

ALBUQUERQUE

GETTING YOUR FAITH OFF THE GROUND

JOSE ZAYAS



TYNDALE

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Airplanes, Adventures, and Jesus

You're bound to meet a lot of people when you fly 100,000 miles a year.

I know. Because that's my story.

I'm a follower of Jesus Christ, and the reality of His work in my life has compelled me to share my experience with anyone willing to listen. Crossing countries and continents, I've dedicated my life to helping people take the first steps to experience radical personal change.

It can be difficult to thoroughly explain to the people I meet the deep mystery and joy of how they can know their Creator in a personal way. I've found that illustrations often communicate something my explaining cannot.

Jesus used word pictures much of the time to share truth. He told a group of farmers that the realm of God is like "a mustard seed" (Matthew 13:31-32). Jesus said that this tiny mustard seed would grow into a tree large enough to house a flock of birds.

What truth was He sharing? That His actions would transform tens of millions of lives for centuries. His message would grow. The farmers got the point; they saw it.

I've chosen the analogy of a plane ride for this book as a way of explaining the adventure of following Jesus. Why a plane ride? Because plane rides have takeoffs, landings, turbulence, and often involve conversations with all sorts of interesting people. Traveling by plane can illustrate the process of a relationship with Jesus Christ. This relationship is about a journey . . . not just an event or one moment in time. Following Jesus is supposed to be an adventure, a life's pursuit. Too often, the idea many people have about Christianity is of a Sunday event, where you go to a building and pay your dues to God. Not so. The Christian faith is meant to be more than a onetime encounter, much more than a religious exercise. It's a continual journey, taking you to places you've never seen and possibly haven't even dreamed about.

A plane ride is an ordinary yet out-of-this-world amazing adventure. Just look out the window from 35,000 feet in the air and you'll know what I mean. You can breathe, walk, talk on the phone, listen to music, watch a movie, or eat a meal while flying in a plane. That's ordinary life occurring while defying gravity!



A plane ride

The same can be said about following Jesus. Your life is filled with homework, stressful jobs, relationship challenges, and the stuff that makes day-to-day life seem ordinary. Yet followers of Jesus tackle life's challenges with the active intervention of God. That's what I call defying gravity. Read the

Bible, and you'll discover the life stories of real people who also interacted with God. You'll find sex, drugs, witchcraft, love, and murder. There are villains and heroes, tearjerkers and happily-ever-after endings.

How do you explain God? He's so huge, so vast . . . by His very nature He's above and beyond our comprehension. Yet we can know Him. Sitting in a brand-new Boeing 777 airplane helps me understand this. Huge engines are attached to the wings. There are miles and miles of wiring and computers with complex programs to make it all work. I don't fully understand how a plane works. But I know that it does.

That's the dynamic tension that you find in pursuing God. Yes, He's beyond your understanding. But you can know and follow Him.

A plane ride is about getting passengers to where they need to be. Pick up the Bible and you'll find that same theme from cover to cover. It starts with God shaping the universe by His very words and carving out the perfect garden for men and women to live in. Flip to the end and you're left with a graphic description of God's ultimate destination for those He loves—a heavenly paradise.

What's in the middle? The story of God. You get to look at how God has mixed things up with people . . . young and old, rich and poor, genius and simple. Each encounter is different, yet the theme remains the same. God is looking to repair the damage of bad choices; He invades history and intersects people's lives. God wants to join us in our journey.

My Brother's Story

Even though I travel all around the world sharing God's message of hope, my own brother Rafael didn't want anything to

do with it. I know what it's like to watch a family member miss out on such a great thing and experience agonizing times of frustration—not knowing what to say or how to say it!

For years, Rafael refused to go past the surface when it came to conversations about God or Jesus. He was quite happy living for himself and enjoying all of life's pleasures. Rafael didn't spend time thinking about consequences or evaluating his behavior. He was satisfied jumping from one party to the next.

Like many Americans, Rafael had seen his share of hypocrites acting "in the name of Jesus." He had read about the scandals. He had walked into many a church building and found it an empty experience.

Rafael had heard enough about Jesus to get by, but not enough about Jesus to follow Him . . . until his life came perilously close to an end. A bit later, I'll tell you how God turned his life around. What amazes me today is not just the brand-new life of my brother, but God's plan to use people like me to connect with people like Rafael—people running from, and wrestling with, belief.

For those of you who already understand what it means to follow Jesus, I trust that this book will enable you to share your faith with confidence. Explaining what a relationship with Jesus Christ looks like doesn't have to be complicated and confusing. A fresh analogy often helps break apart long-held misconceptions.

Jeff's Story

Speaking at a music festival in South Dakota, I bumped into Jeff, who was touring with one of the bands. I talked to Jeff about the concept of this book and he told me to write it fast! Jeff and I

had met a year prior as we traveled thousands of miles across the United States by bus. I was speaking on a music tour, called *Festival con Dios*, traveling with 13 bands from city to city. We spent many an afternoon taking long walks and talking about how to live out our faith. He had only recently taken his faith in Jesus seriously and wanted to grow in his walk with God.

Since I had seen him last, Jeff had met and started dating someone. His new girlfriend had been to church before, but didn't have a clear understanding of what a relationship with Jesus really meant. The more they talked, the more Jeff realized that they weren't on the same page when it came to faith and Jesus.

Even though Jeff has been following Jesus for years, he struggles to find the right words to describe his faith. And Jeff's not alone. I speak with thousands of Christians every year, and the more I listen, the more I discover how many have a tough time putting their heartfelt beliefs into words.

"She's heard about Jesus. She's been to church, but still doesn't get it. I want her to know Jesus like I do. What do I do now?" That was the gist of Jeff's dilemma. And it may be yours. It is my desire that what I have to say will give you the encouragement to simply let your journey with Jesus affect those around you. Believe me, I don't have all of the answers (or many, for that matter!). But I have been asked lots of questions; I hope that you'll find this look at the Christian journey useful in communicating with your searching friends.



Without jargon or complicated phrases, *Airborne* is your guide to understanding the journey of following Jesus. It's your guide to changing your perspective from wondering about God's

value to valuing God's wonder! That type of passionate, intimate relationship can be yours, if you're willing to pursue it.

I've written this book for those people who want to experience the life-changing power that intimacy with God will bring. Only God can change you. It's my prayer that the words on these pages will entice you to pursue Him.

Our journey with Jesus parallels an airplane ride in various ways. Both require trust, commitment, and a ready and willing attitude. Join me as we head for a new adventure—the ride of your life.



Boarding All Rows

An Irresistible Invitation

Some days are just different. There are the ordinary wake up, go to school or work, hang out with your friends days. And then there are ones you will never forget, moments in life that become turning points.

There was the day when I realized I'm not a tough guy. I must have been nine years old and a lanky neighbor was picking on my older brother, Miguel. He had to be a foot taller and much broader than me, but something in my brain told me it didn't matter. "John," I told him, "if you don't leave my brother alone, I'm going to beat you up."

He laughed, which made me burn even more. So I hit him in the stomach, like a fly beating an elephant. Before I could take a breath, I was in the air, back thrown against the wall, and now afraid for my life! It was my first airborne experience. John then picked me up by the shirt so that our eyes met, his glazed over with annoyance. He slammed my frail frame against the wall and said, "Don't you ever touch me, kid."

That could have been the end of my story. As fate would have it, he dropped me and I discovered that I could run—fast. I didn't wait for his next piece of advice. By the time I got home, I discovered I'd gleaned a nugget of truth. *Don't hit guys much taller than you.* Reason beats violence, especially when the other guy has 12 inches on you.

Seems like a small discovery, but it's been a lifelong help. That was the last fight (if you can call it that) I've ever had. Diplomacy is now my middle name, and it took a tall bully to help me develop that talent.

Meeting Carmen

I've had my share of good experiences as well. When I was 16 years old, I was playing drums for a local band. One day, in walks a girl with black slacks, green shirt, and soft brown curly hair. She sat in the front row, to my left, and I couldn't take my eyes off of her. I couldn't remember the rest of the song list, but I knew that I wanted to know who she was.

Problem number one, she walked in with a guy. But soon I found out it was just her brother. Okay, I had a chance. By the end of the evening, I knew her name: Carmen. The next night, through a friend of a friend, I worked it out (schemed, to be exact) for a group of kids to meet at the movie theater. It just so happened that I would be there and would coincidentally sit next to her. We met, had a good time, and by the time we left the theater, I was convinced that we should be together.

Problem number two, she had a father. A strict father. A father who did not like the concept of his daughter with anyone. You get the point. At first, I had "the interview" with her mother. She confirmed what Carmen had told me—that her dad had a strict dating policy. In Dad's opinion, no guy was

worthy of her and so dating was not an option! Her mom, however, was kind enough to speak to Ray on my behalf and invite me over to their house to get to know him.

I remember entering the house that cold winter evening, walking into the living area, and sitting on the couch to face a reclining chair that resembled a king's throne. Carmen sat next to me and we waited for the king to appear.

Problem number three, Ray looked like a mafia boss. Dark, thick hair slicked back. Perfectly tanned skin. I instantly felt like I was in one of the many mob movies I had seen. Something inside told me I was in trouble.



He sat down in the chair. Like a scene out of those movies, I was now scooting farther away from Carmen. My heart pounded furiously and I kept wiping my hands on my jeans. There was no casual start. Ray went straight to the point.

"So, you want to get to know my daughter," he said in a deep, gruff voice. I thought to myself, *No . . . you can have her. I just want to get out of here alive*, but I heard myself say, "Yes, sir."

"Well," Ray quickly added, "I love my daughter and I need you to know one thing. I have a machete in the basement and I'm not afraid to use it." And downstairs we went, to the basement, to have a look at his long knife, used to cut down coconuts from trees (or anyone who made the wrong move with his daughter).

Instead of being scared away, I took his threat as a challenge. Carmen was so beautiful and sweet that I wasn't going

to let an overprotective dad stop me from a great relationship. Little did I know that her dad was a practical joker! He has the tough-guy exterior with a teddy bear heart.

Curiosity brought me to Ray's house. Stubbornness kept me going back. Could Carmen be "the one" for me? Would our relationship last a week, month, year, or even a lifetime? Was this mere infatuation or the spark of love? Would I make it past her dad's machete?

I didn't know then that that night would change my life. After dating for five years, Carmen and I were married in a quaint church not far from the home where Ray threatened my life.

Carmen and I have been together for 15 years now. I'm a different person because of her influence. She was neat and organized. I wasn't. But I've changed over time. She's rubbed off on me, in a good way. I know that I've done the same for her. When we first met, for example, Carmen was extremely shy, but after years of world travel with me, she's much more outgoing.

From the pages of the Bible you'll find a similar pattern with people who've encountered Jesus in a personal way. Ordinary people are completely transformed after spending time with Jesus.

Andrew's Story

Andrew, a fisherman by trade, was one of the closest followers of Jesus while He walked the earth. The first chapter of the Gospel of John unfolds the details of their first encounter.

Andrew had been a student of John the Baptist. John the Baptist was a messenger (prophet), one of the select people God chose to share advance insight into His plan. John the

Baptist traveled the countryside telling people to prepare for the coming of Jesus, who would soon arrive to rescue people from their sin-filled lives. We don't know when or how Andrew met John the Baptist, but he was captivated enough by the message to follow him around.

Andrew and another follower of John the Baptist were there the day Jesus walked into the water where John was baptizing people. John announced to the crowd, *“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me’”* (John 1:29-30).

The next day John the Baptist saw Jesus walking by and said to Andrew and his friend, “Look, the Lamb of God!”

When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, “What do you want?” They said, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?”

“Come,” he replied, “and you will see.” So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him. (verses 37-39, emphasis mine)

Looking at this brief encounter, no one could tell that it would be the starting point for Andrew's new life. But as you keep reading this story, you find that Andrew was in the right frame of mind that day to receive direction from God. Andrew was a spiritual seeker. That's not the case with everyone. Some are happy to dismiss the notion of a God as ancient myth or legend. What made Andrew different?

Out of all of the crowds of thousands that heard John the Baptist's words, Andrew was one who took the words to heart. The crowds were curious about this Jesus who John

referred to. But few took the important step of searching the facts for themselves. Andrew did, by talking to John and listening to his references about the coming of Jesus. When Jesus walked up unannounced, Andrew was right there listening, heart open, ready to hear and know the truth.

Many people say they want to know God for themselves. But what do they do about it? Do they hope God's message will simply come to them? Or do they seek out this God, doing the work to pursue this knowledge they say they want? Let me ask you, have you done your homework? Virtually everyone has some opinion about Jesus Christ. What about yours? Did you get it from your research or have you just inherited someone else's opinion?

Andrew did his homework. He knew the prophecies in the Bible about the One whom God would send to rescue people from self-destruction. So it's no surprise that Andrew left John the Baptist to investigate this Jesus for himself.

Andrew was looking for truth. Truth about God. Truth about God's promise of personal change. When he saw Jesus coming and heard John's confession, "This is the one," that was enough—he got up and followed after Jesus to find out more.



looking for truth

Andrew was in a position to receive truth. He was listening. I spend too much time in airports. One of the basic rules that people seem to forget is that when your flight is about to take off, you have to be at the right gate to hear the announcement and get on board. Sounds simple. Yet every time I go to an airport I hear the call, "Paging Mr. Robert

Berkman, Flight 478 is ready to depart. Please go to Gate C5 for immediate departure.”

If you're not at the proper gate, you can't get on the right plane. Well, how do you find the right gate? There are screens all over the airport displaying all the information travelers need to know. The airline. The destination city. The flight number. The time of departure. The gate number. But you have to look at the screen, find the information on your flight, and get to the gate on time. If you never look, it's a guarantee that you'll miss your flight.

It's like Andrew's encounter with Jesus. It's as if Andrew was in the airport and read the signs to know which gate to go to. When Jesus arrived, Andrew was ready for the adventure before him.

Some people think you have to know everything about God and His Son, Jesus, *before* becoming a follower. Not true! The pattern you see here with Andrew and with dozens of other accounts recorded in the Bible and history is that you only have to know enough about Jesus to trust Him and believe what He says is true.

Let me illustrate. In order to fly from my home in Colorado to England I don't have to have a degree in aeronautics. When I get on the plane, no one tests my knowledge of flight controls or quizzes me on landing procedures. In order to have the confidence to take that flight, I need only to know enough about flying to put my life in someone else's hands.

I need to know enough about the airlines to consider them trustworthy. I need to believe in their track record to put my life in their hands, and believe me, every time you get on a plane that's exactly what you're doing—putting your life in the hands of the pilot and crew. You trust them to get you where you need to go.

That's what happened with Andrew that day. Jesus noticed him following from a distance, turned around, and asked him, "What do you want?"

You can tell a lot about Jesus by what He doesn't say to Andrew. Jesus doesn't start with any comment about Andrew's current life situation or criticism of past choices. He doesn't ask, "What are you doing here?" or "Do you realize who you're talking to?" Jesus doesn't whip out a list of requirements before Andrew can speak to Him, nor hand him a list of do's and don'ts. Nothing is said about rules that must be followed or adhered to before He'll speak with Andrew.



“What do you want?”

There's only a simple, open-ended question: "What do you want?"

Imagine yourself in Andrew's shoes. The Son of God, perfect in every way, knowing all things, is asking what *you* want. How would you reply? It's a great question to ask when starting your spiritual journey. After all, people investigate what it means to have a relationship with Jesus Christ for all sorts of reasons. Religious and intellectual curiosity. Feelings of emptiness and loneliness. Family tradition. Peer pressure.

Look at Andrew's response. It exposes the attitude of his heart. "Teacher, where are you staying?" He wanted to find out more about this Jesus by being with Him.

Jesus quickly replies, "Come and you will see."

Andrew and his friend didn't hesitate to accept the invitation. They had the amazing privilege of spending the rest of the day with Jesus.

I wish we knew more details of this day-long getaway.

What did they ask Him? Surely they wanted to confirm that Jesus was the person whom John the Baptist called the Lamb of God, the one who takes away the sin of the world. No one wants to follow a fraud. Collecting evidence had to be on their mind. They were spiritual seekers looking for answers to life's toughest questions—just like you are.

Andrew's encounter is a snapshot of what a relationship with Jesus Christ is supposed to look like. People honestly seeking. Coming to the One who knows it all, asking not just for things, not just for a better life, not just for a way out of a tough situation—asking for *Him*.

Jesus gave Andrew an invitation—"Come, spend the day with Me, and you will see where I am staying." Andrew took Jesus up on His offer, and whatever they talked about changed the course of Andrew's life. Within a few hours, Andrew ran home to tell his brother that he had found the Messiah (the Promised One from God). Jesus' invitation began with a simple call—come and see.

This seems to be the pattern Jesus used when calling many of His followers. On another occasion, Jesus says to a bunch of fishermen, "Come, follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men."

Continue reading John's Gospel. You'll find that Andrew—and soon after, his brother Peter—were used by Jesus Christ to help revolutionize their generation.

This could be your story too, because Jesus is in the habit of taking ordinary people and transforming them into all God created them to be. But how? Life with God has to start somewhere. It begins by answering God's call.

Imagine you're at the airport and your flight is about to begin. You're at the right gate. The gate agent calls aloud, "Now boarding all rows." It's your chance to get on that plane

and go somewhere. But you have to respond to the call; you have to take steps toward the gate and board the plane.

In the same way, Jesus Christ is calling you to spiritual freedom. Jesus says:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly. (Matthew 11:28-30, MSG)

What an offer! It's not a 50-50 deal, where you bring your gifts and God brings His. Life with God is 100 percent His idea and His work.

From the Beginning

Take a look at the first book of the Bible, Genesis—the book of beginnings. Everything in the world began with God's words. *"And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light"* (Genesis 1:3). Light. Dry ground. Day and night. Fish and birds. Giraffes and monkeys—God spoke them into existence. Mountains. Trees. Flowers. God landscaped the earth with His very words. Everything was spoken into existence by God. It was all good. It had God's stamp of approval.

Then God took special attention in creating the first man and woman:

God created human beings; he created them godlike, reflecting God's nature. He created them male and female.

God formed Man out of dirt from the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life. The Man came alive—a living soul! (Genesis 1:27; 2:7, MSG)

God speaks and the sun shines in its place. At His word, the planets spin in their orbits. Yet God changes His tactics when He creates the human race. God is now taking *action*, not simply speaking, to form and shape Adam's body from the ground and then breathing life into the man's still frame.

Why didn't God simply speak Adam into being? The writer of Genesis links this unique act of creation with God's image. In God's own design, we are patterned after Him. We are made to look like Him—not physically, because God does not have a body, but in the invisible aspects of being human. That includes the ability to reason, the desire for relationship, and the freedom to choose.

Human life is special because God chose to make us in His image. We are free to choose, just as God is—free to make our own moral decisions about right and wrong. The difference between God and human beings, of course, is that God always makes the right decision, and we often make the wrong decision.

But God never makes a mistake. He made Adam and Eve exactly the way He wanted them to be, and He made you according to His plan. Being created in the image of God brings dignity. No matter what you've done, you are valued and are valuable to God simply because He created you. King David, thinking about how well God knew him, put it in writing this way:

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts

from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD. You hem me in— behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! (Psalm 139:1-17)

In simple terms, there’s no such thing as an accidental human being. Whether you were planned or the result of a one-night stand, or even of rape, nothing escapes God’s sight. He knew you before you were conceived and saw you grow in your mother’s womb. From beginning to end, He’s working out His plan in and around everything you do. You are not alone.

Let’s get back to Andrew’s encounter with Jesus. Can you now see it in a different light? It’s not as if Andrew stumbled

upon Jesus. The subtle fact is that Jesus was looking for him. God created Andrew to know Jesus. And Jesus' desire from the beginning was to know Andrew. Jesus came to this planet looking for this ordinary fisherman in Palestine.

It's fair to say that Andrew is just like us. He accepted Jesus' invitation to a new way of living. *Come*. Come and see all that God has in store for you. Come and see a future filled with purpose. Come into a relationship with the Creator of the universe and the One who created you in your mother's womb.

It's the invitation of a lifetime, one that I've seen people answer all around the world.

Diana's Story

I met Diana in a small town in Estonia. Just 16 years old, she came to the club we had rented for a party. However, she didn't know that we rented the club to invite students to hear about how they could know Jesus Christ personally.

Diana was one of the first to show up. When pre-recorded music began before the concert, she didn't waste any time, pushing through the growing crowd to be the first on the dance floor. Watching her, I sensed she had no idea what this party was about.

Three bands played edgy music, and band members shared about their personal encounters with Jesus. The crowd loved it and yelled for more. Diana stood right in front as I got up to speak. I told the crowd of students that God made them, loved them, and accepted them—faults and all.

When I told them how a relationship with God was now possible because of Jesus Christ, Diana was stirred. That night, in a club in a small town in Estonia, Diana followed in the footsteps of Andrew. She placed her trust in Jesus Christ

to rescue and transform her. She is a new person today. She says that she used to wonder what kind of life she could have in a small town in Estonia. Diana often asked herself, *How am I going to get out of this place?* But now she knows she's right where God wants her to be, and if His plan changes, He will guide her to where she needs to be.



ride of your life

If you want to experience the same ride, you have to get on board. Right now, there's a ticket with your name on it. And if you lay hold of it, you're on your way to the ride of your life.

Recommended Reading

Got questions? These resources will give you answers to why Jesus is the most credible leader to follow!

Mere Christianity by C. S. Lewis (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001 Harper edition)

More than a Carpenter by Josh McDowell (Tyndale, 2004/1987 edition)

The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus by Lee Strobel (Zondervan, 1998)

The Case for Faith: A Journalist Investigates the Toughest Objections to Christianity by Lee Strobel (Zondervan, 2000)

Looking for the next step? These resources will help you strengthen your day-to-day life following Jesus!

NIV Starting Point Study Bible, ed. Luis Palau Evangelistic Association (Zondervan, 2002)

Every Day with Jesus: First Steps for New Believers by Greg Laurie (Tyndale, 2004)

Boom: A Guy's Guide to Growing Up by Focus on the Family, gen. ed. Michael Ross (Tyndale, 2003)

Bloom: A Girl's Guide to Growing Up by Focus on the Family (Tyndale, 2003)

About the Author

Jose Zayas, founder of Jose Zayas Evangelism International, serves as teen evangelism director for Focus on the Family. Sharing the gospel in a culturally relevant way is the essence of Jose's ministry. Using humor and everyday illustrations, he communicates the timeless truths of the Bible in today's language. Jose lives in Colorado Springs, Colorado, with his wife, Carmen, and son, Jonah.