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BILL CROWDER
THE SURPRISING SIDE OF GOD

What can we learn from the conflict that erupted between Jesus and some of the most religious people of His day? The question is important for those of us who struggle with the feeling that Jesus has not met our own expectations.

Some of the issues that confused Jesus’ countrymen are likely to be our issues too. With this in mind, Bill Crowder, RBC Director of Church Ministries, helps us take another look at One who has promised, in His own time, to wonderfully exceed all of our hopes and dreams.

In down-to-earth terms, Bill helps us see that because our God does not change, we can expect Him to surprise us today as well.

Martin R. De Haan II
SEARCHING FOR GOD

As a boy, I was fascinated by the science fiction film *The Invisible Man*. The story was about someone who wrapped his face in bandages and wore a hat, gloves, and regular clothing to give himself a physical appearance. But when he wanted to disappear, he just removed the coverings. It was as if he was playing an elaborate game of “hide-and-seek.”

In a small way, the invisible man reflects the elusive nature of One who, according to the Bible and a familiar hymn, is:

- Immortal, invisible,
- God only wise,
- In light inaccessible
- Hid from our eyes.

Although these much-loved lyrics have inspired wonder and worship, they could also leave us feeling overwhelmed by a sense of disconnection from our own Creator. By celebrating One who is inaccessible and hidden from sight, they can leave us with the mistaken feeling that the God we are supposed to love and trust is far off and beyond our reach.

Maybe this is why so many people are interested in books like Max Lucado’s *God Came Near*. We feel the need for a God who can be found and touched with our thoughts. We wonder how we could ever have a relationship with a God who is physically inaccessible.

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We wonder how we could ever have a relationship with a God who is physically inaccessible.

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relationship with One who is physically inaccessible.

These concerns are why we need to understand the surprisingly wonderful rest of the story. Although God remains unseen, the Bible assures us that He is closer, more knowable, and more easily touched by our prayers than we could ever have imagined.

**WHAT IS GOD LIKE?**
The Bible shows that the Lord of heaven knows how hard it is for us to relate to an invisible God. According to the New Testament, that's one reason the Son of God became the Son of Man. By wrapping Himself in human flesh, Jesus mirrored the face and the heart of God for us (Col. 1:15).

But if Jesus personified the God of Abraham, why did so many of the religious leaders of Israel reject Him? To understand how people who were looking for their promised Messiah could have called for His death, let's try to look at His life from their point of view.

**By wrapping Himself in human flesh, Jesus mirrored the face and the heart of God.**

Instead of assuming that they had no reason for being so hostile to Jesus, let's think about what the people waiting for Messiah were looking for. What reflection of God would they have expected to see?

**WHAT DID ISRAEL EXPECT?**
The eyewitness accounts in the New Testament show that Jesus’ first-century audience was looking for a
Messiah who would fulfill what the Old Testament prophets had predicted. They expected Him to deliver them from their enemies. They also believed He would display the character and power of the God of Israel.

There were also some things, however, that they were not looking for. They did not expect their Messiah to claim to be God. Nor did they dream that their long-awaited Deliverer would embarrass and infuriate so many of their religious leaders. They also didn't expect Him to show them how much they misunderstood about their God and His attitude toward moral law.

The Old Testament had much to say about a coming Servant of the Lord who would express the heart and power of God. In fact, one of the key Old Testament passages describing the mission of the promised Messiah was a text Jesus claimed as His own when He preached in the synagogue of His hometown, Nazareth. Luke described it like this:

*He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” Then He closed the*
book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk. 4:16-21; cp. Isa. 61:1-2). Luke then said, “So all bore witness to Him, and marveled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth” (v.22). In the days that followed, those who heard Jesus continued to sense the truth that He taught them (Lk. 20:21).

On the waters of Galilee, they saw Him still an angry storm so that “they feared exceedingly, and said to one another, ‘Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!’” (Mk. 4:41).

When they saw Him overpower demons, they “marveled, saying, ‘It was never seen like this in Israel!’ ” (Mt. 9:33).

The crowds saw a man who backed up His words with the power and authority of God. Matthew wrote:

Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people (Mt. 4:23).

In so many ways, the people who saw Jesus witnessed what they should have been expecting in the Messiah:

- Power revealing power
- Authority revealing authority

“Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!”
Mark 4:41
• Justice revealing justice
• Truth revealing truth

The Old Testament had clearly spoken to the people of God about His character and power—and the Jesus they saw displayed truth and power in such undeniable ways that they marveled at what He did and said. What they saw and heard resonated powerfully with their understanding of what they should have expected of God and His Messiah.

So if Jesus showed them what they were looking for, why didn’t they recognize Him? Was it only because He told them that He wasn’t ready to deliver them from the political oppression of their enemies? Was it because He told them that He had to suffer and die for their sins? Or was there more to their blindness?

WHY THEY COULDN’T SEE

The Old Testament had given the Jewish people plenty of information to prepare them for the Messiah’s arrival. So why didn’t they see Him clearly?

The reason for their disconnect can serve as a caution for all of us. I suspect the problem was not merely one of perspective but one of presuppositions. The fact is that on most issues we don’t start out with a blank sheet of paper. We come to the discussion with a lifetime of accumulated ideas from our experience, our culture, our background, and our training that prejudice our thinking and limit our vision.

Clearly, this problem impacted the ability of the religious leaders of the first century so that they didn’t recognize that Jesus was their Messiah. In spite of
the unchanging teachings of Moses and the prophets, they had slowly added a complicated oral tradition to what the Scriptures actually said. Many of these additions to the Law seemed, on the surface, to honor the Scriptures. But all too often the changes focused on issues of outward conformity rather than on the heart and spirit of the Law.

The result was that the religious leaders of Israel found ways to excuse their own wrong motives by focusing on ritual rather than spirit. Many gradually assumed that they could be right with God on their own terms and by their own strength.

This kind of thinking is alive and well today. What we see is in many ways biased by what we want to see. The result of such assumptions is predictable and might be expressed through the “principle of closeness.” This principle states that the closer we are to God, the more aware we will be of our own sin, weakness, and frailty. Conversely, however, the further we are from God, the more clearly we see the sin, weakness, and frailty of others.

We see an example of this principle in the religious leaders’ rejection of Jesus. With implications that were unseen by themselves . . .

- they believed that knowing, affirming, and outwardly practicing the Law made them better than the “unclean” Gentiles and sinners.
- they believed that they were advocates for righteousness and that they were championing resistance to pagan influence.
- they believed their ritual of blood sacrifice was the solution for personal
and national sin.

• they despised their enemies and others they didn’t think were worthy of God.
• they expected Messiah to free them from national occupation, not personal sin.
• they assumed that Messiah would affirm their leadership and commitment to the Law.
• they assumed that Messiah would give them a sign on demand.
• they resented Jesus’ criticism of them.
• they were envious of Jesus’ influence on the people they were losing.

When Christ came as the Rescuer, they saw no need of personal rescue. In fact, they weren’t looking for personal forgiveness and mercy. They wanted a Messiah who would affirm them and enforce the standards they mistakenly thought they could meet.

As a result, when Jesus came presenting a view of God that did not match their expectations, they determined that He was not authentic. Tragically, their presuppositions were eternally off base.

When Jesus came presenting a view of God that did not match their expectations, they determined that He was not authentic.

In His role as “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), Jesus presented a view of the Father that was what the Scriptures taught the Israelites to expect. Yet what they saw was surprising to them. It was a perspective that was
continually knocking people off balance—and still does today. Why? Because Jesus not only revealed the character and power of God, He revealed to them (and to us) the heart of God. He came to bring the perfect balance of both grace and truth to a generation that mistakenly thought they could handle the truth and didn’t need God’s grace. That’s why what they saw in Christ was such a surprise.

**THE SURPRISING SIDE OF GOD**

Surprises can be interesting. Sometimes they are wonderful and thrilling—like the person who works hard at his job with no expectation of reward or recognition but is surprised with a coveted promotion. It’s a time of joyful shock, and the ear-to-ear grin stays plastered to his face for days and days. What a great surprise!

There are other times, however, when surprises can be heartbreaking, even terrifying—like the person who goes in for her routine health checkup feeling great, only to be told that there are some serious problems she’s going to have to face.

But surprises, whether good or bad, have the potential to knock us back a little. They mercilessly challenge our comfortable presuppositions about life.

Those are the same kinds of unsettling results that happen when Jesus reveals God to us. He went further than the people of His day, or our day, anticipated. He takes us to the edge of the universe and allows us a glimpse inside the throne room of the Father. And what we see there is likely to be far more wonderful and far more unsettling than we expect.

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The surprising side of God challenges us to rethink our spiritual and biblical paradigms. Jesus helps us consider a view of God that is likely to be quite different than what we would have imagined.

These expressions of God’s heart—which were outside the expected norms—can help to explain why many of the people living in Jesus’ day did not recognize Him fully. It helps us to understand why people continue to misunderstand and misrepresent Him today as well.

Jesus revealed God in such unexpected ways that we simply do not have adequate labels by which to categorize the heart of the Father that Jesus revealed.

So, what did Jesus tell us about God that is surprising? Admittedly, a booklet this size can only begin to tell the story.

But in the pages that follow, we will see a few of the ways that God’s revelation of Himself in Christ is more wonderful—and surprising—than anyone could have expected.

God’s revelation of Himself in Christ is more wonderful—and surprising—than anyone could have expected.

MAJESTY
EMBRACING COMMONNESS
The first time I went to Israel, I found myself in awe during much of my visit to this land of the Bible.

• I was awestruck when I first saw the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus spent so much of His earthly life and ministry.
• I was overwhelmed by the breathtaking view of the old city of Jerusalem from atop the Mount of Olives.
• I was intrigued by the history and the heartache of the mountain fortress of Masada.
• I was heartbroken by the sense of horror and grief I felt as we spent time at the Holocaust memorial at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

With all of that wonder, however, it was a surprise to me how underwhelmed I was by two of the best known places in the Bible lands—Bethlehem and Nazareth. They were so ordinary. They were unimpressive, dirty cities, far from the quaint “little town of Bethlehem” I had envisioned each year at Christmas. I was unprepared for the commonness that I saw in those historic sites. Despite my personal disappointment, however, that’s precisely what makes them so significant. They are something of a metaphor of the Christ whose mysterious and inexpressible incarnation gave significance to those sleepy, ancient villages.

It was appropriate that Jesus’ earthly life would be connected to such ordinary places. In spite of the glory of His identity, Christ Himself was often seen as too familiar and ordinary by those of His time.

Even the prophet Isaiah warned the people that it would be that way:

*He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant,*  
*and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him* (Isa. 53:2).

Isaiah’s words are not what many of us would have expected. The thought...
that there was nothing to desire in His appearance speaks to the absolutely common way that the Messiah and Son of God would present Himself.

As a boy, I remember my dad taking me to see the movie *King Of Kings*. The role of Jesus was played by Jeffrey Hunter who was, by any definition, a very handsome man. In his portrayal of Christ, Hunter had long, flowing, auburn hair and piercing blue eyes—which presented a compelling impression.

Jesus, however, did not come to the earth with movie-star good looks. In fact, the implication of Isaiah's words is just the opposite. He would have looked like an average, ordinary, run-of-the-mill first-century Jew with dark hair, dark eyes, and olive skin. Isaiah had prepared the people for Messiah to come as He did, but they didn’t grasp the significance of his words.

The commonness with which Jesus intentionally presented Himself is further seen in the commonness of where He lived. Regarding the reputation of the village of Nazareth, Bible teacher Adam Clarke wrote:

*We may suppose that Nazareth, at this time, [had] become so abandoned that no*
good could be expected from any of those who dwelt in it, and that its wickedness had passed into a proverb: "Can anything good be found in Nazareth?"

This thinking certainly would explain Nathanael’s reaction to Philip’s statement about finding someone special from Nazareth:

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” And Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see” (Jn. 1:45-46).

Being from Nazareth in the Galilee placed a great stigma on Christ. Galileans were regarded by the religious aristocracy in Jerusalem as being backward and ignorant.

So someone from Galilee would not be considered a worthy candidate for the role of Messiah. Notice:

Many from the crowd . . . said, “Truly this is the Prophet.” Others said, “This is the Christ.” But some said, “Will the Christ come out of Galilee? Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the seed of David and from the town of Bethlehem, where David was?” (Jn. 7:40-42).

Their final analysis of Jesus’ heritage is recorded in John 7:52 when the religious leaders said to Nicodemus:

Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee.

Tragically, their conclusions were based on flawed thinking. In fact, there had already been a prophet from Galilee. Jonah was from the village of Gath Hepher (2 Ki. 14:25), only
2 miles from Nazareth. Yet, in their inability to process a Christ of commonness, they dismissed the truth of who Jesus really was—and missed His true identity.

The reality of the incarnation teaches us that what people saw in the outward appearance of Jesus Christ was not the whole story. The rest of the story is alluded to in Matthew 17.

In that passage, Jesus had gone up on a mountain in the Galilee with three of His disciples (Peter, James, John). Matthew’s record of their moments on the mountain is stunning in its description of the true nature of the Jesus who was thought to be so common. Notice:

After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” While he was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!” And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid (Mt. 17:1-6).

The true nature of Christ was endorsed by the remarkable appearance of Moses and Elijah. But even more important, that nature was revealed in the display of His glory ("transfigured") and the declaration of the
Father ("My beloved Son"). The majesty of Christ was put on display on that mountain.

In spite of His common appearance, common upbringing, common lifestyle, and common background, there was absolutely nothing ordinary about Christ. His majesty was undiminished by the ordinary manner in which He chose to reveal Himself. He was still the royal King of heaven, even though in the flesh He was robed in common human appearance.

GREATNESS EMBRACING INSIGNIFICANCE
I once heard a story about Dr. Harry Ironside when he was the pastor of Moody Memorial Church in Chicago. A family had been heavily influenced by Dr. Ironside's teaching. As a result, they saved their money for months to take their children on a special trip to Chicago to hear this well-known preacher in the Moody pulpit.

When they finally visited the church, the parents were thrilled with the worship experience and were excited to have heard Pastor Ironside's teaching in person. As they left the service, they thought their children would also have been overjoyed with the experience, so they asked them to share their thoughts. After some reflection, one of the children said, “I've always heard how great Pastor Ironside was supposed to be. But he wasn't that great. I understood everything he said.”

In a way, that's how it was with Jesus. The "great" religious leaders of His day weren't inclined, or even able, to relate well with the seemingly insignificant people of the world. Jesus,
however, displayed how true greatness bridges that gap in a way that seemed natural and effortless.

In first-century Israel, few things were viewed as being more insignificant than children. Yet Jesus loved children, and they were comfortable with Him. Jesus even used a child as an illustration of true greatness: *Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a little child and set him by Him, and said to them, “Whoever receives this little child in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me. For he who is least among you all will be great” (Lk. 9:47-48).*

Even today we are conditioned to think that children should be “seen and not heard.” We tend to have the same sentiment W. C. Fields had when he said, “Go away, kid. You bother me.” But children were not insignificant to Jesus.

In fact, from the smallest sparrow (Mt. 10:29) to the lilies of the field that are here today and gone tomorrow (Mt. 6:28-30), Jesus consistently placed the value of greatness on the things the world viewed as insignificant.

Ironically, as Jesus embraced insignificance, He openly exposed the relative insignificance of those who sought to present themselves as great. In Matthew 20:25-26, Jesus addressed that issue head-on as we read: *Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant.”*
Jesus sought to bring a heavenly perspective to our earthly paradigms by reminding us of the danger of being consumed by great riches when He dealt with the rich young ruler (Mk. 10:22). He warned against measuring greatness by achievements that cannot last when He exposed the temporal nature of the temple (Mk. 13:1-2). He even warned against the tendency of self-important people to flaunt their

religion as if it were the emblem and badge of their greatness (Mt. 6:1-5).

Jesus surprised the people of His day by redefining the terms and standards of what was truly great and what was actually insignificant. And because He Himself was (and is) truly great, His willingness to give value to that which the world saw as unimportant was unsettling. He made the people of His day uncomfortable by consistently disdaining the “great” in order to embrace the “insignificant.”

WHOLENESS EMBRACING BROKENNESS
On a mission trip to Jakarta, Indonesia, I was traveling into the city for the evening Bible conference session. As we drove along, the scenes on the roadside ranged from mildly amusing to deeply disturbing.

Ironically, as Jesus embraced insignificance, He openly exposed the relative insignificance of those who sought to present themselves as great.

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It was mildly amusing to watch men selling American-made home-improvement magazines to drivers who were stopped in traffic on the highway. But it was deeply disturbing to see families and individuals and children living in abject poverty, obviously without adequate housing, clothing, food, water, or sanitation.

Seeing that kind of poverty almost compelled me to turn away. They were scenes that often create responses in us that move from guilt to anger to disregard to apathy. But in most cases, we simply divert our eyes and do nothing. We see the brokenness of life in this world and find it more than we can process. But Jesus was different. He embraced this world’s brokenness and invested Himself in it. In fact, He actually transformed the brokenness of life into something radically different.

Few things were more perplexing to the people of Jesus’ generation than His willingness to invest Himself and His care in the castoffs and the rejects of society. Jesus turned in compassion and concern to the broken people that most others turned away from. Perhaps nowhere is this seen more clearly than in His interaction with one particular leper.

Jesus turned in compassion and concern to the broken people that most others turned away from.

We must remember that in Jesus’ day leprosy was an ugly, destructive disease that was feared as highly contagious. When a person developed a dry
patch of skin, he would be examined by the priests, then isolated for a period of time. If a second examination proved that the spot was indeed leprous, the sufferer would be driven from his family, home, career, community, and synagogue to wander outside the realm of society. He would often live in exile communities with other stricken sufferers, and was never allowed to reengage in life as he had known it before contracting leprosy. If such an individual found himself among “normal” people, he would have to cover his mouth and cry out a warning to people: “Unclean! Unclean!”

Lepers were the ultimate outcasts of their day—a picture of the brokenness of fallen people in a fallen world. They lived a life of isolation, sorrow, shame, and anguish.

All of this provides the background for the extraordinary nature of Jesus’ encounter with one particular leper. Notice how Matthew described the scene:

*Behold, a leper came and worshiped Him, saying, “Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.” Then Jesus put out His hand and touched him, saying, “I am willing; be cleansed.” Immediately his leprosy was cleansed. And Jesus said to him, “See that you tell no one; but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them” (Mt. 8:2-4).*

Two things jump off the page when I read that account. The first is the boldness of the leper. I can almost imagine him charging toward Jesus, while the crowds parted like the
Red Sea as this obviously afflicted man moved through them. His confident trust in Christ's ability to rescue him from his leprosy was a powerful motivator as he came to the Savior.

The second thing I notice is the compassion of Christ—even though the word compassion is not used in the text. Jesus could have healed this man a dozen different ways. He could have healed him with a thought or a word or a gesture or a nod of His head. But He didn’t. Jesus violated every social and religious prohibition of the day as He healed the leper with a touch.

For a person who hadn’t felt human touch in years, the compassionate touch of the Master would have contributed more to the healing of this leprous man’s lonely heart than it did to the healing of his diseased body. It’s powerful to see the degree to which Jesus was willing to go in order to impact this one deeply broken life.

But why? Why would Jesus go to such lengths to engage a broken world? Perhaps we can find a hint of the answer in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews. There we read:

> We do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that

Jesus violated every social and religious prohibition of the day as He healed the leper with a touch.
we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:15-16).

Jesus experienced life at its most challenging level. And He did this, in part, so that when we are broken by the struggles of life and turn to Him for comfort and help, we know that He understands. He understands because of the way He willingly inserted Himself into life—engaging, experiencing, and embracing broken people at the point of their need.

Using the metaphor of a cleansing rain, Michael W. Smith sings eloquently of Christ’s impact on broken lives with his song “Healing Rain”:

Healing rain is coming down;
It’s coming closer to the lost and found.
Tears of joy, and tears of shame
Are washed forever in Jesus’ name.¹

Jesus was able to impact broken lives because He was willing to inject His divine wholeness into their brokenness—which was another surprise to the watching crowds.

PURPOSE EMBRACING WAYWARDNESS

Vladimir Baluev is an example of someone with a focus and discipline. He shows the endurance that is needed for the marathon of life.

Vladimir is a church planter in Russia who is deeply burdened for the spiritual welfare of his people—so much so, that when I met him, he was planting a church in each of six different Russian villages at the same time. He would spend one day a week in each village, then one day at home.

Some people might question the wisdom of
trying to do so much. But Vladimir was just responding to the sense of purpose that drove his heart. He was committed to reaching his people for Christ—no matter the cost.

While there are many people in the world with admirable focus and self-sacrifice to reach their goals, it’s not natural for us to keep our eye on the goal of serving Christ at all costs. When it comes to wholeheartedly serving the Lord in His time and by His resources, our short attention spans expose our real nature.

The Scriptures reflect our weakness by describing us as sheep. Sheep are notorious for their shortsightedness and aimlessness. In fact, they are defined by their wandering. So, in behalf of the God who loves us, the prophet Isaiah wrote: 

“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:6).

And Matthew added: When [Jesus] saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd (Mt. 9:36).

These inspired statements are a reminder of our basic human tendency to drift. We are distracted by the siren songs of the world and the background noise of life. We lose sight of the goal, and go our own way—not always certain where that might lead.

This is a reality that is echoed in the words of the great hymn “Come, Thou Fount Of Every Blessing” by Robert Robinson:

O to grace how great a debtor daily I’m constrained to be!

22
Let Thy goodness like a fetter bind my wandering heart to Thee. Prone to wander—Lord, I feel it—Prone to leave the God I love. “Prone to wander.” “Prone to leave.” The songwriter clearly recognized our bent toward drifting from the things of God rather than being driven by them. It is this basic human frailty that exposes how desperately we need His grace to bind us to Himself, lest we lose our way.

In contrast to the wayward lives Jesus encountered, everything He did displayed the absolute resolve and focus of His heart on the Father's purposes. This was especially true in Christ's steady, unrelenting march to the cross—even while His disciples sought to redirect Him away from the Father's destination for Him on Calvary. The tension this pressure created came to a head when Jesus was challenged by Peter in Matthew 16:21-23:

*From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day. Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!” But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.”*

Jesus came with a clear purpose—to give light and direction to people who were wandering like sheep gone...
astray. He modeled that resolve ("He must go to Jerusalem") by setting aside anything that distracted from His Father's will, and by placing Himself on a path of determined obedience—even knowing that such obedience led to the cross. Such purposefulness was unsettling to religious leaders who had embraced political and situational expediency. Instead of being challenged by His determination, they sought to exploit Him to achieve their own political objectives.

The measure of Jesus' determination is seen in Philippians 2:8, where Paul wrote:

*Being found in appearance as a man, [Jesus] humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.*

Jesus was obedient to His Father's plan—all the way to His death on the cross. Christ's sense of divine purpose was the only adequate response to our drifting that had taken us away from God.

**SUFFICIENCY EMBRACING INADEQUACY**

The bumper sticker reads, "When you get to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on.” It sounds like very clever advice—until your world comes crashing down all around you.

Sometimes life becomes overwhelming. We can't stand up to the heartache and pain of tragic circumstances in our families without being affected. It brings us to a renewed understanding of our inability to process life in a fallen world.

Yet, unless we are at the brink of disaster, we often
tend to live in a way that reeks of independence and self-reliance. We pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps and press on, convinced that by the strength of our own will we can do whatever we set our minds to.

This is a tragic self-deception. We can sing, “I did it my way,” but the fact remains that we place ourselves in great jeopardy when we rely on our own adequacy.

In writing to a self-satisfied congregation in the city of Corinth, the apostle Paul warned:

*Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall* (1 Cor. 10:12).

The apostle understood that we simply do not have the level of adequacy we claim when facing the serious issues of life. No amount of defiance can compensate for the lack of wisdom, strength, and justice needed to navigate the pain of this world.

Perhaps this is why so many former professional athletes struggle with the adjustment to life after sports. On the playing field, everything is under control. Everything makes sense. Everything is manageable. But in retirement, life shifts to a different arena—one where their athletic prowess is less valuable.

When athletes live most of their lives in an “artificial” world where their skills are
designed to manage a specific kind of controlled life, they can develop a kind of confidence that is, in fact, an illusion. Once they retire, the things that gave their lives equilibrium become tossed aside like a rag doll in a tornado.

Such athletes are symbolic of all of us. We simply are not equipped to manage life in our own strength and wisdom.

Christ responded dramatically to the unfortunate self-sufficiency displayed by the people He created.

In Jesus’ day, this bent toward self-sufficiency was embodied in the religious establishment—and that religious establishment was identified with the city of Jerusalem. Following His “triumphal entry” into Jerusalem, Jesus looked out over that city in a way described powerfully by Luke:

As [Jesus] drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, “If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes” (Lk. 19:41-42).

Why did He weep?

Perhaps part of the reason for His grief over the city is seen in the days following His entry. As Jesus taught in the temple, He confronted the religious leaders of Israel (Mt. 23) by charging them with religious pride and arrogance—in essence, religious self-sufficiency. It was a failing that would not only destroy them but all who looked to them for spiritual direction.

In the end, however, it was not with anger but with heartache that Jesus spoke to them. He saw their self-reliance and its destructive end as He said:

26
O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! (Mt. 23:37).

“You were not willing!” Here we see the all-sufficient Christ broken by the self-sufficiency of fallen human beings. That brokenness is seen in the tears on His face at the gates of Jerusalem—the tears of a God whose heart was broken.

The people were certainly not prepared to encounter this kind of God. In fact, even today we still struggle with the idea of a broken-hearted God. Musician Michael Card understood the surprise this would have been to those observing Christ, and sang of it in “To A Broken God”:

I was unaware how it is with a broken God; I thought of You as above my pain; Lost in my despair, so it is with a broken heart; I never dreamed You could feel the same.²

The Lord Jesus Christ—Son of God and Creator of the universe—experienced deep brokenness as He grieved over the stubborn self-reliance that caused, and still causes, the men and women who are the objects of His love to reject Him. It’s a powerful contrast.

**PURITY EMBRACING SINFULNESS**

When I was a student in Bible college, our pastor often said, “A good apple doesn’t make a bad apple good. It’s always the other way around.” He was talking about the power of influence, particularly when it’s a corrupting influence.
And in terms of most of our relationships in life, he was right. Corruption infects all that it touches.

In the case of Christ, however, we see the reverse of that concept. Jesus was in no way tainted by His association with people who were considered to be spiritual “bad apples.” On the contrary, His mission was to redeem them by purifying the corruption that characterizes human fallenness.

This, frankly, was something the religious leaders struggled to understand. They worked long and hard to maintain the appearance of personal and ceremonial purity, and a significant part of that effort was in maintaining a healthy distance from any contact with “sinners.”

Jesus, by contrast, welcomed the opportunity to associate with those “impure” people the religious establishment held at arm’s length. Notice:

Now it happened, as Jesus sat at the table in the house, that behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said to His disciples, “Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

... [Jesus said,] “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’ For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (Mt. 9:10-11,13).

To the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, it was unthinkable that a holy God would freely associate with known sinners. Yet, in reality, it was the absolute righteousness of Christ that actually made such associations possible. Because of His innate holiness and purity, Jesus
was beyond being tainted by the sinfulness of the people He encountered. Instead, He clearly marked their lives by pulling them out of their sinfulness and into commitment to a life that pleases a holy God.

As a result, Jesus dealt with sinful people in compassion instead of condemnation. He reached out to them instead of withdrawing from them. This is seen in His encounter with a sinful woman in John 8:

*Early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people came to Him; and He sat down and taught them. Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, they said to Him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?” This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear. So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.” And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, “Woman, where are those*
accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said to her, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more” (vv.2-11).

The religious leaders tried to use this woman to trap Jesus. They viewed the woman herself as expendable. They used her to create a dilemma for Jesus. Would He agree with Moses that adulterers deserve death? If so, He would have to allow for a Jewish execution that would defy the laws of Roman occupation.

Jesus exposed their hypocrisy without excusing her sin. His compassion did more than rescue her from the stones of the religious crowd. He tenderly urged her to use His lack of condemnation as an opportunity to accept the better ways of the God who loved her.

FINDING GOD IN THE CROSS

In the Academy Award-winning film Schindler's List, we are confronted with the horrors and evils of the Holocaust. In the process, we learn the true story of Oskar Schindler, a man who was something of a paradox. He was a war profiteer and Nazi party member, but he rescued 1,100 Jews from the death camps, purchasing their lives at great personal loss.

The key moment in the story comes when Itzhak Stern, Schindler's Jewish accountant, is compiling a list of prisoners for Schindler's rescue. Suddenly Stern realizes that the names on the list—representing people being rescued from the Nazi ovens—had been purchased by Schindler with his profits. Stern’s comment? “The list is an absolute good.
It is life.” This was true because the list represented a demonstration of extreme love and surprising compassion in the face of extraordinary evil.

Of all the surprising things Christ tells us about God, this may be the greatest. In terms of man’s expectations of God and Christ’s representation of God, perhaps the greatest contrast of all is seen in what Christ accomplished on the cross.

Jesus said, “The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Lk. 19:10), and it was ultimately on the cross that this happened. But it happened in a way that brought resolution to the deepest needs of our hearts. The psalmist wrote:

Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed (Ps. 85:10).

The perfect balance of mercy and truth was resolved on the cross. In divine mercy, the Son of God took our place. By the sacrifice of His life for ours, He rescued us from the truth of who we are and the judgment we deserve.

There at Calvary, Jesus paid for our sin and delivered us once and for all from what would otherwise have been the destiny of our:

- commonness,
- insignificance,
- brokenness,
- waywardness,
- inadequacy, and
- sinfulness.

It is on the cross that we truly see “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). Perfect love balanced by perfect justice. Perfect truth balanced by perfect grace. It was the ultimate surprise and gift that all of us desperately need.
WHERE DO I FIT IN?

I suppose that, at some point, we are compelled to ask, “What does all this mean to me?”

To answer that question requires two considerations. If you do not know Christ personally, having never asked Him for forgiveness of your sin, it means that there is an answer. There is hope, because there is a God who gave His Son to show you who He is and how much He loves you. That God offers you the gift of His forgiveness and love—a gift which can be accepted only by faith.

For the child of God, however, the challenge is different. Just as Jesus came to put God on display, we are called to do so as well. We can’t do this in our own energy, but we can by His grace and strength. Paul said:


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