

# THE OPPOSITE



What if every instinct, every decision you've made up to this point, has led you further from where you really want to be?

What might happen if you did the opposite?

I'M GEN X, AND I'M A TEACHING PASTOR, so if there's a spiritual principle to be gleaned from the classic TV sitcom *Seinfeld*, I'm going to find it. Which is why the more I think about what it's like to follow Jesus, the more I'm reminded of one specific episode.

On the show, most things in life go wrong for lovable loser George Costanza. "My life is the complete opposite of everything I want it to be," he complains. "Every instinct I have, in every aspect of life, be it something to wear, something to eat—it's all been wrong."

So one day he decides to do the opposite of his every instinct.

The waitress at Monk's Café asks him if he wants his normal order of tuna on toast, coleslaw, and a cup of coffee, but

George chooses the opposite. He goes for chicken salad on rye, untoasted, with a side of potato salad and a cup of tea.

When Elaine encourages him to approach a woman in the diner, George reminds her, “Bald men with no jobs and no money who live with their parents don’t approach strange women!” But Jerry challenges him, “If every instinct you have is wrong, then the opposite would have to be right.” So George decides to give it a shot. He approaches the woman, blurts out the truth about his circumstances, and improbably, she becomes his new girlfriend.

As the episode proceeds, George continues to do the opposite of what his natural instincts say. In an interview with the New York Yankees, he shares horrible details about his job experience and insults the team owner to his face. The interviewer muses, “You are the complete opposite of every applicant we’ve seen,” and the owner declares, “Hire this man!”<sup>1</sup>

*Okay, you might be thinking, but Seinfeld is meant to be absurdist. After all, it’s a show about nothing. This isn’t the kind of thing that makes sense in the real world.*

Well, suspend your disbelief for a moment as I suggest something that may seem just as absurd: I’m not sure whether Jesus is a *Seinfeld* fan, but I believe he is calling us to embrace our own George Costanza moment.

What if every instinct, every decision you’ve made up to this point, has led you further from where you really want to be?

What might happen if you did the opposite?

Let's face it: It can feel like most things in the world are going wrong. If you care about the future of your community and our world, it's easy to feel anxious, angry, and maybe even a little bit hopeless right now. Culture wars are raging. You're worried that your values are being trampled. You are fearful that if more people don't stand up and do something, the other side will gain even more ground.

If you've been outspoken about your beliefs, chances are a few broken relationships lie in your wake. You no longer trust some people you once cared about. Even if you haven't shared your opinions, you likely feel the damage of this divided and polarized climate deep in your soul. To combat your angst and exhaustion, you've had to mute or block friends and relatives on social media or ditch the platforms altogether.

Everywhere you turn, threats seem to loom on the horizon. Whether it is the instability of the economy, the swift judgment of cancel culture, or the stories of senseless violence filling your newsfeed, life can feel like a precarious journey through a minefield. You long for a sense of security and are vigilant about not letting your guard down.

Maybe you're feeling unnerved by all the rapid changes in our pluralistic society, the relativity and chaos you're seeing around you. You long for a simplicity that will bring a sense of clarity and calm. Or perhaps you feel frustrated that things aren't changing faster. All you see are the hurts and injustices and too many people content to perpetuate them. Nothing is as it should be, and you want to see things change.

No matter where you stand, you sincerely want to follow

Jesus and make a difference in this world—and yet it seems increasingly difficult to do so.

It's easy to look around and see everything going wrong. But I'm going to ask you—and myself—a couple of hard questions: Is it possible we are also playing a role in the disruption and dysfunction? When so much seems to be going sideways, are we just observers, or are we participating in some way? What if we're just as responsible for the problems as the people we blame them on?

What if every instinct, every decision we've made up to this point, has led us further from where we really want to be?

What might happen if we did the opposite?

Listen, I'm not trying to beat us down, but I am trying to shake us up. I'm writing this as someone who loves the church. I've spent my entire life connected in Christian community, and I've served in ministry for over three decades. I've seen and experienced the beautiful ways that Christ followers have impacted the world. The church can do a tremendous amount of good. But if we're going to be part of disrupting the status quo, we can't just point fingers at "them." We need to consider how many of our choices—the ways you and I and others who follow Jesus have been living—may have contributed to the quagmire we find ourselves in. And I think there is a core reason why we've found ourselves in this spot.

We've wandered down a path where fear and turmoil and

suspicion roil around and within us, where self-protection and a desire for comfort have led us to surround ourselves only with those who think and look and live like us. Understandably, this can seem like the best and safest way to live.

But there is a problem with this path: We can't stay on it and follow Jesus.

Jesus' Kingdom is counterintuitive and radically counter-cultural, and living fully as a citizen in his Kingdom means entering an upside-down kind of life that goes against many of our natural human instincts and regular patterns of being. When Jesus invites us into the Kingdom of God, he's calling us to an opposite kind of life.

And too many of us aren't living it.

We know we aren't flourishing, but we have no idea why. The world feels complicated and scary, and our relationships can be painful and tense, but we don't know how to make things right. Too many of us aren't experiencing the life Jesus offers us because the gospel we've embraced is not the Good News of the Kingdom. Without realizing it, we're practicing a faith often more informed by inherited assumptions, cultural influences, and political ideology than by the teachings of Jesus.

The late philosopher Dallas Willard notes,

What we are looking at in the contemporary Western world is precisely what [Jesus] himself foretold. We *have* heard him. For almost two millennia we have heard him. . . . But we have chosen to not do what he said. He warned that this would make us "like a silly

man who built his house on a sand foundation. The rain poured down, and the rivers and winds beat upon that house, and it collapsed into total disaster” (Matt. 7:26-27). We today stand in the midst of precisely the disaster he foretold.<sup>2</sup>

## HEAR FROM GOD



Do you realize that God wants to speak to you? If you are a follower of Jesus, God is present with you and within you through the Holy Spirit. How absurd to think he would be that near to you and not have anything to say! And yet many of us go about our daily lives without expecting to hear from him.

Throughout this book, I am going to encourage you to pause and give God opportunities to communicate with you. We’re going to be digging into Scripture, and God always speaks through his Word. God often uses other people to communicate with us, so there may be something in my writing that God wants to use to speak to you. But I believe God also wants to speak to you through your own thoughts, emotions, and spirit. I encourage you to pause from time to time to pay attention to him. When you become aware of something stirring within you—whether it be a new idea, a feeling of discomfort or anger, or just a fuzzy notion that you should be paying attention—stop and ask the Spirit to open your mind and heart to receive and understand what God is saying to you. Pray: *Lord, I want to hear from you. Come, Holy Spirit. Speak to me and empower me to do what you say. Amen.*



Two thousand years ago, Jesus showed up on the shores of the Sea of Galilee and began teaching a group of people a new way to live. He invited them into a Kingdom that was different from anything they’d ever experienced or known. To live in

this Kingdom often required that they do the opposite of their naturally formed instincts. It requires the same of us today.

Let's stop settling for everything going wrong and instead look at our natural impulses and where they've gotten us. I consider myself somewhat of an expert on blowing it, and I'm happy to share what I've learned the hard way. But I'm not just going to speak to you from my own experience. Jesus' most famous collection of teachings, the Sermon on the Mount, tells us a lot about the opposite kind of life. This "manifesto . . . for the life of the individual follower of Christ in the midst of the community of his followers"<sup>3</sup> very well might be *the* most important passage of Scripture for Christ followers living in this current moment.

The Sermon holds the wisdom we need to find a better way forward, but here's what we need to know up front: We're not going to like a lot of it. At times, Jesus is going to rub us the wrong way. We like the idea of being saved from our sins; we don't want to love our enemies.

And yet, if enough people decided to actually follow him, we'd turn the world upside down. After all, it's happened before.

I believe doing the opposite could help create peace in your community. The counterintuitive way of Jesus could help you mend relationships without compromising what you believe. It could bring healing to the rifts with family and friends that grieve you.

I believe doing the opposite could also bring calm to your own soul. Instead of living riddled with fear or anxiety or anger over what is happening in our world, you could live with a quiet confidence that Jesus is on his throne and the Kingdom is

not shaken. You could let go of feeling responsible for burdens that are not yours to bear. You can experience the lived reality of *the Son setting you free*.<sup>4</sup>

And I believe doing the opposite could bring healing to our world. If we, as followers of Jesus, do the opposite of what our natural instincts say, of the impulses that often bring us to these moments of division and distrust, we could restore our credibility to the watching world. We could make the difference we long to make. We could help people find their way back to God and together bring more of his Kingdom to earth.

I really do believe there is a hopeful way forward.

If we're willing to listen to Jesus.

If we leave behind what isn't working and take a risk together, we'll discover that Jesus is about to turn everything upside down.