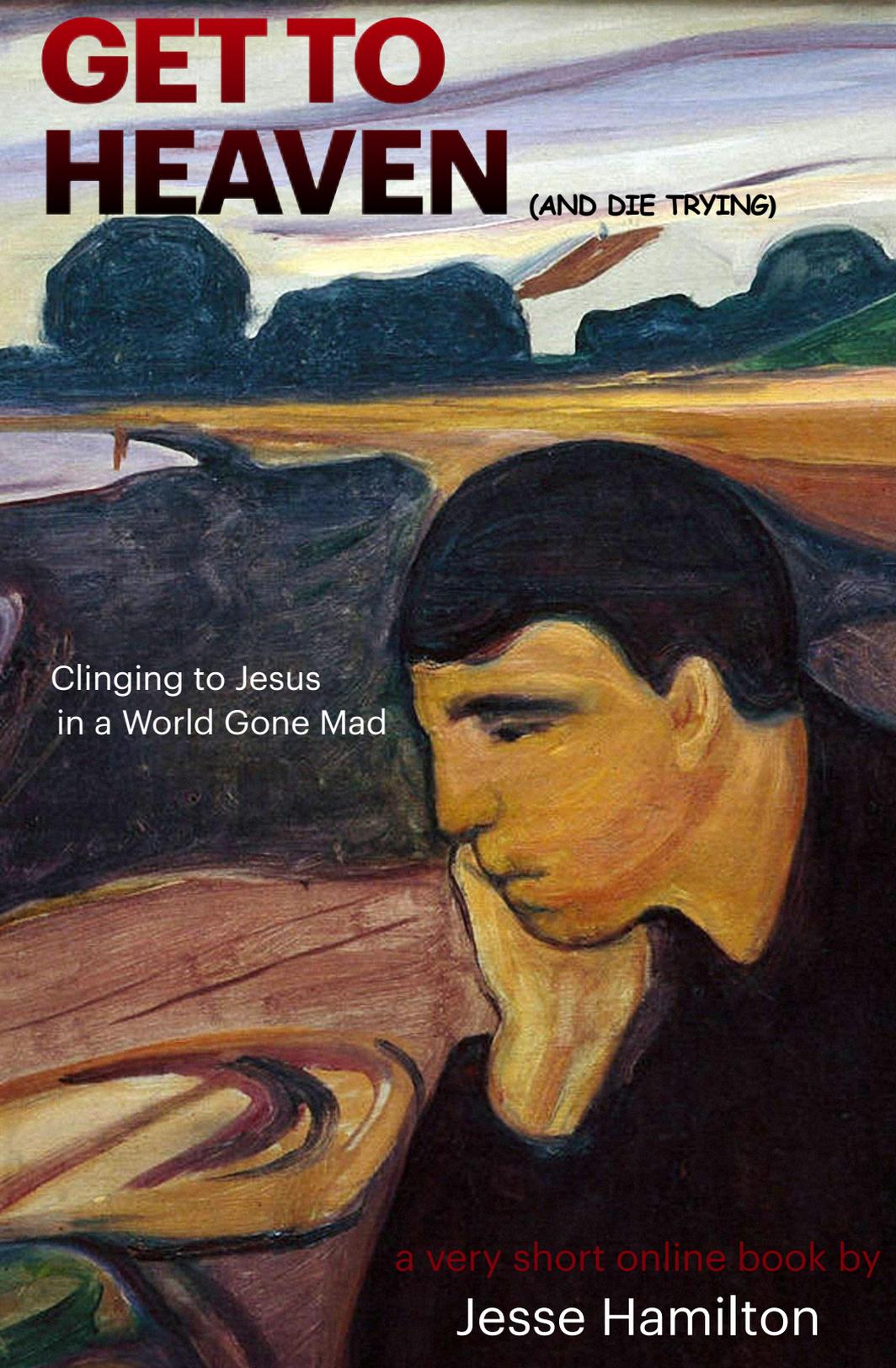


# GET TO HEAVEN

(AND DIE TRYING)

Clinging to Jesus  
in a World Gone Mad

a very short online book by  
Jesse Hamilton



# **GET TO HEAVEN (AND DIE TRYING)**

***CLINGING TO JESUS IN A WORLD  
GONE MAD***

**BY JESSE HAMILTON**

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Cover painting: Edvard Munch, *Melancholy* (1894-1896)

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# PROLOGUE

**E**ver feel like the whole world is crazy except for you? I used to feel that way all the time. I don't anymore.

I now realize I am crazy too. Probably the craziest. In fact, I might be the most insane, irrational person on the face of the earth, based on where I've come from and what I know.

Not a good feeling for a Christian.

Can't help it, though. I'm older now, pushing 50. I know they say age is just a number, but that's the problem: my actual age is 50, but my biological age is 75, which is a far more accurate number. I've got so many chronic health conditions that no one wants to hear about them anymore. And now add this one to the list: I was recently diagnosed with depression.

Perfect.

It went undiagnosed for about a decade, mainly because I didn't have time to think about it (or didn't want to). I was too busy trying to survive from day to day, toiling away in a job I never wanted. But depression actually affects your brain, a lot like dementia. Sometimes the effects are humorous. Here's an example: One day my wife asked me to go fill the car up with gas.

Because the gas station was nearby and it was a beautiful day, I decided to walk.

It gets worse. Halfway there I caught myself, but only after I felt my pockets and realized I'd forgotten the keys.

Not everything has been so lighthearted, though. I lost interest in pretty much anything that once gave me joy. I passed whole days sitting in one place. My wife and daughter suffered, horribly; I found I was systematically neglecting them. My relationships with other believers suffered as well; I found I had fewer and fewer friends (not that I had many to begin with, but somehow I crossed into the negative numbers). I started making some irrational decisions in general; not sinful ones necessarily, but definitely unwise. I felt I was really losing it—for keeps.

My faith never wavered, thank God, but I kept on wondering what in the world God was doing in my life. I think I got the answer, but it was hard to accept. I'll share that answer with you in due time, because I think it holds the secret to everything. But we've got some other stuff to get to first.

So I'm crazy, at least a little bit. My mind and body are falling apart, and it feels like I am slowly disintegrating, breaking apart into the tiny little pieces that will one day become dust. I guess it feels like that because that is exactly what is happening. I am, like it or not, headed for the earth. Dust to dust.

But I am also headed for Heaven. That is the promise I am clinging to. Will I make it? I will, thanks to God. And so will you, if

you are sincerely trying to follow Jesus. But that's really the whole point of this book—and all of my writing, actually. So many people in the West, especially in the United States, claim to be followers of Jesus. I know the poll numbers are dropping, but somehow the voices are getting louder, especially in this current political climate. But are the voices ringing true, or is it all just noise? What in the world is going on out there? Whom should I listen to? Where can I find the answers? It seems like we are all just losing it, like so many fools babbling on street corners, increasingly distracted, angry, and self-absorbed. A symphony of dissonance, each soul blasting his own note.

The world has indeed gone mad, and we are all part of it. We can't escape. That's our starting point, my friend, like it or not; you and I have all been affected by this crazy, polluted atmosphere in which we live and breathe. We are all so diseased that we don't even know it anymore. Meanwhile, truth has gone AWOL, people are dying, and chaos is everywhere. Maybe Jesus is coming back soon, but hold on—we have to make sure we're ready.

This book will be short, simple, and to the point. Each chapter should take around five minutes to read, and the whole thing less than an hour. I won't bog things down with too much evidence; I'll leave most of that for homework. The first thing I want to do is try to show us how far off we are. The second is to help us refocus on the truth, just the basics. Finally, I want to try to encourage us, to advise us on how to avoid the pitfalls all around us and actually gain the confidence we need to face the future. Because make no mistake, my friend; despite the craziness of this world, some

things have never changed. And we have to cling to those things, cling like we are drowning in a burning shipwreck and only one thing can keep us afloat. As I am going to show you here, that one thing is Jesus.

The crazy thing is—maybe the craziest thing of all—no one seems to know him anymore.

## CHAPTER 1

# WHAT IN THE WORLD ARE WE LIVING FOR, ANYWAY?

**E**ver go doom-scrolling? How about junk-scrolling? I'll bet you have. If you've ever started doing it, it's hard to stop. Watching videos is just so *easy*, and so much of the silliness that is out there is fun to watch. At least it is to my decaying brain, which used to feed itself on philosophical thoughts and great works of literature and art. The older I get the more adolescent I become, and the mental issues aren't helping. Thank God I don't have much interest in pornography—I am averse to anything fake and dispassionate (not to mention absurd and utterly demeaning to everyone involved)—but I have found myself recently watching videos of food. And straight up loving it. That's right—food porn. Let's be honest; we've all done it.

Are we serious, though? Can this really be happening? It seems like my mind is literally wasting away. Maybe that's why "brain-rot" has become not only a trend, but a sort of art form. Only in a world gone mad.

I know, I know. The world has gone mad before. There can be no doubt. In fact, if you read the Bible, you'll find that the world went mad early and often. And our current world will likely never match the madness of ancient Rome, where the chief entertainment was watching people get ripped apart by wild animals, or Nazi Germany, where the main business was sending entire people groups to the gas chamber.

But hold on a bit; let's be honest here. We may not be that far gone, but we are close. People die by the millions in horrific ways every day, all over the world, and the average American person, even the average Christian, couldn't give a rip about it. Right now, the only thing that many Americans seem to care about is—wait for it—their own future and the future of their children. That's right: in a world absolutely racked by chaos, disease, poverty, oppression, and hopelessness, the main game in the USA right now is to hunker down, draw in, and make sure *my* safety, *my* security, *my* future, *my* wealth, and *my* rights are protected.

You know it's true; the current trend on the political scene, which has somehow once again been joined to the spiritual scene, is all about ignoring the needs of the larger world and making sure I can have the kind of society I want. There is really no getting around it; this is the state of things.

Let me paint the picture another way. Some of the wealthiest, most secure, most comfortable people who have ever existed—mostly white, upper-middle-class Americans, many of whom are professing Christians—have launched a new, fervent campaign to

essentially safeguard their own interests. The political debate we can safely ignore; the simple point that needs to be made here is that this is completely and totally against everything Jesus ever did or taught. This point is so obvious from reading the New Testament that it is really hard to see how anyone could miss it. Jesus left the perfect, peaceful, secure, comfortable world of Heaven to live and die in a world marred by sin, brokenness, confusion, and oppression, so that we might be saved. So I am arguing right here and now that in a world gone mad, with addicts of every kind—drugs, sex, sports, you name it; people randomly shooting each other; wide-spread mental illness; and growing gaps of poverty and oppression, just as all the writers and prophets predicted of Western society, the craziest thing of all just might be this: a bunch of rich professing Christians saying to heck with a lost and dying world in the name of Jesus.

Sorry, but that's *really* messed up.

## CHAPTER 2

# HOW DID WE GET HERE?

I hate to bring this up, but I feel I have no choice.

I continue to find it absolutely baffling that so many professing Christians feel the need to argue that America used to be a Christian nation. All we need to do, they say, is get back to the beginning.

Seriously?

You think because there were some Christians among the founding fathers that America was a Christian nation, or founded on Christian principles?

Not if I am reading my Bible correctly.

First off, as a general rule, the number of real Christians in any given society will be few indeed. Jesus plainly taught this (see Matthew 7 and Matthew 22). The rest, sadly, are pretenders, or “nominal” Christians, meaning in name only. I think the safest thing to argue about the founding of our country is that there were a significant number of nominal Christians, just as we see

today—just perhaps more of them. But here’s the point: nominal Christianity isn’t real Christianity. In God’s Kingdom, it simply doesn’t count. In fact, in the Bible, the pretenders are the only ones Jesus really gets angry with. Nominal Christianity is always insidious and never really good for anybody. Real sinners have always been closer to the kingdom than pretend Christians.

Christianity indeed made headway in Rome during the first centuries after Jesus, but as everyone knows, it soon became tainted by the lure of politics and power, with which it remains enamored to this day. This ill-fated attraction, so clearly against the life and teaching of Jesus and his apostles, marked the end of the pure and powerful version of Christianity that began with our Lord’s resurrection and spread throughout most of the known world through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Throughout the Middle Ages, Christianity grew to be a bloated, corrupt monstrosity badly in need of reform, which mercifully came. But when it came, it was incomplete. The Reformers may have gotten a good bit right, but not everything. Most obviously, they failed to see the necessity of a break between church and state, even persecuting those who did. In fact, one could argue that this colossal failure—which began, again, with Constantine in Rome—has never fully been corrected. The early American government may have separated church and state (Jesus did it first, of course, with the inauguration of the Kingdom of Heaven), but the church, bizarrely, does not seem to have gotten the message. And that brings us to today, when the Christian upper middle class is once again attempting to put the two firmly together.

So back to the founding of America—we are in the mess we are in today because this is what America gave birth to. America is not and never has been a Christian nation, no matter how many supposed Christian ideals may have leaked into our social consciousness or moral codes (short answer: not that many). America is one thing above all else: a nation born of a desire for political and economic freedom. Never in an eternity of years would Jesus and his disciples have gotten into the affairs of the kingdoms of this world or pursued such worldly aims. But in America these are part of our very DNA. It's way past time to admit it: in this country we all grow up with a sense of entitlement. We believe that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are ours by birthright—three things the follower of Jesus surrenders the moment he picks up his cross (that's right—I said it).

Add to this the inevitable drift toward greed and sexual indulgence that every single advanced society since the beginning of time has manifested, then add to that the incredibly useful but also thoroughly dangerous modern conveniences that have made sin so accessible today, and there you have it: a recipe for spiritual disaster. We are ruined. And in this incredibly dangerous climate, we have created a God in our own image, the original sin of God's first people. Our God, the false God, *wants* us to pursue these things. Our God delights in our wealth, desires our earthly happiness, and longs for us to have fuller, more comfortable lives (I'm not just talking about the prosperity gospel here—I'm talking about the rebirth of premillennialism and the growing popularity of postmillennialism as well). So instead of

getting out of our comfort zones to do battle for Jesus, out where the needs are, we are all just digging in our heels and getting started on this incredible future we are all entitled to enjoy. We *will* have our long lives and our large families and our luxury vacations and our earthly comforts and our quiet pleasures, because God said so—the rest of the world be damned (literally).

But this is spiritual nonsense. For even if something like this picture will take place in the future, that's for the *future*. For now, we'd all better be following Jesus—in other words, doing what he did on earth. Because—duh—that's what the entire New Testament calls us to do. And because if we don't, we may not make it to heaven.

Wait, what??

## CHAPTER 3

# GETTING BACK TO JESUS

At this point you may be unconvinced—or even offended. I am fine, you will argue. I'm not addicted to anything; I am living sincerely as a true Christian. I do all the right things: I go to church; I raise my family right; I avoid habitual sin (most of the time); I am responsible with my finances; I care about others, and from time to time I actually show it; I am not crazy at all. I am quite normal, thank you.

To this I say: perhaps it is better to be mad than to be middle class.

The middle-class soul dreams only of the comfort and safety of the garden. To have a family, do some fulfilling work, and not cross any lines. To not bother others and not be bothered in return. To live a long, full life, with a nice wife, some nice kids—lots of them, of course—and have a nice and full retirement. All the while convincing ourselves that what passes in most places for luxuries are for us just simple pleasures, our inalienable rights.

There is only one problem with this.

Jesus was not middle class.

Jesus was the craziest individual of all. So were his apostles. Other people told them so; it's recorded in the Bible. They lived lives that were considered insane—extreme, dangerous, and ultimately short-lived. They were revolutionaries and martyrs. They gave up everything for the cause, including comfort, security, necessities, and in the end their lives.

I am reminded of our great works of secular literature, which have much to teach us here. In Shakespeare's plays, the fool is often the only one who talks sense. The point in such works is clear: only those outside the camp, outside the mainstream, can see and know the truth. The rest are too busy conforming. They don't want truth; they only want security. But of course the fool will never be accepted by society; he will always be considered an outsider, a madman. That's the deal. And if he speaks too much truth, as the prophets of old did, ultimately he will be banished or even killed. The masses simply will not tolerate too much truth; they prefer to live in lies.

You can see where I am going with this.

It's one thing to be a little bit mentally crazy. As I said in the beginning, we are all a little mad in this modern world.

It's another to be crazy in a spiritual sense. This is something we all need, desperately.

I think we had better take another look at Jesus. Quick.

In what follows, stay with me, my friend. Your life could be at stake. So could mine. We desperately need to recover a vital truth that has gone missing in our times.

Let's start with a reminder: Jesus was fully man, but he was also fully God. Because of this, he was and always will be our example. In other words, he is the only one we should seek to imitate. And imitating Jesus—well, this is the only kind of Christianity there is. He said it himself; so did his apostles. Our goal in life—our duty—is to come to Jesus, accept his message, follow him, and seek to live out his mission. To know him and to make him known. All else, to quote the apostle Paul, is garbage. Knowing Jesus truly and living out his very life—this is the only path to Heaven. As Paul put it: “that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; if somehow I may attain to the resurrection from the dead” (Philippians 3:10-11).

Now, let's think about this for a minute. A lot of people today think becoming a Christian is all about just believing in Jesus. You hear this all the time. But this is not really how Jesus or Paul presented it. And here is our vital missing truth. In our Lord's teaching, belief is foundational, but so is discipleship. This is plain and obvious when reading through the Gospels. In other words, without actually following Jesus—seeking to live out the life he lived—you can't make it to Heaven. A lot of people get freaked out by this; they think this takes us back to the Middle Ages, when the church taught that all sorts of good works were

necessary to get to Heaven. But this is not it at all. Again, stay with me here.

The Bible is crystal clear that we can't do anything to repair our broken relationship with God. We are sinners; our lives are marred and marked by daily failures to do what God requires. This has caused a rift in our relationship with God that we are no longer fit to fix. In short, we are *guilty*, under God's condemnation. (Sorry, but this is just how the Bible presents it; in fact, this is exactly where Paul's long presentation of the gospel in the book of Romans begins). Paul goes on to show in Romans that we need an *outside* righteousness to atone for us; in short, we need the sacrifice of someone who has never sinned. The Bible calls this "God's righteousness"—it cannot be our own. And of course this righteousness is found in the perfect life and pure blood of Jesus, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). And as Paul puts it, if we have faith that Jesus and Jesus alone can save us—if we trust fully in who he is and what he has done—then we have peace with God. Our guilt is taken away, we are declared righteous in the court of heaven, and we become God's children. So far so good.

But the journey to Heaven doesn't end there; it only begins. It's not that faith is the gate to salvation and good works are the way, though there is some truth to this picture. It's more that believing in Jesus also means accepting or embracing him—all of him. To Jesus, being a Christian is more than just believing a bunch of truths about him. For sure, to be a real Christian means coming to Jesus in faith, believing that he is who he said he is and that he alone can save you, but it also means coming to Jesus in

repentance and surrender, declaring that he is Lord and that you must obey him. Jesus said this over and over again in his teaching. Go back to the Gospels and look it up.

Paul, who wrote so clearly about justification by faith, puts it this way: when you come to Jesus in faith, you are embracing or accepting his *death to sin* (Romans 6). You aren't coming with some sort of vague, empty belief; you are coming with the full knowledge of what Jesus's death actually means, or you aren't coming at all. To believe in Jesus and be baptized in his name means that you are dead to sin and alive to God, just as Jesus was. Furthermore, Paul says, being baptized into Christ means that you are beginning a new life, a life in the Holy Spirit, and here's the crucial point: it is only through this life in the Spirit that you can enter Heaven (Romans 8:12-17, Galatians 6:7-9). If you continue in sin, the entire New Testament tells us over and over again, you will not make it to Heaven (see Hebrews 10, 1 Corinthians 6, and Galatians 5 for very clear statements of this point). And my friend, in this earthly life, says Paul, trying to follow Jesus means *suffering*, and only those who suffer with Christ will be glorified with him (Romans 8:17).

So Paul's gospel message mirrors that of Jesus exactly. And it also helps make the teaching of our Lord that much clearer. If anyone would come after him, Jesus said again and again, they must deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow him daily. The road to Heaven is the road of discipleship after all. There is no other way. And what this means, again, is simply that we seek to imitate Jesus. We live as he lived; we do what he did; we love what he loved and hate what he hated. We focus on what

he focused on and leave out the rest. We do his deeds and give ourselves to his cause. In short, we are all about *his* mission—a single-minded, sold-out, all-consuming pursuit of love, truth, holiness, compassion, justice, and healing. A life poured out for God and others and nothing else besides. A life that gives and gives, expecting nothing in return.

And when we compare this idea of the Christian life to the nice, polite, comfortable, sane, secure, sanitized world of the upper-middle-class American Christian (which is all nothing more than glossed-over greed), how does it come across?

You guessed it.

Crazy.

## CHAPTER 4

# MORE ABOUT JESUS

I began this book by saying that I might be losing it a little bit. My mind is going and my body is long gone.

But I hope I am full-on *spiritually* crazy; crazy as Jesus was. Meaning my life looks so much like his that the world—even the Christian world—thinks I’ve lost it. Because I am convinced that anyone who actually follows Jesus will come across this way. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus’s family came to that conclusion quite early; as I said before, they thought he was out of his mind (Mark 3:21).

In this chapter and the next, I am going to argue that following Jesus involves a level of dedication that indeed seems like madness. Jesus made it clear: whoever would follow him must actually...follow him. Literally. It was clear he meant it; he wanted to see if people really loved and trusted him and were willing to give him everything. And he said that if we don’t do this then we won’t make it to Heaven. Simply stated, Jesus’s message goes like this: if you won’t be my disciple, then you can’t make it to Heaven. And if you don’t follow me and seek to imitate me—go

where I am going and do what I am doing—then you can't be my disciple. Because this is what disciples do.

Jesus's teaching makes this clear; incredibly, however, American Christians today seem to have missed it. Or maybe they say they believe it, but they have actually sort of ignored or swept aside what following Jesus means. Again, though, it really is quite simple. Following Jesus means believing in him, learning from him, and imitating him. So here's the point for our little book, and the point that needs to resound in our present age. Jesus was really about one thing: spreading the love and truth of his Heavenly father. That's it. He loved God and people so much that he poured out his life for them, every single day until he went to the cross. This passion and zeal consumed him (John 2:17). He said that the greatest of all Old Testament laws was to love God and others with everything within us, and he lived this out every day. He cared nothing for the things of this world, even for food and drink. *His* food and drink, he said, was to do his father's will. To put it bluntly, this was all he really cared about.

Jesus could be found with sinners—like, real ones—so much so that he was called their friend. Think about that for a minute. He ate and drank and hung out with them. And he was constantly with the poor, the oppressed, and the outcast—he said he came to preach the gospel to these first and foremost (Luke 4:18). He was ostracized by the social leaders of his day, the religious elite. He spent his days on the move, his nights in unfamiliar places. He loved, healed, blessed, prayed, and gave. He lived by faith in the provision of his father and let the larger world and its pursuits pass him by. He was clothed in humility and served. He had a

goal; he knew where he was headed. And ultimately he was faithful to that calling, faithful unto death.

Now, let me say it again: Jesus seemed, for all intents and purposes, strange and different, an outsider, a man obsessed, of another world, crazy. They said the same thing about Paul. So the sober truth for us is this: if we would really be following Jesus today—as dedicated to his cause as he was—what would people say about us?

## CHAPTER 5

# GIVING IT ALL UP IN A WORLD OBSESSED WITH GETTING

**B**ut wait a minute, you say; something's gone wrong here. How in the world can we really be like Jesus? First of all, he was divine, and never struggled with sin; second, what would following Jesus even mean in a modern world? Surely the Bible's message is also to get married, have children, be responsible with our finances, be a good church member, and enjoy God's good gifts. Being a disciple may mean loving Jesus above all, but surely we can love other stuff too. Is Jesus calling us to literally do what he did: be homeless and live like a monk? Despise hygiene and sleep outside? Eat as little as possible and stay on the move?

This is the typical response of most American Christians. In today's climate of rationalization and compromise, I am tempted to simply answer: yes. But of course I can't. Times *are* different; things have changed. Jesus is no longer here, so we can't follow him around literally. But what I will argue is that the *essence* of

what following Jesus means must still be in place; Jesus made it clear that discipleship was required for eternal life. And I think it is clear from his teaching that the essence of following Jesus is simply this, as we have said: imitating him. The writings of the apostles in the later New Testament make this abundantly clear; our new identity is Jesus. We are to become as much like him as we can; we are literally to “put him on” (Romans 13:14), to fold our identity into his. To give up our own lives and seek to live out his. In other words, to be dedicated—heart, soul, mind and strength—to carrying out his mission.

In order to do this, then, *surrender* has to come into play. Jesus called us to so love God and others that we don't really think of ourselves. This means I have to plan my entire life around his mission. This means my goal in life is not to gain earthly pleasure, make money, or even have a family; Jesus and his mission come before all of that. And when you look at upper-middle-class American Christians, let's be honest; for the most part we have it all completely turned around. We don't ask God when and if we should get married; we just assume it's okay. We don't ask God what career he wants us to have, considering how to use our talents for the mission; we just pursue whatever career we want. We don't ask God if we should have kids or how many; we just go for it. We don't ask God what to do with our money, or what house to buy, or whether any of this is good for the mission; we just do it. We spend money and save money and make plans with our money, and it is all usually just based on ourselves, our comforts, and our future. We don't seek ever-increasing ways to give things up to serve Christ or others more; we tend to do our religious acts on the side, something we wear around our necks

as we go about the daily business of life. But the one who is truly following Jesus and seeking to love and serve him to the uttermost doesn't live this way. He first gives everything up to follow Jesus, finding his place in the mission, then he makes his life decisions based on that. Or, if he becomes a Christian later in life, he is constantly seeking ways to give up more and more for Jesus.

I'm not saying this is easy to do, or that anyone can do this perfectly; of course not. It's hard; even impossible. Only God can help us do it (John 6:65). But imagine this for a second. Imagine that all professing Christians in the world took this seriously. Imagine we were all actually living for Jesus and others. Like really. You think the world wouldn't be different? You think we would be as obsessed with our own wellbeing and happiness as so many appear to be today? You think we would all be so concerned with making money, like so many are? You think we would be promoting "America First," like so many Christians are today? You think we would have divided churches, or church services centered mostly on entertainment, or empty sign-up sheets, or vacant prayer meetings? Of course not.

The point I am making here is simple: real Christianity demands an all-out surrender to Jesus, full-stop. And we simply don't have that today. The Christianity of the New Testament has been replaced by a hollow sham, a counterfeit with a "made in America" sticker on it. But as we have said throughout this book, we are all affected by this sickness; no one is living for Jesus as we ought. And so it is fair to ask: in our modern world, where we are held back by so many temptations, complications, and our

ever-growing mental and physical weaknesses, is there any hope for a change? Is it too late for us all? In the following chapters I am going to show that it is not. Stay with me, my friend. Hope and encouragement are on the way.

## CHAPTER 6

# KEEPING IT REAL ABOUT OURSELVES

**N**ot to keep repeating myself, but this life has pretty much done me in. My mental health has suffered horribly just from trying to get back into ministry after leaving the mission field. As the rejections began to stack up one by one (I was doing most of the rejecting), so did the disappointments. At some point, hope became a distant memory; finally, something snapped (I'm not sure what). As I said, depression is a disorder that affects your brain's ability to function; I have lived this out now for the past decade or so, though until recently I was in serious denial. I am now in the process of trying to navigate these unfamiliar waters, but it's hard to even stay afloat, let alone attempt to doggy paddle. I haven't got the strength.

But if the disappointments of life hadn't driven me mad, the pleasures would have. We just described the Bible's version of what it means to be a Christian, but can any of us really claim to be doing this? I can hardly be bothered to get off the couch, let alone go to church, which is so incredibly *boring*. Most of the time I would much rather junk-scroll than pray. I don't need any Christian friends any more—at least I think I don't. And who cares about all the people dying around the world—I tried to reach them

in my younger years and failed miserably. There isn't much else I can do. The older I get, the slower I think and move; by the time I actually get there, it will be too late.

Jesus died at 33; maybe Christianity is a young man's game. But this doesn't make sense either; young people, an increasingly vacuous group, are the last ones who should be leading the charge (but look who is in the pulpits of so many churches today). The longer I live, the more my youthful zeal seems to have been little more than a testosterone-fueled campaign designed to make me appear romantically irresistible—a sort of Christian Byronic hero. The church at large is spiritually bankrupt, to be sure—they've gone all in for life on this earth—but I can't do anything about it anymore. I can hardly concentrate on spiritual things myself, and I was literally reared to do it; how can I expect middle-class Americans to do any better? How, after all, can I avoid sin from day-to-day, especially with all these TV and computer screens around me? Will I even make it through the next hour? Do I even believe this stuff anymore? No wonder so many people are deconverting.

If you're anything like me, you've had these thoughts—frequently. And this is where I want to pause for a minute. Because in a world gone as mad as ours has, avoiding serious sin from day to day, let alone living out the mission of Jesus, has become next to impossible. Let's just be absolutely honest about that. If we aren't depressed, we are addicted to pleasure, far beyond what Jesus and the early Christians ever dreamed of. Sometimes it can feel like it's too late; no wonder American Christians have quite

literally lowered the bar. Post-millennialism or something like it *has* to be true; no other system makes sense anymore.

But we can't go down this road. Whatever our view of the end times, Jesus made it plain that the discipleship he was calling us to was for keeps, until he returns. In this age, we do his mission; in the age to come, we get the good stuff. In this age, we wage war and battle and suffer; in the next, we get our reward. In this age, to put it bluntly, we *die*; in the next, we live. Simple as that. Which brings me to the title of this book. If you get to Heaven, my friend, you *will* die trying. You won't have a choice. So for the rest of our time together, I want to try to help us reset a little. If Heaven is the goal and quitting is not an option, but I am facing so many obstacles both within and without—each earthly step I take sinks me deeper into the mire—then how can I live this Christian life successfully? How, practically, can I follow Jesus and make it to Heaven? That is what the rest of this little book is about. Let's start with a really basic truth—a truth that should transform our entire way of thinking.

## CHAPTER 7

# THE PROBLEM IS US

**H**ere's the number one thing you need to understand if you want to follow Jesus and make it to Heaven.

The problem is you.

You've heard the phrase "I'm my own worst enemy?" That is more true in the Christian life than anywhere else. Sure, we've got all these horrible modern conveniences to slow us down; we are all so over-gratified that we've gotten depressed, and so over-stimulated that we can hardly sit still. (No doubt you are struggling to read this sentence). And there are so many temptations on every side. On top of all that, the Bible teaches that we have a supernatural enemy against us—the devil himself. Not the over-the-top frightening sort of creature you get in tacky horror movies; an invisible, subtle, and far more dangerous sort, a being who wants you not only dead but in Hell forever with him, one who will do whatever he can to wreck your faith, ruin your life, destroy your marriage, dismantle your relationships with other believers, and, if he can't keep you out of Heaven, keep you so utterly useless in the Christian life that you accomplish next to nothing for God or others. We have all these things against us, to

be sure; but more than anything else, we have ourselves. And friend, that is enough.

The New Testament writings make it clear: when it comes to doing spiritual good, there is *flesh*, which is us, and there is *Spirit*, which is God. In other words, there is the earthly us—our brains and bodies—and there is the power of God. That’s it. And you guessed it: our flesh is no use in our fight against sin. In fact, it can only hurt us—Paul says it is actually fighting against the Spirit (Galatians 5, Romans 7). Only God’s power will do. So our primary task in this whole spiritual battle we call the Christian life is really quite simple: we have to figure out how to get more of the Spirit and have less of ourselves. To put it the Bible’s way, we have to figure out how to *put to death* the desires of our flesh, and the only way to do this is by the power of God’s Spirit (see Romans 8 and Galatians 5 for more). Let this biblical truth sink into the depths of your soul: you have absolutely no power at all to be holy and follow Jesus. NONE.

Now, the simplest way to get more of God’s Spirit is to pray for it. Jesus makes it clear that God is willing to give us spiritual help, and that all we have to do is ask (see Luke 11). Interestingly, though, both Jesus and Paul also say that in order to subdue our flesh, there is a certain amount of discipline we have to engage in. Jesus said it like this: we have to *watch* and pray—that is, to *stay spiritually alert* at all times, due to the weakness of our flesh (Matthew 26). Paul puts it this way: in order to prevent our flesh from having its hideous way with us, we have to make our bodies our slaves (I Corinthians 9:27). We have to literally (the text says this) “bruise” our bodies; we have to beat them down and keep

them from getting back up. This is shocking imagery, but it makes sense. Let's break this down for a minute.

Here is what your body wants to do—or, perhaps more helpfully, here is what *my* body wants to do, and probably yours is similar, because the Bible describes us this way. My flesh, to put it simply, wants to *rule*. It wants to feed itself all the time, and it doesn't know when to stop. It doesn't want just one bite of cake; it wants it till it doesn't want it anymore, and it wants it whenever it wants it (metaphorically and literally). It doesn't just want sexual satisfaction; it wants it all the time, all the way, the more the better. It doesn't just want to hurt someone's feelings; it wants to beat that other person down and have complete victory over them. It wants that other person to bow down and admit our superiority. It wants to rule.

Now, you may not think of yourself in this extreme way. I have noticed that many middle-class people have rather tame and ordinary passions—except when someone offends them, and then they morph into comic book-worthy monsters of revenge (I see you Karen). But if you're human and honest with yourself, you know what I am talking about. And when we are away from all the restraints and safety measures God designed to help keep us in line, like the truth, prayer, our friends and loved ones, other church members, guardrails of every sort—anything and anyone who can provide some accountability—our flesh, more often than not, seizes the opportunity and runs with it. Especially when we are tired, discouraged, or in recovery mode (most of my temptations, I have found, come calling in the evening, when my resistance is at its lowest).

And there is more: if you give your flesh a little taste, you've already lost the battle. This is especially true with sexual temptation. Once the flesh gets going, forget about it. It's helpful, then, to approach our bodies in this way: unless God intervenes, a harmless glance could lead to actual immorality. A tiny sip to a full-on chug. An angry thought to a murderous action. One step on the path and you're already there. One moment of hesitation and you've already been swept away. That's how the flesh works. If you feed it, even a tiny crumb, it will instantly grow exponentially and demand all the more, until before you know it you're just along for the ride on the back of a gigantic, hideous, runaway freak, howling across the countryside sniffing for something to ravage. We are all Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and mostly the latter (at least I am). No wonder Paul said we have to beat our flesh down and keep it from getting up. We can't let up or turn our backs on our bodies for a minute, especially in this modern world, when our flesh has so much to feed itself on—at the literal click of a button, and no one the wiser.

But how many of us are putting forth this type of effort to keep our flesh under control? I'm not. This stuff is just too dang hard. I'm too stinking *tired* to fight my own body. I need to rest, mentally and physically, for Heaven's sake. But like Pilgrim of old, as soon as I do, I've wandered off the path.

In this world of horrors all around, with the walls of my resistance already crumbling, is there any hope?

## CHAPTER 8

# BACK TO DISCIPLINE

**A**s I get older, I get more tired and weak—mentally and physically—and this doesn't make things any easier. I now have five chronic conditions I am fighting, four of which make day-to-day living a veritable nightmare. I am definitely trudging uphill. None of it is life-threatening, but it is all so utterly exhausting. I am, as we all are, a thoroughly modern person—made sick and weak not by having too little, but by having too much. And in this business of trying to fight my failing flesh and make it to Heaven in a world gone mad, I've come to realize how desperately needy I am; I seem to grow weaker by the minute. The only real question left to answer, then, is this: am I still willing to pay the price? Am I still ready to go all the way—to do whatever it takes to win?

It makes so much sense that Paul uses both athlete and soldier imagery to encourage us in his writings. But first we need a heart check. Am I really willing to keep on training? Am I wanting to actually be in the game, or am I content to ride the bench for the rest of my life? Or maybe just relax in the bleachers?

This is a bit of a trick question, of course. If you are a real Christian, you are in the game, my friend, like it or not. You are in the battle. It's win or lose now, and all for keeps. Every day is the fourth quarter; every day your life is on the line. It's all or nothing. Spiritual life or spiritual death. Heaven or Hell. You choose. The enemy is coming; you either throw in the towel or grab your weapons and get to fighting.

But how do we do that? What does it even mean to discipline our bodies, to try and gain this holiness that we have to have, but that gets harder by the minute? Let's start as simply as possible. We've all heard stories of super saints who spend hours and hours alone with God and who manage to keep themselves thoroughly unstained by the world. We know our calling to follow Jesus is deadly serious, but if you're anything like me, you find these stories a bit unrealistic—if not downright disheartening. And even straight-up *loco*. Nobody took this kind of thing further than the monks and nuns of the Middle Ages, some of whom separated from the trappings of earth so far (literally) that they lived as veritable corpses, nibbling on hay and water, lashing themselves with whips of their own weaving, locking themselves in solitary confinement for years on end, and praying and reading Scripture till it (and it alone) was oozing from their orifices. The funny thing is, the same Paul who told us that we have to beat up our bodies also told us that denying our bodily pleasures in this sort of mindless way is in and of itself pointless (Colossians 2:20-23). We all need more self-denial, but the goal is that the denial be aimed at *sin*, not just denial for denial's sake.

But we have to be careful here. Again, Paul does tell us that the flesh is our enemy—it is waging war against the Spirit—and with enemies, you can never let them off the mat. Our foot needs to stay on that neck for keeps. So here is an initial and vital biblical principle to reflect on in this whole matter of getting to Heaven, and it really is the order of the day in our modern age—and it is nothing other than a return to the old paths. That principle is this: we have to practice a general self-denial every day in order to make it. When I say “general,” I mean “whole-body,” in that this discipline must be aimed at every bodily desire or impulse we have. It sort of works this way: if you are not keeping your whole body under control, some part of it will get you. Imagine your body as the bad guy at the end of a typical action movie—if you keep him even a tiny bit alive, he will inevitably regain consciousness, grab the gun, and kill you. Or, if you keep only his arms bound, he’ll trip you with his feet. You’ve got to cuff him, gag him, wrap him in chains, get 10 or 12 armed men around him, and throw him in the most secure cell you’ve got. And then monitor his every waking moment.

So we have to work to deny *all* our bodily desires; there is no getting around this. We can’t eat what we want, whenever we want; we cannot indulge our lusts, or our greed, or our jealousy, or our anger, or whatever it is, even on occasion. We have to keep general limits on ourselves and our time. Even when we are enjoying some much needed relaxation, we need to maintain self-control. Our bodies have to be our slaves (1 Corinthians 9:27), not the other way around.

Now, I am *not* advocating some sort of athletic or military-style training regimen here. There is some overlap, as Paul notes, but let's be serious. Most of us can't run three miles every morning, lift weights, sleep exactly the same number of hours every day, eat the same things every meal, measure our recreation time to the second, and so on. Life just doesn't work that way. (Jogging always made me more exhausted and temptation-prone, if I'm being honest). And let's face it: the upper-middle-class white Christian is the world champion at this sort of thing. I've never seen so many people dedicated to living longer. (If I see another rich, comfortable, upper-middle class white Christian out jogging exuberantly through their affluent suburban neighborhood, I might throw up). Sorry, but zeal for longer life has nothing to do with Christian discipline. If only we could have that same level of energy for prayer or caring for others! So, no thank-you to exercise routines, weight workouts, and zest for living. As we will see, the joy of the true Christian is won only through the daily putting to death of just these desires for a rich and fulfilling life that the upper middle class feeds itself on.

So what then does Godly discipline look like? Before we attempt to answer this question, let's first identify the desires we need to control. We know about our most basic ones, our desires for food and sex. But it seems to me that these are getting too much press in our day and age. What about covetousness, for example? Jesus talked more about this than any other sin. Is this part of the body's desires? You bet it is. What about pride? Is this a bodily desire? What about anger? Or jealousy? Or just having more interest and excitement in the things of this life than the things of Heaven? (Think about the joy you feel over sports, for

Heaven's sake, or during a pleasant shopping trip, as compared to when you're reading the Bible or thinking about those in need). I think we're getting the picture.

Again, working out doesn't do it; keeping our bodies thin or muscular is in and of itself spiritually pointless. So is focusing only on food and sex. (Let's be honest, many American Christians mistake physical fitness for holiness). The picture that should be emerging is that there are a host of bodily desires that we are allowing ourselves to indulge in on a daily basis, and if we were honest, many of them have completely overcome us. In this modern world, the enemy has overrun our lines, and the battle appears hopelessly lost. We can't follow Jesus as we ought because our flesh is ruling, day by day, moment by moment.

If I don't experience joy in God, and yet I have intense pleasure over something as empty as a ballgame or a shopping experience, it's not that those things are necessarily sin—it's just that something has gone wrong here. The battle for self-discipline, then, as so many have said, is really a battle for joy and pleasure in the things of God over the things of this earth. So this, in the end, is really the key principle of bodily discipline. The need for bodily self-control is the starting point—Jesus told us, after all, to cut off our hands if they cause us to sin. We have to remove anything that might tempt us. But by itself this is not enough. There is another side to this coin—and as we will see, it involves the most foundational—and challenging—discipline of all.

## CHAPTER 9

# THE ROOT OF EVERYTHING

**W**hat follows is the key to everything when it comes to success in the Christian life. I'm totally serious here. The problem is, winning on this front is a bit like trying to pin down water.

I think you will agree that in order to have proper self-discipline—the kind that is useful and pleases God—it has to be properly motivated. It has to come from God—from his Spirit. We've already alluded to this. But here's a key point that may have already occurred to you: if we don't have delight in God in the first place, then we won't engage in Godly discipline at all.

It sounds a bit paradoxical, I know; in order to discipline myself for Godliness, I first have to be...Godly. In order to love God, I first have to love God. Not good. But instead of getting lost down this philosophical rabbit hole, let's keep it simple.

I think it fairly obvious that we are creatures of delight; we do what we want to do. (Even when we do things we think we don't want to do, there is another, deeper desire motivating us. Think about it.) This is who we are. So it makes sense to say that if we

don't delight in God and his things, we won't pursue him. Delight in God, then, is the root of everything. But who delights in God all the time, especially in this world of sensual pleasures? I know I don't. David's celebrated Psalm 63, in which he says his flesh desires God more than water—in a desert, no less—usually feels a million miles away, if not outright illogical. (How can my flesh desire a purely spiritual being such as God? Answer: only by his Spirit.) So here's a simple, time-honored takeaway: developing our delight in God, and thus winning the battle we've been talking about, comes down to two simple actions: taking in the good stuff and keeping out the bad. That's pretty much it. Taking in what fuels the Spirit and keeping out what feeds the flesh. The goal is to maintain our delight in God—the key to walking by the Spirit (Galatians 5).

Thankfully, there have been many Christian thinkers who have discussed the importance of delighting in God, those of late under the influence of such writers as C.S. Lewis. But I find many of these attempts to be off-target in several ways, and so I think it important to follow this side-trail for a moment. First, many of these writers fail to give place to the intense pain and suffering required to gain or experience delight in God, even a little bit. Make no mistake—waging war against the flesh in order to delight in God will feel like what it is: a battle to the death. Second, they often fail to properly distinguish motives: the true follower of Jesus is overwhelmingly concerned with pleasing God, not himself. This is the spirit of our Lord Jesus. Third, they often fail to recognize that full and complete joy in God is reserved for Heaven (the first question in the Westminster Catechism was right after all). In this age we struggle and wage war; in the next, we

know endless joy in the presence of our Lord. As David was realizing in Psalm 63, we can't stay in the sanctuary all the time. That's what heaven is for. Fourth, they often fail to take seriously Jesus's own warnings about delight in him; it is entirely possible, according to our Lord in many places in the Gospels, to have a delight in God that doesn't lead to obedience—a false, incomplete, or misplaced delight. In my humble opinion, this is an issue with "intellectual" Christian writers the world over, including C.S. Lewis, who love the idea of ultimate truth and beauty and all the wonderful things God represents, but who often fail to fully apprehend the God of the Bible—who is praised first and foremost for his holiness. As Jonathan Edwards might put it, it is the failure of delighting in God for his natural attributes over his moral ones, when in truly Godly people it is the reverse. Finally, such writers often fail to take their own ideas to their full and proper end. Being satisfied in God is not the end game, so to speak; in a very real sense it is the beginning, for it produces a zeal for God's glory in the world (just as it overflowed in God himself in creation). Some of these projects, then, while useful in many respects, are perhaps themselves a byproduct of our modern age's endless quest for joy and pleasure after all. So we must beware and approach this topic soberly and biblically, being careful not to go beyond where the Bible takes us.

Now, back to our main path. Make no mistake: delight in God, properly understood, is and must be the foundation of all we do in the Christian life, but this is no great revelation. It's simply the first and greatest commandment, which Jesus himself placed front and center. But here's the problem. There are so many things that give us earthly joy that we don't really have room for

anything else. We have delicious food, plenty of sexual gratification (so much so that we often resort to perverse or illicit desires to maintain pleasure), the luxuries of comfort and security, daily joys like entertainments, coveting (and getting!), and just good times all around. Our baskets are indeed full, and so are our hearts. We don't want Heaven because we already have it on earth.

When Paul described the Christian life as one of suffering, he was trying to encourage us to keep going because the glory of God and Heaven would be worth it (Romans 8:18). But which one of us has had this experience lately? That life is so bad that I am longing for Heaven? And come to think of it, which one of us has really hated sin lately, the way God hates it? Hated our immoral desires, our overindulgence, our failures in love, and our neglect of Jesus and the poor and oppressed? Who has wept as Jesus wept? Who has rejoiced over Heavenly things like he did? I think you get the picture. So the first and greatest of all battles is the battle for joy and delight in God and his things, over and against joy and delight in the things of earth. I am not saying all these earthly things are sinful in themselves, of course, but they certainly are when joy in God is weak or missing altogether.

So how do we fuel the Spirit within us? We have two ways, two means. The first is obvious: taking in the Word of God. It goes like this: you already have the Holy Spirit inside of you if you are a Christian. In order to feed that Spirit, to make it grow and come to life inside you, so to speak, so that it becomes a living, breathing, empowering force that gives you strength, faith, hope, and love for God and others—and outmuscles your flesh, if you will—you

need to stay in the Word of God, reading it consistently and in meaningful amounts. Reading the Bible daily can feel like drudgery, so don't overdo it and try too much. (By "meaningful amounts," I don't necessarily mean huge chunks, just nutritious mouthfuls, portions you genuinely and deeply reflect on, applying them to your life.) And routines are useful, but should not be rigid. But make sure you take in all of it from time to time, and feast continually upon those passages that you need most. Without the Word of God you simply cannot grow. For the Word of God was itself born of the Spirit—it is the Word of God's Spirit, the Spirit's own fuel. When you read it, it is calling to the Holy Spirit inside of you—Spirit to Spirit. Each day, and all throughout the day, let its gentle breath coax to life the flame inside of you.

The second—you guessed it—is prayer. Paul describes praying in the Holy Spirit as our primary weapon against the supernatural forces of evil. Prayer is that unique activity that unleashes the power of God. When a holy person prays according to the will of God, you can be sure they are striking deadly blows against the enemy. Taking in the Word is the fuel, but prayer is the energy, the fuel ignited and released—the flame of God properly blazing. (It is zeal—love ablaze, as one 20th-century prophet put it.) It is the highest activity of the soul on earth, because it most closely resembles the very heart of God—which beats for his own glory above everything else. It is greater than any work of man because it is God at work within us. It is the lifting of the hands on the mountaintop, which turns the battle. It is the night with God in the desert before the next day's work of the ministry. It is where everything is won or lost—the secret place of prayer. And if there is one sign more telling than anything else about our modern age,

it is that the prayer meeting is now a thing of the distant past. Our spiritual voices are silent. Many are speaking, make no mistake; but they are far too often the words of the flesh.

In times gone by, starting with the early church in the book of Acts, God's people would gather together and pray; they knew it was there that the battle was won or lost. Today such meetings cannot be found, or if they are, they are usually cut short or smothered by raucous praise concerts. But my friend—songs of victory are for after the battle is won. And in this life, the battle is raging daily. Jesus has won the ultimate victory, but we still have to run our earthly race—we still have to share his sufferings. And if we aren't fighting for delight in God—struggling mightily against this thick fog, this earthly mire, this sticky web of sensual entanglements we call the modern world—then we aren't fighting at all; we may in fact be losing.

But you can't give up, my friend. You will get to Heaven all right—but you will die a thousand deaths in the process. That's the deal—because that's the only way.

## CHAPTER 10

# WHERE SHOULD MY FOCUS BE?

**L**et's face it: we have a daunting task ahead of us. I plan by God's grace to get to Heaven; no habitual sin, self-centeredness, or worldly distraction is going to hold me back. With the help of the Holy Spirit, I will defeat my flesh—not perfectly, but resoundingly—so that I can say I am victorious. But what else should I change? Where else should I enter the fight and do battle for Jesus and others? Where should my focus be?

First of all, again, we should focus on ourselves—on the obvious sin in our lives. If there is any sort of habitual sin, be it gluttony, greed, immorality, anger, jealousy, or anything like this—we have to go to war on it. Applying the principles we laid down before, if there is a temptation in my life that I need to get rid of—then I need to get rid of it, simple as that. If it's overeating, attack it. Limit your portions and make better choices at the supermarket. If it's greed, stop fantasizing about wealth; stop buying things you don't need. Get rid of things if necessary. Downsize. Stop window shopping. If it's entertainment you are indulging in, call a timeout for a day or two. Set limits on your screen time. Plan to spend your free time in more meaningful ways. If it is immorality that is plaguing you, in your thoughts, in the things you are looking at, or

Heaven forbid in your relationships, call it quits. Cut the cord. Cancel the service. Dump the screens. End the relationship. Practice abstinence. Go on a fast; there are many ways to fast, after all. Skip the next sporting event. Go a day or two without certain enjoyments. Not just to be doing it, of course; spend the extra time with God and others. And try to start building good habits.

Second, start spending more time with God, on a daily basis. This is where the battle really lies, my friends. It doesn't have to be hours long, but it has to be consistent and meaningful. Try to never go a morning, let alone a day or more, without opening the Bible and letting it really speak to you. Meditate on it and let it do its quiet work in your soul. And start spending more time in prayer. See if you can sit still before God for even five minutes. Go somewhere private and turn off the lights. Get alone with your thoughts and the Lord. Confess your sins—always and often. Pour out your heart in repentance. Trust God to forgive you through Christ. Then ask him for help for specific things during the day, or whatever you are going through in your life. Don't be afraid to ask him boldly to give you power—the power to be pure, the power to be humble, the power to love others, the power to be his witness as opportunities arise.

Then pray for others. Pray for God's people in the same way you pray for yourself. Pray for the purity, unity, and usefulness of God's church. Pray for encouragement and provision for those in need. Pray for protection from evil for all of God's people. And always, always, as strength allows, pray for the success of the gospel. Think of those all around you and around the world who

have never heard of Jesus. Many of them are suffering horribly in their daily lives; pray that God has mercy upon them. Pray for their safety, their healing, and their deliverance. And then pray that the gospel gets to them in power and that they are saved. Pray that churches are formed where there are none and that they are built up and established. Pray that the millions who have never heard the gospel might be reached. Pray that no matter who is trying to reach them, they will be empowered to do so, no matter how immature they are. There are workers out there, and they need your help.

And then think about what else you can do. I am convinced that God wants most young people to finish their education, settle the marriage question, and be part of a church for a while, so they can grow up. Serious gospel ministry is for the mature believer, for those in whom God has worked for years to grow and establish. To those who are getting older, stop the bleeding of wasted time. Stop the endless spending of money and the insistence on building your future. God will take care of you and your children. Ask yourself—what sacrifices am I making for Jesus and those in need? How does your life demonstrate that you are following Jesus? What are you giving up? It starts with repentance and a determination to make a real change. Maybe you can start selling things you don't need, just to get rid of distractions. Maybe you can downsize to free up money for the mission. Someone once told me of a very wealthy person who was giving millions for the Kingdom. Okay, but maybe he was holding millions back, living in obvious luxury. It's not about the amount; God wants your heart. He wants you to give freely and generously, but he primarily wants you to love him utterly. And

Jesus calls us to so give everything up that we actually trust God to provide the needs in our lives. But who in America is doing that? That's crazy.

Don't ditch the church; it's tempting, but it can't be done. Find a congregation that is teaching the truth and join it. Ask to start a prayer meeting if there isn't one. Get together with others to encourage each other and to pray. Let Scripture-fueled prayer be the foundation of everything. And then ask God what he would have each person do. And watch out—you might just decide to do something insane for Jesus. But if you do, you might also be shocked to find that you are actually just following him—maybe for the first time.

# EPILOGUE

Mind you, it won't be easy. As I said, to take even the first step toward real sacrifice will feel like death. And make no mistake, it *is* death. That's why Jesus said to take up our crosses daily (Luke 9:23). Following Jesus means waking up every day and knowing you will die. And being increasingly happy with it.

Killing the flesh gets harder every day. I need God's Spirit more than ever; my mind and body are fading. I'm barely 50, but mentally at least, my life has been hard. The one thing I swore I would never do is live a normal life working with normal middle-class kids in the United States. I am now 15 years into this nightmare and it has nearly killed me. Literally. It has destroyed my mind and body and turned me into a mentally crippled shell of the person who left for the mission field immediately after college, vowing never to return. To be sure, I wasn't ready for the spiritual battle that awaited me overseas; I got my butt thoroughly kicked and limped home. But I went back out again, only to have to return due to God's clear direction. Most recently, I have lost out again and again and again on opportunities to get back in the missions game; I can't win for losing (though there aren't a lot of great opportunities out there to begin with). I have for the most part given up on returning to full-time ministry. But I've also slowly come to realize that I've been missing the point.

The old “life is a journey, not a destination” saying is wise indeed. The destination is Heaven. The point is getting there. But to get there, you have to live life to the full—God’s way. You have to say yes to the journey—not your own earthly, sinful journey, but the journey of Jesus, lived through you. It’s the road of discipleship, which starts with a cross (sorry, but the only way to accept the cross of Christ is to carry it). You have to stand face to face and go toe to toe with every difficult trial and every impossible temptation and every irritating person and every spiritual setback and you have to plow right through and keep on fighting. Whatever path God has for you—whatever calling, whatever career—is what you have to redeem, no matter how mentally and emotionally defeating it is.

That’s the secret I mentioned at the beginning, and it’s pretty much the meaning of life. It’s not about you and what you can accomplish; it’s all about what God can accomplish through your suffering. Because suffering, as we all know, is the only way to accomplish anything good. And the more you take on this challenge and live for God’s glory, no matter how impossible the pain, the more glory God gets. This is the worship in the wake of devastation (Job), the joy in the midst of famine (Habakkuk), the faith in the face of fire (Daniel’s friends), the praise in the prison cell (Paul and Silas), and the surrender on the brink of infinite separation (Jesus). Not my will but thine be done.

The question for all of us in this little book has simply been this: are we actually on this path?

There is really only one surefire way to tell. How much are you suffering for Jesus? I'm not talking about the suffering of normal life; for everyone other than the upper middle class and above, who are able to live on top of the world because they enjoy selling things (or who have never had to work at all), normal life is hard. I'm talking about suffering because you are fighting for Jesus—fighting against sin, fighting against temptation, fighting against the world, fighting against your flesh, fighting against the devil, fighting, fighting, fighting. You refuse to accept that latest sin; it WILL NOT happen again. You will make sure of that. You refuse to take that discouragement; you WILL trust in the promises of God. You WILL accept when you have done wrong; you will bear responsibility and vow to change. You will not accept spiritual mediocrity in your life; if you didn't pray today, then by God's grace you will pray tomorrow. If today you spent too much time entertaining yourself, tomorrow you will have more discipline. If today you failed to love, tomorrow you will make up for it. If today you stank of pride, tomorrow you will reek of humility. You will not neglect the needy any longer. You refuse to live for yourself and your children alone—you will put others above yourself. And for all of us in this fool's paradise called America, this means thinking of those around the world who are suffocating under an avalanche of poverty and oppression.

I will care for these; I will “lift up my eyes” (John 4:35). I will recall that Jesus came for the poor, the broken, and the oppressed (Luke 4:18). I will seek new and meaningful ways to reach the physically and spiritually needy in the entire world. I will seek out how to pray for them. I will give to them. I will hurt for them. I will desire their wellbeing. I will organize meetings at church to

discuss and pray for them. I will turn off my TV to pray for them further. I will do this consistently. I will go on trips to minister to them. I will stop thinking about my own society and my outward wellbeing; I will focus on the Kingdom of Heaven. For the Kingdom of Heaven is for all people everywhere and is all about knowing and loving Jesus and helping others to do the same. There is simply no time anymore for hours of entertainment, recreation, and the good life; that is old world thinking. The future is now. The Kingdom of God is in our midst. The time of reaping is upon us. This modern world has tricked us, trapped us, and presently holds us fast. To break out and break free is going to come at a cost; it will hurt. It will be pain and sacrifice like no other. And when we do make progress, in holiness, love, and prayer, the devil will be there to oppose us. He will try to destroy us, and at times he will come breathtakingly close to doing so. In fact, one day he will—but only when God allows it, and never for keeps.

We *will* die trying to make it to Heaven, each and every day; that is the only way to get there. The path to Heaven is marked by pain and suffering. It is to bear the cross each day and feel its imposing weight upon our backs. This is what it means, after all, to share in the sufferings of Jesus (Philippians 3:10). But in one important sense we will not suffer like Jesus. For glory to God, we don't have to bear the weight of God's punishment for our sins. Clinging to Jesus in a world gone mad means always being near to him, staying close to him, never letting him get too far away, and always, always, trying to imitate him. But more than anything else, it means trusting in him.

Because when the way gets nigh to impossible he will carry us. When we lie broken and bleeding from the battle he will heal us and restore us to health. When we fail and fall back, he will wait for us. When we fall down, he will pick us up. When the devil defeats us, Jesus will pray for us, and he will wait patiently until we regain our strength. Because clinging to Jesus means knowing that the price he paid for sin, which only he could pay, means the war is won. The prize for my suffering was bought at the price of his suffering. There is no going back, my friend, because there is nowhere to go but up. Heaven is waiting because Heaven is won. I will win because Jesus won for me. I will defeat sin because his purpose and plan for me cannot fail.

So when this world and my flesh and the devil finally kill me, I will be found victorious stretched across the threshold of Heaven with the cloak of Jesus grasped firmly in my hand, and our precious Savior wiping my brow and saying “it is finished.” I will die trying, but I will get there because I am clinging to Jesus. And knowing this makes me want to fall down on my face in repentance and then climb to my knees in prayer and then get up on my feet and walk out the door in the power of the Holy Spirit to do good to a dying world. I’m going to drag my run-down, washed-up, burned-out body and soul out the door each and every day and by the grace of God make it count for Jesus—and I will consider it all joy. We may be dying, my friends, but take heart—it’s the only way to live.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jesse Hamilton (or what's left of him) studied systematic and philosophical theology in grad school and has over 20 years of experience in Christian ministry. He is the author of four books in practical theology and a collection of poetry. He blogs occasionally at [jessebhamilton.com](http://jessebhamilton.com).