

To my lifelong friend, Dr. O.S. Hawkins, whose life and ministry have intersected with mine through the years. I express profound gratitude for your faithful life, inspiring faith, and encouraging love.



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Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS *vi*

FOREWORD: JOSH MCDOWELL *vii*

SECTION I MAKER OF MY LIFE

LIGHT FOR THE PATH	3
TRUE OR FALSE	7
RELIGIOUS SNOBBERY	11
STARTING OVER	13
MIRACLES WITH A MESSAGE	15
AN UNSINKABLE PLAN	19
ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER	23
THE LIFE EVERYBODY WANTS	25
LIFE OR DEATH	27
GOING DOWN TO GET UP	29
COMING HOME	33
A TRIP TO THE ORCHARD	37
VANDALISM AND GRAFFITI	41
THE REAL LORD'S PRAYER	43
THE BREVITY OF LIFE	47
HANGING ON	49

SECTION 2 BREAKER OF MY CHAINS

THE COURAGE TO CHANGE	53
FREE TO BE SECOND	55
PERFECT PASSION	59
THE FAITH CONNECTION	63
GETTING WELL	67
THE LIFESAVER	69
OPEN-HANDED LIVING	73
RIGHT OR WRONG	75
FREE TO GO	77

ALL TIED UP 79
WINNING AT WORK 83
BETRAYAL 87
A LEGACY OF PEACE 89
WORK IN PROGRESS 93
LIFE'S TOUGH CALLS 95
BEHIND CLOSED DOORS 97

SECTION 3 KING OF MY WORLD

THE BIG PICTURE 101
THE LIFE OF THE PARTY 103
IF ONLY YOU HAD TOLD ME 107
FOREVER—A LONG, LONG TIME 111
THE EYES HAVE IT 115
FROM HEAD TO HEART 117
WHEN LITTLE IS MUCH 121
THE CHOSEN 123
FINDING FAULT 125
FOR SURE AND CERTAIN 129
GIVERS AND TAKERS 133
HOW DO YOU WORSHIP? 137
INQUIRING MINDS 141
CHURCH OR CLUB 143
ASKING AND ANSWERING 147
A GOOD NAME 149

SECTION 4 LOVER OF MY SOUL

REAL LIFE WITH THE REAL GOD 155
SPEAKING MY LANGUAGE 159
NO LONGER ALONE 161
LIVING WATER 163
TIME OUT 167
COME TO THE TABLE 171
TO PRAY OR PREY 173
PORTRAIT OF A GOOD SHEPHERD 175
A TIME FOR TEARS 177

THE BELIEVER'S BADGE 181
EVIL OVERTURNED 183
ART OR AGONY 185
FRIENDS AND FAILURE 189
THE BEST OF INTENTIONS 191
YOU WANT ME TO DO WHAT? 195
THE HEART OF GOD 197

SECTION 5 **CHANGER OF** **MY HEART**

THE RIGHT REASONS 203
DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH 205
HOUSECLEANING 207
YES, BUT . . . 209
A SURE THING 213
TOUGH ASSIGNMENTS 215
FAMINE OF THE SOUL 219
HARD WORDS 221
THE RIVER OF LIFE 225
VITAL SIGNS 227
OUT OF THE DARKNESS 231
BELIEVING IS SEEING 233
THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE 237
HAPPY OR WHOLE 241
DISUNITED WE FALL 243
PASSING THE BUCK 247

FOREWORD

JOSH McDOWELL

Having spent most of my life amazed by the evidence for Jesus Christ, I have documented hard evidence that shows that he is the Son of God who loved us and gave his life for our sins to reconcile us to God. However, some of the greatest evidence comes in the form of changed lives: desperate lives that now have hope, fearful lives that now know peace, and empty lives that are now full to overflowing.

The book of John presents a number of these dramatically changed lives. Jack Graham, my pastor and my friend, brings these people to life for us and shows how we can access the same awesome power that changed their lives.

As I sit under the teaching of Dr. Graham, I continually gain new insights. His understanding of both the Bible and the human condition, combined with his knowledge of people based on years of experience as a pastor, allow him to illumine God's Word in fresh ways week after week.

And now Jack has gone one step further in this book. He has taken the teaching material from his popular sermon series on the book of John and applied his lessons and insights to the tough issues people face today. He doesn't hesitate to tackle challenging topics like freedom from addiction, religious snobbery, and the insidious attraction of false gods in today's culture. He uses real talk for the real problems of today. He shows us a strong and passionate Jesus who is tender, compassionate, and very real himself—the God-man who doesn't shy away from controversy.

As one examines statistics about signs of decay in our society, like the use of illegal drugs, teen suicide, and a pervading sense of despair, you know that we need a complete turnaround from where we are today. We need a revolution that will replace status quo thinking with transformed minds and lives. And that is only possible when people come face-to-face with Jesus, the One we find spotlighted in this book.

So get ready for a change because this book will transform the way you see Jesus and also the way you live your life.

LIGHT FOR THE PATH



Life itself was in him, and this life gives light to everyone. The light shines through the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it. John 1:4-5

A MOM AND DAD with three preschool children were part of a group hiking through the woods at twilight, observing the habitat of nocturnal creatures who only venture out at dark. One of the little boys wanted to climb up on a log at the side of the pathway and jump off, so the family paused while he did so. Naturally, the other two children had to climb up and jump off as well, and during the process the other hikers got far enough ahead that the family could no longer see where they were or in which direction they had gone.

In the deepening darkness, the parents didn't want to alarm the children by shouting for the group or calling for help, so they began to sing hymns, hoping they would be heard and rescued. Sure enough, a welcome flashlight shone in their direction a few minutes into the second song, and they escaped a night of sleeping in the damp marsh and eating bugs for dinner.

When we cry out to God, whether we sing hymns, sob in grief, or talk to Him in the quietness of our room, He hears. He is eager to shine His light on our path and bring us back into His group, the church, the body of Christ. Having created us for a relationship with Him, His ears are always turned toward those who love Him.

What does John's description mean to us living in this third millennium? John talked about two of Jesus' roles in these verses: He is the Creator-God and He is the source of life and light. Understanding these roles can deepen our appreciation of His authenticity. His creativity made the world, His light illuminates it, and His superintendence allows it to function.

Whatever people may think causes the world to go around, the true power is Jesus Christ. Without Him, nothing exists.

First, Jesus is the Creator-God. As God, He is sovereign, the supreme ruler of the entire universe. Matthew emphasized Jesus' sovereignty in his Gospel which is the most "Jewish" of the four books. From his perspective, proving that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah of the Old Testament was paramount. So he portrayed Christ as a sovereign, the king of Israel. Matthew was right to present Jesus as sovereign. Though humans resist the idea of anyone ruling over us, that is what a sovereign does. From the Old Testament (Zechariah 8:23) to the New (Philippians 2:10), Scripture tells us that Christ is King over all.

The great news is that nothing of ours is too hard for the Sovereign Ruler of the universe. Not job difficulties, wayward children, or sick family members. Because He is sovereign, He knows what lies ahead on our life path when we can't see farther than the present, so He can light the way for us.

Since He made us, He thoroughly knows how we "work." He knows how to get our attention, how to lavish abundant gifts on us and give us our hearts' desires, and how to slowly but surely grow us into people who act and talk and live and love like Jesus. It takes a lifetime of growth, but our Creator is very patient.

Second, Jesus is the true source of life and light. He made us, gave us life, and promised to guide us in the way we should go. "Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will direct your paths" (Proverbs 3:5-6). We can count on His promise to light our way if we but ask Him.

What about You? Next time you are lost and can't find your way or life's pressures seem too much to handle, turn to your Creator, your source of life. He is the ever present light waiting to take your hand and lead you along your life path. Do you

SECTION 1: MAKER OF MY LIFE

honestly believe He's able? Check Him out. As you lean heavily on God, you'll find Him trustworthy.

Take a Look As you read Isaiah 40:12-27, write down ten examples of God's complete sovereignty, or control over the world and everything in it. As Isaiah asks in verse 18, "To whom, then, can we compare God?"

TRUE OR FALSE



But although the world was made through him, the world didn't recognize him when he came. Even in his own land and among his own people, he was not accepted. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. John 1:10-12

MANY PEOPLE talk about God, but which “god” do they mean? Even during His days on earth, the world didn’t recognize Jesus as God, and that confusion still exists today. Many believe that Jesus was simply a great man or a respected prophet. Others believe that all roads lead to heaven, whether we follow Jesus, Muhammad, or Buddha. Without knowing who Jesus really is—the Son of God and the only Savior—we may try to fill our inner longing with false gods such as money, success, or even harmful behaviors. We may try to please God with good works or even self-sacrifice, rather than receiving the free gift of salvation Jesus offers.

While the God of the Bible is a loving God, the many deities of mythology were capricious, jealous, and petty. Since they were created by people, they reflected all the weaknesses of mankind. The true and living God, on the other hand, has none of our faults. Instead, He has created us in His image, imparting many of His characteristics to us. He is trustworthy, steadfast, and certain.

Even as Christians, we still sometimes create petty gods without realizing it. We may idolize our accomplishments, our pleasures, other people, or material things. We might deny our idolatry because we don’t “worship” these things, in the sense of giving religious reverence to them, as the dictionary describes the word. Think about the following questions: Are your thoughts focused continually on one part of your life, almost to

the exclusion of others? Do you habitually and almost compulsively perform particular behaviors again and again? Are you devoted to a person or the pursuit of a particular goal at the expense of other areas of life? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you may be worshipping a false god, one that will surely disappoint.

Think of the man who travels so extensively as he climbs the ladder of success that he misses out on his children's growing-up years, or the woman who strives to please her unpleasable husband until he leaves her for another woman. Their gods have let them down, as false gods always will.

But Jesus will always do what is best for you. He has promised to bring good out of even the most horrible circumstances, and He does that time and again.

Rachel Scott was one of the high school students killed in the Columbine High School tragedy in 1999. She was killed because she was a Christian who was not afraid to talk about her love for Jesus. While her parents, friends, and teachers were heartbroken because of her death and the deaths of the others in the incident, God brought good out of the evil of that unforgettable day. After her death, other students gave their lives to God as a result of her courage and faith.

But false gods are just the opposite of the one true God. While He brings good out of evil, false gods insert evil into good things. For example, eating is a natural and necessary physical function, and delicious food is another of God's gifts. But food, misused and over—or under—eaten, becomes an idol when it becomes one's focus and ruins lives with obesity or anorexia.

Three key characteristics distinguish Jesus from the false gods. First, He is equal with God the Father and God the Spirit. This has been the belief of the Christian church since the beginning. In A.D. 325 this belief was formalized in a Trinitarian creed (the Nicene Creed) to counter a heresy that was attempting to demote Christ from His place as equal with God. And that heresy is still around today.

SECTION 1: MAKER OF MY LIFE

If you haven't already experienced it, one day you will answer your door and find yourself face-to-face with members of a religious cult who claim to be Christians—but they aren't. They don't believe Jesus was God. They will say He was "a" god but not "the" God. Those who assert that Jesus did not preexist his earthly life nor create the world rob Jesus of His equal and eternal place with God.

Second, Jesus is essentially God. God is three-in-one, a trinity of beings. They are not different manifestations of one being. Some people believe God morphed Himself into a human being and came to earth as Jesus. Another misbelief is that the Holy Spirit isn't really a person, just the power of God being unleashed. The Father, Son, and Spirit are all distinct persons—and all God (Philippians 2:5-11).

Third, Jesus is eternally God. Another thing the Nicene Creed states with certainty is the biblical doctrine that Jesus was "begotten, not made." That is, He wasn't created. He is, and always has been, infinite and eternal. A Jesus who isn't eternal Himself could hardly provide eternal life for you.

Like Paul, we need to "know whom [we] have believed" (2 Timothy 1:12 NKJV) and, with Peter, why we believe (1 Peter 3:15). We need to know how to tell a false god from the real God, because the difference is a matter of life and death, a choice between a fruitful, productive life and a tormented life, between freedom and bondage.

What about You? What are the gods in your life? Be honest. Who or what occupies the majority of your thought life? Are there behaviors or habits that you do repeatedly and know you should stop? The real God, Jesus Christ, will help you to dethrone the false god as you turn again and again to the One who is true.

Take a Look Read the creation story in Genesis 1. What did God start with and what did He end up with on day six of Creation?

RELIGIOUS SNOBBERY



There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.”

John 3:1-2 NKJV

NICODEMUS HAD a problem many people have today. He felt spiritually superior to others. He was religious, he was respected, and he kept all the rules.

Some Christians today also believe that since they obey the rules, go to church, and give their money, they’re above those who don’t. They may even secretly wonder whether their success in life doesn’t somehow reflect God’s pleasure in how they live, as in “I do what I’m supposed to do, and God has rewarded me for that.”

But in Luke 18:11-13, Jesus dashed that way of thinking when He told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Jesus cut to the heart of the matter when He said the proud Pharisee thanked God that he was not a sinner like everyone else, especially the tax collector. All the hated tax collector could say to God was, “Be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.” Jesus’ point was that the proud will be humbled and the humble will be honored. Jesus is so good at standing human wisdom on its head. The honored fellow would be brought low and the despised man would be forgiven.

We don’t really know why Nicodemus approached Jesus at night, although we know he was intellectually interested in the miracles Jesus had done. Perhaps he was afraid of what his religious cohorts would say or was ashamed to be seen talking to a lowly carpenter. Or he might have had spiritual questions that could not wait until the next day—questions about Jesus being the long-awaited Messiah.

Men in Nicodemus's part of the world engaged in their deepest conversations in the evening when the time for work was over. They gathered to talk about philosophy or spiritual matters. Perhaps he came at night for a long and interesting talk. He addressed Jesus formally, as *Rabbi*. He was self-sufficient, confident, and curious, but he didn't know the true need of his heart and life—his need for Jesus.

To Jesus, Nicodemus's position as an educated Pharisee meant nothing. Some of His most scathing rebukes were directed at the religious leaders and their pompous hypocrisy. Most of the time, He chose to be with those who were rejected by society—the unsophisticated, plain, authentic people who truly understood their need for Jesus.

Think of Zacchaeus, the scorned man who stole some of his people's taxes for himself. Yet Jesus loved him and called him to come down out of the tree, singling him out and visiting his house. Or the woman at the well, who was spurned because of her marital history. Or Mary Magdalene, a prostitute. Jesus seemed to specialize in befriending outcasts, and there are many examples of that in the Bible.

Jesus chooses authentic people to spend time with.

What about You? Are you drawn to those rejected by most people? Do you tend to approach people whose needs are most obvious? Or are you attracted to success and beauty and repelled by failure?

Jesus loved the outcasts, and He never hesitated to put the arrogant religious leaders in their places. How can you make your church and your home places where those with the greatest needs will experience the love of Christ when they enter? He singled them out for attention; we can do it too.

Take a Look Read James 2:2-5 and write a sentence explaining how we should treat people. How should a shabbily dressed person be greeted in church? And what about the elegantly dressed person? What, indeed, would Jesus do?

STARTING OVER



Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” John 3:3-5 NKJV

THE MIRACLE OF BIRTH. A parent who sees his or her new-born child emerge into the world is often awestruck. The physical act of giving birth is astonishing; the way the human body works to produce a new life is almost beyond understanding. New parents often can’t take their eyes off that tiny person given to them to love and care for.

Years ago, an Oklahoma doctor delivered a baby after the mother struggled for hours even though her own life was in danger. When someone described the birth as a miracle, the doctor said, “Every birth is a miracle.”

But as amazing as the physical process of birth is, it can happen only once. There’s no going back from whence we came. Imagine Nicodemus’s surprise and the mental pictures his mind must have conjured when Jesus told him he needed to be born again.

His rhetorical question as to how a man can be born when he is old probably meant something like, “I’m an old man now and I can’t start over.” He had devoted himself to religion. He was willing to study the law of the Jews, to obey its many commandments as well as the traditions of the religious leaders. He even taught the law to others. But he was incredulous at the thought of a new birth.

Jesus told him he could do it. He could start over because it’s never too late. Stubborn hearts can be softened. Attitudes

can change and lifelong patterns can be broken. True change can occur.

What did Nicodemus need to do? The same thing each of us needs to do—tell Jesus that we need Him and we want to be born again, to experience the authentic miracle only He can do, the miracle of new birth. Have you done that? Have you told Him you have sinned and asked Him to forgive you? Have you asked Him to handle your life from now on and be your Savior? The Bible promises that by doing that, you, too, can be born again. “For whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Romans 10:13 NKJV).

What about You? Do you think you’re too old to start again, too set in your ways and habits? Jesus says it’s never too late for a new birth when you place your life in His hands, or for a renewal of your heart when you give Him additional parts of your life to handle. It wasn’t too late for Nicodemus, and it isn’t too late for you.

Take a Look Second Corinthians 5:17 says, “What this means is that those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!” Read to the end of 2 Corinthians chapter 5, noting the purpose for which we have new life in Christ.

MIRACLES WITH A MESSAGE



But I have a greater witness than John's; for the works which the Father has given Me to finish—the very works that I do—bear witness of Me, that the Father has sent Me.

John 5:36 NKJV

MAGICIAN HARRY HOUDINI was famous for his ability to free himself from handcuffs, chains, and ropes. Houdini began life as Ehrich Weiss in 1874 in Budapest, Hungary. His family was poor, and at age eight Ehrich sold newspapers and polished boots to earn money. When his father took him to a magic show, Ehrich was entranced, and his first performance as a magician took place when he was just nine. At fifteen, he read an autobiography of French magician Jean Robert-Houdin, and decided to change his name to Houdini, adding the letter “i,” which means “like.” He performed twenty shows a day, earning just twelve dollars a week.

Interestingly, Houdini spent much of his life debunking the supposed powers of spiritualists and mediums. He knew they were fakes and that his own abilities came from sleight of hand, physical agility, and much practice.

Houdini never claimed that his feats were miracles, but Jesus' works were very different. There was no human explanation for what He was able to do; no sleight of hand or fancy footwork could accomplish those feats. And with every one of Jesus' miracles, there was a message.

To the couple who had run out of wine at their wedding in Cana, He showed that He is the answer for life's disappointments. To the nobleman with the sick son, Jesus showed He was the answer for doubt, and the man believed. For the paralyzed man, Jesus demonstrated that He is God's answer for disabilities and frailties. When He fed the five thousand, He

showed that He is the answer for our needs and desires. When He walked on the water, He demonstrated that He is the answer for life's dark times and storms. When He healed the blind man, He showed that He has the answer even when we can't see it. And when He raised Lazarus from the dead, He showed He is God's answer for death.

The miracles Jesus performed were also evidence as to who He is. They identified Him as God, able to do great works. In Luke 5:23-26, Jesus said:

"Is it easier to say, 'Your sins are forgiven' or 'Get up and walk'? I will prove that I, the Son of Man, have the authority on earth to forgive sins." Then Jesus turned to the paralyzed man and said, "Stand up, take your mat, and go on home, because you are healed!" And immediately, as everyone watched, the man jumped to his feet, picked up his mat, and went home praising God. Everyone was gripped with great wonder and awe. And they praised God, saying over and over again, "We have seen amazing things today."

Recall that Nicodemus said in John 3:2 (NKJV), "we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."

Some people argue that the miracles in the Bible aren't true because it's difficult to believe in supernatural events. They say we need to take the miracles out of the Bible so we can more easily believe it and see Christ who spoke wonderful words, and who came as a social outcast and overturned society. But if you remove the miracles, you strip Jesus of His deity. He was and is God, who controls time and history, who is able to do what God and God alone can do. Jesus said these miracles, signs, and wonders tell us who He is. They prove His veracity.

If the Bible were stripped of the miracles, we would miss the message, the central theme; we would miss discovering the reality of God in Jesus Christ.

Jesus' miracles were not tricks or publicity stunts; they had a

SECTION 1: MAKER OF MY LIFE

purpose. Houdini's purpose was to amaze people by his physical abilities, nothing more. Jesus' purpose was to show the people then and us today that He is the only answer to our every need and situation.

What about You? Which of the specific needs Jesus met in the miracles are you experiencing today? Is it disappointment like the wedding couple? Or doubt like the centurion with the sick son? Or disability and frailty like the paralyzed man? Or the despair and darkness of a storm? Or are you even facing death? Will you believe that Jesus is the answer to your need and that He will provide for you as He did for all of these people?

Take a Look Read Matthew 8:14-17. What additional purpose did Jesus' miracles accomplish?