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*Discover the Real Jesus*

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## AN INCREDIBLE MAN

I have a friend who's had an amazing impact on my life. Maybe you have a friend like that too.<sup>1</sup>

This man is the epitome of integrity. In the midst of a culture where too many people live by deception and the power of unbridled egos, my friend is true to the core. What you see is what you get. He has no pretense, no show. He is utterly reliable. When he says he'll do something, he does it. It's so refreshing. I know I can trust this man.

I have such confidence in my friend's wisdom that when I have key decisions to make, he's the person I turn to. He's a patient listener, helping me to explore my options, my motives, and my doubts. He has given me advice countless times in my life, and never once has that advice led me in the wrong direction.

Our relationship is so comfortable that I tell him everything and anything. He makes me feel safe. He lets me dream, always encouraging me to press on to accomplish big things for God. He also lets me unearth the dark parts of my heart, the doubts and fear, the insecurities and temptations. When I do that, though, he never attacks me. He listens, and then in his gentle way he prods me to change, always pointing me toward what is true and pure.

And he's like that with everyone he knows. Patient. Kind. Wise. True.

One of the things I most admire about him is his compassion. He is so sensitive to people's needs. While he cares for people of every stripe and background, he has a real heart for the poor. He's the kind of man who spends time with homeless people, with Alzheimer's and AIDS patients, with the people society often casts aside as worthless. But no one is worthless to him. I've seen him give attention and value to people most of us would ignore or avoid. He's as comfortable with a convict as he is with a church leader. I wish I had his heart and love for people.

That's really the crux of it for me. This man is so attractive that I want to be like him. I want his heart. His humility. His ability to love sacrificially. His absolute commitment to the truth.

My friend has been a powerful mentor to me. As I said, I just want to be more and more like him.

As you've probably guessed by now, the friend I describe is Jesus Christ. He's everything I've said about him—and more. So much more. I've written this book because I want you to meet Jesus for yourself.

My hope and prayer is that you will discover who Jesus really is. And when you do, your life will be changed forever.

I didn't always know and love Jesus. In fact, I entered adulthood very confident in my own skills and power. I didn't need anyone else.

Let me tell you my story. . . .

<sup>1</sup> Even though Dr. Bright died during the final revisions and editing of this book, the publishers decided to retain the verb tenses in the present tense to reflect his thoughts in his initial writing of the book.

# 1

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## A Momentous Decision

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*W*hen you look back at your life, can you point to one event that changed your entire future? I vividly recall a day that upended almost everything I believed.

The day started out innocuously enough. I was a young man at the time, starting a new adventure. I had just moved to Los Angeles, the movie capital of the world, from a ranch near Coweta, Oklahoma. I had dreams of becoming a successful actor or businessman so that I could be wealthy, live in a big house, drive the best cars, and travel the world. The teeming culture of Southern California seemed like the place to achieve my goals.

I came from an ambitious family. My grandfather, Samuel Bright, had made the “run for land” during the land-rush days in Oklahoma in the late 1880s. My father, Dale Bright, was a macho rancher who could ride wild broncos and tame unruly cattle. These two men were my role models. They were honest, hardworking, and unafraid. I expected to be as successful as they were.

On my first day in Los Angeles, I stopped for a red light at the corner of Sunset Boulevard and Figueroa Street, where I noticed a clean-cut young man looking for a ride. When I asked him if he wanted to jump into my car, he introduced himself as Dawson Trotman. Later, I found out that he was the director and founder of the Navigators evangelistic ministry. He in-

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vited me home for dinner, and since I was so new in town and had nowhere else to go, I accepted.

Around the Trotman dinner table, I met some other people associated with the Navigators organization. These people were intelligent, attractive—and they quoted Bible verses!

This combination was a mystery to me. As a youngster in Coweta, I had been baptized and had joined the local church, but those were rituals most people observed. My grandfather and father considered religion all right for women and children, but the men in my family were not too involved in the church. In fact, for them the church was a part of the community's social fabric, nothing more. Since I wanted to be like the men in my family, especially my grandfather, I accepted their perspective.

After dinner at the Trotmans', the men announced that they were going to a birthday party at the home of Charles E. Fuller in honor of his son, Dan, who was home from the navy. Our country was in the midst of World War II, and I had ardently wanted to join the military, but a pierced eardrum barred my enlistment. When the men asked if I would like to come along to the navy man's birthday celebration, I accepted.

At the party, I met another group of appealing people who were also very open about their religious beliefs. They talked about Jesus Christ as if they knew Him. But they didn't press me about my beliefs. After the party, I stayed overnight at the Trotman home, then went on my way.

About that time, I became involved in a business partnership making and selling specialty food. Within a short time, I bought out my partner and worked eighteen- to twenty-hour days building Bright's California Confections. My products were picked up by several well-known stores and even marketed overseas. At the same time, I was studying drama at the Hollywood Talent Showcase, doing amateur radio once a week, and in my spare time riding horseback in the Hollywood Hills. I had money for clothes and a nice car. The future looked sunny.

### SHAKEN FROM MY PATH

Right about that time another unusual event happened. I rented an apartment from a friendly elderly couple who repeatedly invited me to attend their church. They were excited about their pastor, Louis Evans Sr., and I was mystified about how anyone could love a preacher so much.

Late one Sunday afternoon when I was returning from riding in the hills, I impulsively decided to check out my landlord's church, Hollywood

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Presbyterian. I slipped into the back pew because I smelled of horse and sweat. I left before the service ended, deciding that I had done my duty.

Not too long after that, I received a call from a young woman involved in the church's college and career department. She invited me to attend a party at a ranch owned by a movie star who was a member of the church. Of course, I agreed to go. Meeting a rancher who was an actor might be a good connection for my own acting career.

I didn't know what to expect at this sort of a party, but what I saw surprised me—three hundred of the sharpest college-age men and women I had ever met. Their happiness didn't fit the mold of my ideas about religious people. And strangely, they also talked about Jesus Christ as if they had truly met Him.

Attracted by what I saw, I started attending church meetings. Soon I got to know Dr. Henrietta Mears, a tireless worker and dynamic woman who was the education director at the church. She had traveled the world and had a global perspective on life. She shattered all my preconceived ideas about what a religious person was. She talked to our group about a living, personal God who wanted to have a relationship with each person He had created. This captivated me.

My confusion over religion came to a head one Wednesday evening in the spring of 1945. Dr. Mears was teaching from the New Testament about the life of the apostle Paul. She told us the story of how he zealously tried to stamp out the new religion that had recently cropped up. That religion was what we today call Christianity. In the early part of his life, Paul's goal was to capture Christians so that he could take them to Jerusalem, where they would be stoned. He was a true anti-Christian zealot.

But as Paul (then known as Saul) traveled to Damascus one day, an amazing moment changed his life forever. Right there on that road, Paul was blinded by a brilliant light, and he heard a voice that called his name and asked, "Why are you persecuting Me?"

Confused by the mysterious voice, Paul asked, "Who are you?"

The voice answered: "I am Jesus, the One you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you are to do" (Acts 9:5-6).

From the moment Paul heard that voice, his life was changed. Jesus Christ had pursued him and cared enough to stop him in his tracks.

Paul's life did an about-face. Soon he began preaching and teaching about Jesus, the very one he had hated, and Paul became instrumental in establishing a new movement that in time would spread around the globe!

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When Dr. Mears finished telling the story, she addressed her audience. “The happiest people in the world,” she explained, “are those who are in the center of God’s will. The most miserable people are those who are not doing God’s will.”

Her words hit me hard. I thought of my own ambitions and goals—they were all self-centered. I had not considered God when making any of them.

But what Dr. Mears said next was even more earthshaking. “Not many of us have dramatic emotional conversion experiences as Paul did. But the circumstances don’t really matter. What matters is your response to the questions ‘Who art Thou, Lord?’ and ‘What wilt Thou have me to do?’”

Then she challenged us to take the next step by going home, getting on our knees before God, and asking Him the same two questions.

That night I did exactly what she suggested. I knelt beside my bed and asked with a prayerful heart, “Who art Thou, Lord?” and “What wilt Thou have me to do?” I didn’t have an emotional experience or hear directly from Jesus as Paul did. But at that moment, I began my personal journey in discovering the real Jesus Christ. Little did I know how much those questions would change my life!<sup>1</sup>

### RELIGION OR RELATIONSHIP?

Since that night more than fifty years ago, I have found that many people have a serious misconception about Jesus Christ—they see Christianity as a religion, not a relationship. This is the difference: Religion is our effort to reach up to God. In other words, we feel we must do “this” and “this” and “this” to obtain God’s attention and pleasure. Christianity, however, is the story of how God reached down to begin a relationship with us. He did this by sending His perfect Son, Jesus Christ, to open a way for us to have a deep and meaningful relationship with the God of the universe.

When humans invent a religion, they create a god in their own image—gods made of wood or stone or metal. Museums around the world are filled with the images of gods who resemble the people who worshipped them. The character of the gods reflects the culture in which they were conceived.

But Jesus came to a world that was not expecting someone with His character and mission. Even His closest friends didn’t understand what He was about until after His death. In the person of Jesus of Nazareth—a Jewish man who ministered along the dusty roads of the Middle East for about three years—God reached out to His human creation. This contact was personal and loving, and it culminated in the greatest sacrifice ever made.



## Discover the Real Jesus

My dear friend Josh McDowell, who has probably spoken to more audiences about the claims of Christ than anyone else in history, tells the story of how he had fallen into the trap of thinking that Christianity is a religion. Josh was a brash, self-centered university student when he found himself attracted to a group of students who had a quality he desired. During a conversation with a group of them, he asked, “What makes you different?”

One young woman in the group looked Josh straight in the eyes and said, “Jesus Christ.”

“Don’t give me that kind of garbage,” Josh exclaimed. “I’m fed up with religion, the Bible, and the church.”

The woman shot back, “Mister, I didn’t say ‘religion.’ I said ‘Jesus Christ.’”

Josh went on from that day to meet the Person who *is* Christianity—Jesus Christ. And Josh’s life was radically changed.<sup>2</sup>

### DISCOVERING THE REAL JESUS

In this book I want to introduce you to the real Jesus—the Person who desires to have a relationship with you. Of course, as we discover who Jesus is, we will have to look at some facts about His life, His death, and His mission on earth. But these facts are a way of understanding the personality and love of Jesus and His desire to be your closest friend.

I can tell you from personal experience that *knowing* Jesus—not just knowing *about* Him—will change your life in ways you cannot imagine. Perhaps you have already met Him in a personal way but are seeking to understand Him more deeply. Or maybe you have never been introduced to Him on a personal level and want to know more.

Jesus is the most attractive person you will ever meet. After five decades of walking with Him, I can tell you that His qualities have come to mean so much to me: His unconditional love when I fail Him; His patience when I don’t “get it” very quickly; His compassion when my heart aches; His joy when my whole world seems to be crumbling. As you read along with me, you will find in Jesus qualities that will become meaningful to you too. He’s like that. He touches each of our lives in ways that are unique to our personality and circumstances.

Getting to know Jesus will change how you interact with the world. Years ago when I was a small boy, I remember watching my father break in wild horses. How skilled he was! He took plenty of time and patience to get the bridle over the quivering nostrils of the animal. As I watched, I could

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see that my father knew just how to handle the unruly creature so that the horse could become a useful part of the ranch. So many times I have thought about that scene and related it to how patient and gentle Jesus has been with me all these years as He has worked with my outlandish thoughts and behaviors. He had a lot to change in the heart of that vain, ambitious young Oklahoma man who was out to conquer the world.

Another vivid picture I have of my father is when he would tame a wild colt. He would bring the young animal's mother into the corral to stand beside him. Eventually, the colt would calm down and inch close to his mother. Gradually, my father would move between the colt and the mare, and the colt would allow him to slip on the bridle. The colt could be tamed because he saw the acceptance in his mother's eyes.

This, too, reminds me of Jesus. He is the One who stands beside us, full of wisdom and calmness. He is there to protect us, to teach us, to show us what is good and what to avoid. He has much more concern for our lives than the mare had for her colt.

### THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

My grandfather and my father are still two of the most important role models in my life. Although both of them have died, my memories of them are clear and endearing. My mother's faith also remains as a dominant force in my life. Her influence grew as I became more aware of her love for Jesus.

But beginning on that spring day in 1945, I found someone who is the perfect role model. That person is Jesus Christ. As I grew closer to Him, my commitment to His mission grew deeper. And I became more like Him in every way.

In the coming pages I want to share with you just how He took the raw clay of a materialistic young man and gave me a life of adventure that I never could have imagined. He showed me not only who He is but also what He wants me to do.

But right now, these questions hang in the air for you to answer: Who do you say that Jesus is? and What does He want you to do? Until you answer these questions, your life will not be complete. In the next chapter, we will tackle the issues behind these questions.

Before we go on, let me explain about the "Discover Jesus" questions that you will find at the end of each chapter. I encourage you to take time to consider each question asked there. They will help you relate the concepts in the chapter to your own unique life situation.

## *Discover Jesus*

**R**ead about the Real Jesus: Listen to what the apostle Paul said later on in his life:

I harshly persecuted the church. And I obeyed the Jewish law so carefully that I was never accused of any fault. I once thought all these things were so very important, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the priceless gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

PHILIPPIANS 3:6-8

1. What things were very important to Paul, and why did he later consider those very things to be worthless?
2. What things do you consider to be “so very important” in your life?
3. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your knowledge about Jesus? (1 = next to nothing, and 10 = I’ve learned everything there is to know about Him)
4. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate your desire to know more about Jesus? (1 = no interest at all, and 10 = great interest)

## NOTES

### Chapter 1—A Momentous Decision

1. This story is also told in Michael Richardson's book *Amazing Faith: The Authorized Biography of Bill Bright* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: WaterBrook, 2000), 1–23.
2. Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 1999), xxiv.

### Chapter 2—"Who Do People Say That I Am?"

1. Charles Malik, *Christ and Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 67–70.

### Chapter 3—What Does Jesus Say about Himself?

1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 56.

### Chapter 4—The Miraculous Birth

1. This chart and the following statistics are taken from Bill Bright, *A Man without Equal* (Orlando: NewLife Publications, 1992), 39–41.
2. Peter W. Stoner and Robert C. Newman, *Science Speaks: Scientific Proof of the Accuracy of Prophecy and the Bible* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), 40–41.

### Chapter 5—The Mystery of Two in One

1. *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, eds. Walter A. Elwell and Philip W. Comfort (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 2001), s.v. "Christology."
2. *Ibid.*
3. Bill Bright, *A Man without Equal* (Orlando: NewLife Publications, 1992), 49–50.

### Chapter 6—Our Good Shepherd

1. This story is told in Robert Schuller's book *The Be (Happy) Attitudes: Eight Positive Attitudes That Can Transform Your Life* (New York: Bantam, 1987), 135.
2. *Ibid.*, 136.
3. Information on sheep and shepherding is taken from Phillip Keller's book *A Shepherd Looks at the Good Shepherd and His Sheep* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 75, 89.
4. *Ibid.*, 115.

### Chapter 7—The Lamb of God

1. Adapted and expanded from Francis A. Schaeffer, *Death in the City* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1969), 112–13.
2. Robert Lowry, "Nothing but the Blood," in *Gospel Music*, William Doane and Robert Lowry (New York: Biglow & Main, 1876).