

THE COMPASSIONATE CHRIST



Draw Near to the Risen Savior

SHERRI HUGHES-GRAGG



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

The Compassionate Christ

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*To Pamela who, as my life burned to ashes, had the
courage and compassion to stay by my side.*





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INTRODUCTION

One Sunday night long ago, I lay in bed as my heart pounded in my chest. Just that morning, a well-meaning Sunday school teacher had delivered a powerful lesson on the precarious state of my immortal soul without Jesus. I stared wide-eyed into the darkness for fear that if I closed my eyes and went to sleep, I would awaken in eternal flames. Finally, when I could stand it no more, I slipped from beneath the covers and padded barefoot down the hall to my parents' room. My daddy and I sat on the side of the bed, and I prayed to receive Christ as my Savior. I was four years old.

The infancy of my faith was founded not in Christ's tender love for me, but in the deep belief that He was a harsh judge who awaited the opportunity to throttle me. Throughout my childhood



and youth, I kept this vengeful God at a distance and tried very hard to be good.

This flawed view of God and the fear that accompanied it would define my life for most of the next forty years. My misunderstanding of my heavenly Father stole my gifts. I was compelled to write from the time I was a child, but I doubted myself too much to allow anyone to read my work. Close relationships were elusive for me because I was too busy hiding a heart I feared was unlovable. If my Creator was so displeased with me, how could anyone else accept me? The falsehoods I believed about God repeatedly drowned me in despair. Even on the days I knew the truth in my head, I struggled to untangle the tendrils of the lie from my heart.

It was not until I was forty-one years old and took a trip to Israel that I was introduced to the concept of interpreting Scripture through the cultural lens in which it was written. That's when the shackles on my heart and mind began to fall in earnest. Bit by bit, I learned to view Jesus' teachings through the eyes of a Middle Eastern peasant. Scripture started to come to life for me. I found, at the center of humanity's tragic drama, a Messiah who was the incarnation of God Himself pouring out His life in costly love to redeem us all.

I have written each devotion in this book with the hope of guiding you into God's presence through fictional narrative surrounding Scripture. And while this is a creative work, it is one that is strongly rooted in research. For example, I do not know for certain that there was a narrow window near the ceiling of the room in which the sinful woman anointed Jesus' feet, but I do know that this was the type of window commonly found in a first-century



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home in Palestine. Also, some of the historical terms and names used may be unfamiliar to you. To address this, there is an asterisk after those words to indicate that a definition is provided in the glossary at the back of the book.

My prayer for you while reading these pages is that you'll experience the same compassionate Christ that I have, and that you will truly know He stands with arms open wide to welcome you into His Father's kingdom just as you are.

*Christ's peace,
Sherri*



ONE

THE MASTER VINTNER

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine—

the best of meats and finest of wines.

On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.

The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
from all faces;

he will remove his people's disgrace
from all the earth.

The LORD has spoken.

ISAIAH 25:6–8



I



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Before you begin, read John 2:1–11.

The lamps had been lit. Platters of olives, roasted lamb, stuffed grape leaves, and dates stood at the ready next to row after row of amphorae* filled with wine. The guests chatted among themselves in quiet but joyful tones when, at last, someone hushed them.

“They are coming!”

Moments later the groom entered the gate wearing a white linen robe trimmed in blue. A ceremonial crown rested on his head. His new bride, still veiled, accompanied him. She, too, was enrobed in her finest. Gold bangles jingled upon her wrists. She was beautifully adorned for her groom.

The groom extended his hand to his bride and led her into the house. As a reverent hush fell over their family and friends, he spread a corner of his cloak over her shoulders, symbolizing his commitment to protect and care for her before proclaiming for all to hear: “This is my wife, and I am her husband for all eternity.”

He took her by the hand, and the lovers were excused to be alone as their wedding celebration began.

Eventually, of course, the happy couple rejoined the party as its rightful king and queen, but there was no rush. The event would last a full seven days. Jesus, His family, and some of His disciples were among those happily taking part in the feast.

And that feast was a tremendous social responsibility. The couple’s families were expected to provide generously for a proper celebration. For days, all went well. Delicious food was plentiful and wine flowed, but then the unthinkable happened.

Two of the servants bustled into a side room where wine amphorae lined the wall. They walked to the nearest one, grasped the handles, and prepared to strain against the weight, only to find it far too light. It was empty. Frowning, the men turned to the next amphora and found only dregs in the bottom. As they walked down the line of containers, they rapped each of them with their knuckles. Again and again, a hollow echo rang throughout the room.

Their eyes wide with alarm, they rushed out of the room to deliver the news—they were out of wine!

The disaster had to be brought to the attention of the groom's mother immediately, and when it was, the woman's joy instantly turned to horror. Tears filled her eyes, and she began to wring her hands.

Seeing her distress, Mary asked quietly as to the nature of the dilemma. She listened, patted the woman's arm, and asked her to wait. She knew Someone who might be able to help.

As she turned to leave, she motioned to the servants to follow her. She scanned the faces of those reclined along the triclinium table in the main room. He was not there. Then she made her way into the courtyard and found Him enjoying the party with His friends. She approached her son, cleared her throat, and leaned in close to His ear.

"They have no more wine," she said.

Jesus turned to look at her for a moment and then quietly replied, "Woman, why do you involve me? My hour has not yet come."



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Mary simply turned to the servants.

“Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:3–5).

Jesus looked about the courtyard, and His eyes fell on six limestone water jars kept for ceremonial washing. Each could hold twenty to thirty gallons of water, and every drop was needed for a wedding party. Each guest was expected to wash before and after eating and before praying as well.

Costly limestone jars . . . the backbreaking labor required to fill them . . . all to be poured out in homage to the traditions of the fathers that had nothing to do with God’s heart. The Pharisees were so concerned about breaking one of God’s laws that they had established fences around each law, adding ceremonial traditions like washing rituals so that the law itself would never be broken. But what began as a noble desire for holiness had taken on a life of its own as neighbor began judging neighbor on how well each kept the traditions. The Pharisees had fallen into the trap of legalism. They would define the sin, judge at will, and lay the whole burden on their fellow man. Not even a wedding celebration was spared the crushing yoke of tradition.

Jesus turned to the servants and motioned to the jars. “Fill the jars with water.”

A handful of servants rushed to the stone jars, where the men divided into pairs before taking their places on either side of one of the empty vessels. They hooked their strong fingers into the handles carved into the sides and began making their way to a nearby well. A short time later, they returned, their knuckles white and muscles straining under the weight of the water. As soon as one full jar was placed in the courtyard, they picked up the next

to return to the well. When the last purification jar was filled to the brim, the exhausted servants returned for further instructions.

“Now,” He told them, “draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet” (John 2:7–8).

One of the servants grasped a large pot by the handle and thrust it beneath the surface of the water in the purification jar. When he raised it again, the water that ran from the lip of the pot and down his hand was dark, and the sweet aroma of wine wafted through the air. The servant’s eyes widened as he called for a serving pitcher and carefully filled it.

The master of the banquet was a corpulent man whose full beard cascaded in waves over his robes. He was engaged in a lively conversation with the diminutive older man next to him, but he would occasionally glance anxiously at the room full of guests with their empty goblets. It was his job as the chief servant to ensure the quality, and quantity, of the food and drink for the wedding. As much as he tried to feign interest in his companion’s story, he had one thought looping through his mind: *Where is the wine?* As soon as one of the servants arrived at his side with a freshly filled cup of wine for him to taste before it was served to the guests, he sighed in relief and took a sip.

The servants watched breathlessly from the back of the room as his eyes widened, and although the man next to him chattered on, it was the goblet that now had the banquet master’s full attention. As he swirled the wine in the cup beneath the lamplight, he observed the depth of its color. He lifted it to his nose and breathed in the scent of vanilla and clove. He closed his eyes, took another sip, and savored hints of berries, cherries, and plums.

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He set the goblet on the table, called the groom to his side, laughed, and gave him a joyous slap on the back.

“Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now” (John 2:10).

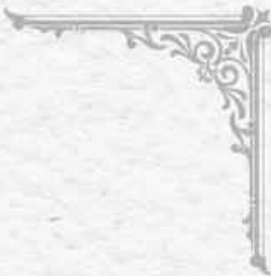

Prayer

Merciful Savior,

Forgive me for sacrificing joy and stealing it from others because I was too proud to receive Your gifts humbly. I have been guilty of building fences around my own idea of holiness—for myself and others—because I want control more than I want to trust. Please show me where I have set myself up as god, honoring tradition more than Your heart.

You, my Jesus, are the Giver of every good and perfect gift,¹ the Master Vintner, and I joyfully worship You.

Amen.



TWO
UNCLEAN!

Praise the LORD, my soul;
all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
Praise the LORD, my soul,
and forget not all his benefits—
who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit
and crowns you with love and compassion,
who satisfies your desires with good things
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
The LORD works righteousness
and justice for all the oppressed.

PSALM 103:1–6



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Before you begin, read Luke 5:12–15.

Some mornings, when I first awakened, I would think it had all been a terrible dream. Then I would roll over and see not my wife and children on their mats beside me in the pale early light, but rows of other men. And then I would remember that nightmare and reality were one.

My roommates were a macabre sort. Their limbs were swollen, and their bodies were covered with craterlike sores—deep, red pits rimmed with scaly white flesh. The nodules that covered their foreheads, lips, and chins were like countless pebbles strewn across the sand. Every man was missing at least a couple of fingers and toes. A few wretched souls had almost none at all. Their skin, which sagged and draped limply over their gaunt faces, looked like leather. Eyes were shrunken and weak. Noses had collapsed. The men trembled in their sleep as dry coughs shook their skeletal frames. These were the outcasts of society, the living dead.

Just like me.

This reality was a horror from which I could never awaken. I am a leper . . .

The day that changed everything started out like any other. I rolled my mat and placed it in the corner, a task much more difficult after I lost a thumb and two fingers to injuries. I was also missing my small toe on my right foot. It had become very difficult to protect fingers and toes once all sensation was lost. My missing nose was another story entirely. It had simply collapsed in on itself bit by bit. All my eyelashes had fallen out, and my eyes had become

UNCLEAN!

so sensitive to the sunlight that I was limited to scavenging during certain hours of the day.

That morning, I slowly made my way out of the house into the early morning light, my legs heavy as I pushed them as fast as I could. The incessant gnawing in my empty stomach was driving my feeble body to the city gate in the hope that someone passing by would pity me and toss a piece of bread my way.

I glanced down and saw blood seeping into my sandal from a sore I could not feel on the bottom of my foot. Then I heard footsteps ahead. I drew to the far edge of the road, pulled the edge of my head covering across the lower half of my face to cover my nose, and shouted the designated warning just as the travelers came into sight.

“Unclean! Unclean!”

Their revulsion was immediate and obvious. Some were horrified by my wounds. Others were terrified that such a fate could befall them. The worst of all were those who snarled in contempt, confident that my affliction was an outward expression of the Lord’s judgment for some secret sin.

“Bread! Bread!” I begged as the travelers hurried past. One young man paused, reached into his pack, tore off a chunk of bread, and tossed it to me before hurrying away. The bread rolled through the dust to my feet. I picked it up, quickly brushed it off, and then devoured it as I continued on my way.

After a while I grew weary of dragging my heavy legs along the road—and even wearier of the horror openly expressed by the travelers I passed. So I stopped for shelter in the shade of a rocky outcropping far enough away to no longer offend but still close enough to catch bits of the conversations that drifted to me from the road.



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Over and over the travelers were excitedly discussing the same topic: the great Healer and Miracle Worker, Jesus of Nazareth, was nearby. His fame was spreading throughout all Judea. They said He healed the lame, the blind, the deaf, and the mute.

What if this Healer could heal me too? I knew, of course, that my leprosy was unlikely to be healed, even in light of these miracles. No one had heard of anyone being cured of leprosy in hundreds of years. I had heard some say that healing leprosy was one of four miracles only Messiah Himself could do. The belief was held widely enough that priests put a specific temple protocol in place for any leper claiming to have been healed. He was required to present himself to the priests, who would inspect the man's body. If the healing was real, the priests would begin to investigate if the Messiah had indeed come at last.

As I sat in the dust, I looked down at my disfigured body and my filthy rags. I thought of my wife and children. I wondered if my mother was still living. If there was any chance I could be reunited with my family, I had to seize it. I struggled to my feet and trudged on.

When at last I came to Jesus, a large crowd surrounded Him. I stood at a distance for a moment, my heart pounding in terror at the thought of crossing the road, breaking the law, and casting my vile, decaying flesh into the midst of all that was whole and good. I took one shuddering breath and limped my way toward Him. Someone spotted me, and the cry was raised. The crowd scattered, but Jesus stood firm.

“Unclean! Unclean!”

UNCLEAN!

I threw myself face down into the dust at His feet, weeping, begging for mercy, believing the unbelievable—that He was Messiah and was therefore able to make me, even me, whole.

“Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean” (Luke 5:12).
Jesus reached out His hand and touched me. He wasn’t repulsed by my filth; He wasn’t afraid of my decay.

“I am willing,” He said. “Be clean!” (Luke 5:13).

Great power and life-transforming love flowed through me. Strength returned to my muscles. Feeling surged into my limbs. Fingers and toes were simply . . . restored.

I pulled back the sleeves of my robe to see perfectly smooth skin. I gingerly lifted my fingers to my face to find the nodules gone and my nose just as it should be.

I was speechless, overcome with awe and gratitude. I looked up into His kind face as tears of thankfulness streamed down my cheeks.

Then He said to me, “Don’t tell anyone, but go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them” (Luke 5:14).

And I rose and made my way to the temple in Jerusalem. I was unclean no more.

II

Prayer

My God,

The world is fraught with suffering. Be near today to those who are outcast and in desperate poverty. Give me ears to hear their cries and an open hand to help meet their needs. Break my heart, Jesus, for those for whom Your heart breaks, that I may extend mercy to the untouchables and receive the forgotten as Your dear children.

Amen.