson stain. Above, up on the crosses, the three condemned men have a conversation. Something about paradise. One believes. One does not. Clustered on the road nearby, the soldiers play a game. Wagering for the Man's clothes. Over the next few hours, the Man suspended on the middle cross pushes up with His legs, pulls with His arms, and tries to fill His lungs with air. Each breath harder than the last because His lungs are filling. He grows weaker.

It's not long now.

Many in the crowd are weeping. They've torn their clothes. Mourning the leader of a failed rebellion. Last week the entire town was ready to install the Man as ruler. Shouting. Waving palm branches. Throwing down their clothes. Praising the one to take on Rome. Even the rocks cried out. But the Man made outrageous claims. Didn't back them up. A flash in the pan. Now, He's a nobody. Shamed. Rejected. Bruised. Crushed. Little more than a common, nameless criminal. A grain of wheat falling to the earth. The song of drunkards.¹

For the last three hours, an eerie darkness has spread across the earth.

His mother approaches, hanging onto the arm of one of the fisherman.

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The dying man speaks to both. She buries her face in the other man's shoulder. Her knees buckle and he holds her. She is shredded. They retreat, and the Man is thirsty. A soldier dips a sponge in something sour and holds it to the Man's mouth, but He refuses. A scribe, a learned man, watches the hanging Man refuse the sponge and thinks to himself, *Could it be . . . ?* as the words of a psalm echo in his mind, "For my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink."²

With considerable effort, the Man lifts His chin off His chest and scans the crowd.

His breathing grows more shallow. He is drowning. Summoning His last ounce of energy, the Man pushes up one last time and screams heavenward. A shadow falls across Him, shrouding Him in darkness. Even God has forsaken Him.

In the temple, the high priest slices the throat of the lamb and catches the warm blood in a basin. Through an incense cloud, he walks into the Holy of Holies carrying the blood and paints the mercy seat. The bells on his shirt jingle as he walks. The rope tied to his ankle trails behind him and disappears beyond the curtain.

On the road outside the gate, the condemned Man exhales, dies, and gives up His spirit.

Below, the earth quakes. Above, the sky falls pitch dark. A light in the heavens has been turned off.

No. *The* light.

The crowd huddles in hushed silence. Lightning flashes and spiderwebs across the sky. The air turns cold. Nearby, a soldier shakes his head, whispering something about the Son of God.

The two men on either side are dragging it out. To speed things along, soldiers swing heavy bars and break their legs. No longer able to push up, the condemned drown quickly.

With little more to see, the soldiers disperse the crowd. The criminal hangs alone. Dead. Eyes still open. The life that had been there moments ago is gone.

Blood still drips off the toes of His left foot. The words of Moses echo:

“For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls.”³

The lifeless Man hangs at an odd angle, and His bones seem out of joint. Off to one side, His mother won't leave. She is screaming at the top of her lungs. Abruptly, a soldier shoves a spear into the chest cavity of the dead Man, and water and blood spill out from the hole. The splashing sound echoes. The earth trembles and shakes with angry violence. The stones of the temple are rocked. The curtain tears in two. The sky thunders and lightning flashes. The sign above His head reads, “King of the Jews.”

What If It's True?

Years ago, I opened my Bible and began wrestling with this question: What if every single word of this story is absolutely true and I can trust it? What if Jesus really is who He says He is? What if the King of the universe is speaking directly to me through the words of His book? What if what He says is more true than my circumstances? Than what my eyes see and my ears hear?

And if His Word is true, how do I respond? Something in me should change, but what? How? Because if this story is true, then the King of all kings, the infinite God who spoke the Milky Way and me into existence—because He loves me deeply—stepped off His throne and embarked on a rescue mission to save and deliver a self-centered slave like me.

What kind of king does that?

What if the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ is the singular most important event in the history of mankind, and what if one drop of His blood is the most powerful thing in this universe or any other? What if dead and crucified Jesus came back to life by the power of the Holy Spirit and He is alive today? Right now. What if, having conquered the enemy, He empowers us to do what He did? Anointing us with defense against evil. Against addiction. Against sickness. Against generational sin

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and curse. Against the hardness of our own hearts. What if His singular desire is for us to know the love with which the Father loved Him before the foundation of the world?

Are you kidding me?

Our enemy, using every tactic and weapon at his disposal, has attacked this gospel. These words. The greatest war in the history of history and beyond has been waged against this very word. *The Word*. It's been watered down, abused, adulterated, manipulated, and changed. With so much stacked against it and us, we have trouble believing it means today what it was meant to mean today. Many of us, either consciously or not, just have trouble believing that the shed blood of a Man named Jesus two thousand years ago has anything to do with us here today.

As a result, we live in the crossfire and we're not sure what to believe. But—what if?

What if His story is true?

What if this Jesus, the One who walked out of the tomb shining like the sun, holding the keys of death and hades, is alive—in you? In me? I write fiction for a living, and that's either the craziest thing I've ever heard or it's the most important word ever spoken.

Let me give you an example: Jesus talked more about the kingdom of heaven than anything else. In Matthew 13, He compared it to a dragnet which was cast into the sea where it gathered some of every kind. When full, it was dragged to shore where the good was gathered into vessels but the bad was thrown away. Jesus was speaking of a future event in history which is really going to happen.

Jesus continued to explain that at the end of the age, the angels will come, separate the wicked from the just, and cast the wicked into the furnace of fire where there will be wailing and people screaming at the top of their lungs. Of this event, Paul told the church in Corinth, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10). But look at what he said next: "Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men" (2 Cor. 5:11).

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Make no mistake about it—Jesus said some things which struck His listeners as just plain crazy. Maybe none better than this: “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him” (John 6:53–56).

Imagine being in the crowd when He said this—which incidentally, occurred just after He walked on water. If I found myself following a guy who could walk on water and yet talked about my cannibalizing Him and washing it down with a pint of His blood, I’d be scratching my head and reevaluating my decision-making paradigm.

If you look closely at the scripture above, you’ll find this: “Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, ‘This is a hard saying; who can understand it?’ . . . From that time many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more” (John 6:60, 66). Even His disciples found it tough to believe, and they were standing in His presence!

If Jesus is who He says He is, and He did what Scripture records Him as having done and is doing, then His life and His words, by their very nature, demand a response. And no response is still very much a response. We cannot look with cavalier indifference and/or resignation at the life and words of Jesus of Nazareth.

You and I have a problem, and the appearance of a baby boy in a nameless stable in Bethlehem is our first clue that the problem is out of our control—that after a few thousand years of pleading with us to return to Him, He has come to us. To save us from ourselves.

The problem—the reason the King of kings stepped off His throne and came here—is my sin. Your sin. And our utter and complete inability to do anything about it. Our knowledge and understanding of this predicament have been watered down by time and a clever enemy, but in God’s economy, for reasons I don’t and can’t understand, sin requires a payment.

Sin requires blood.

I can’t explain why. It just is. Somewhere in here, I came to grips with

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the beautiful, tender, magnificent, barbaric, soul-shattering, eternal, unequivocal reality that the birth, life, and death of this innocent boy and magnificent Man are simply my King's first step from throne to trough to cross to tomb to hell to God's right hand.

As a result, I am blood bought. Blood washed. And blood redeemed.

And you are too.

What kind of king does this? The weight of the answer pierces me because I know me. I am not worthy.

Why Write This Book?

A few years ago, when I first pitched the idea of this book to Christy and my agent, Chris, they asked, "What's the takeaway?" And in the two or three years since, every time I've presented this book to anyone, they've asked the same question. If I'm honest, I'm still struggling with that answer. Not because I don't know it, but because it doesn't fit well in a sound bite. There's a lot here, but if you press me I can give it in one word: "Freedom." Freedom from the stuff that wants our heads on a platter.

If you are down, broken, brokenhearted, shattered, bleeding from the inside out, staring at a lifetime of bad decisions and now the bars of worse consequences, ashamed, struggling with getting out of bed and facing today (or facing the next minute), thinking more about checking out than digging in, angry (no—pissed), shaking your fist at God, screaming at the heavens, staring at your hands knowing what they've done and wondering how God could ever love you, unable to breathe from the weight of the wound in your chest, mopping up the pus spilling out of your heart because you trusted someone, sitting with your head in your hands watching the slideshow of all the faces you betrayed who no longer trust you and wondering where to start, searching the horizon for any sight of your prodigal but they aren't even in this time zone, waking up a long way from home wondering how to get back and unable and unsure how to face the mushroom cloud you left behind, covered up in soul-wrecking grief and

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spirit-breaking sorrow, unable to see daylight for the blanket of darkness, unable to get off the unmerry-go-round and stop the cycle of medicating your pain with pills or drink or sex or money or anything other than the tender and magnificent love of Jesus—I'd give you this book.

Admittedly, some of the things I'm writing about require a little imagination. I'm taking license with stuff we just can't know and can't prove. I have no idea if the woman with the issue of blood, the centurion, Bartimaeus, and others were present at Jesus' crucifixion. I certainly can't prove it. But if I were them, and Jesus had done to me and in me what He did to them and in them, I'd have been there. I've tried to think like that. I'm also well aware of the warning in Revelation 22:18 to anyone who adds anything to this book and the plagues he will suffer. With trembling fingers, I've attempted to write within those boundaries, painting scenes while not speaking blasphemy.

Having said that, Jesus still speaks. Today. To you and me. I talk to Him all the time. Can I tell you that I hear Him like you're hearing me now through this book? Of course not. But whether through His Word, the council of many, an impression in my spirit, or an audible, still small voice, I do hear Him. (Although, I will admit the audible voice is not a common thing.)

In this book, you will read a lot about my conversations with Jesus. For the record, I am not claiming new revelation. If you sense that in these pages, you should close this book. God's Word is perfect, inerrant, inspired, and completely true. Everything we need is in there. But, there are places in this book where I will talk about how His revelation is new to me. I will talk more about this in a later chapter, but I am sharing that newness with you in the same way C. S. Lewis shares it with us in the *Screwtape Letters* or *Mere Christianity*.*

I don't question whether the God of the universe is still speaking. He is. I want to know what He's saying. So, there are times in these pages

* And no, I'm not setting myself up as the next Lewis. I'm simply using him as an example. St. Bernard of Clairvaux said we are dwarves perched atop the shoulders of giants—and Lewis is a giant.

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when I'll share some idea of what He's saying—to me. If I were you, I'd check me. How? Well, spread these pages out next to God's Word and check for yourself. Secondly, there's counsel in the wisdom of many. I'd encourage you to seek that counsel. Lastly, ask Jesus about it. "Jesus, is this true?" Then use the same process to check what you might hear as the answer. I grew up in a church where folks claimed to have heard Jesus. Truth was, some had. Some had not. And it wasn't always immediately clear who had and who had not. So, I've seen this abused. I pray I don't fall into that camp.

Today, as a man who has walked with Jesus as Lord and Savior and King for over forty-five years, my problem is not with folks claiming they hear the voice of God—we can usually check that. My problem is with folks who claim to know Him and yet don't hear from Him. Who claim He doesn't speak to us the way He did when He was here. My question for them is this: If Jesus is not speaking to you, then do you know Him? And if so, how?

If you want to hear Jesus, I believe He will speak to you. He tells us to seek Him while He can be found. To come to Him like little children. To call on Him. Further, you don't have to be some different or improved version of yourself to hear Him. The question is, are you listening? My hope and prayer for you as we walk through these pages is that you learn to hear Him. Just as Samuel, Elijah, the apostles, and Paul did. I would love nothing more than to walk you up to the feet of Jesus and for you to close this book, take His hand, and hear His voice.

Also, I am not writing this as a theological exercise. I have no formal training in theology. As much as I know my own heart, my goal is freedom. Period. Both yours and mine. Given that, this is not really a book you just read. I hope you read it, but once the words have entered your eyes and taken a few laps around your brain, I hope they migrate down into your heart and that you "do" these words.

There is stuff here to be done.

Some of this is messy and uncomfortable. Some of it was uncomfortable to write. But, for the last ten plus years, I've walked with a group of men

(and as a couple, Christy and I have walked with various women) through difficult places in their lives. And they've walked with me. What I discovered is that just filling a pew on Sunday morning did absolutely nothing to bring freedom. I'm not knocking church. We should all be in one. I thank God for His bride. But the traditions of our churches and our theological systems are often impotent to kill the stuff that's killing us.* So I am, and have been, simply looking at people in prison and chains of their (and my) own making, and I'm wondering how to get them (and me) free.

Guided by the idea that there's got to be more, I began asking the question, "Lord, where is the power of Your gospel? Where is the You that I read about in the Gospels and Acts? Where is that life? That freedom? That power of that kingdom? Where is that love?" We all, each of us, are just broken children of God, and what you will read in these pages is the record of that journey to freedom. Of our walk from broken to not broken. To whole. To new.

One of the things I have realized is that when Jesus was talking to the scribes and Pharisees, when He continually called them "hypocrites," He was talking directly to me. To you. There's no getting around it. We are them. When He told them they "cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence" (Matt. 23:25), He was talking to and about us. Most of the time, if left to myself, I am that man.

What follows in these pages are the things we did and prayed that the Lord used to cleanse the inside of our cups and dishes. The inside of us. The Cross—the blood of Jesus—works *for* us, *in* us, and *through* us. This is a book primarily about how it works *for* and *in* us. Right now I've got an outline of the book that will show how it works *through* us. But first walk, then run.

At the end of each of chapter, I've written a prayer. Something I've prayed myself and put down on paper. I'm inviting you to join me in those prayers. In praying, I'm inviting Jesus into His rightful place. To be the

* Jesus talked about this very thing in Mark 7:1–16.

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King He is. Don't rush through these pages. Don't hurry to the next chapter. Linger here. Read them slowly. These prayers are some of the most important words you and I will read through together.

The following is my prayer for you.

Lord Jesus, I give You these words. If they are true, multiply them. If not, erase them. For the last twenty years, I've written fiction. Now I'm writing about You. Telling Your story. And telling my story with You. I know You look to the one who is contrite and trembles at Your word. I pray that when You see me penning these pages, You find me contrite and trembling. I pray that You also find me fist pumping, mic dropping, and dancing. And in the end, I pray You are increased and I am decreased. I pray that like Psalm 45 my pen is the tongue of a ready writer and that I make Your great name known to the nations.

Jesus, because of You, I am blood bought, blood washed, and blood redeemed. That thought shatters me. So touch my lips, my fingers, and these words with a burning coal. Forgive me in advance if I say anything in error. Use these words to break chains, fling wide prison doors, heal the brokenhearted, release the captives, give beauty for ashes, anoint with the oil of joy, and wash away mourning. Wrap your children in a robe of praise and deliver them and me from any spirit of despair so that we might grow up as oaks of righteousness, ministers of our God, and priests in Your kingdom.

Jesus, without Your spirit of revelation, these are just black marks on a page. Please reveal to us, through the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit, what all this means. Walk us through the door and into Your presence. We invite You to come and be released in and through us to show us what You mean and who You are. You've told us that Your Spirit is the Spirit of truth, the Helper. Please speak truth to us and help us.

I've always loved Paul's admonition to the church in Ephesus, so let me end with that: I pray "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened;

that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:17–23).

In Jesus’ Name, amen.

One last thought before we get started: let me encourage you to make this book a working document. The words I’ve written here may shake some stuff loose in you. They did in me. So, make a record of the shaking. Write in the margins. Write the date. Where you are when you read it. At the end of chapters. Everywhere there is white blank space. Don’t just read this. Read this and wrestle it out. Start your own conversation with the Lord. Circle. Underline. Dog-ear. Highlight. Read with a pen in one hand and a Bible in the other.

Some of this has been tough for me to write. But if you walk into a deeper place with Jesus, with deeper understanding, deeper revelation, deeper intimacy, and deeper love, then I’d gladly write it again. So, let me encourage you to start a dialogue with Him. Really. Like on that white space just below this paragraph. He—Jesus, whose name is above every other name and at whose name every knee will bow—desires to have a lifelong conversation with you. Actually, He wants an eternal conversation, but we’ll get to that. So, cover these pages in those words. That conversation. Create a written record of your own process and the words you speak to Him and He speaks to you. I think you’ll be amazed at the conversation that rises to the surface.

CHAPTER I

The Word Becomes Flesh— And Dwells Among Us

The night is cool and turning cooler. The air smells of wood smoke, lamp oil, and manure. Quirinius is governing Syria. Caesar Augustus has issued a decree: “Register the world! Take a census.”¹ Under the dominating hand of Rome, men and their families scurry to their ancestral homes to register. Jerusalem is overflowing. Bethlehem is packed.

It is dark. Past the evening meal. A young man leads a young girl riding a donkey up a small trail into Bethlehem. He is pensive. Every few seconds, he glances over his shoulder.

The rumors have preceded them. As have the whispers. She’s pregnant but not with his child, and to complicate matters, they’re not married. It’s a scandal. According to Jewish law, he should put her out and she should be stoned.

The innkeeper has had a long day. He watches warily. The tired young man asks, “Sir, do you have a room?”

The innkeeper shakes his head. “Full up.”

The young man strains his voice. “You know of . . . anywhere?”

The innkeeper leans on his broom handle. Half-annoyed. His patience is thin. “Try down there. But you’re wasting your time.”

* I have written Joseph as a young man here. It’s quite possible he was an older man at this time. How old? I don’t know. The events at the crucifixion suggest Joseph was already dead.

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The girl winces. The contractions have started. The stain on her dress suggests her water broke. The innkeeper's wife eyes the barn and whispers, "We can make room."

Hours later, the couple returns. The young girl is sweating. Doubled over. The young man is frantic. The innkeeper is in bed. Upon hearing the knock, he rises reluctantly and unlocks the door. "Son, I told you . . ."

"Please sir . . ." He points to the young woman. "She's bleeding."

The innkeeper's wife appears over his shoulder. She says nothing, which says plenty. The innkeeper trims his wick and, for the first time, looks into the young man's eyes. The innkeeper gently grabs the reins of the donkey and leads the young woman to the barn where he spreads fresh hay to make a bed. His wife appears with a towel and some rags. She brushes the two men out and helps the girl.

The innkeeper and the young man stand at the door of the stable—little more than a cave carved into the rock wall. The animals seem amused at the ruckus. The innkeeper lights his pipe. The young man shuffles nervously.

Behind them, the screams begin.

The innkeeper speaks first. "You the two everyone is talking about?"

The young man doesn't take his eyes off the cave. "Yes sir."

Another puff. Another cloud. "What happened?"

The young man is not quick to answer. "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

The innkeeper laughs, "I don't know. I was young once. She's a pretty girl."

Another scream echoes out of the barn.

"Is the baby yours?"

The young man rubs his hands together. Calloused, muscled. They are the hands of a stonemason.* "No, he's not. I mean, he will be but . . . I'm not the, well. . . ."

* It is my opinion that Joseph, and hence Jesus, probably worked more with stone than wood, although I'm sure they worked with both, which is why I here use the word stonemason. I think the problem for us probably arises out of earlier translators who used the word carpenter. I will use both interchangeably.

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The innkeeper chuckles. “You sure it’s a he?”

The young man nods. “Pretty sure.”

“You intend to marry?”

The young man glances over his shoulder. “Soon as she heals up.”

Another scream and the innkeeper changes the subject. “You here to register?”

The young man nods.

“What family?”

“House of David.”

The innkeeper raises an eyebrow. “Good family.”

The screams have risen to a fever pitch. The young girl is out of her mind. The innkeeper’s wife calls from the stall. Her voice trembles. “Honey, I need some hot water.”

The innkeeper disappears and leaves the young man alone. He stands repeating the same phrase over and over and over. “*Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one! Hear, O Israel. . .*”²

Above a star has risen. Abnormally bright.

Made Flesh

Elsewhere, in the throne room of heaven . . .

They are arranged in laser-perfect rows. Ten thousand in a row and tens of thousands of rows. Trailing out farther than any eye can see. They are radiant and barefooted. Every shade of skin color dressed in a sea of brilliant white robes. Decked in glistening gold. Chiseled, elegant features. Blond, auburn, ebony hair. The floor upon which they are dancing is reflective. Shiny. Not a speck. Not a smudge. They stand somewhere above ten feet tall. Many have hair to their waists. Some pulled back in a ponytail. Their wings stretch another ten feet into the air, the tips are almost touching. They are frozen in time, holding the same choreographed pose each was holding when the music stopped. Along with everyone else, they are waiting for the music to begin again and send them into the next

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movement. Right now, they are catching their breath and waiting for orders. Heads bowed, beads of sweat drip onto the mirrored floor.

The air carries with it the fading echo of a drumbeat and the receding sound of the concert of a million feet dancing and tapping to perfection. It's a powerful, penetrating rhythm felt in the depths. Several miles in the distance, there is a bright light. Brighter than the sun. It is the most piercing and penetrating light in the history of light. The breeze created by the angels' wings brings with it the smell of mint, rosemary, lavender, lemon, and eucalyptus. This place is an architectural wonder. Planes could fly in here. A thousand planes. A river flows through the middle. A roof above. In the distance, fiery stones.

This is the banquet hall of all banquet halls.

Rising on the air is a chorus of voices. They come from higher up. Thundering. Declaring. Proclaiming. Pitch perfect. While each is distinct, they layer over each other. The melody forms and rises. They are reading from an ancient text. The acoustics are perfect and unamplified.

The first voice speaks of how He will be born of a woman. Another states that He will come from the line of Abraham. Another, the tribe of Judah. The House of David. Born of a virgin. Will sit on the throne of David. An eternal throne. Emmanuel. Born in Bethlehem. Worshiped by wise men. Presented with gifts. Called out of Egypt. Called a Nazarene.

The voices continue—He will be zealous for His father. Filled with God's Spirit. Heal many. Deal gently with Gentiles. Rejected by His own. Speak in parables. Enter triumphantly into Jerusalem. Praised by little children. A cornerstone. Perform miracles—which some would not believe. Betrayed for thirty pieces of silver that would be used to buy a potter's field. A man of sorrows. Acquainted with grief. Forsaken by His own best friends. Scourged. Spat on. Unrecognizable as a man. Crucified between two thieves. Given vinegar to drink. His hands and feet would be pierced. Others would gamble for and divide his clothes. Surrounded and ridiculed by His enemies. He would thirst, commend His spirit to His Father, and not one of His bones would be broken. Stared at in death, buried with the rich, raised from the dead, He would ascend and become a greater high

priest than Aaron. He would rule the heathen. A ruling scepter. Seated at the right hand of God.

As the last word echoes off, all eyes turn toward the light several miles in the distance where a King is seated on His throne. He is resplendent. Like ten thousand nuclear bombs exploding over and over and over. He is magnificent. Splendor indescribable. Majesty on high. El Elyon. The brightness of the sun times ten trillion. To His right sits His Son. The very Word of God. Broad shoulders, the spitting image. A river—crystal clear—flows from beneath His throne. In His hand, He holds a scepter. He is radiant. Nothing has been, is, or ever will be more perfect. He is like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance, and there is a rainbow wrapped around His throne like an emerald. From the throne come flashes of lightning and peals of thunder.³

Layered in the air, the several-million-voice chorus rises: “Glory to God in the highest!” The shimmering, angelic bodies below snap into unison. Twirling. Tapping. Synchronized. Each dancer has six wings. Two cover their faces. Two cover their feet. And with two more they fly. Cirque du Soleil doesn’t hold a candle.

Voices sing out:

- “Only begotten Son.”⁴
- “Heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power.”⁵
- “For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth . . . whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.”⁶
- “He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him be honor and eternal dominion!”⁷
- “He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him

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was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.”⁸

- “The Alpha and the Omega . . . who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”⁹
- “The Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God.”¹⁰
- “The Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David.”¹¹

Then the voices hush. Every angel kneels. Bowing. Face to the floor. Twenty-four elders, each holding a harp and a bowl of incense—which are the prayers of the saints—lie on the ground in a circle around Him having cast their crowns at His feet.

The Son is quiet. Unassuming. No desire to draw attention. Not feeling that equality with the King is something to be grasped. His mannerisms are that of a dove. His presence that of a lion. His demeanor like a lamb's. His attraction like the bright morning star. Expressing both longing and joy. Both tears and a smile.

He is attended by an archangel. One of three. This angel is relatively new at his job. The other two have been here a long time. The last archangel that had attended to Jesus was described as the “seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.” He had been, “in Eden, the garden of God . . . you were perfect in your ways from the day you were created, till iniquity was found in you.”¹² He is also described as the “son of the morning”¹³ and “son of the dawn.”¹⁴ He announced the morning only to eventually grow jealous of all the praise leveled at the Son. Wanting it, he reached up, tried to grab it, and fell. Disguising himself as an angel of light, he led a rebellion, and he took a third of the other angels with him. Mutiny. God the Father would have none of it and cast the dark angel out of heaven like lightning. Hurling him earthward where he has stirred up trouble for millennia.*

* It is my opinion that satan was once an archangel and that his job was to attend to Jesus. I know people who disagree with this, and I admit I can't prove my opinion. Nor has anyone disproven it to my satisfaction. I cover this idea to a greater extent in a later chapter dealing with the deepest wound of the human soul: rejection.

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After he left, the King made a new creation out of dust. His most stunning to date. Made in His very image. When finished, the King pressed His lips to the mouth of His creation and breathed in His very breath. The *ruach* of God. Giving man life. Angry and envious, the rebelling angel slithered in and took them all hostage. Kidnapped every one. Bondage. Slavery. Mass carnage. Things are bad. The only hope is a rescue mission. It's why the Son has to leave. Whispers are it's a suicide mission.

Slowly, the Son rises. It is pin-drop quiet. He places His scepter gently in the corner of His throne. Unbuckling His sword, he leans it upright next to the scepter. Next, He takes off His robe, folds it, and places it in the seat He just occupied. He pulls off His linen, tasseled undershirt and places it neatly next to his robe, folding the corners—or the *kanaph*, also called “wings”—gently. Finally, He removes the ring from His finger and lifts His crown off His brow, placing both atop His folded robe.

Save a loin cloth, the Son stands naked. His voice is the sound of many waters. Like Niagara. Or the break at Pipeline.

God the Father rises as His Son crosses the fiery stones. The Father hugs the Son, buries His face on His son's cheek and kisses Him. The time has come. On earth, the sons of Adam have lost their way. Each gone their own way. Astray. The entire human race has been taken captive, and the enemy is torturing them. Not one of them will survive the night. The Son has volunteered for a rescue mission, but it's a prisoner exchange. The whispers are true; their freedom will cost the Son everything.

His life for theirs.

The Father holds His Son's hands in His and tenderly touches the center of His palm. He knows what's coming. A tear rolls down the face of the Ancient of Days. The Son thumbs it away. “I'll miss you.” He glances at the earth below and hell in between. Billions of faces shine across the timeline of history. He knows each by name. They are the “joy set before Him.”¹⁵ He turns to His Father, “I will give them Your word. And declare to them Your Great Name.”¹⁶ The Son looks with longing at His home.

Voices rise from every corner singing at the tops of their lungs. It is the loudest singing in the history of song. “Blessing and honor and glory

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and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever.”¹⁷ Angels bow. Brush the floor. He pats many on the shoulder. Kisses some. Hugs others. Long-held embraces. Kids rush forward and grab His hands as they dance in laughter-filled circles.

As He turns to leave, leaning against the two giant doors that lead out into the Milky Way, He turns to His Father. His eyes are piercing, penetrating, inviting. He smiles, “We’re going to need more rooms in this house when I come back.” He waves His hand across the timeline, “Because I’m bringing them with me.” The Son—whose “countenance was like the sun shining in its strength”¹⁸—exits heaven blanketed in the singing of more than a hundred million angels and bathed in the tears of the Father.

The Word becomes flesh, and He is gone.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory.¹⁹

God with Us

The innkeeper returns as the cries of a baby pierce the night air. The child’s lungs are strong. The wife clears the mucus, and the cries grow louder. The young man exhales a breath he has been holding for a little over nine months. The innkeeper stokes the fire in the corner and hugs the young man. “Come!”

The hay beneath the young woman is a mess. The baby boy has entered the world in much the same way the nation of Israel left Egypt. Through blood and water. The animals look on. The stones cry out.²⁰

The woman places the baby on the mother’s chest, and the two lie exhausted. The young woman is exposed, and the young man is uncertain as to his role. He has yet to know her. The innkeeper’s wife leads him to the young girl’s side where he cuts the cord and then slides his hand inside hers. His heart is racing. She is exhausted. Sweaty. The afterbirth

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arrives and the innkeeper's wife begins cleaning the woman. The young mother stares at the boy and hears the echo of the angel that appeared to her some ten months ago: "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."²¹

This is a bittersweet moment because she knows well the words of both Isaiah and the psalmist. How the Messiah will suffer. Be cursed. Bruised. Pierced. Despised. Rejected. Oppressed. Afflicted. Cut off from the land of the living. He will bear our griefs. Carry our sorrows. All His bones will be out of joint. His heart will melt like wax. He will give His back to those who will beat Him, pour out His soul unto death, bear the sin of many . . . and become unrecognizable as a man.²²

She turns to the man who did not leave her when he had every right. The honorable man who will be her husband. She hands him the boy and speaks His name, "Yeshua Hamashiach."

The young father holds his son and whispers, "The Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings."²³

The innkeeper and his wife stand at a distance. They can't take their eyes off the boy. She whispers, "Every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the LORD."²⁴ On the air above them there is an echo. Faint at first, it grows louder. The innkeeper stares at heaven. The star above them is daylight bright and casts their shadows on the ground. Finally, he can make it out. Voices. Purest he's ever heard. Singing at the top of their lungs: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"²⁵

The innkeeper knows now. He bows low and speaks loud enough for the young couple to hear. "The Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel."²⁶

God with us.

But not all are so inviting. In the dark night air, invisible armies draw invisible battle lines. Forces gather. Battle plans are drawn. Even now, the boy's life is in danger.

Just over the next hill, beyond earshot, lies another hill. Mount Moriah.

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It is an ancient and storied place. It is the hill where Melchizedek reigned as priest to God Most High. Where Abraham raised the knife above Isaac. The hill where Ornan the Jebusite built his threshing floor. Where the plague stopped. Where David danced before the Lord and returned the ark. The hill where Solomon built the temple. And in about three decades, forces will gather on this hill to execute this boy.

Daylight breaks the horizon, the innkeeper tends the fire, and “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined.”²⁷ Mary wraps Jesus tightly in swaddling clothes, lifts Him from the stone trough, and cradles the suckling baby, “who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient.”²⁸

Joseph kneels and presses his lips to the forehead of his son. He knows the words by heart. Written 740 years ago, Isaiah was speaking about his Son. About this very moment. About this improbable beginning. About this King who stepped off His throne to become a boy who will grow into a man and walk from this cave to that hill—and down into hell—to ransom you and me.

For unto us a Child is born,
Unto us a Son is given;
And the government will be upon His shoulder.
And His name will be called
Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of His government and peace
There will be no end,
Upon the throne of David and over His kingdom,
To order it and establish it with judgment and justice
From that time forward, even forever.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.²⁹

A Proper Context

Most of us see Jesus as a long-haired, soft-spoken, pacifist, speaker of fables, mystic guru who never lost His cool and kept His mouth shut when the soldiers nailed Him to a tree. Nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus was “begotten.” Not created like us. Big difference. Isaiah says, “a Child is born . . . a Son is given” (9:6). Meaning, He existed before the ages. Before the eons. We tend to focus on the baby in the manger, and I’m with you. But in minimizing Jesus to someone we can touch and something we can wrap our heads around, we’ve reduced Him. Jesus was the only begotten Son in the throne room before He arrived here as a child. Jesus Christ was, is, and forever will be King of all kings.

The One who stretched out the heavens, made the stars, and calls each *by name*. We forget this.

King David, speaking through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, gave us insight into a conversation that occurred in heaven before the foundation of the world. It’s from Psalm 110—which, incidentally, is the most quoted Old Testament verse in the New Testament. Jesus applied it to Himself²⁰ and it’s also quoted by Peter³¹: “The LORD said to my LORD, ‘Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.’ The LORD shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion. Rule in the midst of Your enemies!” (Ps. 110:1–2).

A few things strike me here. First, God the Father spoke to Jesus, the Son, and told Him to sit at His right hand. That seat of distinction has never been given to another. It also means that Jesus ruled from the throne room before He ever arrived here on earth. We also know from Stephen’s speech to the high priest and leaders of the council in Acts that Jesus is still there: “But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, ‘Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’” (Acts 7:55–56).

Second, God Most High made Jesus’ enemies a footstool beneath Jesus’ feet. That means all of them. He is the undisputed, undefeated,

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unconquered, unvanquished King of all kings. Speaking to His disciples, Jesus said, “If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven” (John 3:12–13).

Third, Jesus rules in the midst of His enemies. If you spend time thinking about this, it will mess with your head—and your theology. Think about it. Name any other king anywhere who rules in the midst of those who want him dead. Our definition of a ruler is one who drives out his enemies. Not lives with them. The fact that Jesus does not, to me, says much about both His power and His love—even for those who wish Him dead.

The throne room is the epicenter of the universe. It's where the decisions are made. It's where you and I were first spoken into existence. What we know of the throne room of God can be pieced together from a couple sources. Each adds another dimension to the picture. They are rich with texture and layer and worth reading.³²

Life in the throne room is unlike anything we've experienced. There's perfect peace, perfect love, perfect everything. There is also the absence of fear. No anger. No judgments. No jealousies. Every bad emotion is not in there. Everything good is. There's no death. Only life.

Jesus gives us a peek behind that curtain when He prays to His Father in John 17. What we call the High Priestly Prayer. It's amazing—the Son speaking with unfettered intimacy to the Father, and we get to listen. His deepest and most intimate thoughts. Even as I type this, it's tough to wrap my head around. But it's still true. Everything your heart and my heart hope for—the divine search for eternity in us, the eternity that's written on our hearts—finds its perfect expression and culmination in that room. With *that* God. The reason the angels are singing, “Holy, Holy, Holy” continuously before the throne (Rev. 4:8) is because God is revealing His glory to them, anew, every few seconds. And each revelation is better than the last. It's like staring at a diamond with infinite facets and angles. And that reflection is blowing their minds.

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Before we get in to the stories of Jesus' life and words and what those might mean to us, we need to first put Him in His proper context in our minds. To think rightly about Him.

Who is this Jesus?

Jesus said of Himself, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). And if Jesus is the way, then He's taking us somewhere. But where? I believe the answer is to His Father. This idea of God as "Father" as revealed by Jesus had been sparingly revealed in the Old Testament. It wasn't overly common. God refers to His people as "His children" or "His son," so the inference is made, but Old Testament writers—other than David, Isaiah, and Jeremiah—don't really refer to God as an intimate Father. The Old Testament understanding was more corporate. As in, God the Father of the nation of Israel. Of His people. He was the "God up there." Not the "God right here." Jesus turns this on its head. His revelation is individual. God is your Father. Mine.

To the apostles, this was mind-blowing.

Jesus arrived here through a gooey, humbling mess in a cave in Bethlehem. But why? What is your personal experience with Jesus? Not the one your church or your friends believe. Not the one passed to you by your parents or culture. I mean yours. The one in your gut. The one you run to when life gets tough. When things hurt.

Yes, He is my friend and the lover of my soul, but in calling Him that, have I reduced Him? Hear me: I need Jesus to be the intimate lover of my soul; I desperately need Him to whisper to me—Charles—and to single me out. But I wonder if in this need I haven't somehow forgotten that He spoke and everything I see came into existence. Including me and my ability to see it. He is eternal. He is infinite. He fashioned me from the dust. Every curve. Every wrinkle. Every hair follicle.

The books of Hebrews, Colossians, and Revelation establish Jesus as deity, anointed, Messiah, King, and Sovereign Ruler in an eternal kingdom, seated at the right hand of God, supreme, heir of everything, Creator, the radiance of God, the exact representation of God, the One who upholds all things by the Word of His power, and that He alone made purification

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for our sins. If we had this understanding, if we truly understood who He was and is, where He was, and what His role was before He arrived here—at least as much as our hearts and minds are capable—how would it change how we see Him and what we do with it and about it? Paul said it this way: “Now this, ‘He ascended’—what does it mean but that He also first descended in to the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things” (Eph. 4:9–10). He alone is the first born among the dead. He alone ascended on high.

The reason the Twelve followed Jesus to the cross and died as martyrs (save John) is because they knew Him in this way. As the resurrected King of the universe. They touched the holes. Saw the light in His eyes. When they were being boiled alive, beheaded, flayed, crucified upside down, I imagine the image in their minds that spurred their faith, that got them through, was a gut-level knowing of this Jesus.

When John, the disciple whom Jesus loved and the one who reclined against Jesus’ bosom at the Last Supper, encountered the resurrected King Jesus in His eternal reality on the island of Patmos, he fell on his face as though dead. And then Jesus, in beautiful Jesus fashion, touched him on the shoulder and said, “Do not be afraid” (Rev. 1:17).

Jesus is all of the above. The problem I’ve bumped into as I’ve walked with people who are wrestling with Jesus is that either consciously or unconsciously they have reduced Him to a mysterious, walk-about prophet with cool sandals and a posse. A sayer of good sayings. A soft-spoken teller of fables. A passive wimp. Just a guy whose red-printed words appear in an imposing black book.

This limitation is really dangerous. For us.

So let me come back around—what is your personal experience with Jesus? To you, who is He? No, I mean really. Spend some time here. Ask yourself, when things are bad, who holds the power? Your enemy? Or Jesus? Your enemy wants you to think he does. But your enemy was created by Your King. Uncreated vs. created. Our enemy is a footstool. And our King is on the throne. Ruling in the midst of them.

THE WORD BECOMES FLESH—AND DWELLS AMONG US

If we had this understanding, if this “knowing” was in our gut, if this was the picture we held of Jesus, if this was the truth with which we countered the lies that whisper in our ears, then the circumstances we face—no matter how horrible—would be about as powerful as gnats in a hurricane. I’m not saying our circumstances don’t hurt. They can and do. A lot. Your and my pain is real. But our pain doesn’t dictate our reality or the truth of who Jesus is.

I’m trying here to give you a picture that grows your faith and your hope. He is God of battle-axe and spear. God of angel armies. He holds the keys of death and hades. And when you were created, by Him, He meticulously fashioned you out of the dust, sculpted your body as it is, then knelt down, took a giant breath, placed His lips to yours, and breathed out for all He was worth. That life-giving breath made you a living, breathing soul. Your first breath started in His lungs.

That’s my King.

At this point in history many of us believe the enemy (the devil) is winning and Jesus is either powerless to counter him or He doesn’t care enough to do anything about it. Like He’s just sitting there giving us what we deserve. Many of us point to our circumstances or to our pain or to a deep sense of powerlessness and shake our fists at the sky: “We are getting our lunch handed to us! Things are terrible! Just look around. If You are who Your book says You are, then do something about it!”

Our enemy would have us believe that our circumstances determine what is true. Our King is telling us they do not. Never have. And, He has done something about it.

Tonight, about midnight, walk outside and take a look around. Chances are good you will find the world rather dark. Sitting in that dark place you face a choice: you can determine in your infinite wisdom that this current darkness is the reality of your world and you just need to suck it up and get used to it because life’s not going to get any better and only the strong survive and God either doesn’t care or can’t fix it anyway so you’re on your own which you’ve known all along—or you can wait about six hours and watch the sun pierce the skyline.

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I want to lift my eyes off my circumstances and onto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. To crush the speculations and strongholds in our minds where we've allowed the deceiver to convince us that Jesus is anything less than He is. To point out the lies that exalt themselves against the knowledge of God.

Lord Jesus, I'm asking You, by the power of Your Holy Spirit, to give me an experience with You that is new to me. Truer than I've known. Deeper than I've understood. Let me see You as You want to be seen by me. Show me who You are. And in the name of Jesus, I bind, cast down, and silence any whisper or voice to the contrary that would seek to speak lies or doubt into the reality of who You really are. I command that satan be muzzled; you may not speak lies to me about my King.

Jesus, for so long I've lived with a less-than picture of You. With a false understanding. I've let the enemy chip away at who You are and rob me of knowing You fully. I'm really sorry for doing that. I don't want to do that anymore. Please forgive me. Forgive my passive indifference. My quiet resignation. Forgive me for not bringing every thought to You and asking You if it is true.

Here and now I give my heart and mind to You, and I give You permission to paint a new picture. In 4K and technicolor. Let me see You as You are. Please reveal Yourself to me. Let me see You from King to child to Messiah to Savior to crucified to resurrected to defeater of death and the grave, to seated on high interceding for me.

And lastly Lord, I want to hear Your voice. Please. I know You are speaking. Please let me hear You. You have given me the Spirit of sonship through which I cry "Abba," and I desire nothing more than to hear You, My Father, speaking to and with me. Please let me join my voice with Samuel who said, "Speak, for Your servant is listening."³³ Lord, I'm listening.

In Jesus' Name, amen.

We're All Bleeders

Jesus steps out of the boat, and the crowds rush the beach. The country of the Gadarenes sits behind Him. Across the water. The rumors have already spread.¹

Even His disciples are whispering. One of them thumbs over his back. “Did you see that?”

Another nods. “Yeah, I saw it but I don’t know what to do with it.”

A third spoke. “I’ve never even thought something like that.”

Jesus laughs. He has several appointments to keep. What happens in these next few minutes will upend the world.

A man runs across the beach. Robes flowing. He’s wealthy. One of the rulers of the synagogue. He darts through the crowd. The apostles move to protect Jesus when Jairus falls at His feet and begs Him earnestly. “My little daughter lies at the point of death. Come and lay Your hands on her, that she may be healed, and she will live.”²

Jesus smiles and gestures with His hand. “Take Me to her.”

Moving through the street, Jairus screams at the crowd, fearing his daughter’s death, “Move!” But Jesus is not hurried. In fact, He slows. Purposefully.

He chose this street. He has been waiting for this day. This moment. The crowd squeezes in, but He’s not bothered. He is taking His time. He catches a glimpse of her behind Him, and His heart leaps. He knows her

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by name. There she is again. Weaving through the crowd, desperation painted across her face. He is her last hope, and He knows it. He smiles to Himself.

She's heard the stories. Word has spread throughout all Judea. There was the man with the withered hand. The centurion's servant. The son of the widow of Nain who was in a coffin being carried out through the gate. The paralyzed man lowered by his friends through a roof who, after the Healer touched him, walked out the front door. How He calmed the wind and the waves with just a word. How He laid His hands on those with various diseases and how He healed them all. Every one. Lastly, she's heard how He delivered the demon-possessed man of the Gadarenes. And then, just recently, she's heard how He read the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue. How the Spirit of the Sovereign Lord was upon Him. She knew the prophecy.

He was the Healer. The One the prophets talked about.

Through no fault of her own, she'd been bleeding for twelve years.³ We're not sure why, but we do know that Leviticus 15 gives strict instructions to anyone like her. This law has declared her unclean. Everything that she touched, lay down on, sat on, or wore—and everything that touched any of these things that she touched, lay down on, sat on, or wore—was unclean. This included people. That meant whoever she touched was unclean. She was not allowed to “be with” a man or for a man to know her. The message given, the law applied to her, was, “Stay away. You are cast out.” Given her condition, she was excluded from worship and from offering sacrifice—not allowed in the front door. And had been for over a decade. She could not get access to the priest, and hence, God. There was no atonement. No forgiveness. She didn't shake hands in public. She didn't kiss anyone. Didn't hug anyone. Kept at arms length.

How many times had she wondered if she'd be better off dead?

Then there was the issue of constantly having to wear a diaper. Something to soak up the blood so it didn't trickle down her leg, but sometimes it soaked through. Sometimes she left a trail. Her shame had soaked through too. In the back of her house, where she dried her laundry, she

hung the stained rags. Her neighbors couldn't help but notice when they flapped in the breeze. They wished she'd do something about the smell.

She'd tried everything. Been to every doctor. Now broke, she'd traveled far and spent every penny. The problem had not improved. Only gotten worse.

Everyone knew about her condition, which also meant they knew the source of her shame. It was sin. Either hers or her family's sin had brought this curse on her. The law of Moses said so. So she lived under the constant shadow of whispers. Whatever sin she'd committed must have been significant. She's paying the penalty. And only God knows why.

She was a walking, steaming, stench-filled mess. She was also a "daughter of Abraham." We know from the narrative what's wrong with her, and to some extent, we know what she knows or has heard about Jesus. But we don't really know why she is stalking Jesus—and make no mistake, that's what she's doing.

To truly understand the depth of this woman's pain, desperation, and courage, I need to push Pause and leave her in the street for a moment. To truly "get" where she's at, we need to understand what or who has fueled the hope that brought her to this moment and has her standing in this street.

And to do that, we need to back up about fifteen hundred years.

In the Shelter of His Wings

In 1500 BC, Moses marched some three million Hebrews out of Egypt.* They were a nation of slaves. Three days out of Egypt, they're thirsty. They came upon a well, but the water was bad. They grumbled. The Lord told Moses to throw a tree in the water. He did, and the water turned

* Why do I say three million? In Numbers 1, during the Israelites' second year of wandering in the wilderness, Moses took a census of men over 20 who were able to go to war. That number was 603,550. From this, scholars believe the total number of men in the nation of Israel was between 1.2 million and somewhere north of that. Add wives and children, and I guesstimate three million.

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sweet. (Notice deliverance here via a tree.) And then He said, “I am the LORD who heals you” (Ex. 15:26).

It is significant that one of the first names with which the Lord names Himself after His people’s deliverance from generations of slavery is *Yahweh-Raphah*. It means, “The Lord—Your Healer.”

Three months later, Moses stood at the foot of Mount Sinai.

And Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: ‘You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.” (Ex. 19:3–6)

Here, the Lord introduced the concept of “wings,” including how He brought the Israelites to Himself and how those wings are a symbol of His protection and deliverance. The Lord continued this idea of healing and deliverance under the shadow of His wings when He gave instructions to Moses on how to build the ark of the covenant:

And the cherubim shall stretch out their wings above, covering the mercy seat with their wings, and they shall face one another; the faces of the cherubim shall be toward the mercy seat. You shall put the mercy seat on top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the Testimony that I will give you. And there I will meet with you, and I will speak with you from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are on the ark of the Testimony, about everything which I will give you in commandment to the children of Israel. (Ex. 25:20–22)

God’s wings were a covering and a protection for His people. More than that, He invited them to come and meet with Him there, under the wings.

Psalm 91 (probably written by Moses) says it this way:

He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High
Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.
I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress;
My God, in Him I will trust."

Surely He shall deliver you from the snare of the fowler
And from the perilous pestilence.
He shall cover you with His feathers,
And under His wings you shall take refuge;
His truth shall be your shield and buckler. (Ps. 91:1–4)

Note the meanings: Cover. Refuge. Deliverance. Trust.

Because God is practical and He didn't want His people to forget, He took this one step further. Brought it closer to home. He told Moses:

Speak to the children of Israel: Tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a blue thread in the tassels of the corners. And you shall have the tassel, that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of the LORD and do them, and that you may not follow the harlotry to which your own heart and your own eyes are inclined, and that you may remember and do all My commandments, and be holy for your God. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the LORD your God. (Num. 15:38–41)

He said the same thing in Deuteronomy 22:12: "You shall make tassels on the four corners of the clothing with which you cover yourself."

The Hebrew word used here for "corners" in those passages is *kanaph*. It means an edge or extremity; specifically (of a bird or army) a wing, (of a garment or bed-clothing) a flap. So, the corner/border of a garment is the same word used for wings. God was making a mental connection

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for His people. In a sense, He was saying, “The corner of your garment should remind you of Me and My protection—of My deliverance and your healing.”

This idea became a major element of the Hebrew culture.

Around 1000 BC, David was fleeing Saul in the Wilderness of En Gedi.

Then Saul took three thousand chosen men from all Israel, and went to seek David and his men on the Rocks of the Wild Goats. So he came to the sheepfolds by the road, where there was a cave; and Saul went in to attend to his needs. (David and his men were staying in the recesses of the cave.) Then the men of David said to him, “This is the day of which the LORD said to you, ‘Behold, I will deliver your enemy into your hand, that you may do to him as it seems good to you.’” And David arose and secretly cut off a corner of Saul’s robe” (1 Sam. 24:2–4).

What do you think David cut off?

That tassel represented God’s covering and protection. God had given Saul into David’s hand. And when David held it up and showed it to Saul, and Saul glanced down at his now three-winged shirt, Saul knew it. He understood.

Then around 740 BC, the prophet Isaiah said:

Have you not known?
Have you not heard?
The everlasting God, The LORD,
The Creator of the ends of the earth,
Neither faints nor is weary.
His understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the weak,
And to those who have no might He increases strength.
Even the youths shall faint and be weary,
And the young men shall utterly fall,
But those who wait on the LORD

Shall renew their strength;
 They shall mount up with wings like eagles,
 They shall run and not be weary,
 They shall walk and not faint. (Is. 40:28–31)

Lastly, the prophet Malachi wrote this around 400 BC: “But to you who fear My name the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings; and you shall go out and grow fat like stall-fed calves” (Mal. 4:2).

The prophets fell silent for four hundred years. Then Jesus, the boy, appeared wearing a shirt with four corners. And Jesus the boy grew into Jesus the Messiah—*Yeshua Hamashiach*. How do we know this image, this idea, is important to Jesus? He told us, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” (Matt. 23:37).

From Psalms to Isaiah to Malachi to Matthew, the same word was used for wings: *kanaph*. Now, let’s go back to the street and our bleeding woman.

Here Is My Shame!

News has traveled and even the outcasts have heard the stories of Him. Something in her stirs. Hope? Desperation? Mixture of both. Being unclean, she cannot get to where He is. They won’t let her. The law prohibits it. She knows she is not allowed around other people. She’s been forced to live and sustain herself on the outskirts, and—if she knows anything at all—she is certainly not allowed to reach out and touch anyone. Most of all, Him. But, she doesn’t care what they think.

She has come to the end of herself.

She doubles the cloth rag between her legs. Covers her head more so than usual, crowding her eyes and brow so that she might not be

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recognized. The crowd passes. He is in the middle. Everyone's attention is focused on Him. She files in behind. Out of sight. Then, gathering her nerve, she begins picking up her step, working closer. Weaving. Elbowing. If she is caught, she will be disciplined. Greater shame. Complete and total public embarrassment. Both bleeder and believer, she picks her way through the crowd.

Just a few steps away, the crowd encroaches. She has to elbow her way through. She knows she is in violation. If she's caught—she doesn't want to think about it. A few more steps and there He is. An arm's length. Standing next to him are several men who look like they are from Galilee. The loud, big one must be Cephas. She's heard of him too. The crowd shoves, and pushes, and tightens, and she is losing sight of this Man named Jesus of Nazareth. In desperation, she lunges, extends her reach, and grasps the corner of His garment. His shirt. The tassel. The wing. She clings. Holds tightly.

He feels the tug. Feels the power leave.

She feels it enter.

Now a certain woman had a flow of blood for twelve years, and had suffered many things from many physicians. She had spent all that she had and was no better, but rather grew worse. When she heard about Jesus, she came behind Him in the crowd and touched His garment. For she said, "If only I may touch His clothes, I shall be made well."

Immediately the fountain of her blood was dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of the affliction. (Mark 5:25–29)

Luke recorded it this way:

And Jesus said, "Who touched Me?"

When all denied it, Peter and those with him said, "Master, the multitudes throng and press You, and You say, 'Who touched Me?'"

But Jesus said, "Somebody touched Me, for I perceived power going out from Me." Now when the woman saw that she was not hidden, she

came trembling; and falling down before Him, she declared to Him in the presence of all the people the reason she had touched Him and how she was healed immediately.

And He said to her, "Daughter, be of good cheer; your faith has made you well. Go in peace." (Luke 8:45–48)

Mark and Luke say, "Immediately." Or, "straightaway." Matthew says, "from that hour." Right then and there, her broken body is healed—and she knows it. Twelve years of pain and shame and anger and exasperation begin working their way out her soul. The tears begin to fall. She tries to back away. To escape. She is trembling. She is shattered. Her knees buckle.

Jesus pauses. Stops. She is fearful of what He might say next. Then He says it. "Who just touched Me?" She is discovered. Found out. More shame. Cast farther out. Will they stone her for so great a violation? Jesus raises His voice. "Who touched Me?" His friends, led by Peter, say, "Master, all these people? Everybody is touching You."

Jesus shakes His head. They don't get it. He is the Sun who has come with healing in His wings,⁴ and somebody who both knew and believed that touched Him with intention. The Sun of Righteousness wants her brought before Him. Why? Because He fashioned her. Knit her together. He's known her pain. Has suffered with her. He saw her coming through the crowd. He knows she's been weakened by twelve years of chronic anemia so He slowed just enough so she could reach out and touch Him.

He's not finished with her. Not by a long shot.

He lifts a hand. "Somebody touched Me with intention. Power left My body." Everybody, all those big men, begin looking for the perpetrator in the crowd. The thief.

Trembling, having lost total control of her emotions, pleading on the inside that God would either have mercy on her in this moment or just strike her down, she falls to her knees. Soaks the earth with her tears. Bowing her head, hiding her eyes, she spills it. Lays it out there for the whole world to hear.

"Here is my shame!"

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Her cries echo off the stone city walls. She is a woman undone. Laid bare.

Jesus, who knows her name, steps forward. He is so glad to see her. He has missed her and He has been looking forward to this moment for a long time. He chose this road because He knew it would lead near her house. Because while her body is battered and torn, it's her heart that is broken. In this moment, Jesus has already healed her body. "The fountain of her blood was already dried up." He is calling her forward because He is about to heal her heart. Then, of all the words He could have spoken, He says the one singular word she needs to hear.

"Daughter."

The word echoes inside her. Dancing around her insides like a pinball until it comes to rest in that place in her gut. Where her soul lives. Down where her hope is buried.

Scripture doesn't say it, but I think Jesus reaches out and lifts her. Raises her up in front of everyone else. Hugs her. Tightly. While she weeps and smears snot on His shoulder, He welcomes this daughter back into the family. And then just so everybody knows and to ensure there's no doubt, no question, He says, "Your faith has healed you."

Somewhere in there it hits her. "I am healed! It's over. I am what I once was. What I've always longed to be." This knowingness spreads across her face. "I am a child of God!"

We're All Bleeders

Years ago, I was working on a book in Africa. I met up with some doctors who were treating women with obstetric fistulas. A condition caused in countries with limited medical care. Prior to birth, the baby gets stuck in the birth canal, dies, and in so doing tears a hole in either the bladder, the bowel, or both. After delivering a stillborn baby, the women are left with uncontrolled leakage of urine, feces, and blood. With no cure, the women eat and drink less to control the flow. Considered cursed by God, they

are thrown out like lepers. Many sleep with the animals to keep warm. Suicide is common. The stench is significant. No, it's awful. I have walked among them so I am speaking from experience. The only thing worse than the smell is the shame carved into their faces. Few, if any, look you in the eyes. In colloquial language, these women are called "the bleeders."

For whatever reason, this tormented woman in the street was a bleeder.

I wonder how much time passed before she took off that diaper? How long before she tore down the laundry line, burning every last rag? In my mind, she stands alone in the street and screams at the top of her lungs, "*He called me 'Daughter'!*"

When I get to heaven, I want to find this woman and hug her neck. Her story knocks a few things loose in me, and I want to thank her. I want to thank her for her gumption. For her faith out of which she elbowed her way through a crowd that didn't want her. For despising her own shame. For, when all seemed lost, she reached out her hand and cried out to Jesus. Why, of all the saints in Scripture, do I want to find this one?

This woman believed the Word was more true than her circumstances.

Let that sink in.

"Thy word is truth" (John 17:17, kjv).

We're all bleeders. You, me, that person over there. All of us. We are draped in shame, bleeding out, and yes, our bodies need healing. But it is our hearts that are broken and we are in need of hearing one singular word. If you think this is an isolated event in the life of a woman that didn't and doesn't pertain to you, let me lead you to Matthew: "And when the men of that place recognized Him, they sent out into all that surrounding region, brought to Him all who were sick, and begged Him that they might only touch the hem of His garment. And as many as touched it were made perfectly well" (14:35–36).

The wings of His garment are here. Now. Will you reach out and grab hold?

Some days, I find myself at the end of myself. As Isaiah said, my "filthy rags" are hanging in the backyard and blowing in the wind. I am bleeding

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and I am broken and I am getting worse. But I've heard the stories, and He is passing by. I bathe quickly, wrap on a diaper. Elbow my way through. Cling to His shirttail. Plead to God to have mercy.

And then He calls me forth, saying the thing I need to hear. "Son. Charles. I've missed you. I was hoping you'd find Me today. I'm so glad to see you." It's around here that Jesus hugs my neck and I weep on His. Smearing snot.

"See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are" (1 John 3:1 NASB).

Children. That is what we are!

You and I are not disqualified by a decade of shame and pain. By nonstop blood. By stench and smell and filthy rags. We are not too dirty. We, each of us, and yes—that includes you—are welcomed in. Lifted up. Healed. Forever. From this very hour.

The question is this: While you are a bleeder, are you a believer?

Close your eyes. He chose this street. He's waited for this moment. He's walking slower. Taking His time. Chose this route because He knew He'd pass by you. The multitude is with Him, but there's a break in the crowd. He sees you behind Him. His heart leaps.

Go! Forget the diaper. You don't need it. Run fast. Don't worry what anyone else thinks. Throw elbows. Lunge. Reach out.

Cling! Cling.

Now, just listen.

Lord Jesus, I am a bleeder. And I am helpless to help me. I am bleeding both from what I've done and what's been done to me. I've tried everything and only made matters worse. Nothing I did changed my situation. I'm a mess, and I'm sorry.

Today, I bring my shame and my infirmity to You. All of it. Today I bring the truth of me and lay it bare before You. I don't want to live in hiding anymore. No more lies about the truth of me. Today I'm exposing all of me before all of You. I believe that You are who You say You are. You tell me that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

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Will be delivered. You tell me that if I confess with my mouth and believe with my heart that You are the Savior and Redeemer of the world, and that You alone paid my penalty and died my death, then I am saved from an eternity without You and welcomed into an eternity with You. Jesus, this is both my confession and my belief, and here and now it is my proclamation.

You are Yahweh-Raphah. My Healer. Today I declare out across the stratosphere that I am Your child! That You are my God! The Son of Righteousness. And that You chose this road, this moment, this page, because You knew I'd pass by here and You have come with healing in Your wings. For me. Here today, I reach through the crowd and hold tightly to Your wings. To You alone I hold, and I am not letting You go.

In Jesus' Name, amen.