

FOREWORD BY JACKIE HILL PERRY

PRESTON PERRY

HOW TO TELL THE TRUTH

THE STORY OF HOW GOD SAVED ME TO WIN
HEARTS—NOT JUST ARGUMENTS



Preston Perry is a gift to the church. When we consider the profoundly important work of sharing our faith, we are almost always alluding to one of the most uncomfortable, fear-inducing, and consequently neglected areas of our Christian lives. We need—dare I say, we *depend*—on works like *How to Tell the Truth* to strengthen us where we are most vulnerable. In Preston’s story I find my own, and in his perspective my courage increases. Through poetry and passion, clarity and conviction, truth and love—this book is a witness igniter. I am thrilled to see how our mission to evangelize will be set ablaze as a result of this book! Thank you, Preston.

KEVIN “KB” BURGESS

Artist, bestselling author, podcaster

Lies seem to spread faster than the truth. “Fake news” and artificial facts have widened the already broad way. In these pages, Preston Perry has served his generation well by teaching us how to tell the truth, truthfully. Almost biographically, Preston fuels our courage, revisits the essentials, and lights a path back to the narrow road.

DR. CHARLIE DATES

Senior Pastor of Salem Baptist Church of Chicago,

Progressive Baptist Church

This book is fantastic. I found myself saying, “Yes, *yes*, YES!” Preston shares his compelling story of becoming a Christian and then provides a road map—through his

successes and failures—for how to lovingly and naturally share your faith with others.

SEAN McDOWELL, PhD

Professor of Christian Apologetics at Biola University and
author of *A Rebel's Manifesto*

Preston Perry is a bold voice for the gospel. And bold is how we Christians *ought* to speak (Ephesians 6:20). If you're like me, you want to be courageous. But we also want to be gentle, respectful, kind. Preston understands that too. His great new book, *How to Tell the Truth*, can help us grow in sharing the message of Jesus with the beauty of Jesus.

RAY ORTLUND

President of Renewal Ministries, Nashville

Evangelism is a lost art. I don't hear much about evangelism anymore—not from churches, parachurch organizations, and Christians. We need a revival in just sharing our faith. Moreover, we need to be encouraged and taught by people who actually are contagious evangelists. Preston is passionate about evangelism, and his commitment to it is contagious. This work is an accessible tool to aid in all of us . . . taking the communication of the gospel from being left to experts to all believers.

DR. ERIC MASON

Founder and lead pastor of Epiphany Fellowship Church,
Philadelphia, PA

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THE TRUTH

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How to Tell the Truth: The Story of How God Saved Me to Win Hearts—Not Just Arguments

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FOREWORD

HIDE-AND-SEEK IS A GAME CHRISTIANS OUGHT NOT TO PLAY. Not the version of it taught to us as children—running into shadows, around corners, and behind couches with the steady approach of another child ready to say, “Got you!” The sort of play I have in mind is the one that begins when there’s a knock at the door. You know something about the religion of the person who knocked and the reason they found your home without ever having to twist the knob. Or another version happens when a friend, a coworker, or a person of another faith decides to defile your own, making claims that deny the truth as you know it. These friends or family have a confidence that might persuade you to think their views are not all sinking sand. When intimidated by a Jehovah’s Witness’s knock or religious conversations instigated by the scoffers we know by name, we become children without



faith. Finding a shadow, a corner, or a place to comfort our cowardice, we play an invisible game by hiding ourselves and ultimately the truth we're supposed to tell.

Fear wears many faces. Some of us are afraid to engage the world with the truth of God's gospel because we're afraid of confrontation. There are others who are afraid of what could become of their reputation, peace, and paycheck. Then there are the sincere types who want to speak but don't know what to say, maybe because all they know of the Bible is how it explains that Christ died for the world, and to them, that knowledge doesn't seem good enough. Whatever the cause, fear has to die for dead people to learn how to live.

This may come across as intense, since fear is a constant reality for most of us. So perhaps we need to be reminded of the fear beneath the fear, which is that most of us don't believe God is really with us. That he's sent people into the world to teach others all that he commanded and then left them to fend for themselves. But recall the testimony of the entire Bible. When has God ever sent his people to do anything of eternal value that he did not do *with* them? Whether it's opening the door to "those people," inviting to dinner "that friend," or responding to the articulate lie from "that group," you're not alone in this.

In hide-and-seek, some hide and one seeks. The seeking one's primary goal is to find the hiding ones. It's a version of hunting by which children find joy in "catching" their friends. Some Christians engage the world around them in the same way. Treating the hiding ones—the sinning folk, the unbelieving, and their neighbors of other faiths—as prey instead of

people. We've seen this play out in our families, churches, and online, where Christians (or so-called) accurately communicate truth but in such a way that undermines the dignity of those they communicate with.

The love God requires of his saints is not just in the truth telling but in the truth embodying. Which is to say that truth is not just a system of belief that accords with reality as God sees it; truth is a person. To put it simply, if Christ is truth, to be a true truth teller, we need to reflect him as we tell it so that the hiding ones don't just hear the gospel of Christ but see and experience it in the witness of his ambassadors. Embodying truth, love, and compassion cultivates in us a particular wisdom that is often lacking in evangelistic and apologetic resources. It's commonplace for instruction to revolve around the mind of the evangelist and what doctrine they must know for their efforts to be effective. But the success of the evangelist is not solely in the knowing but also in the *being*. God intends for people to love him with all of their heart, mind, and soul, and thus the goal is to engage the entire person in our witness. Not focusing on the mind and missing the heart, or engaging the heart and neglecting the mind. Engaging people is a comprehensive project.

This work in your hands is written by a man who seeks to teach you as best he can how to tell the truth in love. I've seen him do it more times than I can count. There have been countless times when the knock on the door came, the Jehovah's Witness standing behind it then welcomed into our home for a conversation. I've seen him be curious. Prayerful. Discouraged, but then instructed by it. Steadfast in making sure the truth was

made plain in his speech and discernible in his body. I've seen him sit in the Scriptures, turning them over in his mind until the living Word became alive in him so that his preaching was an overflow of intimacy as opposed to arrogance. When the woman who worshiped other gods came his way, he discerned that to address her idolatry, he first needed to acknowledge the pain that brought her there. He decided against the usual way, which assumes that all people need is truth and not also a hug. I've also seen him challenge, call out, and confront lies with a boldness that transcended him. I've seen him enter rooms and say things that would've gotten him stoned in another era. And knowing this, he said them anyway.

I say all of this to say, I have seen him time and time again be like Jesus. And that's the whole point of everything, including this work. That you wouldn't hide or even seek but that you would simply *be* like your Lord, full of grace and truth.

Jackie Hill Perry
Bible Teacher,
Author of Holier Than Thou

INTRODUCTION

“HEY. DO YOU BELIEVE IN GOD?”

I’ve started many conversations with these exact words. I love how a question so simple can take a conversation anywhere. More than that, I love what God can do with a conversation when a heart is committed to sharing his truth with the world around it.

Talking to people about God feeds me in a unique way. It is both a pouring out and a filling up. It requires me to give up some of myself, but at the same time, I don’t feel like myself when I *don’t* share my faith. I guess what I’m trying to say is, I’ve accepted that I’m an evangelist at the core. There is a deep burning inside me to share the gospel with those who do not know it.

What is the cause of this burning? Imagine walking around every day of your life, and all you see is people dying of thirst, but you know where they can get free water. In fact, the person who has



free water has given *you* access to the water. This is the hard part, though: the people around you don't know that they're dying. They don't even know that they're *thirsty*. Not only do they need you to offer them water, but many of them also need you to prove to them that water is what they need to live. Do you *not* offer the water because you feel like people will reject you? Or do you find ways to show them that they are thirsty and that someone wants to give them a drink?

The latter has called me by name during my time as a Christian. The gospel message is the water the dying world needs. Jesus is the one who has given us access to life, because he has given us access to himself. He is the living well of water that never runs dry. Jesus is the one who wants to quench our thirst forever. If we have the gospel in our possession, why don't we share it with those who need it?

I believe that, as Christians, we are *all* called to share our faith. The reason is that Jesus commanded it:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

MATTHEW 28:18-20

We are *all* called to share our faith, but that looks different for every person. For me, it doesn't matter where—the

barbershop, the airport, the grocery store, in the back seat of an Uber ride. There is never really a bad place to talk to someone about the God who created them. You might be different. You might not have a special calling as an evangelist. Sharing the gospel with strangers while in public might not be your thing. And that's okay. God has given each of us different gifts. The key thing is to recognize that God can (and wants to) use you and to be ready when opportunities come.

Here's the thing. While it's true that God has gifted me with a particular type of personality that makes it easier for me to talk to strangers than for some, sharing my faith didn't always come naturally. Many of the things I do are learned skills. I had to work at them. I've also learned quite a bit from the mistakes I've made. And trust me, I've made my share of mistakes while trying to share Jesus with others.

Maybe fear of making mistakes has prevented you from sharing truth with others. In this book we will start a war with those fears. The god of this world wants you to submit to those fears. The devil does not want you to know the evangelist inside you. The devil doesn't want you to know that facing your fears—of looking like you're not knowledgeable, of saying the wrong thing, or of offending someone or being rejected—will help mold you into a better witness for Jesus, if only you would give that fear to God and just go for it.

Maybe you fear that you'll have to defend your faith against those who would attack it. I've seen the word *apologetics* (the term for defending religious doctrine) scare God's saints at times. I think some feel like they have to be a fountain of knowledge or a

brilliant scholar to engage in apologetic discourse. But I reject that ideology. Our apologetics and evangelism will always hold hands. As I take you through my own story, I'll explain why I believe we tend to overcomplicate both evangelism and apologetics.

I will also acknowledge that a lot of us have stayed away from apologetics and evangelism because we haven't liked the way we've seen it done. Some Christians hear the word *defend* and lose sight of the fact that the purpose of the defense is to be witnesses and not opponents. YouTube videos with titles like "Christian vs. Muslim" sound more like boxing matches than Christians trying to win hearts. We cannot "make disciples of all nations" if we posture ourselves like enemies.

In fact, that's why I started my YouTube channel where I've shared tips on how to engage people of other faiths with the truth of Jesus and shown some of my own conversations about God with people I've met on the street. I wanted to encourage and equip believers in Jesus to share their faith with boldness, truth, and love.

I've traveled all over the world as a spoken word poet. Seeing the deep, global need for Jesus has made me more invested in the lives of people and has given me a deeper desire to teach and share God's Word. I was fascinated to find that in my time in South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, London, Sweden, and a host of other places, people around the world have the same questions we have in the United States. Questions like, how do I share the gospel with unbelievers? How do I give truth to my father who is a Jehovah's Witness? What do I say to my brother who is a Hebrew Israelite?

INTRODUCTION

This book is my humble attempt to answer questions like these and share with you how to tell the truth of the gospel—in your context, with the gifts that God has given you, to the people that God has placed in your life. I'll share with you stories from my own life—of my successes and failures—to help you understand how God can use you to reach people with his love and truth. My aim is twofold: to help Christians who don't see themselves as evangelists share their faith where God has placed them, and to correct the combative way we often see evangelism and apologetics done. Sharing our faith is not about winning arguments; it's about winning hearts. And the way we do that is by engaging the world around us with truth, dignity, and respect.

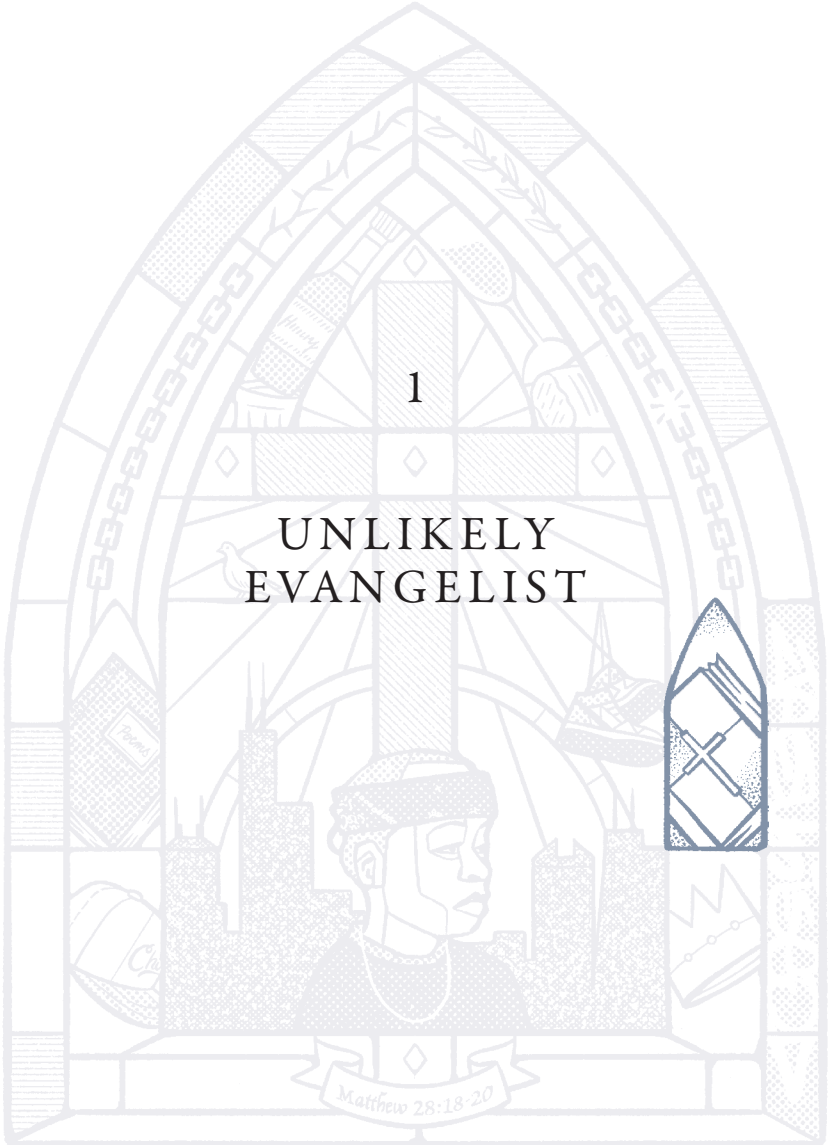
My hope for you as you read this book is to not merely learn a bunch of information but also to learn practical tools for how to apply the information in a way that honors God by honoring people.

Jesus told his disciples that they should be wise as serpents and harmless as doves (see Matthew 10:16). Both doves and serpents are quiet creatures. But notice how often, when we gain knowledge, that can make us very loud.

I believe Jesus is pointing us to a wisdom that creates a quiet calmness with those who do not know him. Jesus told his disciples to be like serpents—cunning and stealthlike—not to do evil like a serpent (we all know about the Garden of Eden) but to do good under people's noses without them even realizing what's happening. He also told his disciples to be harmless as doves, to leave each person better off.

HOW TO TELL THE TRUTH

My heart in this book is to help you see that, when we tell the truth of the gospel, what we say is not the only thing that matters—how we tell it holds just as much weight. So keep reading, and learn from my story a better way to tell the truth.





ONE OF THE THINGS I've tried to make clear through my YouTube channel and my speaking about evangelism is that you don't need a theology degree or to know the whole Bible by chapter and verse to tell the truth of the gospel to other people. God uses normal and even unlikely people. Like you. Like me.

While my personality is outgoing, it still surprises me that God would choose to use me to make his glory known. While this book is not a memoir of my life, I want to start the conversation with where I come from—or, should I say, with how God has brought me here. Because if God can use me to win hearts (and not just arguments), he can certainly use you.



My grandmother's home on the far south side of Chicago was a summer haven for me and all my cousins. Chicago was far from a paradise by all accounts, but those summers spent with my cousins at my grandmother's were a delight to me. I think it was the joy of being together.

Picture us, growing up around men standing statue on street corners—neighborhood men shooting dice, hoping to gain a dime for their families. Hustling, struggling, fighting, gambling, but trying. Winning and losing daily.

Our Chicago summers were a tightrope between life and death. My cousins and I dodged bullets while playing in front of loose-jaw fire hydrants sprawling water into our neighborhood. We let those wild mouths loose on the corner while dancing near death like it was normal. It was *our* normal. And so we

grew up fearing little, like most people around us.

GOD USES NORMAL AND
EVEN UNLIKELY PEOPLE.
LIKE YOU. LIKE ME.

The streets of our neighborhood were crowded with different shades of brown boy

bodies, hearts all the same shade of courage. When dusk finally grew legs and chased us home, we would head inside to bathe in our grandmother's smile. Her home was a shower and sanctuary of its own. We watched her become a choir, preparing dinner for her thirteen grandsons. We didn't know how privileged we were to sit inside her songs before bed, to grow up planted in her rich soil. We didn't know then how her prayers preserved us

for the next day, when evil was walking the streets of our hood, hot with violence, seeking to decompose our melanin.

My cousins and I would sleep on the floor in the basement to be close to one another. I guess that was the only way we knew how to say, “I love you.” To say, “These summers we spend together are special.” We said those I-love-yous every night by cracking jokes on each other. Nightly conversation and sharing secrets about girls tucked us under the covers. We took turns falling asleep beneath the dim glare of moonlight peeking through the small window above us. I spent many nights before bed soaking in how powerful I felt with my cousins. There I was, preteen Preston, smirking at the threat of death, daring it to come near us tomorrow.

The morning couldn't wake us from our slumber soon enough. In those days, we treated sleep like an inconvenient necessity. Eager for the day, we'd throw our bodies out the front door and lose ourselves in the city too early and unruly for my grandmother's liking. The train ride through each neighborhood was more than a simple daily commute. Watching the window on that floating journey through each neighborhood was a reminder of our placement within the city.

Chicago's south side was intriguingly tragic, a truth that was obvious to us even then. No two days in our neck of the woods were just alike, yet each day was related. Every day saw shoot-outs, fistfights, and police harassment. Living in the city in those days was like being trapped in a broken jukebox, one that refused to play the same song twice and skipped the song you selected, yet everything it played sounded the same.

But the neighborhoods we lived in were much more than bullets and drug transactions. They were filled to the brim with laughter and rich, close-knit communities. The aroma of BBQ often stained the sky around us, keeping us running to somebody's cookout. Radios blasted the soundtrack of my childhood. Ours was a community built generously by decent people. Most of the men in my neighborhood never saw the inside of a college but balanced three or four trades to keep hot food on the table. The dirt caked on their hands was always the complexion of honest work. When we needed something fixed around the house, we didn't look in the phonebook; we called Johnny from down the street. He could repair your hot-water heater and change your car transmission and still make it home in time to tuck his children in bed.

As soon as the summer sun began to head in for the night, elders would come outside to sit on their front porch, drink sweet tea, and fill in crossword puzzles. I always felt like they were watching over us—not the same as angels, but placed there by God to keep us safe all the same.

Back then, I didn't know the sovereign plans of the Lord. I didn't see his hand or face in my mundane. I did, however, see him through my grandmother. Her spirit was still through all the chaos in the city. She would talk to us about God like he was a close childhood friend. She saw the goodness of the Lord everywhere she looked, her joy daily made full and then spilling over into praise shouts and singing throughout the day.

Even though my cousins and I weren't living like we should, she never preached at us or lectured. She just lived her faith out

loud and prayed that God would chase us down and catch us before a bullet did.

My grandmother's faith wasn't the only influence on me as I sought to make sense of things. I was such an inquisitive kid: the world around me was a puzzle I got a little closer to solving every day. There was always a question for someone lingering on my tongue. And everybody I saw had a different answer. On Saturdays, 117th Street was a melting pot of people pushing their agendas. The drug dealers tucked into alleyways of city blocks with one eye on a fistful of cash and the other on the undercover police cars threatening to take their freedom. Men of the Nation of Islam and the local Hebrew Israelites each occupied a corner on the main street. Their passion was deafening.

The Hebrew Israelites would yell in every Black ear passing by their side of the sidewalk, "We are a chosen people!" "The so-called Black man is the lost child of Israel!" "The white man has lied to us for years!" They would read from the Bible with big, loud voices so everyone nearby could hear them. After one man would read, another would break down his interpretation of God's Scripture. Their explanations always pointed back to the belief that Black people were the chosen tribe, rather than the God I heard my grandmother sing about. As a result we grew used to their aggression. Very few people would engage them, but whenever someone did, it often escalated to a hostile conversation. The Hebrew Israelites had visceral reactions to being challenged. They would regularly frustrate their challengers with crude jokes and persistent interruptions. Most people passing by would

ignore them as a result, but I would always listen to their arguments. I listened for years.

The men of the Nation of Islam were visibly dedicated. Donning heavy suits in the middle of June, they would offer a copy of *The Final Call* newspaper to every passing car with an open window. Their approach was strikingly different from the Hebrew Israelites. They were quiet, graceful, disciplined men. Never forcing their religion down our throats, they politely offered us their literature along with some bean pies for a small fee. For that reason, they were one of the most stable and respected organizations in the neighborhood. They recruited a lot of young men who were searching for hope and spiritual guidance in a community too filled with chaos.

Around midday, the Jehovah's Witnesses would file out of the local Kingdom Hall and rush the front doors of every home in the area with fixed smiles and pamphlets. They were so consistent that there wasn't a house on any street that didn't know when to expect them. Whether people planned to dodge them or welcome them as guests, they knew the Witnesses were coming, and coming with their message.

I realize now that everyone always has a message. Every person in every hood around the world has some kind of belief system they're communicating.

In my summers in Chicago, the belief messengers ranged from the hustlers teaching me to get money; my grandmother telling us to stay out of the streets; some kid trying to come up in his gang with a boastful threat on his lips; and a religious man with a pamphlet and smile.

To all of those people it was no secret the hood was fertile ground. I know now God was using that ground to shape me for the harvest.



As I grew into my teenage years, God was chasing me, although I couldn't see it at the time.

I didn't see it because I was too busy chasing a girl I liked. Her parents had a house church in the apartment complex I lived in. Every Sunday morning, two dozen of the neighborhood's faithful pressed in shoulder to shoulder on well-worn sofas encircling a cluster of tightly packed folding chairs in her family's living room to listen to her father preach, heads nodding and enthusiastic choruses of "amen" yelling back at his fiery sermon.

I was by no means a regular churchgoer, but on this particular morning, the sermon was calling me by name.

I arrived late so I sat in the back, but the pastor's words leaped from the pulpit like a wild beast and began to feast on my conscience. He warned that if we didn't "turn from our sin, repent, and put our hope in Jesus," we would feel God's righteous wrath.

"Every one of us will stand and face God someday," he proclaimed. "Some of us will meet him as a friend, others as a judge. And if you think God being love means that he won't destroy everything he hates, you don't understand what love is!"

That shook me. I had heard preachers talk about God before, but never like this. It was the first time I had ever understood

that I was a sinner and that God had a beef with the way I was living my life.

Even so, I did not turn to Jesus that morning. But from that day forward, I was keenly aware that God was watching me.

Watching me break into people's homes to steal things that did not belong to me.

Watching me smoke weed and sell drugs.

Watching me fight and fornicate and get kicked out of school again and again and again.

Watching me do all kinds of crazy, immoral, sinful things. I knew God was mad at me. But I also knew that saying yes to him meant saying no to all the sin I loved that never loved me back.



It was a warm spring day. The hum of morning was quiet, like all the mornings that came before it. While still in bed, I heard gunshots echo in the distance.

Who's shooting this early in the morning?

I heard gunshots a second time, and this time they sounded closer. I stuck my head out my window. There was my friend Chris, running from between two apartment buildings down the street from my house. Running like death was behind him. His eyes were wide, and terror clung to his cheeks. Five seconds later, a man I didn't know appeared, running from the same direction, hugging a pistol with his fist and shooting at my friend like he was on a mission. Those shots forced him to the ground.

I raced downstairs, calling to my mom as I passed the

kitchen, “Somebody just shot Chris!” My frantic cry was only outdone by my friend Slim, who was closer to Chris. When I reached Chris, Slim and our other friend Hollywood were already lifting him off the ground to carry him closer to Slim’s house.

The three of us hovered over him, helpless as he cried, “Don’t let me die! Don’t let me die!” over and over as blood was a waterfall near his collarbone. Hollywood took off his shirt and pressed it firmly against the bleeding.

“What do we do, man? What do we do?!” Slim yelled and looked in my eyes for an answer. He saw none.

“We need to get him to the hospital,” Hollywood said, looping his arms under Chris’s and lifting him into a sitting position.

“Boys!” My mom raced into the street in her robe and slippers, a big bath towel in hand. “Don’t move him! You don’t know where the bullet is!” There are some things a mother shouldn’t know—like how a hollow-tip bullet is designed to decorate someone’s insides. A regular bullet goes straight through the body, but a hollow-tip bullet is creative. Once it enters the body, it does to the flesh what it wants. Once it’s in, you never know the damage it has done just by looking at the outside. “Just lay him back down,” she directed us. “I called 911. They’re on their way.” Then, like it was second nature, she knelt down and tended to the bleeding.

“Don’t let me die. Don’t let me die.” Chris’s eyes couldn’t stay still. They looked like frantic birds flying in the dusk with no vision. His voice grew softer, like the last line in a sad song.

“Shhhh . . . don’t talk, baby.” My mom rubbed her soft

words into his wounds to soothe his mind. “It’s gonna be okay. Help is coming.”

I watched helplessly. I tried to hold the back of his head still, but my hand had a mind of its own. It kept shaking without my permission. Blood seemed to be coming from everywhere, soaking into the pavement, my shorts, my T-shirt—a red river of life leaving my friend right in front of me.

“Preston.” Slim pulled me from the red sea back to the shores. “Man, you gotta pray for him.”

I froze. In my mind, I was about as far from God as you could get. Mostly I just regurgitated stuff I had heard my grandmother say, but to guys like Slim and Hollywood, I sounded spiritually mature.

“Yeah, bruh . . . pray for him, Preston,” Hollywood pleaded. I can still remember how desperate they sounded. At that moment it felt like my hypocrisy was on full display. I couldn’t pretend I knew the Lord in a time like this.

I looked down at Chris, new tears escaping his eyes and running across his old tear marks the color of white ghosts, my mom pressing her now blood-soaked towel against his collarbone where the bleeding seemed to be heaviest. *Hollow-tip bullets*. One of them had come in through his upper back and violently bloomed open like a flower in early May, tearing up muscle, soft tissue, and arteries as it moved through the body, looking for a way out.

“Please, don’t let me die.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but my conscience stopped the words in my throat. Who was I to ask God for help? I was

an enemy of God, just like Chris. Chris's blood that baptized my clothes that morning could just as easily have been my own. Why would God listen to me?

"Hold on, bro." I reached into my back pocket and grabbed my phone. *Please be home.* "Mrs. Collier?" Mrs. Collier was my ex's mom and a pastor. I knew God would listen to her. "Yeah, it's Preston. I'm here with Chris. He's been shot, and it's really bad. Can you please pray for him?"

She asked me to put the phone to his ear. I leaned in and listened as she led him through the Sinner's Prayer. "Chris," she said, "you need to ask the Lord to forgive you for your sins."

I closed my eyes tight. *Listen to her, bro.* A siren called out for Chris in the distance.

"Do you hear me?" she asked. "You need to ask God to forgive you for your sins." She might as well have been talking to me.

"I don't want to die. I don't want to die." By this time, Chris's voice was a whisper.

"Preston, I need you to hold this right here," my mom said, nodding at the crimson-stained towel pressed against Chris's collarbone. "He's bleeding out. I need to get another towel."

Mrs. Collier just kept repeating, "Ask the Lord to forgive you."

"I don't want to die."

"Preston!" my mom all but shouted. "Do you hear me?" All I could hear were Mrs. Collier's words echoing in my head.

"Ask the Lord to forgive you."

"Preston!"

"Ask the Lord to forgive you."

I don't want to die.

I don't want to die.

We don't always get what we want.

Chris's life ended that day on the way to the hospital.

Mine was just getting started.



Chris's death was a wake-up call. I knew I had to change the way I was living. That was hard to do when all my friends were criminals. Later that week, I called my aunt Denise. She was a pastor at a church out in Olympia Fields, a suburb roughly twenty miles south of Chicago, and she agreed to let me stay with her for a while. There was just one catch.

"If you're going to live in this house," she said, "you need to go to church." Man, looking back, if I didn't know any better, I'd have sworn that God was setting me up.

My aunt was a righteous woman. She stood five-foot-nothing, but her smile was much bigger than this world. She reminded me of my grandmother. The songs she sang in the morning carried my heart the same way my grandmother's did. She lived out her faith so loud. She was a leader and great Bible teacher in public, but I saw what happened in private, and that was good for a young soul like mine, a soul that was searching for God in a world filled with lies and many voices trying to earn my worship.

My aunt Denise opened the doors of her home to me at a time when there weren't a lot of doors for me to walk through. There weren't many options for a young man like myself, with no vision of what he wanted to be or do in life. But Aunt Denise

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invited me into a stable life and a place I could call home. She helped me enroll in a vocational college. She didn't know what I was called to do in life either, but she knew I needed structure. Her being in my life gave me just that.

But more than that, she played an instrumental role in my salvation.

For the first couple of weeks that I lived with her, I would wake up in the morning, only to find an oily substance on my forehead. There were mornings I would brush my teeth and my eyes would catch a glimpse of my shining forehead in the mirror. I was so confused. For a while only heaven knew why I looked like someone had rubbed a piece of fried chicken across my face while I was sleeping.

Then one morning it all made sense.

It was around 5:00 a.m. I was usually asleep, but on this morning, my body was only a shallow grave of rest. So when someone touched my head, I woke up in wonder and confusion. My eyes cracked open to find my aunt standing over me with a bottle of oil in her hands, her face fixed in a subtle cry. Feeling awkward at her presence, I closed my eyes just as quickly as I had opened them. I kept quiet and lay as still as an ocean trying not to wake the waves. I waited to see why she was in my room.

She touched my forehead again, this time with oil slick on her fingers. She began praying for me.

“Save his soul, Lord.”

“Watch his coming in and going out.”

“Keep him, Lord.”

“In your wrath, remember mercy, O God.”

“Reveal yourself to him.”

“Make yourself known in his heart.”

These were some of the prayers she uttered in a quiet moan, tears running frantic down her face. Her prayers sounded like she was begging God on my behalf, desperation clinging to her every word in such a precious yet careful way, like a poor man holding brittle gold between his tired fingers. I could feel her love for God and for me traveling through my body, as if her prayer was God’s way of depositing his mercy inside a soul that did not know him yet.

My body was fully awake now. God was preparing me for the awakening of my soul.



A couple mornings later, over breakfast, Aunt Denise announced, “I’ve asked a young man to stop by and talk with you today. I think you’ll really like him. He’s taking classes over at Moody.”

My shoulders slumped. I turned my head away so she wouldn’t see how unexcited I was to meet him. I knew what people from Moody were like, and I didn’t need a starched-shirt, Billy Graham wannabe preaching at me all afternoon.

Two hours later, my aunt and I were sitting on her porch when the dude pulled into the driveway in a Mustang. I was unsettled as I waited for him to get out of his car. Even though his car was tight, I just knew I was about to see a

typical churchgoer, the kind of person that had judged me my whole life. But I was surprised. His baggy jeans looked like they hadn't had a day off in a while, yet he was fashionable all the same. He was wearing Jordan sneakers—but not the Team Jordans the uncool kids wore in high school. These were the hard-to-get kind we waited outside Foot Locker to get on Saturday mornings. He had on a Bulls cap I immediately wanted for myself and a black hoodie. His appearance grabbed my attention. I thought, *This dude don't look like no Christian. He look like a hood cat.* He walked up to me smiling wide, and his smile didn't seem fake. He looked like he was genuinely excited to meet me. He stuck his fist out. "What's up, brother? I'm Gary."

"Sup, man," I said. "I'm Preston." We shook hands. In the Black community, a handshake is the first way to feel if a person has anything in common with you. It can determine if you're going to entertain a conversation or quickly look for a way out. Gary shook my hand like all the people I grew up with did.

And the dude just kept smiling. "Yeah, your aunt told me about you. Man"—he shook his head—"you living with a mighty woman of God. She prayed for me many times, bro."

"I heard you go to Moody, so her prayers must've worked," I joked. We both laughed.

Then he shifted gears. "Hey, you hoop?"

I nodded. "Oh, fo sho, I hoop."

"Cool. I was gonna head over to Washington Park, see if I can get a pickup game going. You wanna come?"

Washington Park? That was a rough neighborhood. *This*

dude's gonna drive a Mustang into that neighborhood, and he's not from there? This dude trying to get us robbed?

"You sure?" I asked. "You know it's wild over there, right?"

His smile curled confidently. "We good, bro. I know a lot of guys over there. I hoop over there all the time."

On the way into the city, Gary told me a little about himself. Turns out he was a former gang member and dealer who grew up in one of the worst neighborhoods in Chicago. His dad was a pastor, but Gary didn't go to church very often. In fact, his father had made him choose, either the streets or the church. Gary chose the street life, but he gave it up when God breathed new life inside him.

Man, the dude was practically me! There was just one difference.

"Where you at with the Lord?" he asked as we turned off the expressway.

"Me and the Lord?" I thought about it for a second. "Yeah . . . we good." I couldn't tell if he believed me or not, probably because I didn't believe myself. To his credit, Gary didn't push it. He just said, "Cool, cool" and left it at that.

When we got to Washington Park, Gary walked right over to a bunch of guys who were hooping on the basketball court. As we approached them, Gary stretched his smile so wide they wouldn't see us as a threat. "What's up, brothas! My name's Gary. This is Preston. Y'all mind if we play with y'all?" At first they said nothing but stared at us for what felt like an eternity. Finally, they broke the silence. "Yeah, we're playing a game of 21. Y'all can jump in."

Gary clapped his hands together. “Cool, cool.” And then we just started playing.

Gary was good about that, as I came to find out. He could start a conversation with anybody, and he would always build some type of rapport. And then after we’d finished playing, Gary would share his faith. He would be like, “Oh, man, I enjoy playing with y’all brothers. It was a joy.” Then he’d follow up with something like “This might seem weird, but can I pray with y’all? There’s a lot of stuff going on. Young brothers out here dying. Y’all mind if we pray?” And they would always say yes. What else could they say? We would gather, grab hands on the basketball court, and pray. The first time we did that, I was thinking, *This dude is crazy. We’re in Washington Park, and he’s asking these street dudes to pray with him?*

And he *would* pray—a sincere prayer. And after almost every time he would pray, it would lead to a conversation.

He would always share his story about being a member of a Chicago gang and how Jesus saved him. But before he could lose their attention, he’d say, “I’m not trying to preach at y’all. This is just what God did with my life. I met Jesus one day, and I never was the same.”

Everything Gary did was fascinating to me. He was just a normal dude from Chicago. There wasn’t any phoniness to him—no pretense—and that was refreshing.

And as I hung out with Gary, I stopped doing a lot of the stuff I had been doing. I had started to mimic his life. I think because my life mimicked Gary’s, I started to convince myself

that we had matching hearts, that I was on fire for the Lord like he was. But my heart wasn't new. I wasn't a Christian. Yet.



My heart was not yet born again, and the day that became painfully obvious to me will forever sit in the corner of my mind.

It was Thursday afternoon. The sun was shining something crazy, its rays spilling over the shoulders of Chicago, giving life to the battered body of the city. Gary came to pick me up to play basketball in Washington Park. As I had learned, Gary would intentionally go to the most violent neighborhoods to hoop so he could share the gospel with the guys on the court afterwards.

Before we headed to the basketball court, Gary had to go to the bank. We pulled into the drive-thru. The teller was a beautiful cinnamon brown girl, her curled hair a pretty, silky sand color with streaks of black. From my view in the passenger seat, I saw her eyes grab Gary and hold him closely, as if she wanted to dance or to hear the way his heart beat inside his chest. While asking for his ID, her smile was saying, *Talk to me—I know your name, but I want you to know mine.*

Gary appeased her. He awkwardly asked, “How’s your day going?”

“It’s going better, now that I’ve seen you,” she replied.

Gary laughed, put his head down, and smiled into his lap so she wouldn’t see the blushing forest fire she ignited on his face. I sat there quietly, my ears an open gate as she

continued to flirt and engage Gary with small talk. I just knew this exchange would end with him getting her number or him asking her out.

Surprisingly, it didn't.

As soon as the transaction was over, Gary ended the conversation abruptly, told her to have a nice day, and sped off. I took a quick glance at the young lady's face as we drove away, and she looked perplexed. I was confused as well, and secretly shaming Gary in my heart. I thought he was crazy for not taking such a beautiful woman up on her advances when she had so neatly gift wrapped all of her attention for him.

For the next ten minutes Gary drove in silence, his face soaking in deep thought as he stared intently out the window. I assumed he was kicking himself for letting such a beautiful woman get away.

Gary pulled the car over to the side of the road. "P," he said, "I want to apologize to you, man."

My face curled into a question mark. "Why are you apologizing to me?"

"I was not a good example to you back at the bank when I was talking to that girl," Gary replied, his face joyless and empty, like an abandoned church on Sunday.

I was still puzzled. "But she was flirting with you," I said. "What did you do wrong?"

"I know, I know," Gary replied, "but my heart wasn't right, Preston. For a while now that girl has been flirting with me, and that time I entertained it, and what makes it worse is that you were in the car to witness it! I have no desire to pursue her,

and all my thoughts were lustful when we were talking. I'm so convicted, bro. Could you pray with me?"

I was still a little confused, but I said, "Yeah, sure, Gary, let's pray." I was amazed as Gary began talking to the Lord, asking him for his forgiveness. His prayer was so sincere. He spoke to God like he was a good friend that Gary had just let down. As Gary prayed, my mind raced. His prayer faded into the background as the thoughts in my head got louder. At first, I tried to tell myself that he was overreacting. Then I thought, *Well, maybe he's just being dramatic like all the other church folk.* But Gary was unlike any other churchgoer I had ever met. *Nah, that can't be it.* Here he was, a few years older but a young man like myself, that lived out his convictions when no one else was watching to praise him for it.

I had never seen a young man flee lust like every woman not named "Wife" was made of flames. I couldn't deny that this moment was pure and genuine. And just like that, a light came on for me. A hard truth came to my mind as if someone else had placed it there: *This is what it means to truly love God, and I don't love him like Gary loves him.* That day Gary's life showed me that I was a cemetery, dead inside.

I wanted what Gary had. I just had to find out how to get it.



After what happened with Gary, the rest of the week I had been confronted with the weight of my sin. And now, it was too much for my weary soul to carry.

That's the interesting thing about sin. You can live comfortably with it all your life, but once you are made aware of how offensive it is to a holy and righteous God, it becomes a nagging, unwanted guest in the home of your heart.

There was a problem, though. I didn't know what repentance looked like. I couldn't remember the words of the prayer Mrs. Collier said to Chris that day as he lay dying in the street. I didn't even know if I should say that prayer at all. All I knew was I didn't know God, and that weighed heavy on my heart.

I got up and walked back and forth between my bed and the window, searching for the right language to talk to God. Initially, I just wanted to ask for his forgiveness, but the words couldn't find my mouth in the new morning light.

I began to cry like my heart was broken, because it was. For a while now I felt like God was calling me to himself, and at the moment, I was ready to surrender, but I couldn't find the right words to say. What I know now that I didn't know then is that God didn't need my words; he was listening to my heart. In fact, he had been talking to my heart the whole morning. I cried for an hour straight.

By this time, the sun had swallowed dusk whole and overtaken my bedroom, and the flood of tears finally stopped. I walked over to the mirror that hung over my dresser next to my Tupac and DMX posters to look my reflection in the eyes. I wondered if I would see the same shame I felt in my heart. All I saw was a broken man. I didn't know if that was good or bad. My eyes were swollen with grief. The dried tear marks on my face looked like a road map to freedom, but I still didn't know

the way. I just knew I wanted to love God how I saw my grandmother and Aunt Denise and Gary love him.

I cried again. I was frustrated by all the crying, but it was a purging of sorts. I began to think of all the bad things I'd done that deserved death and started uttering words. "I'm sorry, God, forgive me. I'm sorry, God, forgive me." At that moment, a sweet presence wrapped me blanketlike. My heart felt a soothing warmth, similar to how the skin feels when the sun greets the body after a cold swim.

I cried out and said, "Lord, I want to love you like Gary loves you." I can still smell that moment. I can still taste it. It was the greatest moment of my life. In that moment my heart was saying, "Here, God, take it. Here, God, I'll take you instead of battered shame and overwhelming grief." I knelt by my bed and thanked God for the freedom I felt. I thanked him over and over until I grew tired and lay prostrate on my wilted bedroom carpet. A sweet hush fell on my room, like a mother nursing a new life to sleep. A quiet entered my body and set up in my bones. A stillness rested deep in my marrow. I had not yet known this feeling, but I knew that this was peace. God had officially taken my heart out of the concrete jungle and invited me into a garden—a garden where death was absent but life was present and all around me. There my heart was calm, but my body was so tired. I passed out right where my body lay on the floor, and it was the best sleep I've ever had.

When I awoke around noon, my body still felt like it had taken a beating, but my soul felt new. It felt like somebody came and cleaned up all the mess that was inside me, and now my heart

could live comfortable inside my body. The only thing I could think about was the goodness of God—how he had chased me for years until he finally had me. How he wanted me when I didn't want him. I knew now that I loved him.

That morning was historic for me. It was the morning that God saved my soul.

And from that moment on, I started sharing my faith with whoever would listen.



As I look back over my own story, I am again struck not just by how God could rescue me, but by how he could *use* me to reach others.

The apostle Paul felt the same way. Learning about Paul was an encouragement for me because I saw myself in his God-breathed story. I, too, had a brick for a heart that I often stoned Christians with, but like Paul, I met Jesus one day, and now I love him with all that I am. I wasn't always a saint drenched in hymns in the morning. I was once a rebellious black sky running from the Son. Paul was the same. But after Jesus met Paul on the way to Damascus to bring him into the morning, Paul never forgot the darkness of night that God had brought him from. Paul never lost his sense of awe that God could use him. And shouldn't this be the testimony of everybody that God has brought out of darkness and into his marvelous light?

Paul's ability to remember where God brought him from helped him to abandon pride and adopt gratefulness on his

journey with Jesus. He wrote to his young protégé Timothy, “The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost” (1 Timothy 1:15). Even when Paul was traveling the world and telling people about Jesus, he remembered where he came from and what it meant for him—a former enemy of God—to be God’s messenger.

Maybe you’re reading this book and you’re from the hood like me. Maybe you’re from a place where seminary is not the first option for many. Maybe you’re a stay-at-home mom balancing bills and diapers while trying to study God’s Word during naptime. Maybe you’re an HBCU student, and hearing that Christianity is “the white man’s religion” is a new and confusing experience for you. Whoever you are, my prayer is that you would not feel like you are disqualified to share this treasure we call the gospel with the world. If you are no longer in darkness, that means you can see clearly. That’s what qualifies you to be an evangelist.

God isn’t seeking to use special people. He just wants to use us—normal people—to show the world that we were once blind, but now we can see, and they could too if only they would repent and believe. God doesn’t use us *because* of ourselves. God uses us *in spite of* ourselves. Paul writes,

Consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame

the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

I CORINTHIANS 1:26-29

Paul makes it clear to the church in Corinth that God didn't choose them because they were wealthy, influential, talented, or smart. God has his own purposes, and he delights in using our weaknesses to display his glory. As Paul writes in another letter to this church, "We have this treasure [specifically, the gospel message] in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Corinthians 4:7).

When Jesus gave the great commission to his disciples, he didn't tell them, "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations . . . but first, get a degree in biblical exegesis and another in apologetics, and then spend another several years in seminary." Those things are valuable, and thank God he has equipped his church with people who have done that necessary work. But those things don't automatically make us effective in God's Kingdom. Jesus ends by telling them that he will be with us until the end of the age. Jesus tells us to go and make disciples because the *Holy Spirit* will empower us to do it. Jesus, in his last words to his disciples before he was taken into heaven, told them, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit empowers the witness.

The Holy Spirit is the great equalizer when it comes to evangelism. God did not give us his Spirit merely so we can study and pour into people what we know. He gave us his Spirit so he can speak through us. I'm not knocking knowledge by any means. The knowledge we have of God is essential to our faith, and God's Word tells us his people perish for lack of it (see Hosea 4:6). But what if it's possible for us to trust so much in what we know that we become insensitive to what the Holy Spirit wants us to say? Jesus told his disciples that when they were brought before powerful people to answer for their faith, they should "not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (Matthew 10:19-20).

We see the truth of this over and over again in the book of Acts. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit fell heavy on the church in Jerusalem, and they were given the power to preach—and three thousand people were saved. In Acts 4, when Peter and John were brought before the Jewish leaders to answer for healing a man who was crippled, they gave a bold defense of their faith in Jesus. And what astonished the Jewish leaders was that they "perceived that [Peter and John] were uneducated, common men. . . . And they recognized that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13).

You don't have to be Billy Graham or even Gary or me to be bold in sharing your faith. You just need to be with Jesus. While in his company, he'll make us like him if only we ask.

One thing about this last point: context matters when it comes to evangelism. No offense to the Christians that came

before Gary, but their lives weren't as effective with me as Gary's was. And that's because representation matters, especially when it comes to seeing someone live holy. I needed to see that God calls people like me too. People need to see what it's like for God to change a life—they need to see a before and after that they can understand. It's hard to imagine our lives being a certain way if nobody that looks like us lives this way. God used Gary to help me hope for a new soul of my own. If all I saw were people who grew up in church living their lives for Jesus, I might think, *You grew up in church. Of course you're a Christian.* But to see someone who used to sell drugs and be a gang member serve the Lord was monumental for me. Gary's story mirroring my own made his relationship with God feel more tangible, like if God met him one day, maybe he died to meet me too.

And here's the thing: you can be that person for someone else. They don't need a famous person to convert to Christianity or tell them about Jesus to see that living for him is possible. They need to see *you*, in whatever your context is, living your life for Jesus, making belief in him seem possible. Desirable.

REPRESENTATION MATTERS,
I NEEDED TO SEE THAT GOD
CALLS PEOPLE LIKE ME.

Jesus gave the great commission as a command to *all* his disciples, because all of his disciples, through the power of the Holy Spirit, can do it.

Now that you know my story and have seen how God can use you—where you are, within your unique context—let's look at some tools to make you more effective in telling the truth of the gospel to a world that needs to hear.