

DARREN WHITEHEAD & JON TYSON

---

# RUMORS OF GOD

EXPERIENCE THE KIND OF FAITH YOU'VE ONLY HEARD ABOUT



An Imprint of Thomas Nelson

*Rumors of God*

© 2011 by Darren Whitehead and Jon Tyson

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by Nelson Books, an imprint of Thomas Nelson. Nelson Books and Thomas Nelson are registered trademarks of HarperCollins Christian Publishing, Inc.

Thomas Nelson titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fund-raising, or sales promotional use. For information, please email [SpecialMarkets@ThomasNelson.com](mailto:SpecialMarkets@ThomasNelson.com).

Scripture quotations marked KJV are from the King James Version. Public domain.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the New American Standard Bible®. Copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. All rights reserved. [www.lockman.org](http://www.lockman.org).

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com). The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®

Scripture quotations marked NKJV are from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NLT are from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation. Copyright © 1996, 2004 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked TNIV are taken from the Holy Bible, Today’s New International® Version, TNIV®. Copyright © 2001, 2005 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. “TNIV” and “Today’s New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®

ISBN: 978-1-4002-5427-9

**Library of Congress Control Number: 2025931192**

*Printed in the United States of America*

\$PrintCode

*For Brandy, who gave me a card at Fusion and  
has held my attention ever since. This journey is  
infinitely sweeter with you.*

*For Christy, who listened to my ramblings on the  
baseball field at Toccoa and has faithfully been  
there to watch much of it come true.*

# CONTENTS

Authors' Note .....	xiii
1. The Sculptor's Shop .....	1
<i>Rumors of Abundant Life</i>	
2. Hostages of the Mind .....	11
<i>Rumors of Another Dream</i>	
3. The Great Reversal .....	27
<i>Rumors of Generosity</i>	
4. The Faith You've Only Heard About .....	47
<i>Rumors of Love</i>	
5. Getting the Gospel in Order .....	63
<i>Rumors of Grace</i>	
6. Giving Up Your Rights .....	79
<i>Rumors of Freedom</i>	
7. The Radical Individual .....	93
<i>Rumors of Commitment</i>	
8. Loving Beneath the Surface .....	107
<i>Rumors of Community</i>	

9. The Greenroom . . . . .	121
<i>Rumors of Justice</i>	
10. Our Burning Revolution . . . . .	139
<i>Rumors of Hope</i>	
Epilogue: In Our Day . . . . .	155
About the Authors . . . . .	159
Acknowledgments . . . . .	161
Notes . . . . .	167
Reading Group Guide . . . . .	175

## AUTHORS' NOTE

In life when something really good or really bad happens, we all have someone we call first. We've been mates for over thirty years. During the last few decades we have made literally hundreds of those "first" calls to each other. When you immigrate to the other side of the world, you forfeit personal history and tenured relationships. You basically start all over again. Our friendship is the only one that we both have in this country that predates our move. Even our wives have only known us since our move to the States. This unusual dynamic has forged something unique.

We met as teenagers at a youth camp in Mt. Barker, South Australia. Both of us came for the girls. In fact our first-ever collaboration was sneaking into the girls' sleeping quarters during the church service and piling up more than fifty mattresses into the center of the room. (Our second partnership was mopping all the bathrooms after we got caught!) Little did we know that we would one day be pastors in churches in two of America's largest cities.

A lot of life has happened in the last twenty years. We have been part of each other's weddings, have shown up when each

AUTHOR'S NOTE

other's kids were born, and have journeyed together through highs and lows. Through all the changes, we have had one tradition that dates back to our early days in Australia. When either of us senses that God is ending a ministry assignment, closing one door and opening another, we travel to that one's city and sit in the back of the empty church auditorium together. We spend several unhurried hours sitting in the quiet and telling stories of what God has done in that season. We try to drink deeply of the moment before a new chapter begins.

So now we're literally writing chapters together. Although we wrote in one voice, we occasionally delineate who is telling the story for the benefit of you, the reader.

We wrote this book because we love the church. Many have the sense that the greatest days of the church are in the past. We humbly disagree. This book is our small rebellion against that notion. We believe that if you listen to the rumors of God, you will hear that God is doing something new in the church. We long to confirm those rumors with our lives.

Here's to what's to come.

Cheers.

Darren Whitehead

Jon Tyson

CHAPTER 1

THE SCULPTOR'S SHOP

RUMORS OF ABUNDANT LIFE

*LORD, I have heard of your fame;  
I stand in awe of your deeds, LORD.  
Renew them in our day,  
in our time make them known;  
in wrath remember mercy.*

—the prayer of the prophet Habakkuk

**T**he first couple of rows at church that morning held a unique assortment of women. They whispered nervously to each other before the service started, obviously feeling a little out of place and probably wondering if they should have come in the first place. Not your typical church attendees, these women would likely be going from the church to other, darker, environments;

but they had come on this day to celebrate the baptism of one of their compatriots, Rebecca. She, too, had a sordid past but today was a new beginning.

My (Darren) friend Catherine, on the other hand, had a past no one would be ashamed of. She grew up on a steady diet of Bible study and small-group experiences, going to church every week. She was actively involved in the children's ministry and found great community in the student ministries. By the time she reached her twenties, however, she felt disillusioned. After two decades of throwing herself into the Christian subculture and trying to grow spiritually, her faith seemed stagnant—she sensed there was something more to following Jesus.

In addition to this, the stories and accounts in the Bible read like science fiction to her in that she didn't see much evidence of their impact in her world. She knew she wasn't the only one who felt like this, but no one else seemed to care. Catherine was bored, uninspired, and disappointed with her faith experience. She was in a rut. So she started to search for something else.

Catherine trained to become a professional makeup artist and began working in the modeling and entertainment industry in Chicago. This lifestyle was hip, fast paced, and fascinating. She often worked with celebrities and influential icons in the fashion industry. Still, something was missing.

One day an older lady from church called and invited her to join a team headed to Costa Rica to serve women who were trying to break out of prostitution. They would train the Costa Rican women with alternative life and career skills so they would have new options for employment. The woman explained that Catherine could teach them how to apply makeup in an attractive and subtle manner. Before she knew it, Catherine heard herself agreeing to the trip.

## THE SCULPTOR'S SHOP

During those three months in Costa Rica, Catherine encountered something she had never experienced. Loving, serving, and believing in these women was the most alive she had ever felt. It quickened her. She began to reengage her faith and opened her heart to a whole new way of experiencing God, and when it came time to go home, she knew she could not simply return to the spiritual rut she was living in before the trip. Something in her had awakened. How, she wondered, could she continue this work stateside?

When Catherine returned to Chicago, she did some research and began a most unusual way of serving women. At a strip club in the city, she worked backstage applying the women's makeup before they went out and performed.

As she selflessly loved these women, she started to build relationships with them. One day she decided to offer sermons on CDs from our church. No pressure, she would just bring a box of CDs and set it backstage for anyone to borrow and then return for others to use.

Several months went by, and one evening a stripper named Rebecca began to show an interest in the CD box. She borrowed a couple of CDs and liked them. A week later she asked if she could borrow the whole box. "Sure!" Catherine said. Rebecca listened to the entire box in a matter of days, and when she returned the box, Catherine asked if she wanted to attend church with her.

"Would I be allowed in?" asked Rebecca.

"Of course you would. We would love to have you."

When Rebecca came with Catherine to our church, I met with them in the lobby and we sat together at a table.

"So, you're a pastor?" Rebecca asked.

"Yeah, I am."

She looked me right in the eye and asked, “Do you know what I do?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Catherine is trying to tell me that God loves people like me. People who . . . um, do what I do.”

Tears welled up in her eyes, spilled over her long eyelashes, and started running down her cheeks. It was hard to fight back the tears myself.

“Yes, Rebecca, God loves you deeply.”

“How can this be?” she asked, and then started to tell me some of the horrible things people often say to her and shout at her while she works. “I don’t understand how God can love me. I don’t even love myself.”

“Rebecca, Jesus came to take away our sin and shame and replace it with grace and mercy. That is the good news—that is God’s message.”

That day Rebecca accepted God’s forgiveness and opened her life to his irrational love. A few weeks later I baptized her at our church. I will never forget the expression on her face. She glowed with joy and childlike delight.

The first few rows of the auditorium were filled with strippers and other people from the club. They were cheering and shouting to support Rebecca’s moment. Several of them were weeping, some were laughing and crying. I couldn’t help but wonder what they were thinking as they watched our church embrace and love this woman, a stripper. I remember thinking this had to be a taste of the kingdom of God.

Rebecca stopped stripping. Catherine ended up training her in the makeup profession, and together they continued to serve the other women. They even started to play Christian worship

music backstage as the women were getting ready. In a place that was filled with depravity, exploitation, and pain, the rumors of the God of love started to circulate.

When I asked Catherine how she would describe this experience. She replied, "It was like coming to life!"

## COMING TO LIFE

Don't we all want what Catherine experienced? Something deep in the human heart breaks at the thought of a life of mediocrity. Our hearts cry out for life—new life. In his classic work *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis used a striking metaphor to describe the Christian's experience of coming to life. He said: "And that is precisely what Christianity is about. The world is a great sculptor's shop. We are the statues and there is a rumor going round the shop that some of us are some day going to come to life."<sup>1</sup>

How would you describe your experience of faith? Perhaps to you the life described in the Scriptures feels more like a series of rumors than real life. Maybe you're stuck in a rut, like Catherine. Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly."<sup>2</sup> Does that describe your experience? If not, you're not alone.

In fact, many churches today are filled with people who might describe their faith as being as cold as a statue—lifeless. Although Christianity is growing in places like South America, China, and India, this is not the case in the United States. In America, Christianity's growth and influence seem to be waning, as "non-religious" has become the fastest-growing religious category.<sup>3</sup>

You can almost feel the change happening. It's as if the

Western church is on a “fade to black” trajectory. Society seems to be drifting further and further into secular humanism and we, as Christians, feel powerless to do anything about it. Ironically, the culture grows increasingly more “spiritual” while the church grows increasingly more practical. No wonder most Americans say they’re not interested in Christianity.

Not only do we seem to be missing a connection with the greater culture, we can’t seem to find common ground within our own ranks. Church leaders love to tangle about their own subcultural debates: liberal versus conservative, attractional versus incarnational, the city versus the suburbs, evangelism versus social justice, secularism, sexuality, consumerism, globalization, hell, heaven, and universalism—just to name a few. It seems as if Christians talk a lot about *what* we are doing or *how* we are doing it, but don’t discuss *why* any of it even matters.

Sometimes it feels like that scene in *Titanic*, when the string quartet continues to play their instruments as the ship sinks. They make every effort to avoid sliding off their chairs, while pretending not to notice the ship is going down.

It seems like the future of the Western church is hanging in the balance.

## A RISING HOPE

The prophet Habakkuk lived in a time when the future of God’s people was also hanging in the balance. There was prevalent sin and judgment within God’s people, a growing ungodly world power and uncertainty with God’s rule. The prophet captured the *why* of his generation when he prayed:

THE SCULPTOR'S SHOP

*LORD, I have heard of your fame;  
I stand in awe of your deeds, LORD.  
Renew them in our day,  
in our time make them known;  
in wrath remember mercy.<sup>4</sup>*

Habakkuk passionately verbalized the anguish of his time. He had heard rumors of God's fame, caught rumblings of God's deeds, but would not stop until he experienced the *reality* of the transcendent power of God in his life. Habakkuk started to cry out for something he had never seen. The cry of his heart was to see an awakening of the fame and deeds of God—in his day, in his time, in his generation.

When we were teenagers we experienced an awakening. We both grew up in a Christian tradition that was more defined by what you didn't do than by what you did. Christians prided themselves on abstaining from drinking, smoking, swearing, and dancing. This defined the Christian subculture.

Growing up in South Australia, Jon and I met in our late teens when we both started attending the same church youth group. Jon had recently become a Christian and I was discovering that God was not a series of religious rules and positive lifestyle principles. In fact, we were both captivated by an idea that was brand-new to us. God's strategy for redemption on the earth was to be carried out by the church.

The very same sleepy, uninspiring institution that we painstakingly endured growing up was actually the community that was anointed and called by God. It was astounding that right under our noses were the most compelling vision, mission, and cause that we had ever heard. Captured by this new reality, Jon and I started to pray together. We would often get up early and pray in our church

parking lot, in the city, or on a hill overlooking the city, asking God to allow us to see the church become all that he had called her to be.

Independently, within six months of each other, Jon and I both moved to the United States to study and work. We have been on staff at several different churches. Today Jon is the senior pastor of Church of the City in New York City—a thriving, growing church in the heart of Manhattan. I am the senior pastor of Church of the City, a multi-site church based in Nashville, Tennessee. We moved to the United States because we believed the church in the Western world would be worked out in America.

Some would say we have ended up in diametrically opposed environments—a church planter in an urban context and a megachurch teaching pastor in the suburbs. What do these guys have in common? Our response: Decades of friendship, a mutual love for the church, and a desire to see the church reach her God-given potential. We are convinced we are living in a pivotal time in history. We want to see God do something truly historic in our day, in our time, in our generation.

We wrote this book because the thought of our generation going to the grave without seeing the fame and deeds of God filling the pages of our own stories and the story of the world is untenable. We believe God is writing an epic, global, redemptive story that every single one of us has been invited into.

We want to share our own experiences in life and ministry where we see people breaking free of spiritual ruts and coming to life, just like Catherine. We hope that as you read you will gain a clearer understanding of the cultural and spiritual obstacles the Western church faces and, more important, how we can overcome them. Every day in our ministries we see vivid signs of God's kingdom coming to earth. We pray God will ignite your hearts with the

## THE SCULPTOR'S SHOP

desire to see it in your life, in your church, and in your community.

May we echo the prayer of Habakkuk and see the church rise up in our day and in our time. We are convinced that God has something fresh that he wants to do, and we know that God rewards those who earnestly seek him. We want to experience the kind of faith we've only read about and heard about.

These are the stories of statues coming to life. The rumors are true.