

# **HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES**

*A Seriously Unserious Guide to the Most Important Conversation You'll  
Ever Have*

# HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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### FOREWORD

### INTRODUCTION

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#### PART ONE: BEFORE YOU OPEN YOUR MOUTH

**Chapter 1 — Do You Actually Believe This?** *The Gospel Has to Wreck You Before You Can Share It*

**Chapter 2 — What Exactly Is the Gospel?** *Four Walls, One Message, No Substitutes*

**Chapter 3 — Killing the Freak-Out Factor** *What You're Afraid Of and Why You're Going to Do It Anyway*

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#### PART TWO: LEARNING TO LISTEN BEFORE YOU SPEAK

**Chapter 4 — Shut Up and Listen** *The Most Underrated Evangelism Skill Nobody Teaches*

**Chapter 5 — Reading the Room** *Not Everyone Is in the Same Place, and That Changes Everything*

**Chapter 6 — Building Bridges, Not Walls** *The Long Game of Relational Witness*

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#### PART THREE: OPENING YOUR MOUTH

**Chapter 7 — Your Story Is Your Superpower** *How to Share Your Testimony Without Losing Your Audience or Your Integrity*

**Chapter 8 — The Gospel Conversation (Without Awkward Silence)** *From Small Talk to the Most Important Talk of Their Life*

---

**PART FOUR: WHAT HAPPENS NEXT**

***After the Conversation***

**Chapter 9 — Handling the Hard Questions** *What to Do When They Ask Something You Can't Answer*

**Chapter 10 — Contextual Evangelism** *One Gospel, Many Conversations*

**Chapter 11 — When They Say Yes** *You Led Someone to Faith. Now What?*

**Chapter 12 — When They Say No (or Not Yet)** *Releasing the Outcome Without Losing the Relationship*

**Chapter 13 — Staying in the Game** *Evangelism as Lifestyle, Not Event*

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**PART FIVE: ADVANCED DUMMY TRAINING**

***Going Deeper for Those Who Can't Put This Down***

**Chapter 14 — The Theology Behind the Conversation** *Why You Share Determines How You Share*

**Chapter 15 — Tools for the Toolbox** *Resources That Actually Help (and Some That Don't)*

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**CONCLUSION: GO BE THE GOSPEL BEFORE YOU TELL IT**

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**APPENDICES**

**Appendix A — The Gospel in Plain English** *A One-Page Handout for Personal Use*

**Appendix B** — 30 Days of Prayer for People Far from God *A Daily Intercession Guide*

**Appendix C** — Recommended Reading by Audience Type *A Curated Guide for the Gospel Witness Who Wants to Put the Right Book in the Right Hands*

**Appendix D** — Glossary of Christian Jargon *Translated for Normal Humans*

**Appendix E** — Common Objections Quick-Reference Card *What to Say When They Push Back — Without Losing Your Mind or the Conversation*

**Appendix F** — Scripture Memory Plan *12 Key Gospel Verses in NASB to Internalize*

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## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### FOREWORD: PUT DOWN THE MEGAPHONE

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*"The gospel is not a doctrine of the tongue, but of life."* — John Calvin

*"We are beggars showing other beggars where to find bread."* — D.T. Niles

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Let me tell you what this book is not.

This is not a manual for ambushing strangers in parking lots with a tract and a smile so forced it scares children. It is not a guilt-trip disguised as a guide, designed to make you feel like a spiritual failure every time you get through Thanksgiving dinner without converting your Uncle Gerald. It is not a script for the perfectly polished gospel presentation, delivered with the confidence of a used car salesman and the warmth of a DMV clerk. And it is absolutely, positively not another attempt to turn you into a religious street fighter — armed with verses, rehearsed rebuttals, and a folding table set up outside the grocery store.

If that's what you were hoping for, I'm going to save you some time right now. Put this book down, back away slowly, and go find something else to read. No hard feelings.

But if you're still here — if some part of you is quietly relieved by what I just said — then pull up a chair. We need to talk.

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I spent years in a fire station before I ever stood behind a pulpit. And one of the first things you learn in the fire service is that you don't run into a burning building just because you feel like it. You train. You prepare. You learn to read smoke, to move through darkness, to stay low when the heat is rising. You learn that courage without skill is just a faster way to get yourself and everyone around you killed.

Evangelism, I've come to believe, is not so different.

Most Christians I know genuinely want to share their faith. Somewhere deep in their chest, beneath the anxiety and the fear of saying the wrong thing, there is a real desire to tell someone — anyone — about the grace that changed their life. But somewhere along the way, the church handed them a megaphone when what they actually needed was a conversation. We gave people methods when what they needed was authenticity. We gave them formulas when what they needed was freedom. And so, faced with the gap between the script they were handed and the messy, complicated people actually sitting across the table from them, most well-meaning Christians did the most logical thing in the world.

They said nothing at all.

I don't blame them. I've been there myself.

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Here is what I want you to understand before you read a single chapter of this book: the gospel is not a product to be marketed. It is not a debate to be won. It is not a performance to be perfected. John Calvin — a man not exactly famous for his warmth and spontaneity — understood this when he wrote that *"the gospel is not a doctrine of the tongue, but of life."* He meant that the message of Jesus Christ was never meant to live only in our words. It was meant to breathe in the way we love people. In the way we show up. In the way we stay when everyone else leaves.

The gospel, in other words, was always meant to be lived before it is spoken.

And that is extraordinarily good news for those of us who are not particularly polished speakers.

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There is a quote — one of my favorites in all of Christian literature — from a theologian named D.T. Niles, who described evangelism as simply *"one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread."* I have turned that sentence

over in my mind more times than I can count, and every time I do, something in me exhales. Because that's it. That's the whole thing. That's the entire philosophy of gospel-sharing distilled into one beautiful, humbling, liberating image.

Not one expert instructing an ignorant. Not one righteous person rescuing a sinner. Not one polished Christian performing for a skeptical audience.

One beggar. Another beggar. Bread.

That framing changes everything, because it starts with honesty. It starts with the admission that you didn't earn your way to the table — you stumbled to it, hungry and hollow and out of options, and someone pointed you toward something that filled you up in a way nothing else ever had. And now, the most natural thing in the world is to turn around and tell the person behind you where you found it.

That's not a sales pitch. That's just what love does.

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Now, I want to be honest with you about something, because this is a book about honesty and I can't very well start it any other way.

Sharing your faith is still going to feel uncomfortable sometimes. This book will not cure that. It will not hand you a magic formula that makes every gospel conversation easy and natural and perfectly received. Some conversations will be awkward. Some people will look at you like you've lost your mind. Some seeds you plant will take years — decades even — to break the surface. And a few people you love deeply, people you have prayed for and wept over and waited on, will still look you in the eye and walk the other way.

That is the cost of the Great Commission, and I won't pretend otherwise.

But here is what I can promise you: the God who called you to this task did not do so because He needed someone impressive. He is not sitting in heaven, wringing His hands, hoping you'll finally figure out the right technique. Emil Brunner once wrote that *"the church exists by mission as fire exists by*

*burning*" — meaning that bearing witness to the gospel is not an optional add-on to the Christian life. It is the Christian life. It is what we are. It is what we do. Not because we are powerful, but because we carry something that the world is absolutely dying without.

And you don't have to be Billy Graham to carry it.

You just have to be willing.

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So here is what this book IS.

It is a field guide for ordinary, broken, grace-soaked people who want to talk about Jesus without becoming someone they're not. It is a practical, honest, occasionally irreverent companion for those of us who believe the gospel with our whole hearts but sometimes struggle to find the words. It is a crash course in the kind of evangelism that starts not with a script, but with a relationship — not with an agenda, but with a question — not with a megaphone, but with a cup of coffee and a willingness to actually listen.

It is written by a ragamuffin for ragamuffins.

Which means it is written for you.

Now put down the megaphone. Pull up a chair. And let's talk about the most important conversation you will ever have — not because you have to, but because you found the bread, and someone out there is still starving.

*That's the only reason any of us needs.*

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— Jeff Metro Community Chaplaincy Metro East, Illinois

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*"We are not the light. We are not even a lighthouse. We are a window."* — Brennan Manning

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*Chapter One begins on the next page. Get ready to get uncomfortable — in the best possible way.*

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### INTRODUCTION: THE BEST NEWS NOBODY KNOWS HOW TO TELL

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*"But how are they to call on Him in whom they have not believed? How are they to believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?" — Romans 10:14 (NASB)*

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There is a survey that gets passed around Christian ministry circles that should embarrass us all into action, and yet somehow manages to embarrass us all into further silence instead. The numbers vary depending on who's doing the asking and how the question is worded, but the finding is remarkably consistent across decades of research: the vast majority of people who identify as Bible-believing, church-attending, Jesus-following Christians have never — not once — shared their faith with another person in any meaningful way.

Not once.

Let that settle for a moment.

We are talking about people who believe, with genuine conviction, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that He died for the sins of humanity, that He rose bodily from the grave, and that faith in Him is the difference between eternal life and eternal separation from God. People who sing about it on Sunday mornings. People who put fish symbols on their cars and Bible verses in their social media bios. People who would tell you, if you asked them directly, that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the most important truth in the history of the universe.

And yet — silence.

Not because they don't believe it. But because somewhere between the pew and the parking lot, something goes terribly, mysteriously, almost comically wrong.

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## **WHY WE'D RATHER HAVE THE ROOT CANAL**

I want to start here, in the uncomfortable truth, because I think it's the only honest place to begin. If you picked up this book, there's a good chance you already know the feeling I'm describing. That particular brand of spiritual guilt that settles in when the conversation with your coworker or your neighbor or your college roommate starts to drift toward the kinds of questions that could open a door — and you feel it, you sense the moment, and then you watch yourself smoothly, expertly, almost professionally steer the conversation somewhere safer.

Sports. Weather. The inexplicable behavior of your HOA.

Anywhere but there.

And afterward, driving home, you have that quiet argument with yourself. *I should have said something. Why didn't I say something? Next time I'll say something.* And next time arrives, and the cycle repeats, and the guilt compounds, and eventually you reach a kind of silent truce with yourself where evangelism becomes something other, more qualified, more gifted people do — and your job is just to be a decent person and hope that's enough.

It is not enough. And deep down, you already know that.

But here's what I want you to understand: the fear you feel is not a character flaw. It is not evidence that you are a bad Christian or a weak believer or someone who doesn't really love Jesus. It is evidence that you are human — and that somewhere along the way, the church handed you an approach to evangelism that was so clinical, so transactional, so utterly disconnected

from how real human beings actually relate to one another, that your God-given social instincts rose up in self-defense and said *absolutely not*.

Your instincts were not entirely wrong. The approach was the problem.

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## **SELLING VERSUS TELLING**

There is a version of evangelism that has haunted the Western church for the better part of a century, and it looks a lot more like a sales presentation than a conversation between friends. It has steps and stages and closing techniques. It treats the gospel like a product and the unconverted like a target demographic. It has perfected the art of steering every conversation toward a predetermined destination, regardless of where the other person actually is. And it has, in the process, produced some of the most awkward, performative, and relationally damaging interactions in the history of human communication.

I say this not to mock the people who developed these tools. Many of them were sincere, passionate, deeply committed followers of Jesus who wanted nothing more than to see the world come to know their Savior. Some of those methods have borne genuine fruit. God, in His remarkable grace, has used even our clumsiest efforts.

But there is a difference — a profound, life-altering difference — between *selling* the gospel and *telling* the gospel.

Selling requires a pitch. Telling requires a story. Selling requires a close. Telling requires a relationship. Selling keeps score. Telling simply loves. Selling is performance. Telling is presence.

The Apostle Paul, writing to the church in Rome, asked a series of questions that cut right to the heart of why any of us bother with this at all: "*But how are they to call on Him in whom they have not believed? How are they to believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?*" — Romans 10:14 (NASB). Notice what Paul does not ask. He does

not ask how they will respond to the right technique. He does not ask how they will react to the correct theological sequence. He asks simply: *how will they hear?*

Someone has to tell them. Not perform for them. Not close them. Not process them through a spiritual transaction. *Tell* them. The way you tell a friend about a doctor who saved your life, or a restaurant that changed how you think about food, or a book that broke you open and put you back together differently. With your own words. In your own voice. From your own experience.

That is what this book is about.

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## **THE RAGAMUFFIN ADVANTAGE**

Here is something the slick evangelism training manuals almost never tell you, and I think it might be the most important thing in this entire introduction: broken people make the best evangelists.

Read that again.

Not the most polished people. Not the most theologically educated people. Not the people with the most impressive testimonies or the most articulate gospel presentations or the most Bible verses memorized. The broken ones. The ones who know what it feels like to be at the end of themselves. The ones who can look another person in the eyes across the table and say, without any performance or pretense, *I know what it is to be lost. And I know what it is to be found. And let me tell you — the difference is everything.*

There is a reason Jesus didn't recruit His first evangelists from the Temple staff. He found them on fishing boats and at tax collector's tables and in the middle of lives that were, by any religious measure of the day, deeply unimpressive. He found a woman at a well in the middle of the day — which meant she was an outcast among outcasts — and after a single conversation with Him, she ran back to her entire town and said, *"Come, see a man who told me all the things that I have done; this is not the Christ, is it?"* — John 4:29

(NASB). No training. No technique. No carefully crafted presentation. Just astonishment and an open mouth.

That woman led a revival.

The ragamuffin — the one who has been broken by life and put back together by grace — carries something that no amount of theological polish can manufacture: *credibility born of desperation*. When you have been at the bottom and you know what pulled you out, you don't need a script. You just need the courage to open your mouth.

Brennan Manning, the patron saint of ragamuffins everywhere, spent his whole ministry arguing that the church's greatest witness was not its moral achievement but its honest acknowledgment of need. That the most compelling thing a Christian can say to a broken world is not "*look how far I've come*" but "*look what grace does with someone like me.*"

Your brokenness is not an obstacle to evangelism. In the right hands — which is to say, in God's hands — it is your greatest asset.

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## **HOW FEAR HIJACKED THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD**

Let's be painfully direct for a moment about what fear has cost us.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is, objectively, the greatest news in the history of the world. It is the announcement that the God who made everything has not abandoned the everything He made. That the brokenness humanity chose has been answered, at unimaginable cost, by a love that refused to let us go. That death has been defeated, shame has been addressed, guilt has been removed, and the door to the life we were made for is standing wide open. It is the story of a God who came looking for us while we were still running from Him — and found us, and loved us, and called us His own.

That is the story we have been entrusted to tell.

And we are terrified to bring it up at brunch.

Fear does strange things to good people. It takes the most liberating message in human history and convinces us that it's a burden we might drop. It takes the God of the universe — the One who spoke galaxies into existence — and shrinks Him down to a package we might fail to deliver correctly. It takes the Holy Spirit, who Jesus Himself said would give us words when we didn't know what to say, and somehow convinces us that it all depends on our performance.

This is, to put it plainly, theological absurdity. And yet most of us live there, in that absurdity, every day.

The fear of rejection. The fear of saying the wrong thing. The fear of being seen as one of *those* Christians — the pushy, weird, out-of-touch kind that makes everyone uncomfortable. These fears are real, and I am not going to dismiss them. But I am going to tell you that every one of them is built on a lie: the lie that the outcome of this conversation depends primarily on you.

It does not. It never did. The Holy Spirit was doing this work long before you showed up, and He will continue doing it long after you fumble through your words and drive home feeling like you got it wrong. Your job — the only job you have ever been given — is to be willing. To open your mouth. To trust that the God who saved you is more than capable of using your imperfect, honest, ragamuffin witness to reach the person sitting across from you.

John MacArthur once wrote something that has stayed with me for years: "*You are the only Bible some people will ever read.*" Not the most eloquent Bible. Not the most theologically precise Bible. Just — the one they have access to. The one that showed up in their life in human form, with your face and your history and your particular set of scars, and said *I know Someone you need to meet.*

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## **WHAT THIS BOOK WILL AND WON'T DO FOR YOU**

I want to be straight with you about what you're holding in your hands, because I have a deep and abiding allergy to books that overpromise.

This book will not make you a professional evangelist. It will not give you a foolproof system that guarantees results. It will not eliminate the awkwardness of every gospel conversation, because some awkwardness is simply the honest friction of one human soul reaching toward another, and that is not a problem to be solved. It will not tell you that everyone you share the gospel with will respond with tears and gratitude and immediate surrender to Jesus Christ. Some will. Many won't. At least not right away, and maybe not in ways you'll ever get to see.

What this book WILL do is give you a framework for thinking about evangelism that actually fits the way real human beings relate to one another. It will help you understand the message you're trying to share well enough to say it in your own words. It will help you face down your fear with something more durable than willpower — namely, a clear-eyed understanding of whose job this actually is. It will give you practical tools for real conversations with real people in the real, messy, complicated world where you actually live.

And it will, I hope, remind you again and again that you are not doing this alone. That the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is the same Spirit at work in every conversation you have ever stumbled through. That God is not waiting for you to get better at this before He starts using you. That He has been using you — your presence, your love, your imperfect witness — all along.

You are not a salesperson. You are not a closer. You are not a religious professional tasked with meeting a quota.

You are a beggar who found bread. And somewhere in your neighborhood, your workplace, your family, your circle — there is another beggar who is absolutely starving.

Tell them where you found it.

That's all this is. That's all it has ever been.

*Let's get started.*

*"You are the only Bible some people will ever read." — John MacArthur*

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*Part One begins on the next page. We're going to start where every honest conversation starts — with you.*

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### PART ONE: BEFORE YOU OPEN YOUR MOUTH

#### *Getting Your Own House in Order*

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#### CHAPTER 1: DO YOU ACTUALLY BELIEVE THIS STUFF?

##### *Evangelism Starts with Conviction, Not Curriculum*

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*"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes." — Romans 1:16 (NASB)*

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I want to ask you a question, and I want you to resist the urge to answer it quickly. Quick answers to this particular question are almost always the wrong ones. Sit with it for a moment before you respond, even if you're just responding to yourself in the privacy of your own head.

Here it is:

*Has the gospel actually wrecked you?*

Not impressed you. Not comforted you, in the generic, greeting-card sense of the word. Not given you a moral framework or a church community or a sense of purpose or a reason to stop drinking so much or a better marriage or any of the other genuinely good things that tend to travel in the gospel's wake.

*Has it wrecked you?*

Has it gotten down into the basement of who you are — past the polished surface and the religious vocabulary and the correct answers you've accumulated over years of Sunday school and small groups — and dismantled something? Has it shown you something about yourself that you could not unsee, and then shown you something about God that left you undone? Has it brought you to your knees, not because someone told you

that's what Christians do, but because there was simply nowhere else to go when you finally understood what it was saying?

Because here is the dirty secret that nobody in the evangelism training seminar wants to say out loud: you cannot compellingly share a gospel that has never genuinely broken you open. You can recite it. You can outline it. You can walk someone through the steps with reasonable competence and theological accuracy. But there is a difference — and the people you're talking to will feel it, even if they can't name it — between a person who is reporting information and a person who is testifying to something that happened to them.

One is a presentation. The other is a witness.

The world does not need more presentations. It is drowning in presentations. What it is starving for is witnesses — people who can look another human being in the eyes and say, with no performance and no agenda and no carefully rehearsed closing line, *this is real, and it changed everything, and I could not keep it to myself if I tried.*

That kind of witness does not begin with a curriculum. It begins with a reckoning.

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## **THE WORD THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING**

Before we go any further, let's talk about the word itself — because I am convinced that much of our confusion about what the gospel IS contributes directly to our confusion about how to share it.

The word *gospel* comes from the Greek word *euangelion*. It is two words pressed together: *eu*, meaning good, and *angelion*, meaning message or announcement. It is, at its most literal, simply *good news*. Not good advice. Not good principles. Not good suggestions for improving the quality of your spiritual life. News. An announcement. Something that has happened,

outside of you and independent of your participation in it, that changes the entire landscape of reality.

This distinction matters enormously, and here is why: advice can be ignored. Advice can be evaluated, weighed against other advice, found wanting, and set aside. Advice makes demands of the recipient — it requires effort, implementation, follow-through. And if the person receiving the advice is already exhausted by the effort of being human in a broken world, more advice — even very good advice — lands like another item on an already impossible to-do list.

But news is different. News does not make demands. News makes announcements. News says: *something has happened*. The war is over. The rescue team found the survivors. The diagnosis was wrong. The debt has been paid.

You do not respond to that kind of news by trying harder. You respond to it by collapsing in relief.

The gospel — the real gospel, the *euangelion* that Paul said he was not ashamed of — is that kind of news. It is the announcement that God Himself entered human history in the person of Jesus Christ, lived the life we could not live, died the death we deserved to die, and walked out of the grave three days later as proof that everything He said about Himself was true. It is the announcement that the chasm between a holy God and a broken humanity has been bridged — not by our effort, but by His. It is the announcement that the verdict on your life has already been rendered, and it is *not guilty*, and the only appropriate response is astonished, undone, grateful surrender.

That is *euangelion*. That is what you are being asked to share.

Now — and I ask this with genuine pastoral tenderness, because I have had to ask it of myself more than once — does that news still astonish you? Or has familiarity quietly pickpocketed your wonder without you noticing?

## ABOUT JESUS VERSUS IN JESUS

There is a line that gets blurry in church circles so gradually that most people never notice it happening. It is the line between believing *about* Jesus and believing *in* Jesus, and the distance between those two positions is, spiritually speaking, the distance between earth and heaven.

Believing *about* Jesus is primarily an intellectual exercise. It means holding a set of theological propositions as true — that He existed, that He was divine, that He performed miracles, that He died and rose again. These things are not small. They are, in fact, essential. But they are not sufficient. James, the brother of Jesus, made this point with a sharpness that should make every nominally religious person profoundly uncomfortable when he wrote that even the demons believe — and shudder — James 2:19 (NASB). The demons have impeccable theology. It has done them no good whatsoever.

Believing *in* Jesus is something altogether different. It is not merely intellectual assent to a set of claims. It is the act of throwing your entire weight onto Someone — trusting Him not just with your agreement but with your life, your future, your sin, your shame, your secrets, your failures, your hopes. It is the difference between knowing that a chair can hold your weight and actually sitting down in it. It is the difference between knowing the bridge is structurally sound and actually walking across it.

Here is why this matters for evangelism specifically: you can only share what you actually have. If your relationship with Jesus is primarily a relationship with *ideas about* Jesus — if He is more theological framework than living Lord, more heritage than heartbeat — then what you share will have the unmistakable flavor of a secondhand account. People are remarkably good at detecting the difference. Not because they are cynical, but because they are hungry. They have been fed enough secondhand religion to last a lifetime. What they are looking for, even when they don't have words for it, is someone whose faith is clearly, demonstrably *first-person*.

Someone for whom Jesus is not a doctrine to be defended but a Person to be known.

C.S. Lewis, in one of his most quietly devastating observations, wrote that *"a man who is eating or lying with his wife or preparing to go to sleep in humility, thankfulness and temperance, is, by Christian standards, in an infinitely higher state than one who is listening to Bach or reading Plato in a state of pride."*

What Lewis was getting at — with his characteristic elegance — is that authentic, humble, genuinely-meant faith beats impressive religious performance every single time. That the person who quietly, honestly, unpretentiously walks with Jesus in the ordinary moments of their ordinary life is a more compelling witness than the person with the most sophisticated theological library and the least personally acquainted heart.

Authentic beats impressive. Every time. In every room. With every person.

The question is not whether you can articulate the gospel correctly. The question is whether you have let it reach you personally.

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## **YOUR BANKRUPTCY IS YOUR ASSET**

I want to spend a moment with something that runs completely counter to the instincts most of us bring to conversations about faith, because it has the potential to liberate you from one of the heaviest burdens evangelical culture tends to place on its people.

You do not need to have your life together to share the gospel. In fact — and I mean this with full theological seriousness — the more clearly you understand your own poverty, your own insufficiency, your own absolute dependence on grace, the more effectively you will communicate the gospel to people who are themselves impoverished and insufficient and desperate for grace.

Paul understood this. This was a man who described himself as the *"foremost"* of sinners — 1 Timothy 1:15 (NASB). Not a former sinner who had

cleaned up nicely and was now in a position to help the less fortunate. The foremost. Present tense. A man who had persecuted and murdered Christians, who wrestled with a "thorn in the flesh" he begged God to remove, who had public conflicts with fellow ministry leaders, who admitted to doing the very things he did not want to do — Romans 7:19 (NASB). And this man, with this resume, wrote more of the New Testament than anyone else and planted churches across the known world.

God did not use Paul in spite of his brokenness. He used him through it, because a man who knows how desperately he needed grace is a man who can speak about grace with an authority that no amount of polish or achievement can manufacture.

Your personal bankruptcy — the places where life has humbled you, where you have failed, where you have been failed, where you have needed something outside yourself to survive — is not a liability in gospel work. It is the very credential that earns you a hearing with the people who are most in need of what you carry.

The firefighter who has pulled someone from a burning building speaks about fire differently than someone who has only read about it. The person who has been in the deep water speaks about rescue differently than someone who has only observed it from the shore. And the person who has genuinely, personally, at great personal cost encountered the grace of Jesus Christ speaks about that grace differently than someone who learned about it in a classroom.

Your story — the real one, the unpolished one, the one with the parts you're still a little embarrassed about — is not an obstacle to effective evangelism. For the right person, in the right moment, it is the exact key that fits the exact lock on a door that nothing else has been able to open.

Don't sanitize it. Don't perform it. Just tell it.

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## **A WORD ABOUT PAUL'S CONFIDENCE**

Before we get to your Dummy Drill, I want to circle back to the verse that anchors this chapter, because there is something in it that deserves more than a passing glance.

*"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."* — Romans 1:16 (NASB)

Paul says he is not ashamed. Which means, at minimum, that the temptation to be ashamed existed. You do not assert the absence of something that was never a possibility. Paul knew what it was to be mocked, to be dismissed, to be beaten and imprisoned and written off as a lunatic. He knew what it felt like to stand in a room where what he was saying was being received with contempt. And he says — not *I have never felt the pull of shame* but rather *I am not ashamed* — present tense, active choice, daily decision.

Notice also what he says the gospel IS: *the power of God for salvation*. Not a helpful moral guide. Not a useful framework for ethical living. The power of God. *Dunamis* in the Greek — the same root word from which we get *dynamite*. Paul is saying that the message he carries is not merely true but *alive*. Not merely correct but *powerful*. Not merely worth defending but *capable of doing something* in the life of the person who receives it.

This means that when you share the gospel — imperfectly, nervously, with your words getting a little tangled and your hands maybe shaking just slightly — you are not primarily dependent on your own eloquence. You are releasing something that has its own power. You are, to use a firefighting analogy, pointing the nozzle. The water pressure is not your responsibility. You just have to be willing to hold the line.

That should make you breathe a little easier.

Now — your turn.

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 **DUMMY DRILL #1**

*Set a timer for fifteen minutes. Get a pen and something to write on — not your phone, something you actually have to write on with your hand, because there is something about the physical act of writing that bypasses the part of your brain that wants to sound impressive.*

*Write one paragraph — just one — answering this question:*

**What has the gospel actually done in your life?**

*Not what it is supposed to do. Not what you have been taught it does. Not the theologically correct answer. What has it ACTUALLY done — in your real life, in your real history, in the real interior of who you are?*

*Has it given you peace you couldn't manufacture on your own? Has it freed you from something that had you in its grip? Has it changed the way you see yourself, or other people, or the world? Has it shown up in a dark season and proven itself real in a way you didn't expect? Has it given you hope when hope had no rational basis?*

*Write it down. Keep it honest. Don't dress it up.*

*When you're done, read it back to yourself. What you just wrote is not a theology paper. It is not a testimony script. It is the raw material of the most compelling thing you will ever say to another human being — because it is true, it is yours, and it happened.*

*That is where evangelism begins. Not with a curriculum. Not with a technique. Right here, in the honest record of what grace has actually done in the life of one particular, imperfect, grateful beggar.*

*You.*

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*"A man who is eating or lying with his wife or preparing to go to sleep in humility, thankfulness and temperance, is, by Christian standards, in an infinitely higher state than one who is listening to Bach or reading Plato in a state of pride." — C.S. Lewis*

*"God uses broken things. It takes broken soil to produce a crop, broken clouds to give rain, broken grain to give bread, broken bread to give strength. It is the broken alabaster box that gives forth perfume." — Vance Havner*

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*Chapter Two is where we make sure you actually know what you're sharing. Because you'd be surprised how many people are trying to give away something they've never fully unwrapped themselves.*

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### CHAPTER 2: WHAT EXACTLY IS THE GOSPEL, ANYWAY?

#### *Getting Clear on the Message Before You Send It*

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*"Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you... that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." — 1 Corinthians 15:1, 3-4 (NASB)*

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Here is a scenario that happens more often than any of us would like to admit.

A well-meaning Christian works up their courage, finds an opening in a conversation, takes a deep breath, and begins to share the gospel. They are sincere. They are earnest. They genuinely love the person they're talking to. And what comes out is something along the lines of: *"You should really come to church with me sometime. It's changed my life. The people are great, and the pastor is really good, and I just think if you gave it a chance you'd really enjoy it."*

Or maybe it's: *"I just think that if more people tried to live by the Golden Rule, you know, treat others the way you want to be treated, the world would be a much better place. That's basically what Jesus taught."*

Or, perhaps most common of all: *"I'm not here to judge anybody. I just think that faith gives you a kind of peace and purpose that you can't really find anywhere else. It's just been really good for me personally."*

Now. None of those statements are false, exactly. Church can be life-changing. The Golden Rule is genuinely good advice. Faith does provide peace and purpose. These are not lies.

But not one of them is the gospel.

And this is the problem. Not a small problem, not a technical theological problem that only matters in seminary classrooms, but a massive, urgent, people-are-dying-without-this problem. Because if you don't know precisely what the gospel IS, you cannot share it — no matter how sincere you are, no matter how much you love the person across the table, no matter how many evangelism books you read. A blurry message, delivered with perfect passion, is still a blurry message. And the gospel is too important — and the people who need it are too precious — to be left in a fog.

So before we talk about how to share it, we are going to get ruthlessly clear on what it actually is.

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## THE FOUR NON-NEGOTIABLES

Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthian church, does something remarkable in its simplicity. He sits down and defines the gospel. Not in hundreds of pages of systematic theology — though systematic theology has its place — but in a handful of sentences that a first-century fisherman could understand and a twenty-first century skeptic can evaluate. He says: "*Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.*" — 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 (NASB).

That's it. That is the irreducible core. Everything else we say about the Christian faith flows from this or points back to it, but this is the thing itself — the marrow, the nucleus, the load-bearing wall that, if you remove it, the entire structure collapses.

Over centuries of careful biblical reflection, theologians and pastors have organized the content of the gospel around four essential movements. I call them the Four Non-Negotiables, because you can adjust your vocabulary, your illustrations, your tone, and your approach based on who you're talking to — but you cannot subtract any of these four without ceasing to proclaim the gospel altogether. They are not four options. They are four walls. The house needs all of them.

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## **NON-NEGOTIABLE ONE: GOD**

Every gospel conversation, whether it lasts five minutes or five hours, must begin with God — who He is, what He is like, and what He originally intended. This matters because the problem the gospel solves only makes sense against the backdrop of what was lost.

God, according to Scripture, is the Creator and Sustainer of all things. He is not a cosmic force or a vague spiritual energy or the universe's better angels. He is a Person — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — who exists in eternal, perfect, self-sufficient community and who, out of the overflow of that love, chose to create. He spoke, and galaxies appeared. He breathed, and humanity became alive. And everything He made, He called good.

But here is what is absolutely essential to understand, and what gets lost the moment we reduce God to a kindly grandfather figure who mostly wants everyone to be happy: God is holy. Profoundly, utterly, uncompromisingly holy. The prophet Isaiah, when he caught a glimpse of God's holiness, did not smile and feel warm. He fell on his face and said "*Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips.*" — Isaiah 6:5 (NASB). The holiness of God is not a minor theological detail. It is the very thing that gives the rest of the gospel its weight. If God were indifferent to moral reality, forgiveness would cost nothing and mean nothing. It is precisely because He is holy that grace is staggering.

God is also — and this is the other side of the same coin — love. Not sentimental affection. Not divine tolerance. The kind of love that "*so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son*" — John 3:16 (NASB). The kind that pursues, sacrifices, refuses to give up. Both realities — holiness and love — must be held together, because the gospel is the story of what happens when they meet.

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## **NON-NEGOTIABLE TWO: MAN**

The second wall of the gospel is an honest account of the human condition. And this is where things get uncomfortable in polite company, because an honest account of the human condition requires us to use a word that our culture has spent considerable energy trying to retire.

Sin.

There it is. We'll talk more about it shortly, because it deserves its own extended conversation. But for now, here is the non-negotiable truth that any gospel presentation must include: humanity is not basically good and occasionally flawed. Humanity is fundamentally broken and in desperate need of rescue. Not in need of improvement, not in need of education or therapy or better social systems — though all of those things have their place — but in need of rescue from a condition that we cannot fix from the inside.

*"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* — Romans 3:23 (NASB). All. Not most. Not the obviously bad ones. All. And the consequence, Paul tells us just a few chapters later, is that *"the wages of sin is death"* — Romans 6:23 (NASB). Not a timeout. Not a reduced quality of life. Death — spiritual separation from the God for whom we were made, with physical death and eternal consequences following in its wake.

This is not good news. This is the diagnosis before the cure, the darkness before the dawn, the hunger that makes the bread meaningful. You cannot share the gospel without it, because without an honest account of the problem, the solution sounds like an answer to a question nobody was asking.

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### **NON-NEGOTIABLE THREE: CHRIST**

This is the hinge of everything. This is where the announcement that makes Christianity unlike anything else in the history of human religion lands with its full, staggering weight.

God — the holy, loving Creator whose law humanity had broken and whose glory humanity had rejected — did not respond to the human catastrophe by

abandoning His creation. He entered it. The eternal Son of God took on human flesh, was born in a barn in an occupied territory to a teenage mother, grew up in an unremarkable town, and spent three years turning the world's entire understanding of power, righteousness, and love completely upside down.

And then He died. Not accidentally, not as a martyred idealist, but deliberately, purposefully, cosmically. He died as a substitute — bearing in His own body the full weight of human sin and the full force of divine justice — so that the holy God who could not simply overlook sin could also be the loving God who forgave it. "*He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*" — 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NASB). The transaction that took place on that cross is the most important event in the history of the universe.

And then — three days later — He walked out of the tomb. Which brings us to the hinge.

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## **NON-NEGOTIABLE FOUR: RESPONSE**

The gospel is not merely information to be absorbed. It is an announcement that demands a response. Paul tells the Corinthians that the gospel is something they *received* and in which they *stand* — it is not passive.

Elsewhere he summarizes the required response as *repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ* — Acts 20:21 (NASB).

Repentance is not feeling bad about yourself. It is a turning — a change of direction, a reorientation of your whole life away from self-sufficiency and toward God. And faith is not merely intellectual agreement. It is the act of trusting — throwing the whole weight of your life onto the Jesus who died and rose and promised that "*everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life.*" — John 3:16 (NASB).

These are the four walls. God. Man. Christ. Response. Every gospel conversation, no matter how informal, how stumbling, how brief, needs to touch all four.

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## **THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE GOSPEL AND CHRISTIAN MORALITY**

This might be the most practically important distinction in this entire book, so I need you to stay with me here.

The gospel and Christian morality are not the same thing. They are not even close to the same thing. They are related — genuine faith in the gospel produces genuine moral transformation — but they are not interchangeable, and confusing them has done incalculable damage to the church's witness in the world.

Christian morality is a set of ethical commitments that flow *from* the gospel. Be honest. Be faithful. Be generous. Pursue justice. Love your neighbor. These are real, important, non-negotiable aspects of what it looks like to follow Jesus. But they are the fruit, not the root. They are the result of the gospel, not the gospel itself. And the moment we start presenting Christian morality as though it IS the gospel — as though what God primarily wants is for people to behave better — we have traded the most liberating message in human history for a slightly more religious version of what every other moral system in the world is already offering.

The world does not need another moral improvement program. It is full of them. What it needs — what it is absolutely desperate for, whether it knows it or not — is the announcement that the moral debt it has accumulated has been paid. Not reduced. Not restructured. Paid. In full. By Someone else.

That is the gospel. And it is nothing like a self-improvement plan.

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## **WHY "BE A GOOD PERSON" IS HERESY WITH GOOD MANNERS**

I want to be a little provocative here, because I think the situation calls for it.

When the central message of a church, a ministry, or an individual Christian witness becomes *"try to be a better person, and Jesus will help you do that"* — that is not a gentle, accessible, user-friendly version of the gospel. It is a contradiction of it. It is, to use the theological term without apology, heresy. Very polite heresy. Very well-intentioned heresy. Heresy that probably has excellent coffee and a really good parking ministry. But heresy nonetheless.

Here is why. The gospel's entire premise is that human beings *cannot* be good enough. That the bar is not low — it is infinite, because the standard is the holiness of God Himself. That every attempt to reach that standard through human effort is, as Isaiah put it, *"like a filthy garment"* — Isaiah 64:6 (NASB). The gospel begins with the declaration that you cannot fix this. You cannot be good enough. You cannot try hard enough. You cannot religious-discipline your way out of the condition you were born into.

And then — only then — does the announcement of grace land with the force it deserves.

A gospel that says *"try harder, and God will meet you halfway"* is not good news for the person who has been trying their whole life and knows, in the brutal honesty of 3am, that they have not made it. For that person — and that person is most people, if they're being real — *"try harder"* is not rescue. It is just more weight on an already breaking back.

The actual gospel says something categorically different. It says: *stop trying to save yourself*. It is already done. What you could not do, He did. What you could not pay, He paid. What you could not become, He became on your behalf. The invitation is not to try harder. The invitation is to receive what you could never earn.

That is not an excuse for moral passivity. The person who genuinely receives that grace finds, to their own astonishment, that it produces a desire for holiness that all the rule-following in the world never could. But the motivation

has changed completely. You are no longer trying to earn love. You are responding to love already freely given.

Dallas Willard put it as cleanly as anyone ever has: "*Grace is not opposed to effort. It is opposed to earning.*" Read that sentence three times. Tattoo it somewhere. It is the answer to every person who worries that grace is a license for laziness, and it is simultaneously the death blow to every works-based religion that has ever tried to replace the gospel with a to-do list.

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## **SIN: THE WORD NOBODY WANTS TO SAY**

Let's talk about sin, because we have to, and because the way we talk about it — or don't — reveals a great deal about whether we actually understand what the gospel is rescuing people from.

Sin has a branding problem. In popular culture it has been reduced to either a punchline — "*sin*" as a fun descriptor for indulgent desserts and guilty pleasures — or an accusation wielded by religious people against the people they disapprove of. Neither version bears any resemblance to what the Bible is actually talking about.

The biblical understanding of sin is far more serious, far more systemic, and far more personal than either of those caricatures. At its root, sin is the choice to place something other than God at the center of your life — to be your own authority, your own source, your own salvation. It is the declaration of independence from the One who made you for Himself. And its consequences are not primarily external punishments handed down from an angry deity. They are the natural, inevitable result of a created being trying to function without the source it was designed to run on.

It is not that God punishes sin the way a judge punishes a criminal. It is that sin *is* death — spiritual death, relational death, the slow hollowing out of everything that was meant to be full. "*For the wages of sin is death*" — Romans 6:23 (NASB). Wages are not punishments. Wages are what you earn. Sin earns death the way that not eating earns hunger. It is simply what happens.

Now — here is where sharing the gospel requires courage. Because you cannot tell people about rescue without telling them what they need to be rescued from. You cannot tell people about a cure without being honest about the diagnosis. The temptation, especially in a culture that has developed a highly sophisticated immune response to anything that sounds like judgment, is to soft-pedal this part. To skip over it quickly. To get to the grace before the person has had a chance to feel the weight of why they need it.

Resist that temptation. Not by being harsh. Not by weaponizing sin as an accusation. But by being honest — the way a doctor is honest with a patient about a diagnosis, not to shame them but because the treatment depends on the person understanding the severity of the condition. Compassionate honesty about sin is not cruelty. It is the prerequisite for grace to mean anything at all.

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### **GRACE: THE WORD EVERYBODY LOVES UNTIL THEY UNDERSTAND IT**

On the other side of sin stands grace — arguably the most misunderstood word in the Christian vocabulary, and the one most desperately in need of rescue from its own sentimentalization.

We have turned grace into a synonym for niceness. For tolerance. For God being generally easygoing about the whole sin situation. We sing about it as though it were a warm feeling, a spiritual ambiance, a kind of divine background music that makes life more pleasant. And in doing so, we have stripped it of the very thing that makes it extraordinary.

Grace is not God overlooking sin. Grace is God paying for it Himself.

There is a critical difference. Overlooking sin requires nothing. It costs nothing. It changes nothing. It is simply the avoidance of the problem, which means the problem remains. But paying for sin — absorbing its full cost, satisfying the full demand of justice, taking the full weight of its consequence — that requires everything. That is what the cross is. Not God looking the

other way. God, in the person of His Son, stepping into the line of fire so that we could walk out of it.

*"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."* — Romans 5:8 (NASB). Not while we were trying. Not while we were improving. *While we were yet sinners*. Grace does not wait for you to get better. It comes to you in the middle of your worst, and it changes everything from there.

John Stott, one of the great theological minds of the twentieth century, drew the line with perfect clarity: *"The gospel is not advice to be followed; it is news to be announced."* Grace is not something you achieve through spiritual effort. It is something that happened — on a hill outside Jerusalem, two thousand years ago — and the only appropriate response is to receive it, with both hands, as the drowning person receives the life preserver.

That is grace. And that is what you are carrying when you share the gospel.

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## **THE RESURRECTION: THE HINGE OF EVERYTHING**

We cannot move on without stopping here, fully, because the Resurrection is not an optional theological upgrade you add to the basic gospel package. It is the gospel. It is what separates the Christian proclamation from every other religious system in the history of human thought.

Paul understood this with an unflinching clarity that we need to recover: *"And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins."* — 1 Corinthians 15:17 (NASB). He does not soften this. He does not offer an alternative interpretation for those who find the bodily resurrection difficult to accept. He says flatly: if it didn't happen, go home. There is nothing here. The whole thing collapses.

But he doesn't stop there. Because the other side of that equation is equally absolute: *if it DID happen* — and Paul stakes everything on the claim that it did — then everything changes. Death has been defeated. The grave has been

emptied. The promises of Jesus have been validated. The sacrifice has been accepted. And the same power that raised Christ from the dead is available to everyone who is united to Him by faith.

The Resurrection is not a poetic metaphor for new beginnings. It is not a spiritual principle about hope emerging from hardship. It is a historical event — the most consequential historical event in human history — that demands a verdict from everyone who encounters it. Either it happened or it didn't. Either Jesus walked out of that tomb or He didn't. And the entire weight of the gospel rests on the answer.

Share this without apology. Share it as fact, because it is claimed as fact by the people who saw it, who touched the scars, who ate breakfast with the risen Christ on a beach in Galilee, and who then went to their deaths rather than recant their testimony. The disciples did not die for a metaphor. They died because they had seen something that they absolutely could not un-see, and the world needed to know.

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## **THE GOSPEL IN ONE BREATH**

Before we close this chapter, I want to give you something practical — a single sentence that you can carry in your pocket, return to when you lose the thread, and use as a compass when any gospel conversation starts to drift.

Here is the gospel in one breath:

**Humanity broke what God made. God fixed what humanity broke. Jesus paid what humanity owed. Faith receives what grace freely gives.**

That's it. Four movements. Every word load-bearing. Memorize it not as a script but as a map — so that wherever a conversation begins and wherever it wanders, you always know where the center is, and you can always find your way back to it.

God. Man. Christ. Response. Holiness. Brokenness. Cross. Faith. The problem. The payment. The person. The invitation.

However you organize it, whatever words you use, whatever illustrations you reach for — keep those four walls standing. The house needs all of them.

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*"The gospel is not advice to be followed; it is news to be announced."* — John Stott

*"Grace is not opposed to effort. It is opposed to earning."* — Dallas Willard

*"The Bible is not a book about how to get to heaven. It's a book about how heaven came to earth."* — N.T. Wright

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## **DUMMY DRILL #2**

*Take the four-sentence gospel summary above — Humanity broke what God made. God fixed what humanity broke. Jesus paid what humanity owed. Faith receives what grace freely gives. — and do two things:*

*First, expand each sentence into two or three sentences using your own words and your own experience. Don't use theological jargon. Write it the way you'd explain it to your neighbor over the back fence.*

*Second, read what you've written out loud. All of it. Time yourself. If it takes longer than three minutes, cut it down. The goal is not comprehensiveness. The goal is clarity.*

*The world is not waiting for a perfect theology lecture. It is waiting for someone to tell it, in plain and honest language, the best news it has ever heard.*

*Practice until you can tell it simply. Then practice until you can tell it naturally. Then go find someone who needs to hear it.*

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*Chapter Three is about the thing that's been stopping you from doing exactly that. It has a name. We're going to look it directly in the face. And then we're going to walk right past it.*

**OR**

***Fear, Failure, and Why God Doesn't Need You to Be Billy Graham***

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*"For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline." — 2 Timothy 1:7 (NASB)*

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I want to tell you about a call I ran early in my firefighting career that I have never quite been able to shake loose from my memory.

We got a report of a structure fire in a residential neighborhood — nothing unusual about that. We pulled up, and sure enough, smoke was pushing from the eaves and flames were visible in a second-floor window. Standard enough scenario. We had trained for this hundreds of times. I knew exactly what to do, in exactly what order, with exactly what equipment. The knowledge was not the problem.

The problem was that for approximately four seconds — four seconds that felt considerably longer — my feet did not move.

Not because I didn't believe the training. Not because I doubted the equipment. Not because I had forgotten the procedures. My feet didn't move because something very old and very animal in my brain looked at the burning building and said, with considerable authority: *do not go in there*.

Fear does not wait for an invitation. It does not check your credentials or your theology or your track record of courageous behavior before it shows up. It just shows up. And in those four seconds, I had a choice that had nothing to do with knowledge and everything to do with will.

I went in.

Not because the fear disappeared. It didn't. But because the training had built something in me that was stronger than the fear — a commitment to the

mission that could hold its ground even when every instinct was screaming in the opposite direction.

I tell you this story because I think it is, almost perfectly, the experience of sharing the gospel for most ordinary Christians. The knowledge is there. The desire, somewhere beneath the anxiety, is there. The belief that what we carry matters — that is there too. But when the moment arrives, when the conversation opens up and the door appears, something very old and very human says *do not go in there*.

And the feet don't move.

This chapter is about what to do with that. Not how to eliminate the fear — I am not going to insult you with that promise — but how to build something in you that is stronger than it. Something that can hold its ground when the freak-out arrives, look it calmly in the face, and walk through the door anyway.

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## **THE THREE FEARS THAT KEEP CHRISTIANS SILENT**

In my years of pastoral work with first responders, recovering people, and church-wounded believers, I have had more conversations about the fear of sharing faith than about almost any other single topic. And while the specific details vary from person to person, the fears themselves are remarkably consistent. They tend to cluster around three core anxieties, and I want to name them clearly — because fear, like most things that have power over us, loses a significant amount of that power the moment it gets called by its actual name.

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### **FEAR NUMBER ONE: REJECTION**

This is the oldest one and, I suspect, the deepest one. The fear that if you tell someone what you believe — really tell them, not the vague spiritual platitudes that pass for religious conversation in most social settings, but the actual thing, the Jesus-died-and-rose-and-this-changes-everything thing —

they will look at you differently. Think less of you. Pull back from the relationship. Label you as one of *those* people and quietly rearrange their social calendar to create more distance between you.

This fear is not irrational. Rejection is real. Social cost is real. There are relationships that have been strained and friendships that have been complicated by honest gospel conversations, and I will not pretend otherwise. The world has a well-developed immune response to religious conversation, and sometimes that immune response activates even when the conversation has been handled with grace and gentleness and genuine love.

But here is what I want you to examine carefully: whose rejection are you actually afraid of? Because Jesus, who was not given to theological understatement, said this — *"For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."* — Mark 8:38 (NASB). That is a clarifying verse. It does not eliminate the sting of human rejection, but it puts it in a context that changes the calculation entirely.

The approval of the person across the table from you is temporary. The approval of the God who made you is eternal. And the God who made you has already given you His approval — not because you earned it, but because His Son absorbed the rejection that should have been yours. You are, in the deepest possible sense, already loved. Already accepted. Already secure. Which means the rejection you fear has already lost its ultimate power over you.

That does not mean it won't hurt. It means it cannot define you.

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## **FEAR NUMBER TWO: INADEQUACY**

This is the fear that you don't know enough. That your theology is not tight enough. That the person you're talking to will ask you a question you cannot answer, and you will stand there with your mouth open and your credibility

evaporating, and you will have done more harm than good and set the kingdom back by at least a decade.

I have good news and better news about this fear. The good news is that you don't need to know everything to share the gospel effectively. You need to know the four non-negotiables from Chapter Two, your own story, and where to find resources for questions you cannot answer. That is a manageable list. The better news is that the gospel does not depend on your theological competence to be true. God was saving people long before systematic theology was organized into textbooks, and He will continue doing so long after every theological framework currently in existence has been revised, refined, and argued about at academic conferences.

The disciples Jesus sent out in the first century did not have seminary degrees. They did not have carefully crafted apologetic frameworks or memorized answers to the top ten intellectual objections to Christianity. What they had was a direct encounter with the risen Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit. And they turned the world upside down.

Now — I am not suggesting that theological education is worthless. It is not. Study matters. Growing in your understanding of what you believe and why you believe it is a legitimate and important part of discipleship. But study is preparation for the conversation, not the prerequisite for it. You do not need to have arrived at theological mastery before you are qualified to open your mouth and tell someone what Jesus has done in your life.

Inadequacy is, at its root, a form of pride. I say that gently but directly, because I think it needs to be said. The fear of being theologically inadequate assumes that the outcome of the gospel conversation depends primarily on your performance — that if you are not brilliant enough, articulate enough, prepared enough, the whole enterprise will fail. But the gospel is not your project. It is God's. And God has a long and well-documented history of doing extraordinary things through entirely ordinary, under-qualified, frequently confused human beings who were simply willing to show up.

Moses had a speech impediment. Jeremiah thought he was too young. Gideon was hiding in a winepress when the angel found him. Peter denied Jesus three times — *three times* — and became the foundational voice of the early church. God has never once been limited by the inadequacy of His messengers. He has only ever been limited by their unwillingness.

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### **FEAR NUMBER THREE: MESSING IT UP**

This is perhaps the most subtly paralyzing of the three, because it masquerades as conscientiousness. It sounds responsible. *I just don't want to say the wrong thing and turn someone off to the gospel forever.* Which is, on its surface, a thoughtful concern. And underneath that thoughtful surface is the same fundamental misunderstanding driving Fear Number Two: the belief that you are primarily responsible for the outcome.

You are not.

You are responsible for your willingness, your love, your honesty, and your prayerfulness. The outcome belongs to God. Always has. Always will. And the God who is sovereign over the salvation of human souls is not wringing His hands over the possibility that you might fumble your transition sentence or forget the exact wording of Romans 3:23 or accidentally say something slightly theologically imprecise in the heat of the moment.

He is, if anything, rather accustomed to working with fumbling, imprecise, nervously well-meaning human beings. It is essentially His entire track record.

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### **SPOILER ALERT: YOU WILL MESS IT UP**

Let me save you a significant amount of anxiety by telling you something right now, clearly and without equivocation:

You are going to mess up gospel conversations. Not might. Will. You are going to say things that come out wrong. You are going to forget important points.

You are going to get asked a question that sends you into a full mental blank, standing there nodding slowly while internally you are experiencing something very close to system failure. You are going to walk away from conversations thinking of seventeen things you should have said and didn't, and three things you said that you shouldn't have, and wondering whether you've set the cause of Christ back by several years.

This is normal. This is universal. This is the experience of every single person who has ever opened their mouth to share the gospel — including, I would argue, the Apostle Paul, who had to revisit his approach after his speech at the Areopagus landed with a considerably more mixed reception than he might have hoped — Acts 17:32-34 (NASB).

And God will use it anyway.

This is not theological cheerleading. This is the documented testimony of Scripture and two thousand years of church history. God uses imperfect messengers delivering imperfect presentations of a perfect message and somehow — somehow — it reaches people. It breaks through. It lands in ways we didn't plan and takes root in soil we didn't even know was receptive. Because the power is not in the delivery. The power is in the message itself. And the message is, as Paul told us, *"the power of God for salvation"* — Romans 1:16 (NASB). Not the power of God contingent on an excellent presentation. Just — the power of God. Full stop.

I have been a chaplain long enough to have heard testimonies from people about the conversations that led them to faith, and I can tell you that a surprising number of those conversations would not score particularly well on any evangelism rubric. Stumbling words. Incomplete theology. Awkward silences. Follow-up questions that went unanswered because the person sharing didn't know the answer. And yet — somehow, through all of it — the person on the receiving end heard something. Felt something. Encountered something that would not let them go.

That something was not the eloquence of the messenger. It was the presence of the Spirit who was moving long before the conversation started and would continue moving long after it ended.

You will mess it up. Go anyway.

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## **YOU ARE THE MAIL CARRIER, NOT THE POST OFFICE**

Here is an image I return to constantly in my own thinking about evangelism, because it has a way of redistributing the weight of responsibility in a manner that is both theologically accurate and practically liberating.

You are a mail carrier.

Your job is to take a letter that was written by Someone else, in language that belongs to Someone else, containing promises that were made by Someone else, and deliver it to the address you've been given. You did not write the letter. You do not determine its contents. You are not responsible for how the recipient responds to it. Your one job — your entire job — is to deliver it faithfully and let the letter do what the letter does.

The post office is not your responsibility. The infrastructure that makes the whole system work is not your department. The fact that the letter was written, that it contains what it contains, that it was addressed to this particular person at this particular time — none of that is on you. You just carry it. You just deliver it. And then you trust the One who wrote it to do what He does with words that belong to Him.

This is not an excuse for laziness or sloppiness. A mail carrier who crumples the letter, delivers it to the wrong address, or reads it out loud on the street corner in a mocking voice is not doing their job well, and that matters. How we carry the gospel — our love, our honesty, our respect for the person we're talking to — all of it matters. But the carrier is not the message. And the carrier is not responsible for results that only the message's Author can produce.

Paul, once again, says it with almost casual precision: *"I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth."* — 1 Corinthians 3:6-7 (NASB). You plant. You water. God grows. That is the division of labor, and it has not changed. Your job is faithfulness. The results are His.

Put down the weight of outcomes you were never meant to carry. Pick up the letter. Deliver it. Trust the Author.

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## THE HOLY SPIRIT'S JOB DESCRIPTION

If there is one thing I wish every Christian understood before they ever attempted a gospel conversation, it is this: you are not the primary actor in evangelism. You are not even the secondary actor. You are, in the grand scheme of what God is doing in the life of the person you're talking to, closer to a supporting role — important, meaningful, irreplaceable in that specific moment, but supporting nonetheless.

The primary actor is the Holy Spirit. And His job description, as Jesus laid it out in the Gospel of John, is breathtaking in its scope.

*"And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment."* — John 16:8 (NASB). Convict the world. Not — convict the world provided the Christians give a sufficiently compelling presentation. Not — convict the world if the messenger has their theology completely sorted out. Simply — convict the world. The Holy Spirit takes the words you offer, however imperfect they are, and He does something with them that you are constitutionally incapable of doing yourself: He makes them alive to the person who hears them. He takes an external gospel and makes it an internal reality. He bridges the distance between a human message and a human heart in a way that no rhetorical skill, no apologetic argument, no emotional appeal can replicate or replace.

Jesus also told His disciples — right before He sent them out into a world that was actively hostile to everything they were about to say — *"But the Helper,*

*the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.*" — John 14:26 (NASB). In other words: when you get in that conversation and your mind goes blank and you can't remember what you were going to say — that is not the end of the story. The Spirit who lives in you knows what needs to be said. And your job, in that moment, is less about performing and more about staying present and staying prayerful and trusting that the Helper actually helps.

I have seen this happen in real time, in pastoral conversations and hospital rooms and fire station kitchens and back porches at midnight. A conversation goes in a direction I didn't plan. A question gets asked that I didn't see coming. And something rises up — not from my preparation, not from my training, not from anything I manufactured — and the right thing gets said in the right moment for the right person. And afterward, driving home, I know with absolute certainty that I cannot take credit for it. That was not me.

That is what Brennan Manning meant when he wrote that *"we are not the light. We are not even a lighthouse. We are a window."* A window does not generate light. It simply gets out of the way and lets the light that already exists shine through. Your job in evangelism is not to generate spiritual transformation. Your job is to be a clean enough window — present, honest, prayerful, loving — that the Light can shine through you to the person who needs to see it.

The Holy Spirit will do the rest. He always does.

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## **SEEDS YOU'LL NEVER SEE HARVEST**

There is one more thing about fear that I need to address before we get to your Dummy Drill, and it is the fear that may be the quietest of the three but is in some ways the most corrosive: the fear that your efforts don't matter. That you share the gospel, or try to, and nothing happens, and maybe it was pointless. Maybe you're not making a difference. Maybe the seed is just falling on pavement.

I want to talk about seeds for a moment, because Jesus talked about seeds constantly — and I think it's because He understood something about spiritual agriculture that we tend to forget in our results-obsessed culture. Seeds do not sprout on command. They operate on a timeline that has nothing to do with the convenience or the impatience of the person who planted them. They require darkness. They require time. They require conditions that are entirely outside the planter's control. And very often, the person who planted the seed never gets to see what grew from it.

The farmer who plants in spring does not stand over the field every morning demanding to see evidence of germination. He plants. He tends. He trusts the process. And in due season — not his season, the seed's season — something breaks the surface.

You will have gospel conversations that appear, by every visible measure, to go nowhere. The person will smile politely and change the subject. Or push back. Or go quiet. Or thank you and never bring it up again. And you will drive home wondering whether any of it meant anything.

It meant something. You may never know what, and you may never see it, but it meant something. Because the Word of God, as Isaiah tells us, does not return empty — *"So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it."* — Isaiah 55:11 (NASB). The seed does not require your supervision to germinate. It requires only the soil and the Spirit and the season that God has appointed.

I have talked to people who came to faith after decades of resistance and can trace the thread of their spiritual journey back through multiple conversations, multiple moments, multiple seeds planted by multiple people — none of whom knew what the others had done, none of whom saw the final harvest, all of whom were simply faithful in their particular moment. The person who planted in 1987 did not get to see the harvest in 2019. But their faithfulness was woven into the story nonetheless.

Your job is not to produce the harvest. Your job is to plant when the opportunity comes, water when you can, and trust the God of the harvest to do what only He can do with a seed placed in His hands.

That is enough. It has always been enough.

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### **DUMMY DRILL #3**

*This one has two parts, and I want you to actually do both of them before you move to the next chapter.*

*PART ONE: Get honest about your fear.*

*Take five minutes and write down, as specifically as you can, your primary fear about sharing the gospel. Not the generic version — the real one. Is it a specific person you're afraid of losing? A specific scenario you keep imagining? A specific part of your own story that makes you feel disqualified? Name it. Get it out of the shadows and onto paper where you can actually look at it.*

*PART TWO: Read Acts 4:1-31.*

*This is the account of Peter and John before the Sanhedrin — the most powerful religious authority in their world — after being arrested for preaching the gospel publicly. Note what they were afraid of. Note what the other disciples prayed for when they heard what had happened. Note what God did in response to that prayer. Note particularly verse 31: "And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness." — Acts 4:31 (NASB).*

*Now compare your fear from Part One to what the first disciples faced. They were looking at imprisonment, beatings, and execution. You are probably looking at an awkward moment at a dinner party.*

*I say that not to minimize your fear — fear is fear, and it is real regardless of scale. I say it to put it in context. The same Spirit who filled that room in Acts 4 and produced boldness in people who had far more to lose than you do is the same Spirit who lives in you right now. He has not gotten less powerful in two thousand years.*

*Close this exercise with a simple prayer — not a polished one. Just an honest one. Tell God exactly what you're afraid of. Then ask Him for the thing the early church asked for: not safety, not a guarantee of good results, but boldness. The courage to open your mouth and trust Him with what comes out.*

*Then watch what He does with it.*

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*"We are not the light. We are not even a lighthouse. We are a window." — Brennan Manning*

*"Courage is not the absence of fear, but the judgment that something else is more important than fear." — Ambrose Redmoon*

*"God doesn't call the equipped. He equips the called." — Often attributed to various sources, universally true*

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*You've done the interior work. You know what you believe. You know what the gospel is. You've named your fear and looked it in the face.*

*Part Two begins on the next page. It's time to stop talking about the conversation and start learning how to have it. But first — we're going to learn to shut up and listen. Because the best evangelists in the world are almost always the best listeners.*

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### PART TWO: LEARNING TO LISTEN BEFORE YOU SPEAK

#### *The Art of Earning the Right to Be Heard*

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## CHAPTER 4: SHUT UP AND LISTEN

### *Presence Is Proclamation*

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*"Know this, my beloved brethren. But everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger." — James 1:19 (NASB)*

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In the fire service, we have a concept called a size-up.

Before you do anything else on a scene — before you pull hose, before you force entry, before you commit anyone to an interior attack — you size up the situation. You walk the perimeter if you can. You look at the smoke color and the volume and where it's coming from. You look at the building construction. You talk to bystanders. You listen. You gather information. You let the scene tell you what it needs before you decide what you're going to do about it.

The firefighters who skip the size-up — who pull up, see fire, and charge in based on assumption and adrenaline without stopping to actually read what's in front of them — are the ones who get people killed. Including themselves.

The size-up is not a delay. It is not timidity. It is not a failure of urgency. It is the thing that makes every subsequent action effective rather than catastrophic. It is the discipline of letting the situation speak before you do.

I have thought about that principle ten thousand times in ministry contexts, because the parallel is almost painfully exact. Most of us, when we approach a gospel conversation, skip the size-up entirely. We pull up with our hose already charged, our approach already planned, our destination already

decided — and we charge in based on assumption and spiritual adrenaline without ever stopping to actually read the person in front of us. What are they carrying? Where have they been hurt? What have they been told about God? What are they actually afraid of? What are they quietly longing for beneath the surface of whatever they're talking about?

We don't know, because we didn't ask. We didn't ask, because we weren't really listening. And we weren't listening, because most of the evangelism training we've received is so focused on what we're going to say that it never got around to teaching us the single most powerful tool in the entire enterprise.

Our ears.

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## **THE MISSING CHAPTER IN EVERY EVANGELISM MANUAL**

Here is something I want you to think about. Go back through every evangelism training, every witnessing seminar, every outreach workshop you have ever attended. Think about the content. Think about what was emphasized, what was practiced, what was drilled until it became second nature.

My strong suspicion is that the overwhelming majority of that content was about talking. What to say. How to say it. Which verses to use. How to transition from small talk to spiritual talk. How to handle objections. How to close. How to follow up.

Now think about how much time was spent on listening. On the art of asking a good question and then actually receiving the answer. On the practice of sitting with someone in their pain without rushing to fill the silence with theological content. On learning to hear not just what people are saying but what they're actually communicating beneath the words.

If your experience matches that of most Christians I've talked to over the years, the answer to that second question is: not much. Maybe a passing

mention. Maybe a bullet point in a handout somewhere. But not the sustained, serious, practiced attention it deserves.

And this, I want to argue, is not a minor gap in the curriculum. It is a fundamental misunderstanding of how the gospel actually travels from one human heart to another.

James, the brother of Jesus, writing to a community of early believers who were apparently in desperate need of the reminder, put the principle with a directness that requires no interpretation: "*everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger.*" — James 1:19 (NASB). Quick to hear. Slow to speak. In that order. Intentionally in that order. Because the order matters, and we have been systematically getting it backwards in our approach to sharing the faith.

The ears come first. They have always come first. The tragedy is that nobody told us.

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## **LISTENING TO RESPOND VERSUS LISTENING TO UNDERSTAND**

There are two fundamentally different ways to listen, and if you are honest with yourself, you already know which one you spend most of your time doing.

The first is listening to respond. This is the mode most of us default to in most conversations, and it is especially pronounced in gospel conversations where we feel the pressure to say the right thing. In this mode, while the other person is talking, you are not really with them. You are in your own head, monitoring the conversation for the moment when it will be your turn, preparing your response, sorting through your mental file of appropriate verses and illustrations and transition phrases, waiting for the opening that will allow you to move the conversation in the direction you've already decided it needs to go.

You are physically present. You are spiritually elsewhere.

The person you're talking to almost certainly knows this, even if they can't articulate it. There is a quality of attention that human beings extend to one another in genuine listening that is entirely absent in strategic listening, and people feel the difference in their bones. When someone is truly listening to you — when you can feel that your words are actually landing somewhere, that the person across from you is genuinely with you rather than just waiting for their turn — something opens up. Something relaxes. You go a little deeper than you planned to. You say something truer than you would have said otherwise.

The second mode is listening to understand. This is the discipline of actually going where the other person is taking you — following their thought, sitting with their story, asking questions because you are genuinely curious about the answers rather than because curiosity is a technique you've been taught to deploy. In this mode, you are not monitoring the conversation for gospel-sharing opportunities. You are simply being present with another human being, attending to their reality with your full and unhurried attention.

And here is the paradox that every good chaplain, every good pastor, every good friend eventually discovers: the listening to understand approach creates far more genuine gospel opportunities than the listening to respond approach ever could. Because when people feel truly heard — when they sense that you are actually interested in them as a person rather than as a prospect — they begin to open doors you didn't even know existed. They bring you into rooms of their inner life that they keep carefully locked when they feel they're being worked on. They ask you questions they would never ask someone who was clearly waiting to preach at them.

You cannot manufacture those moments with technique. You can only create the conditions for them by being genuinely, unhurriedly, uncomplicatedly present.

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## **HOW JESUS ACTUALLY DID THIS**

One of the most instructive exercises you can do with the Gospels is to go through them and count how many times Jesus responds to a person or a situation with a question rather than a proclamation. The number is striking. The pattern is consistent. And it runs almost entirely counter to the way most of us have been trained to think about gospel proclamation.

Consider the woman at the well in John chapter four. Jesus is sitting by the well when she arrives. He could have opened with a presentation. He could have announced His identity. He could have delivered a comprehensive theological overview of the plan of salvation. Instead He says: "*Give Me a drink.*" — John 4:7 (NASB). A request. An opening. An act of vulnerability, even, that puts Him in the position of the one who needs something rather than the one who has something to deliver.

From that simple, human beginning — *give Me a drink* — a conversation unfolds that moves, organically and unhurriedly, into the deepest places of her life. Her thirst. Her relational history. Her religious questions. Her spiritual hunger. Jesus doesn't drive the conversation toward a predetermined destination. He follows it. He asks. He listens. He responds to where she actually is rather than where He might have assumed she was. And by the time she walks away, she has encountered something so real, so personally specific to her particular brokenness, that she cannot keep it to herself.

No pamphlet. No script. No closing technique. Just a man who asked a question and then actually listened to the answer.

Or consider Bartimaeus, the blind beggar in Mark chapter ten, who calls out to Jesus from the roadside. The crowd tries to silence him, but Jesus stops — *stops*, in the middle of what by any measure is an important journey — and says something remarkable. He says: "*What do you want Me to do for you?*" — Mark 10:51 (NASB). This is the Son of God. He is omniscient. He knows exactly what Bartimaeus wants. He knows what Bartimaeus needs. He could have simply healed him and continued walking. But He stops. He asks. Because what Bartimaeus needs is not just physical healing — he needs to be seen,

heard, asked, known. He needs someone to stop and treat him as a person whose wants and words matter.

*What do you want Me to do for you?*

That question, asked genuinely, with full attention and zero agenda, is one of the most powerful tools in the entire ministry of Jesus. And it is available to every single one of us, in every single conversation, at no cost whatsoever except the willingness to actually wait for and receive the answer.

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## **PROXIMITY AS MINISTRY**

There is a model of evangelism that operates at a comfortable distance. It involves tracts and broadcasts and carefully crafted messages delivered to large audiences from behind protective barriers of technology and production value. And while God, in His remarkable grace, has used these methods to reach people, there is something they cannot replicate and cannot replace.

Showing up.

The ministry of presence — simply being in proximity to people in their actual lives, in their actual pain, without an agenda and without a timetable — is not a preliminary step on the way to real ministry. It IS real ministry. In many cases, it is the most powerful form of ministry available to ordinary Christians living ordinary lives in ordinary neighborhoods.

I learned this in fire stations before I ever learned it in theology books. When you work alongside someone in difficult conditions — when you eat with them, when you lose patients with them, when you sit in the aftermath of terrible calls in the quiet of a station that smells like diesel and coffee and exhaustion — something happens that no program can engineer and no technique can produce. They know that you are not there because they represent an evangelism opportunity. They know you are there because you are there. Because you showed up. Because their life and their pain and their questions are worth your actual presence.

That kind of trust — trust built not by words but by proximity, by showing up, by staying when staying is uncomfortable — is the soil in which gospel conversations grow. You cannot skip the soil and go straight to the harvest. It does not work that way. It has never worked that way. And any approach to evangelism that treats the relationship as a delivery mechanism for the message rather than as something valuable in its own right will eventually be felt for exactly what it is — and the door that might have opened will quietly close.

Jesus did not operate at a distance. He showed up in people's homes, at their tables, in their grief, in their embarrassment, in their disease and their poverty and their social exclusion. He was *Emmanuel* — God with us. Not God broadcasting at us from a safe remove. With us. In the middle of the mess. Present in the way that only presence can be present.

If you want to share the gospel effectively, go where people are. Not to perform evangelism at them. Just to be there. To know them. To let them know you. To earn, through the sustained investment of your actual time and your actual self, the right to eventually be heard when you have something to say.

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## **THE FIREFIGHTER PRINCIPLE**

I want to give you a principle that I developed in the fire service and have never found a reason to abandon in ministry, and I call it simply the Firefighter Principle. It is this:

*You do not hand someone a pamphlet in a burning building.*

When someone is in crisis — when they are in the acute, immediate experience of pain, loss, fear, or desperation — the appropriate response is not information. It is not even the gospel, at least not in its verbal form. The appropriate response is presence. Action. Getting in there with them and doing whatever can be done to stabilize the situation and communicate, through your physical proximity and your willingness to be there, that they are not alone.

The gospel, in those moments, is not proclaimed. It is demonstrated. And the demonstration — the showing up, the staying, the refusing to leave someone alone in their worst — is itself a form of proclamation that speaks to places words cannot reach.

I have sat with first responders in the aftermath of calls that nobody should ever have to run. I have sat with families in hospital waiting rooms while surgeons worked on people they couldn't imagine the world without. I have sat with people in the early hours of sobriety when they were shaking and terrified and not at all certain they wanted to be alive. And in those moments, I have almost never opened a Bible. I have almost never delivered a gospel presentation. I have just been there. Present. Available. Not rushing toward the exit the moment the immediate crisis stabilized.

And what I have found, consistently and without exception, is that the conversations that happen *after* — sometimes days later, sometimes weeks, sometimes months — carry a weight and an openness that no cold-call gospel approach could ever produce. Because the person I'm talking to knows something about me that no presentation could have told them. They know I showed up. They know I stayed. They know I was there in the burning building with them, and I didn't hand them a pamphlet.

That knowledge is the foundation on which every subsequent conversation about Jesus is built. Don't skip it. Don't rush it. Don't treat it as a means to an end. Let it be what it is — genuine human presence in the name of a God who showed up Himself — and trust that it is doing more than you can see.

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## **WHAT YOU'RE ACTUALLY LISTENING FOR**

When I talk about listening in gospel contexts, I don't mean passive, undirected attention. I mean a particular quality of listening that is attuned to specific things — not to find a lever to manipulate, but to actually understand the person in front of you at a level that allows you to speak to their real life rather than a generic version of it.

Here is what I have learned to listen for, in years of chaplaincy work with first responders and marginalized communities and people who have been chewed up by hard living.

Listen for hunger. Not the word, but the thing — the place in a person's life or story where something is clearly missing, where they are reaching for something that has not yet filled them, where their language betrays a longing that their circumstances have not been able to satisfy. Augustine was right when he said that our hearts are restless until they rest in God, and that restlessness tends to leak into conversation if you are quiet enough to notice it.

Listen for wounds. The places where religion has hurt them, or where someone who claimed to represent God behaved in ways that made the very word *God* taste bitter. These wounds are not obstacles to the gospel. They are invitations to a more honest conversation about what the gospel actually is — as opposed to what the people who wounded them claimed it was.

Listen for questions. Not the questions people ask out loud, necessarily, but the ones underneath those questions. *Why is there suffering?* underneath which is often *why did this specific suffering happen to me?* underneath which is often *is there anyone in charge of this world who actually cares about what I'm going through?* The surface question is theological. The real question is personal. Listen deep enough to hear the real one.

And listen for the moments when someone stops performing for you and just tells you the truth. Those moments are rare and precious and they almost always come only after you have spent significant time simply being present and genuinely curious without any apparent agenda. When they come, treat them as the sacred things they are. Don't rush to fill them. Don't immediately pivot to a gospel presentation. Just receive them. Stay in them. Ask another question. Go deeper.

The gospel will find its moment. It always does, when the soil is right.

*"Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." — Attributed to Francis of Assisi (Whether he said it or not, somebody should have)*

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#### **DUMMY DRILL #4**

*This one is going to feel strange, and that strangeness is the point.*

*Identify a person in your life who does not share your faith — a friend, a coworker, a neighbor, a family member. Someone you genuinely care about, not someone you have mentally designated as an evangelism project. Invite them to coffee, or a meal, or a walk, or whatever form of time-together fits your relationship naturally.*

*Spend at least twenty minutes with them. During that time, ask three genuine questions — not leading questions designed to steer toward spiritual topics, but questions about their actual life. Their work. Their family. Something they care about. Something they're navigating. Let the questions come from real curiosity rather than strategy.*

*Here is the rule: say nothing about your faith. Nothing about church. Nothing about God. Not because those things are shameful, but because this exercise is not about those things. This exercise is about learning to be present with another person for their own sake, without an agenda, without a destination.*

*Afterward, sit quietly for a few minutes and write down your answers to these questions:*

*What did you learn about this person that you didn't know before? What were they actually talking about beneath the surface of what they were saying?*

*Where did you sense hunger, or woundedness, or longing, or questioning?*

*What question did they ask — or almost ask — that you want to remember?*

*And finally: how did it feel to simply be present without performing? What did that presence cost you? What did it give you?*

*Keep those notes. They are the beginning of a gospel conversation that may be months in the making. And when it comes, it will be grounded in something real — a relationship, a history, a knowledge of this particular person's particular life — that will make it far more powerful than anything you could have said in the first five minutes.*

*The ears come first. They have always come first.*

*Now you know why.*

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*"The greatest gift you can give another person is your genuine attention." —  
Richard Moss*

*"Jesus did not come to explain away suffering or remove it. He came to fill it with His presence." — Paul Claudel*

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*Chapter Five is where we learn to read the room. Because not every person you meet is in the same place on their spiritual journey. And knowing where they are changes everything about how you show up.*

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### CHAPTER 5: READING THE ROOM

#### *Understanding Where People Actually Are*

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*"And He saw a large crowd, and He felt compassion for them because they were like sheep without a shepherd." — Mark 6:34 (NASB)*

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There is a moment in the Gospel of Mark that I have returned to more times than I can count, and it is not one of the dramatic ones. It is not a healing or a resurrection or a confrontation with the religious authorities. It is just Jesus, stepping off a boat after what was supposed to be a private retreat, looking out at a crowd of people who had followed Him around the shoreline on foot — and feeling something.

The word Mark uses is *splagchnizomai*. It is one of those Greek words that doesn't translate cleanly into English because it describes something that happens in the body before it happens in the mind. It refers to a visceral, gut-level movement of compassion — something closer to what you feel when you see a child fall than to what you feel when you read a sad news story from a safe emotional distance. It is compassion that moves from the inside out. Compassion that does not merely observe need but is physically affected by it.

Jesus looked at the crowd and felt that. Not irritation that His retreat had been interrupted. Not strategic calculation about how best to leverage the large audience. Not the detached assessment of a teacher surveying students. He felt *splagchnizomai* — because He saw them as they actually were. Sheep without a shepherd. Lost, directionless, in need of something they couldn't name and wouldn't have known how to find.

He saw them before He spoke to them. He felt them before He addressed them.

That sequence — seeing, feeling, then speaking — is the model for everything this chapter is about.

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## **THE MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY**

Before you can meet people where they are, you have to accept one foundational reality that the one-size-fits-all approach to evangelism has consistently refused to acknowledge:

People are not all in the same place.

This sounds obvious. It is obvious. And yet the vast majority of gospel-sharing approaches treat the person across the table as though they were a blank slate — as though every human being you encounter is at the same point on the same journey, carrying the same assumptions, responding to the same appeals, and needing the same conversation in the same order.

They are not. Not even close.

The person who grew up in a Bible-believing home, drifted away in college, and has spent twenty years carrying a low-grade spiritual guilt is not in the same place as the person who was raised in a functionally atheist household and has never seriously considered the possibility that God exists. The person who was wounded by a spiritually abusive church leader is not in the same place as the person who has never darkened a church doorway and bears no particular grudge against religion. The intellectual who has genuine philosophical objections to Christian truth claims is not in the same place as the person who is just too busy and distracted to think much about eternity.

Each of these people needs a different conversation. Not a different gospel — the gospel is singular and non-negotiable, as we established in Chapter Two. But a different entry point. A different pace. A different set of questions. A different quality of listening. And the failure to recognize those differences — the insistence on delivering the same script to every person regardless of where they are — is one of the primary reasons so many gospel conversations

feel like a size-nine shoe being forced onto a size-seven foot. Technically in the vicinity of the right idea. Practically a painful experience for everyone involved.

Jesus never made this mistake. Not once in the Gospels does He have the same conversation twice. He meets Nicodemus, a religious intellectual with sophisticated theological questions, in a private late-night conversation full of nuance and paradox. He meets the Samaritan woman, a social outcast with a complicated relational history, at a public well in the heat of the day with disarming directness and unexpected tenderness. He meets the rich young ruler's confident religiosity with a challenge that cuts straight to the one thing the man was unwilling to surrender. He meets Zacchaeus — the despised tax collector up in the sycamore tree — not with a theological presentation at all, but with a dinner invitation.

Same gospel. Radically different conversations. Because He saw each person as exactly who they were, not as a generic recipient of a standardized message.

That is the art this chapter is trying to teach.

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## **THE ENGEL SCALE: A MAP FOR THE JOURNEY**

In the 1970s, a missiologist named James Engel developed a framework for thinking about spiritual decision-making that remains, half a century later, one of the most practically useful tools in the evangelism conversation. He called it the Engel Scale, and while it has been refined and debated and expanded in the years since, its core insight is as relevant as ever.

The Engel Scale essentially maps the journey from complete unawareness of the gospel to mature Christian discipleship as a series of progressive steps rather than a single binary moment. On one end of the scale, you have someone who has no awareness of the existence of Christianity or the God of the Bible. On the other end, you have a growing, reproducing disciple of Jesus Christ. And between those two poles, there are multiple distinct stages —

growing awareness of the gospel, understanding of its basic content, recognition of personal need, positive attitude toward the message, grasping its implications, and finally, the decision of repentance and faith.

The scale does several important things for us.

First, it normalizes the process. Conversion, in most cases, is not a sudden event that happens in isolation. It is the culmination of a journey — often a long one — that involves multiple conversations, multiple exposures to the gospel, multiple people playing multiple different roles. Some plant. Some water. Some cultivate. Some harvest. Very rarely does any single person do all of those things for the same individual, and the Engel Scale helps us understand why that's not a failure — it's just how the journey works.

Second, it frees us from the pressure of closing every conversation. If the person I'm talking to is at a point on the scale where they are just beginning to be aware that there is a God who might be personal, the most appropriate thing I can do is help them take the next step from where they are — not drag them twelve steps down the road to a conversion decision they are nowhere near ready to make. Evangelism is not about getting people from one end of the scale to the other in a single conversation. It is about being faithful in the step that is appropriate for this person, in this moment, at this point in their journey.

Third — and perhaps most importantly — it helps us recognize the value of every gospel-adjacent interaction, not just the ones that result in visible decisions. The conversation that moves someone from hostile to curious is not a failed evangelism attempt. It is a genuine and important kingdom moment. The friendship that demonstrates the love of Christ over years, slowly dissolving a person's preconceptions about Christianity, is not pre-evangelism in some lesser sense. It is exactly what God is doing in that person's life, and you are exactly where He needs you to be.

Know where people are on the journey. Meet them there. Take the next step with them. Trust God with the steps that come after.

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## **MAPPING THE TERRAIN: FOUR PEOPLE YOU WILL MEET**

While no taxonomy can fully capture the complexity of any individual human being, there are four broad categories of people you are likely to encounter in gospel conversations, and understanding the distinctive landscape of each one will help you show up with appropriate sensitivity and appropriate honesty.

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### **THE SKEPTIC**

The skeptic has intellectual objections to the Christian faith — sometimes sophisticated ones, sometimes not — and those objections are real to them and deserve to be taken seriously. What the skeptic almost never needs is to be argued into the kingdom. They need to be loved into a conversation.

The mistake most Christians make with skeptics is treating every intellectual objection as a debate to be won. And while there is absolutely a place for honest, substantive engagement with intellectual questions about faith — we will devote an entire chapter to this later — the relentless debate posture tends to produce exactly the wrong result. It turns a conversation into a competition, and in a competition, the goal is to defeat the other person. But you cannot defeat someone into faith. You can only make them a more entrenched version of what they already were.

What skeptics actually need — what most of them are quietly hoping for beneath the intellectual sparring — is to meet a Christian who does not become defensive when challenged, who takes their questions seriously rather than dismissing them as obstacles, and who demonstrates through the quality of their engagement that faith and intellectual honesty are not mutually exclusive. They need to see that you are not afraid of their questions, because you are rooted in something that can hold its ground under scrutiny.

Engage honestly. Acknowledge uncertainty where it exists. Say *I don't know* when you don't. And never, under any circumstances, make them feel that you are trying to win something at their expense. You are not their opponent. You are a fellow human being who found something true, and you are inviting them to examine it with you.

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## **THE SEEKER**

The seeker is already in motion. Something — loss, disillusionment, a crack in the worldview they've been operating from, a moment of transcendence that didn't fit their existing categories — has opened a door in them, and they are moving toward it without fully knowing where it leads.

Seekers are perhaps the most rewarding people to walk alongside in gospel conversations, because they are already asking the right questions. They don't need to be convinced that the questions matter — they already know they do. What they need is a guide. Someone who knows the terrain a little better than they do, who can say *yes, that question matters, and here is where I found an answer that actually held up* — without rushing them, without pressuring them, without treating their seeking as a problem to be solved rather than a journey to be honored.

The primary danger with seekers is impatience. Because they are already open, there is a temptation to accelerate the process — to load them up with information, to push toward a decision, to capitalize on the openness before it closes. Resist this temptation. Seeking is not a problem requiring an urgent solution. It is the Holy Spirit doing something in a person, and the Holy Spirit does not need you to rush Him. Walk with the seeker at the seeker's pace. Answer the questions they're actually asking. Trust that the God who opened the door is quite capable of bringing them through it.

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## **THE CHURCH-WOUNDED**

This is the category closest to my own pastoral heart, because these are the people I spend the most time with — the ones who did not walk away from God so much as they were driven away from a particular, painful representation of Him. The ones for whom the word *church* carries the specific weight of spiritual abuse, manipulation, legalism, hypocrisy, or the quiet, grinding experience of being told that their brokenness disqualified them from belonging.

These people are not your evangelism project. I want to say that directly, because there is a temptation in Christian ministry circles to treat the church-wounded as a demographic to be recaptured rather than as people who have been genuinely, sometimes profoundly, hurt — and who have every right to their grief and their anger and their profound reluctance to try again.

What the church-wounded need, more than any theological argument or gospel presentation, is an encounter with someone who represents Jesus rather than the institution that hurt them. Someone who does not become defensive when they describe what was done in God's name. Someone who can say, without qualification, *what happened to you was wrong, and it was not the gospel* — and mean it.

The distinction that is absolutely critical with this population is the difference between the church — flawed, human, frequently getting it catastrophically wrong — and Jesus Himself, who spent the majority of His earthly ministry in conflict with the religious institution of His day precisely because it was doing to ordinary people what the church-wounded have experienced. Jesus is not the problem. In many cases, He is as offended by what was done to them as they are. Start there. Stay there as long as it takes. Let the wounds be real before you offer the remedy.

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## **THE SPIRITUALLY INDIFFERENT**

Perhaps the largest and most challenging category in contemporary Western culture is the person who is neither hostile to Christianity nor particularly

interested in it. They are not skeptics with intellectual objections. They are not seekers in motion toward spiritual truth. They are not wounded by religion. They simply have not thought about it much, because life — work, family, entertainment, the relentless forward motion of ordinary existence — has not required them to.

The spiritually indifferent are not hard-hearted. They are full. Their lives are occupied, and the space where spiritual questions might otherwise surface has been filled, not with anything dramatically bad, but with the ordinary accumulation of the good and the distracting and the comfortable. They are, to use Jesus' language from the parable of the sower, the seed that fell among thorns — *"the worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word."* — Mark 4:19 (NASB).

You cannot argue or reason someone out of spiritual indifference, because indifference is not an intellectual position — it is an absence of felt need. What tends to move the spiritually indifferent is life — specifically, the moments when life refuses to be ordinary. Loss. Crisis. The sudden awareness of mortality. The quiet failure of everything they built their satisfaction on. These are not moments to exploit, but they are moments when the questions that indifference keeps at bay suddenly become urgent, and the person who has been present and consistent in the relationship — not performing Christianity at them, but simply being a genuinely loving friend — is the person they are most likely to turn to.

Be that person. Long before the crisis. So that when it comes, you are already there.

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## **THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PRE-CHRISTIAN AND POST-CHURCH**

This distinction may be the most practically important one in this entire chapter, and it is one that the church tends to collapse in ways that cause real damage.

A pre-Christian person is someone who has not yet come to faith in Jesus Christ — but their relationship to the gospel is essentially neutral. They haven't rejected it. They haven't been harmed by it. They simply haven't encountered it in a way that required a response.

A post-church person is someone who has had significant experience with Christianity — often including a period of genuine faith — and has moved away from it. Not necessarily away from God, and not always away from Jesus. But away from the institutional church, and often away from the version of Christianity they were handed, for reasons that are almost always deeply personal and frequently deeply legitimate.

These two people require entirely different approaches, and treating them as interchangeable is one of the most common and most damaging mistakes in evangelical outreach.

With the pre-Christian, your primary task is introduction. You are bringing them toward something they haven't encountered. The tone is invitation — *come and see*, as Philip said to Nathanael in John 1:46 (NASB).

With the post-church person, your primary task is often deconstruction before reconstruction. They have a version of Christianity already installed, and it is broken, and before you can show them the real thing, you frequently have to acknowledge honestly that the broken version was, in fact, broken. This requires a kind of intellectual and spiritual honesty that the church often finds threatening — the willingness to say *yes, that was wrong, and I understand why it drove you away* — before you can say anything at all about why you believe the story is bigger than the worst version of it they encountered.

Post-church people are often closer to genuine faith than they appear, because their quarrel is frequently not with Jesus but with what was done in His name. Many of them still find Him compelling. Many of them still pray, quietly and without telling anyone, to a God they're not sure they believe in anymore. Many of them are holding the door open just a crack, waiting to see if anyone on the other side is honest enough to be trusted.

Be honest enough to be trusted. It is, in the end, the only credential that matters with this population.

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## **WHY THEY'RE NOT REJECTING JESUS**

I want to land on this point before we get to your Dummy Drill, because I think it is one of the most liberating reframes available to Christians who are discouraged by the apparent indifference or hostility of the people around them.

When someone pushes back on the gospel — when they say they want nothing to do with Christianity, or that they tried it and it didn't work, or that they find the whole thing unbelievable — they are almost never rejecting Jesus. They are rejecting a representation of Jesus. A version of the faith that was presented to them through flawed human messengers, flawed human institutions, and a flawed human culture that has attached itself to the gospel like barnacles to a ship's hull, sometimes to the point where it is nearly impossible to see the ship beneath.

They are rejecting the Christianity that showed up at their door in judgment rather than grace. The Christianity that told them their questions were dangerous and their doubts were faithlessness. The Christianity that handled their pain with Bible verses instead of presence, their brokenness with shame instead of welcome, their humanity with a set of rules rather than a Person. The Christianity that looked more like a behavior-management system than an encounter with the living God.

And here is the thing: they are not entirely wrong to reject that. That version of Christianity deserves to be rejected, because it is not the gospel. It is a distortion of it, and Jesus Himself, who reserved His harshest words for religious people who were crushing ordinary human beings under the weight of their own righteousness, would agree.

Your job — the extraordinary, difficult, irreplaceable job — is to be a different kind of representation. Not a perfect one. Not a polished one. But an honest

one. One that looks enough like the actual Jesus — the one who stopped for blind beggars and ate with tax collectors and wept at gravesides and welcomed children and treated women with a dignity that scandalized His culture — that the person who rejected the distortion might be willing to take another look at the original.

E. Stanley Jones understood this when he wrote that *"the first task of the church is not to make men good, but to make them alive."* Not to improve people's behavior. Not to clean them up and make them respectable. To make them alive — to bring them into contact with the living God who is the source of all life — and trust that life, genuine life, will take it from there.

Meet people where they are. See them the way Jesus saw the crowd from the boat — with that gut-level, visceral, *splagchnizomai* compassion that is moved by what it sees rather than managing it from a distance. Let their actual location on the journey determine your approach rather than your own predetermined agenda.

The gospel is big enough to meet every person where they are. You just have to be present enough to find out where that is.

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 **DUMMY DRILL #5**

*Think of three specific people in your life who do not share your faith. They can be from any of the four categories we discussed — skeptic, seeker, church-wounded, or spiritually indifferent — or from some combination of those categories.*

*For each person, write down your honest answers to these questions:*

*Where do I think they are on the spiritual journey? What has shaped their relationship to God and to Christianity? What wounds, if any, do they carry from religion? What questions am I fairly sure they are carrying beneath the surface? What would it look like to meet them exactly where they are — not*

*where I wish they were, not where I think they should be — and take the one next step that is appropriate for them right now?*

*Then ask yourself the harder question: Am I willing to let that next step be something other than a gospel presentation? Am I willing to let it be a question asked, a wound acknowledged, a friendship deepened, a cup of coffee shared without agenda?*

*Finally — and only if you genuinely believe it — pray specifically for each of these three people. Not a general prayer for their salvation, but a specific prayer for the next step. Ask God to show you what that step is, and ask Him to make you willing to take it at their pace rather than yours.*

*The map is not the territory. But having a map changes everything about how you travel.*

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*"The first task of the church is not to make men good, but to make them alive."*  
— E. Stanley Jones

*"Meet people where they are, not where you think they ought to be. Jesus always did."* — Henri Nouwen

*"Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion and anguish."* — Henri Nouwen

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*Chapter Six is where we talk about the long game. About building the kind of relationships that create the soil in which gospel conversations actually grow. About why the most powerful word in evangelism might not be a word at all. It might be showing up. Again. And again. And again.*

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### CHAPTER 6: BUILDING BRIDGES, NOT WALLS

#### *Relationships Are the Currency of Evangelism*

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*"The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition." — 2 Timothy 2:24-25 (NASB)*

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I want to tell you about a man I'll call Ray.

Ray worked at a garage two blocks from a fire station where I spent several years of my career. He was the kind of guy who fixed your car and didn't charge you for the extra hour it took, who remembered your kids' names and asked about them every time you came in, who had a laugh you could hear from the parking lot and a vocabulary that could make a sailor wince. He was profane and generous and fiercely loyal to the people he considered his, and he had approximately zero interest in anything having to do with church, Christianity, or what he referred to, with cheerful irreverence, as "the God business."

Ray had been burned. Not by God exactly — he wasn't sure enough about God to be burned by Him — but by a specific church in a specific town in a specific season of his life when things were bad and he showed up, desperate enough to try anything, and was handed a set of expectations he couldn't meet and a community that made clear, without ever quite saying it directly, that people like Ray needed to become different kinds of people before they would genuinely belong.

So Ray left. And he stayed left. And for years he processed his theology of religion through the twin filters of his own wounding and the relentless evidence of Christian hypocrisy he catalogued from the news and from the neighborhood and from people he'd known who said one thing and lived another.

I met Ray because my car needed work. I kept coming back because Ray was worth coming back to. We talked about football and local politics and the kind of calls that stay with you and the strange particular brotherhood of people who work with their hands in difficult conditions. We argued about things, Ray and I, in the way that people who respect each other argue — fully and without mercy and without either person taking it personally. We ate lunch together a dozen times at the diner across the street. I met his wife. He met mine.

He knew I was a Christian. He knew I was a pastor. He never pretended otherwise, and I never hid it — but I also never made it the organizing purpose of the relationship. Ray was not my evangelism project. Ray was my friend. And the distinction between those two things is the entire subject of this chapter.

It was three years before we had a real conversation about faith. Three years of Ray knowing who I was and what I believed and watching — not always consciously, but watching nonetheless — to see whether the gap between what I claimed and how I actually lived was wide enough to confirm everything he already thought about Christians. Three years of friendship that asked nothing of him spiritually, that made no demands and carried no hidden agenda, that was simply what it appeared to be: two people who genuinely liked each other spending time together.

And then one afternoon, in the diner across the street from the garage, Ray put down his coffee cup and said — not asked, said, with the directness of a man who had been thinking about this for some time: *"Okay. Tell me what you actually believe. Not the church version. What you actually believe."*

I told him. We talked for two hours. He pushed back on everything, because that was how Ray engaged with things he was genuinely interested in. He didn't pray a prayer that afternoon. He didn't walk an aisle or sign a card. But something shifted. A door opened that had been locked for years. And the key that opened it was not a gospel presentation or a clever apologetic argument or a well-timed tract.

It was three years of showing up and not having an agenda.

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## **THE 2% PROBLEM**

Let me give you a number that the evangelism industrial complex would rather you not think too hard about: approximately 2% of people come to faith through cold-contact evangelism — the door-to-door visit, the street corner conversation, the tract handed to a stranger, the unsolicited gospel presentation delivered to someone with whom you have no prior relationship.

Two percent.

Now — God bless that two percent. Every one of those stories is a genuine miracle and a testimony to the fact that the Holy Spirit can work through absolutely anything, including methods that most people find intrusive and off-putting. I will never diminish those stories or the people who share them.

But I want to ask a straightforward question about the other ninety-eight percent. Because while the church has invested enormous energy in developing, refining, training, and deploying cold-contact evangelism strategies, the overwhelming majority of people who come to genuine, lasting faith do so through a relationship with someone they already know and trust. A family member. A coworker. A neighbor. A friend. Someone whose life they have observed over time, whose faith they have watched function in real conditions, whose love they have experienced as something other than a recruitment strategy.

The data on this is not ambiguous. Study after study — from the Pew Research Center to the Billy Graham Center — consistently shows that relational, long-term, proximity-based witness is the most effective form of evangelism in virtually every cultural context. Not because cold-contact approaches are wrong, but because human beings are relational creatures who make their most important decisions within the context of trust — and trust is almost never built in a single encounter with a stranger.

Paul understood this intuitively. Writing to Timothy, he did not describe the effective gospel witness as aggressive, bold, or confrontational. He described him as *"not quarrelsome, but kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition."* — 2 Timothy 2:24-25 (NASB). Kind. Patient. Gentle. These are not the adjectives of a cold-call strategy. These are the adjectives of a relationship — one that has developed enough history for patience to be necessary and enough depth for gentleness to mean something.

The currency of evangelism is relationship. It has always been relationship. And you cannot counterfeit it with technique.

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## **FRIENDSHIP WITHOUT AN AGENDA**

I want to address something directly, because I have watched well-meaning Christians tie themselves in knots over it, and I think the knot is unnecessary.

Is it manipulative to befriend someone with the hope — the genuine, honest, non-coercive hope — that they might one day come to know Jesus?

No. It is not. And here is why.

Manipulation requires concealment and coercion. It involves hiding your true motives in order to maneuver someone toward an outcome they would not choose if they knew what was happening. That is not what relational evangelism is, provided — and this is the crucial condition — that the relationship itself is genuine.

The test is simple: if your friend decided with full certainty that they would never become a Christian, would you stay in the relationship? Would you continue to invest in them, care for them, show up for them, value them as a human being rather than as a conversion prospect? If the answer is yes — if your friendship exists because you genuinely love this person and value their presence in your life independent of any spiritual outcome — then it is not manipulation. It is love. And love, by its very nature, wants the best for the

beloved. The Christian who loves their friends genuinely cannot help hoping that those friends will encounter the grace that has changed their own life. That hope is not a hidden agenda. It is the natural overflow of genuine affection.

The manipulation enters only when the friendship becomes instrumental — when the other person is valued primarily as a target rather than as a person, when the relationship exists as a means to an end rather than as something worthwhile in itself, when you would quietly disengage if the evangelism project appeared to have no future. People sense this. They are remarkably good at detecting when they are being worked rather than loved, and the moment they sense it, the door closes — not just to the gospel conversation, but often to the friendship itself.

So the question is not whether it's okay to hope your friends come to faith. The question is whether you would love them faithfully if they never did.

Answer that question honestly. Then go be their friend.

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## **THE LONG GAME**

I want to talk about time, because our culture's relationship with time is one of the primary reasons relational evangelism is so hard for us.

We live in an era of immediate results. We expect fast food, fast shipping, fast answers, fast everything — and the expectation of speed has migrated from our consumer habits into our spiritual assumptions in ways that are doing real damage. We want conversions the way we want coffee: quickly, reliably, and without a lot of waiting around.

But the kingdom of God has never operated on that timeline. Jesus, who had three years to establish a movement that would outlast every empire in history, spent the vast majority of that time with twelve people — eating with them, traveling with them, answering their questions, correcting their misunderstandings, watching them fail and helping them get back up. He did

not optimize for scale. He optimized for depth. And the depth He invested in those twelve people became the root system of a church that two thousand years of history has not been able to kill.

The long game in relational evangelism means investing in people before you need anything from them spiritually. It means being the friend who shows up when things fall apart — not with a Bible and a pre-packaged prayer, but with a casserole and the willingness to sit in the rubble as long as it takes. It means being present in the ordinary seasons of people's lives — the boring ones, the unremarkable ones, the ones where nothing spiritual seems to be happening — so that when something spiritual does happen, you are already trusted.

It means, in some cases, years. It meant three years with Ray. It has meant longer with others. And it means accepting, with genuine peace rather than resignation, that you may invest years in a relationship and never see the harvest. That the harvest may come through someone else entirely. That your role in a particular person's spiritual journey may be to break up the soil and plant a seed and water it faithfully, and then — without bitterness, without a sense of wasted effort — entrust the whole thing to the God who causes the growth.

This is not passive. It is one of the most demanding forms of ministry available to ordinary Christians, precisely because it requires the sustained sacrifice of your time, your attention, your emotional energy, and your hope — with no guarantee of visible results on any timeline you can control.

But it is the way Jesus did it. And it works.

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## **YOUR ORDINARY LIFE IS ALREADY PREACHING**

Here is something that should simultaneously humble you and liberate you: whether you are intentional about it or not, your life is already a witness. Every day, in every interaction, in every decision and reaction and response to difficulty, you are communicating something to the people around you about what it means — or doesn't mean — to follow Jesus.

This is not meant to make you paranoid. It is meant to reframe the scope of what evangelism is. Most of us think of evangelism as something that happens in specific, designated conversations — the moments when we consciously, deliberately attempt to share the gospel. And those moments matter enormously. But they are not the whole of it, and in many ways they are not even the most important part.

The most important part is what the people around you observe in the ordinary, unguarded, unscripted moments of your actual life. How you treat the waiter who gets your order wrong. How you talk about the people you disagree with. How you handle loss, failure, disappointment, injustice — the moments when the gap between what you claim and how you actually function becomes visible. How you love your family in the difficult seasons. How you treat people who have no social power and nothing to offer you. How you respond when someone wrongs you, and whether your response looks anything like what Jesus described in the Sermon on the Mount.

None of this needs to be performed. In fact, performance is precisely the problem — because people are exquisitely tuned to the difference between someone who is living their faith and someone who is displaying it, and the difference is not flattering to the latter. The witness that opens doors is the quiet, consistent, untheatrical evidence of a life that actually functions differently because of what it is rooted in. The peace that is genuinely present in circumstances that should produce anxiety. The generosity that exceeds what social obligation requires. The patience that holds in situations where impatience would be entirely understandable. The willingness to be wrong, to apologize, to forgive — not because you are constitutionally easygoing but because you have been forgiven something that makes every human offense look small.

That is the witness that makes people ask questions. And questions, as we discussed in Chapter Four, are the beginning of everything.

Your ordinary, imperfect, sometimes inconsistent, genuinely-trying-even-when-you-fail life is already speaking. The question is not whether it is preaching — it is always preaching — but what it is saying.

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## **TABLE FELLOWSHIP: THE MOST RADICAL THING JESUS DID**

Of all the countercultural things Jesus did during His earthly ministry — and the list is long and remarkable — I want to make a case for the one that is most underestimated in discussions of evangelism.

He ate with people.

Not just the right people. Not just the people whose company was socially acceptable and spiritually safe. He ate with tax collectors, who were the collaboration-with-the-occupying-empire class of their day. He ate with sinners, which in first-century Jewish culture was a specific and serious designation that carried real social and religious consequences for anyone willing to share a table with them. He ate in the home of a Pharisee and in the home of a despised tax collector in the same week without apparent discomfort at either table. He accepted dinner invitations from people whose lifestyles He did not endorse, and He extended dinner invitations to people who had not yet done anything to deserve His company.

This was not incidental. Table fellowship in the ancient Near East was one of the most loaded social acts available. To eat with someone was to say something profound about your relationship to them — to declare them worthy of your presence, to communicate acceptance and equality and belonging in a way that transcended words. When the religious leaders complained that Jesus was "*a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners*" — Matthew 11:19 (NASB) — they were not making a comment about His diet. They were reacting to the radical social and spiritual statement His table choices were making. He was, by eating with these people, announcing something about how the kingdom of God works. About

who is welcome. About what grace actually looks like when it takes up residence in a human life.

Brennan Manning captured this with a line that I have used more times than I can count and have never found a better way to say: *"Sinners love Jesus. It's the religious people who have a problem with him."* Read the Gospels with that lens and you will find it confirmed on almost every page. The people who were most drawn to Jesus were the ones who knew they were a mess and had no religious credentials to hide behind. And they were drawn to Him, in large part, because He kept showing up at their tables — or inviting them to His.

What does this mean for your dinner table? It means exactly what it sounds like. It means that one of the most powerful evangelistic acts available to an ordinary Christian is the ordinary act of eating with people. Inviting your neighbor for dinner. Having your coworker over after work. Making room at your table for the person who doesn't fit the profile of your social circle — who is rougher around the edges, less religiously tidy, carrying a story that doesn't match the decor of your church's target demographic.

There is something that happens around food that does not happen in other contexts. Guards come down. Conversation deepens. The shared vulnerability of eating together — of accepting nourishment in someone else's presence — creates a kind of intimacy that is disproportionate to the apparent simplicity of the act. Jesus knew this. He leveraged it constantly. And every one of us has a kitchen and a table and the capacity to extend the same radical, ordinary hospitality that turned tax collectors into disciples and sinners into saints.

Open your table. It is one of the most underrated tools in the entire evangelical toolbox.

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**THE BRIDGE IS BUILT WITH YOUR ACTUAL LIFE**

I want to bring all of this together with one final image before your Dummy Drill, because I think it captures something important about the nature of relational evangelism that gets lost when we reduce it to a strategy.

A bridge is not built in a day. It is not thrown across a gap on the strength of a single inspired moment. It is constructed, carefully and over time, out of materials that must be laid in a specific sequence — foundation before span, support before surface — and the process is slow and often invisible to anyone who is not paying close attention. You can walk past a bridge under construction for weeks without seeing obvious progress, and then one day you notice that the structure has reached the other side, and what was a gap is now a crossing.

Your relationship with the people in your life who don't yet know Jesus is a bridge under construction. And the materials it is built with are not gospel presentations and evangelism techniques. They are meals shared, commitments kept, and crises shown up for. They are the apology you didn't have to offer, the patience you extended when you didn't have to, the generosity that exceeded what was expected or required. They are the years of faithful presence that communicate, without a word of explicit religious content, that you are a person whose life is anchored to something real.

All of that — every meal, every kept promise, every moment of genuine presence — is bridge-building material. And one day, when the bridge is long enough to reach the other side, the conversation that crosses it will carry a weight that no cold-contact gospel presentation could ever achieve. Because it will travel on the strength of everything that came before it.

Paul, tender and direct in equal measure, told Timothy that the servant of the Lord must be *"kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition."* — 2 Timothy 2:24-25 (NASB). Notice the sequence again. Kind. Patient. Gentle. All of those come before the correcting — and the correcting, when it finally comes, comes with gentleness rather than force.

Build the bridge first. Cross it when it's ready. Trust God with the timeline.

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## **DUMMY DRILL #6**

*This drill has three parts and is meant to take some real time. Don't rush it.*

*PART ONE: Make your list.*

*Write down three specific non-Christian people in your life — people you interact with regularly, people you genuinely care about. Not three categories of people, three actual people with actual names.*

*PART TWO: Answer honestly.*

*For each person, answer these questions as specifically as you can: What do I actually know about their story? Where did they grow up? What has shaped them? What have they lost? What are they afraid of? What do they love? What do they hope for? What wounds do they carry — from life, from religion, from people who should have been safe? What question do I think they are quietly carrying that they haven't said out loud to anyone?*

*Now the harder question: How do I know what I know about them? Did I learn it by asking and listening, or did I infer it? And what does the gap between what I know and what I don't know tell me about the depth of the relationship?*

*PART THREE: Make a plan.*

*For each person, identify one concrete, non-religious, no-agenda thing you could do in the next two weeks to simply be present in their life. Invite them to something. Show up for something they care about. Sit at a table with them. Ask about something you know matters to them and then actually listen to the answer.*

*Write it down. Put it in your calendar. Do it.*

*Not as an evangelism strategy. Not as the first move in a carefully choreographed sequence designed to result in a gospel conversation. Just*

*because they are worth your time. Just because presence is what love looks like when it shows up in person. Just because Jesus ate with people, and you have a table, and there are people in your life who have not yet been invited to sit at it.*

*Start there. The rest has a way of following.*

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*"Sinners love Jesus. It's the religious people who have a problem with him." — Brennan Manning*

*"You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you." — Dale Carnegie*

*"Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy." — Henri Nouwen*

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*Part Three begins on the next page. You've done the interior work. You've learned to listen. You've built the relationship. Now it's time to open your mouth. And the first thing we're going to talk about is the most powerful thing you will ever say — your own story.*

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### PART THREE: OPENING YOUR MOUTH

#### *How to Actually Have the Conversation*

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## CHAPTER 7: YOUR STORY IS YOUR SUPERPOWER

### *The Testimony Nobody Can Argue With*

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*"But sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence." — 1 Peter 3:15 (NASB)*

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Somewhere in the middle of my firefighting career, I responded to a house fire that I have never quite been able to file away in the part of my memory reserved for ordinary calls.

The fire itself was not particularly dramatic by fire service standards. We got it knocked down quickly. No injuries. The family got out. Structure was damaged but salvageable. By every measurable metric, it was a successful outcome. And yet I have thought about that call hundreds of times since, not because of what happened during the fire, but because of what happened afterward.

The homeowner — a man somewhere in his sixties, standing in the yard in the clothes he'd been wearing when the alarm went off, watching us pack up our equipment — walked over to me as we were getting ready to clear the scene. He didn't say anything at first. He just stood there for a moment, looking at the house. Then he turned to me and said something I wasn't expecting.

He said: *"You went in there. You didn't have to, but you went in."*

I told him we did this every day. Standard stuff. Part of the job. He shook his head.

*"You don't understand," he said. "That's my grandfather's house. He built it with his hands. Everything I have of him is in there. And you went in."*

He wasn't making a theological statement. He wasn't trying to construct an argument for the value of the fire service. He was telling me what had happened to him — specifically, personally, in this particular house, on this particular night — and the telling of it was the most persuasive thing anyone could have said on behalf of the work we did. No statistics about fire fatality rates. No public safety campaigns. No infographics about the importance of residential sprinkler systems. Just a man standing in the yard telling me what this specific thing meant to his specific life.

I have never forgotten it. I never will.

That is the power of a personal story. And it is the power you are carrying right now, whether you know it or not.

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## **THE ARGUMENT NOBODY CAN WIN**

Here is a truth about human communication that rhetoricians have known for centuries and that most evangelism training consistently undervalues: argument changes minds. Story changes lives.

Argument operates on the level of reason — it marshals evidence, anticipates objections, constructs logical sequences, and attempts to move a person from one intellectual position to another through the force of superior reasoning. And argument has its place. We will spend an entire chapter on intellectual engagement with hard questions, and I take that part of gospel witness seriously.

But argument has a fundamental limitation that story does not share: it can be countered. Every argument, no matter how well constructed, has a counter-argument. Every piece of evidence has an alternative interpretation. Every logical sequence has a potential flaw that a determined skeptic can locate and exploit. And in a debate, the person who is losing on the merits has a

powerful psychological incentive to find that flaw, because losing the argument means conceding the point, and conceding the point means something much more threatening than intellectual defeat.

Story does not work this way. When you stand in front of another human being and tell them what actually happened to you — what your life was like before grace showed up, what the encounter was like, what has changed since — you are offering them something that no counter-argument can touch. Because your story is not a proposition to be evaluated. It is a testimony to be witnessed. And the only honest response to a testimony is not *you're wrong* but *that's not my experience* — which is a very different conversation, and a much more honest one.

The Apostle Paul understood this instinctively, which is why — in a remarkable display of strategic intelligence — he told his personal story in three of the most high-stakes moments in his ministry recorded in the book of Acts. Before the hostile Jerusalem crowd in chapter twenty-two. Before Felix and Agrippa in chapters twenty-four and twenty-six. In each case, he could have constructed a theological argument. He was more than capable of it — the man had a first-rate theological education and a mind sharp enough to hold his own in any intellectual arena of his day. But he told his story. The blinding light on the Damascus road. The voice. The scales falling from his eyes. *"I was like this. Something happened. I am like this now. Tell me that didn't happen."*

Nobody could. Nobody can. And nobody can tell you that your story didn't happen either.

That is your superpower. It has been in your possession since the moment grace laid hands on your life. Most of us simply haven't learned to use it.

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## THE THREE-ACT TESTIMONY

Every compelling story in the history of human storytelling — from the cave paintings of Lascaux to the latest streaming series your neighbor can't stop talking about — operates on a basic three-act structure. Something was a

certain way. Something changed. Things are different now. Beginning, middle, end. Problem, turning point, resolution.

Your testimony follows the same structure, and the simplest way to organize it is also the most effective: Before. Encounter. After.

Let me walk you through each act.

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## **ACT ONE: BEFORE**

This is the honest account of your life before grace showed up in a personally meaningful way. It is not necessarily the account of your life before you said a prayer or walked an aisle or joined a church — because those external religious events may or may not correspond to the moment the gospel actually got down into the basement of who you were and changed something real. What I am asking you to describe is the interior landscape of your life before something genuinely shifted.

What were you living for? What were you running from? What were you using to fill the space that was actually empty? What did the world look and feel like from inside your particular life before the light changed?

Now — and this is important — I am not asking you to excavate the most lurid details of your worst behavior and display them for maximum dramatic effect. That is not what this act is about. What it is about is honesty. Real, specific, particular honesty about what your life actually felt like from the inside — the restlessness, the emptiness, the performance, the fear, the self-sufficiency, the quiet desperation — whatever the particular texture of your pre-grace experience was.

The purpose of Act One is not to shock or impress. It is to create identification. The person listening to you needs to find themselves somewhere in your before story — to feel the recognition of *yes, that — I know what that feels like* — so that when you tell them what changed it, they are already leaning in.

## **ACT TWO: THE ENCOUNTER**

This is the hinge. The moment — or the season, or the slow accumulation of moments — when the grace of God became personally real to you in a way that required a response. It is the Damascus road, whether yours was a blinding light or a quiet morning in a kitchen or a conversation with a stranger or the long, gradual dawning of something true you could no longer resist.

Be as specific as you can here, without being so specific that the particulars obscure the universal. *I was sitting in my truck in the parking lot of a gas station at two in the morning, and something broke open in me* is specific and human and accessible. *I experienced a profound soteriological shift in my understanding of the vicarious atonement* is accurate and useful in a seminary classroom and will cause most ordinary people's eyes to glaze over in approximately four seconds.

Tell what happened. Not what you understood theologically was happening — what it was like to be you in that moment. Where were you? What did you feel? What did you surrender? What did you receive? Make it human. Make it real. Let the person listening understand that this was not a religious transaction but a personal encounter — between you and a God who was not content to remain abstract.

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## **ACT THREE: AFTER**

This is where you describe what is different. Not everything — not an exhaustive catalogue of every spiritual benefit you have received since coming to faith. Just the most honest and most observable changes. The thing that was there that is no longer there. The thing that was absent that is now present. The way you face things differently, love people differently, experience ordinary life differently because of what happened in Act Two.

Act Three is not a commercial for the prosperity gospel or a promise that faith makes everything easier. If anything, an honest Act Three often includes the acknowledgment that following Jesus has complicated your life in ways you

didn't anticipate — that it has made demands of you, challenged your comfort, and required things of you that the before version of yourself would have flatly refused. That honesty, counterintuitively, makes Act Three more compelling rather than less. Because it communicates that what you're talking about is not a self-help program or a happiness guarantee. It is something real enough to cost something. And things that cost something tend to be worth something.

Keep the whole testimony under three minutes when you're talking. This is not because your story isn't worth more time — it is. But three minutes is the length of a conversation opener, not a monologue. Your job in sharing your testimony is not to tell your whole story. It is to tell enough of it that the person you're talking to wants to ask questions. Leave room for the conversation to breathe. Leave room for them to find themselves in your story and lean across the table toward you.

The rest will follow.

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## **LOSING THE JARGON**

I want to spend a moment on this because it is one of the most common and most unnecessary obstacles in testimony-sharing, and it is entirely within your power to fix.

The Christian community has developed, over centuries of in-group communication, a vocabulary that functions beautifully as shorthand between people who share the same reference points — and as an impenetrable foreign language to everyone else. Words and phrases that carry enormous meaning inside the church land as empty, strange, or faintly threatening to people who have no framework for them.

*Washed in the blood. Saved. Convicted. Born again. Sanctified. Covered. Hedge of protection. Laid it on the altar. Felt a peace about it. The Lord led me. Blessed. Breakthrough.*

None of these phrases are wrong. Several of them are biblically rich and theologically important. But if you drop them into a testimony being shared with someone outside the Christian tradition, what you are communicating — unintentionally, but effectively — is that the experience you're describing belongs to a tribe that the person you're talking to is not part of and may not be welcome in.

The solution is not to strip your testimony of all spiritual content. The solution is to say what you mean in the plainest language available to you. Instead of *"I was convicted of my sin,"* try *"I started to see, honestly for the first time, the ways I had been living as though I were accountable to nobody — and it was an uncomfortable picture."* Instead of *"I accepted Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior,"* try *"I reached a point where I stopped running from God and actually let Him have what I'd been refusing to give Him — which was basically control of my own life."*

Same truth. Entirely different accessibility. And the person you're talking to stays in the room rather than quietly disengaging the moment they feel like they've wandered into a conversation that requires a religious decoder ring.

Read your testimony out loud — which we'll get to in the Dummy Drill — and flag every word or phrase that requires insider knowledge to understand. Then translate it. Not away from its meaning, but toward its meaning. The goal is not less truth. It is truth with fewer barriers between itself and the person you need to reach.

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## **WHAT IF YOUR STORY ISN'T DRAMATIC?**

I want to address this directly because it is one of the most common reasons people hold back from sharing their testimony, and it is based on a comparison that is both understandable and entirely wrong.

The evangelical church has an unfortunate love affair with dramatic conversion narratives. The recovering addict. The former gang member. The atheist philosopher who argued himself into faith. The person whose life was

such a visible disaster that the transformation is impossible to miss. These stories are real, they are powerful, and they deserve to be told. But they have also, through sheer force of repetition and platform exposure, created a cultural impression within the church that a compelling testimony requires a compelling before — that the more dramatic your pre-grace wreckage, the more effective your witness.

This is not true. It is not theologically true and it is not practically true, and it has silenced an enormous number of people with quiet, undramatic, but no less genuine stories of grace.

If you grew up in a Christian home and came to genuine, personal faith as a child or teenager without a dramatic crisis or a prodigal season — that is not a lesser testimony. It is a different testimony. The absence of a dramatic before does not mean the absence of grace. It means grace showed up early. It means you were spared some of the consequences that others walked through on their way to the same destination. There is no hierarchy of testimonies, and the person sitting across from you does not need you to have been a heroin addict in order to find your story compelling. They need you to be honest.

What they need to hear in your quiet story is not drama. It is reality. The reality of what it is actually like to grow up trying to follow Jesus — the doubts, the failures, the seasons when faith felt like a performance rather than a relationship, the moments when grace became genuinely personal rather than inherited. The reality of what you have found Him to be in the ordinary, undramatic middle of a life that looks, from the outside, mostly like other people's lives. That is a story a great many people can find themselves in — and finding themselves in it is precisely the point.

You do not need a dramatic story. You need an honest one.

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## **THE TESTIMONY TRAPS**

Before we get to your Dummy Drill, I want to walk you through three specific pitfalls that show up in testimony-sharing with enough regularity that they deserve to be named and avoided.

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### **TRAP ONE: EXAGGERATION**

The pressure to have a compelling story can, in some people, produce a subtle but corrosive drift toward embellishment. The before gets a little darker with each telling. The transformation gets a little more dramatic. The details sharpen and clarify in ways that make the narrative more powerful but less accurate. And what began as a genuine testimony slowly becomes a polished performance that has the shape of truth without quite being it.

This is a trap with serious consequences, because exaggeration — even well-intentioned exaggeration in the service of a true underlying story — is a form of dishonesty. And dishonesty, in the service of the gospel, is not just a rhetorical problem. It is a spiritual one. The person you're trying to reach may not be able to identify exactly what feels slightly off about the story they're being told, but they will feel it. And the subtle wrongness of it will undermine the very trust you are trying to build.

Tell the truth. The truth is enough. It was enough to change your life. Trust it to be enough in the telling.

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### **TRAP TWO: SPIRITUAL NAME-DROPPING**

This is the testimony version of the humble-brag, and it tends to emerge from people who have had genuinely significant spiritual experiences and are trying to communicate their weight without quite realizing how the communication is landing.

It sounds like this: *"And that was the night I really understood what Spurgeon meant when he said..."* Or: *"I was at this conference, and I got to spend some time with one of the most significant theological minds of our generation, and*

*what he said to me personally was...*" Or the classic: *"God has really been taking me deep lately into some profound truths that most people aren't ready for yet."*

Every one of those sentences, regardless of the speaker's sincerity, creates distance rather than connection. They communicate, however unintentionally, that the faith being described is sophisticated and elite and requires a level of spiritual development that the listener has not yet achieved. And the person on the receiving end — the one you are trying to invite into something — feels not drawn in but subtly ranked below.

Keep your testimony about your actual life and your actual experience. Leave the theological luminaries out of it unless they are genuinely essential to the story — which they almost never are. The most powerful testimony is the most human one, not the most impressive one.

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### **TRAP THREE: THE HUMBLE-BRAG**

The humble-brag is the testimony that is technically self-deprecating but is actually, upon closer examination, a fairly impressive performance. *"I know I'm nobody special — I was just this broken, messed-up person that God somehow chose to use in remarkable ways..."* The I'm-nobody-special is doing a lot of rhetorical work to set up the remarkable ways, and most listeners will feel the machinery of it even if they can't name what they're feeling.

True humility in a testimony is not the performance of smallness. It is the genuine, unsurprised acknowledgment that what happened was grace — unearned, unexpected, and entirely out of proportion to anything you brought to the encounter. That kind of humility does not call attention to itself. It simply tells the story without inflating its own role in it.

Scotty Smith put it better than I can: *"Tell your story with both hands. The hand of your sin and the hand of His grace."* Both hands. Not just the hand of your sin, which without the other hand is just a confession. Not just the hand of His grace, which without the other hand is just a theological abstraction. Both

hands, together — held out openly, with nothing hidden and nothing exaggerated — so that the person you're talking to can see exactly what the exchange was. What you brought. What He gave. What the transaction cost each party.

That two-handed telling is the most powerful form of testimony available to any human being, and it requires nothing but honesty and the courage to open your hands.

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## A WORD ABOUT PETER'S INSTRUCTIONS

I want to come back to the verse that anchors this chapter, because there is something in it that I don't want us to slide past.

Peter says: "*always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you.*" — 1 Peter 3:15 (NASB).

Notice what Peter is responding to. Not a confrontation. Not a debate challenge. Not an evangelistic opportunity that the Christian has engineered or manufactured. Someone asks. Someone notices something — *the hope that is in you* — and wants to know where it comes from. The testimony, in Peter's framework, is a response to a question that arises organically from an observed life.

Which brings us back to everything we discussed in Chapter Six. The testimony is most powerful — most natural, most credible, most receivable — when it comes in response to a question that your actual life has provoked. When the person who asks it has watched you long enough to notice that something about the way you carry yourself doesn't entirely make sense in the absence of something real undergirding it. When the question is genuine rather than solicited.

That doesn't mean you wait passively for people to interview you. It means you live in such a way that the question eventually becomes almost inevitable —

and when it comes, you are ready. Not with a memorized script, but with the living reality of a story you know by heart because it is yours.

Your story. Three acts. Plain language. Both hands.

That is the testimony nobody can argue with. Go tell it.

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### **DUMMY DRILL #7**

*This one has three stages, and all three matter.*

**STAGE ONE:** Write it.

*Using the Before-Encounter-After framework, write your three-act testimony. Write it by hand if you can — there is something about the physicality of handwriting that keeps you honest and slows you down enough to actually think. Aim for enough content to fill about three minutes of speaking time when read aloud — which is typically between four and five hundred words.*

*As you write, flag every piece of Christian jargon — every insider phrase, every theological term of art, every expression that requires membership in the tribe to decode — and then go back and translate each one into plain, accessible, human language. Same truth. Different words.*

*When you're done, read what you wrote and ask yourself: Is this actually true? Is any part of it exaggerated for effect? Is both hands present — the hand of the before and the hand of the grace? Would I be comfortable if the person I'm describing this experience to could fact-check it against people who knew me then?*

**STAGE TWO:** Say it out loud.

*Read your testimony out loud to yourself first. Time it. If it runs over three minutes, cut it — not by rushing, but by editing. Every word should earn its place. Then read it out loud again, this time without the paper in front of you, as though you are telling it to someone across a table. Notice where it sounds*

*natural and where it sounds rehearsed. Work on the rehearsed parts until they sound like you.*

*STAGE THREE: Tell it to a non-Christian.*

*This is the step most people skip, and it is the most important one. Find a person in your life who does not share your faith — someone you trust enough to be honest with you — and tell them your story. Not read it to them. Tell it to them, conversationally, the way you'd tell them about something significant that happened in your life.*

*Afterward, ask them two questions: What did you hear? And was there anything that felt unclear or that you didn't understand?*

*Listen to their answers without defending yourself. What they heard is data. What confused them is a gift. Take both back to your testimony and let it make the story cleaner, truer, and more accessible.*

*Then go find someone else to tell it to.*

*And then someone else.*

*And then someone else after that.*

*The testimony nobody can argue with gets more powerful every time you tell it — not because the story changes, but because you do. Because the telling of it reminds you, again and again, of what actually happened. Of what you actually were. Of what grace actually did.*

*Tell it until you can't imagine not telling it.*

*That's the whole assignment.*

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*"Tell your story with both hands. The hand of your sin and the hand of His grace." — Scotty Smith*

*"There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you." — Maya Angelou*

*"The Christian life is not a constant high. I have my moments of deep discouragement. I have to go to God in prayer with tears in my eyes, and say, 'O God, forgive me,' or 'Help me.'" — Billy Graham (Even the greatest evangelist of the twentieth century had a real before. Don't let anyone tell you yours isn't enough.)*

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*Chapter Eight is where your story meets their story. Where the testimony opens into conversation. Where we talk about how to move from small talk to soul talk without anyone feeling ambushed. You've got the story. Now let's talk about how to tell it in the context of a real, live, human conversation. This is where it gets interesting.*

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### CHAPTER 8: THE GOSPEL CONVERSATION (WITHOUT THE AWKWARD SILENCE)

#### *Natural Bridges to the Most Important Topic on Earth*

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*"Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity. Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person." — Colossians 4:5-6 (NASB)*

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There is a particular kind of conversational whiplash that every person who has ever been on the receiving end of an unprepared gospel presentation knows intimately, even if they have never had a name for it.

You are talking with someone — a neighbor, a coworker, a person you just met at a social gathering — about something entirely ordinary. The weather. A mutual friend. A sports team. The inexplicable behavior of the local city council. The conversation is comfortable. Easy. The social rhythm is working. Nobody is performing. And then, without warning, the person you're talking to takes a hard left turn and you find yourself, blinking and slightly disoriented, in the middle of a conversation about your eternal soul that you did not see coming and did not consent to enter.

It feels, if you're being honest, a little like being tackled.

The tackled person does not generally respond to being tackled by becoming more open to the message of the person who tackled them. They respond by getting their footing back, increasing their social distance, and filing the experience away under reasons to avoid this particular individual at future gatherings.

I am not describing this to be uncharitable to the people who share the gospel this way. Most of them are sincere. Many of them are courageous in their willingness to say anything at all, which is more than can be said for the majority of Christians who say nothing. But sincerity and courage, deployed without wisdom, produce results that are almost the opposite of what was intended. And Paul, writing to the Colossians, specifically links gospel witness to wisdom — *"Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity."* — Colossians 4:5 (NASB).

Wisdom. Not just boldness. Not just urgency. Wisdom — the skill of knowing not only what to say but when to say it, how to say it, and how to read the specific person in front of you well enough to say it in a way they can actually receive.

This chapter is about developing that wisdom in the context of actual, live, real-world gospel conversations. It is about the practical art of moving from wherever a conversation starts to the most important place it can go — without leaving skid marks.

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## **THE ANATOMY OF A NATURAL CONVERSATION**

Before we talk about how to introduce gospel content into a conversation, it is worth spending a moment understanding how natural, trust-building conversation actually works — because the principles of good gospel conversation are not different from the principles of good conversation generally. They are the same principles, applied to the most important subject available.

Good conversations move. They have a natural current that flows from surface to depth as trust increases and connection develops. They start in the shallows — weather, shared circumstances, observable facts about the immediate environment — and move gradually, if the conditions are right, into deeper water. The movement is not forced. It is invited. One person goes slightly deeper, and the other person either follows them there or stays in the

shallows, and the conversationalist reads which has happened and adjusts accordingly.

The mistake most Christians make in gospel conversations is not that they want to go to deep water. The water is deep, and the gospel lives there, and it would be a strange kind of love that stayed in the shallows forever. The mistake is trying to go to deep water before the conditions for it exist — before enough trust has been built, before enough listening has happened, before the other person has any reason to follow you into depth rather than retreating to the surface.

Wisdom, in conversation, is the ability to read where the current is and go with it rather than fighting it. It is the patience to let connection develop at its own pace. It is the confidence to introduce deeper content when the moment is genuinely right rather than when your internal evangelism anxiety is telling you to hurry up.

Paul says let your speech be "*seasoned with salt.*" — Colossians 4:6 (NASB). Salt, in the ancient world, was not a condiment — it was a preservative and a flavoring agent that made food come alive. It was used sparingly, with precision, in amounts that enhanced rather than overwhelmed. Gospel content in conversation works the same way. A little, well-placed, at the right moment, in the right amount — it makes the whole conversation more alive. Dumped indiscriminately, regardless of timing and proportion, it ruins the dish.

Learn to use salt well.

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## **THE CURIOSITY QUESTION**

The single most effective tool I have found for moving a conversation naturally toward spiritual content is also the simplest, and it costs nothing but the willingness to ask it and then genuinely receive the answer.

I call it the curiosity question, and it looks like this: you ask something that invites the other person to tell you about their inner life — their beliefs, their values, their experiences with the ultimate questions of existence — not in order to steer them toward a predetermined destination, but because you are actually, genuinely curious about the answer.

The curiosity question is not a leading question. A leading question is designed to produce a specific answer, and the person being asked it can feel the design, which makes them feel managed rather than heard. The curiosity question is genuinely open — it invites any answer, welcomes any response, and communicates through its very openness that you are more interested in the person than in the outcome of the conversation.

Some examples of curiosity questions that have opened remarkable conversations:

*"Can I ask you something? Growing up, what was your experience of religion or church — was it part of your world at all?"*

*"You mentioned losing your dad last year. Has that changed the way you think about what happens after — you know, the big after?"*

*"I've been thinking a lot lately about what actually makes a life feel meaningful. Do you have a sense of what that is for you?"*

*"Do you ever have moments where you feel like there's something more — like ordinary life is pointing at something bigger that you can't quite name?"*

None of these questions are manipulative. None of them have a hidden trap built into them. All of them are questions that a genuinely curious, caring human being might ask a friend — and all of them, if received well and followed with real listening, have the natural capacity to open a conversation toward spiritual depth.

The key is the follow-up. When someone responds to a curiosity question, your first job is not to respond with your own perspective. Your first job is to go deeper into theirs. Ask a follow-up. *What was that like? What did that do to*

*your understanding of God? What do you make of that now?* Let them get all the way to the bottom of what they actually think and feel before you offer anything from your own reservoir. Because the person who feels fully heard will listen in a way that the person who feels partially heard never will.

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## **FROM SMALL TALK TO SOUL TALK: THE TRANSITION**

There will be moments — if you are paying attention, if you are listening well, if you have been faithful in the relationship — when a gospel-adjacent opening appears naturally in the flow of conversation. Not because you engineered it, but because life keeps producing the kinds of questions that the gospel speaks directly to, and people who are in relationship with you will eventually voice those questions in your presence.

Someone mentions that they can't sleep because of anxiety about the future. Someone describes a relationship that has broken in a way that nothing they've tried has been able to fix. Someone reflects on the death of a parent and the strange, unsettling territory it has opened in them. Someone admits, quietly and with a kind of exhausted honesty, that they have everything they were supposed to want and still feel like something essential is missing.

These are not evangelism opportunities to be exploited. They are human moments to be entered. And the question is how to enter them in a way that honors both the person's reality and the gospel's relevance to it — without using their vulnerability as a platform for a presentation they didn't ask for.

Here is the transition framework I have found most effective, which I offer not as a script but as a structural guide:

*Step One: Receive first.* Before you say anything about faith, fully receive what they have just shared. Acknowledge it. Reflect it back. Make absolutely certain they feel heard before you go anywhere else. *"That sounds exhausting. How long have you been carrying that?"* or *"That's a real loss. I'm sorry."* This step cannot be rushed or skipped, because nothing that follows it will land without it.

*Step Two: Bridge with your own experience.* If it is honest — and only if it is honest — share a brief, specific moment from your own story that connects to what they have described. Not to redirect the conversation to yourself, but to establish identification. *"I went through something that felt similar a few years back, and I remember that particular kind of hollowness."* This bridge is short. It is a bridge, not a destination.

*Step Three: Offer, don't impose.* This is the key move. You do not pivot to a gospel presentation. You extend a gentle, pressure-free offer: *"Can I tell you something that actually helped me? It might not land for you, and that's completely okay. But I'd feel like a bad friend if I didn't at least mention it."* Or: *"I don't know if this is where you are at all, but something you just said reminded me of something I believe pretty deeply. Do you want to hear it?"*

The offer does several critical things at once. It respects the other person's autonomy — they can say no, and you have made that genuinely okay. It removes the pressure of the interaction, because you have explicitly released them from any obligation to respond in a specific way. And it signals that what you are about to share is personal — something you actually believe and have actually experienced — rather than a religious product you are attempting to sell them.

Most people, when offered something in this way, will say yes. Not because they have been manipulated, but because the offer itself was made without manipulation — and the absence of pressure created the space that pressure would have destroyed.

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## **WHAT TO DO WHEN IT GOES SIDEWAYS**

It will go sideways sometimes. The conversation will take a turn you didn't expect. The person will react with more emotion — anger, grief, defensiveness — than the moment seemed to call for. A question will surface that you are not prepared to answer. The whole thing will veer off the road you thought you were on and end up somewhere you don't recognize.

When this happens, there is a single most important thing to remember: *stay in the conversation.*

The temptation when a gospel conversation goes sideways is to retreat — to backpedal, to apologize for raising the topic, to steer back to safer conversational ground as quickly as possible and pretend the last five minutes didn't happen. And while there are moments when a graceful withdrawal is genuinely the right move, the reflexive retreat from difficulty communicates something to the other person that you probably do not want to communicate: that your faith cannot hold its ground under pressure. That you are not actually confident in what you believe. That the offer you made was conditional on the other person receiving it comfortably.

Going sideways is not failure. It is the conversation getting honest, which is exactly what you were hoping for. Anger usually means something matters. Defensiveness usually means something has been touched that has touched something else. Grief means you are in a real place with a real person who is experiencing something real. None of these are bad. All of them are invitations to go deeper rather than shallower.

When the conversation goes sideways, slow down. Ask a question rather than making a statement. *"I can hear that this is bringing something up for you — do you want to talk about what that is?"* or *"I clearly touched something there, and I didn't mean to hurt you. Can you tell me what landed wrong?"* Stay curious. Stay present. Stay in the room.

And if the moment calls for it — if you genuinely got something wrong, pushed too hard, misjudged the timing — say so, without drama and without excessive self-flagellation. *"I think I came at that clumsily. I'm sorry."* A simple, honest acknowledgment of your own imperfection is not a gospel conversation derailed. It is a gospel conversation deepened, because you have just demonstrated in real time the very grace you have been trying to describe.

## **THE GOSPEL MESSAGE: A RAGAMUFFIN'S PLAIN-LANGUAGE WALKTHROUGH**

At some point in a gospel conversation, you will need to actually share the content of the gospel — the Four Non-Negotiables we covered in Chapter Two, spoken in your own voice, in language accessible to the specific person you're talking to. What follows is not a script. It is a framework — a set of building blocks that you can arrange and phrase in whatever way feels most natural and most appropriate for the conversation you're actually in.

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### **GOD: MAKER, FATHER, HOLY — AND NOT DISTANT**

Start with who God actually is, because most of the people you talk to are operating with a significantly distorted picture. For some, God is a cosmic vending machine — input prayer, receive desired outcome, become disappointed and disillusioned when the machine fails to deliver. For others, He is a divine auditor, maintaining a running ledger of offenses and waiting to render a verdict. For many, He is simply absent — a placeholder concept that has no meaningful bearing on the texture of daily life.

The God of the Bible is none of these things. He is the Maker — the One from whom everything that exists derives its existence, without whom nothing would be and nothing would mean anything. He is the Father — not metaphorically, not as a pleasant religious sentiment, but in the most intimate and personal sense available. Jesus, who had more immediate access to the nature of God than anyone who has ever lived, addressed Him as *Abba* — the Aramaic equivalent of *Dad*, a term of startling relational intimacy that would have scandalized His contemporaries and is still, two thousand years later, one of the most radical things in the New Testament.

And He is holy — which means, in the most concrete possible terms, that He is not indifferent to moral reality. That the universe He made operates on principles that cannot be violated without consequence. That there is a

standard against which all human choices are measured, and that standard is not negotiable or culturally relative. It is the character of God Himself.

And He is not distant. This is the part that catches people off guard. The God who made everything, the God whose holiness makes angels cover their faces, is also the God who *"so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son"* — John 3:16 (NASB). The holiness and the love are not in tension. They are two facets of the same character, and the gospel is the story of what happens when they meet.

In plain language: *God made everything, including you, for relationship. He is not indifferent to your life. He is not sitting in heaven waiting for you to earn His attention. He made you for Himself, and nothing about that has changed — even though something significant happened to the relationship.*

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## **US: MADE FOR RELATIONSHIP, BROKEN BY CHOICE**

This is where you introduce the human problem — not as a judgment on the person you're talking to, but as a diagnosis that applies universally, including to yourself. The first-person plural is important here. *We* are broken. *We* have chosen autonomy over relationship, self-determination over surrender, the throne of our own life over the God who made us for something better. This is not a moral failing unique to the obviously bad people — it is the condition of every human being who has ever lived, and it manifests differently in different lives but is equally present in all of them.

You do not need to be graphic or inflammatory about this. You do not need to catalogue specific sins or invite the person to a public confession of their worst behavior. You simply need to be honest about the gap — the real, observable, universally experienced gap between what human beings are and what we were clearly made to be. The restlessness. The hunger that nothing satisfies. The reaching for things that promise life and deliver something considerably less. The inability, despite our best efforts and most earnest intentions, to consistently be the people we actually want to be.

*"Here's what I believe about us: we were made for something more than we're living. And the gap between what we were made for and where we actually are — that's not an accident or a design flaw. It's the result of a long history of choices, individually and collectively, to live as though we are accountable to nobody but ourselves. And that choice has consequences that go deeper than behavior. It goes all the way down to the relationship we were made for."*

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## **JESUS: THE ONLY BRIDGE**

This is the center of everything, and it deserves to be spoken with both precision and wonder — because it is the most extraordinary claim in the history of human religion, and if it is true, it changes literally everything.

God, who had every right to respond to human rebellion with judgment and distance, did neither. He responded with incarnation. He became one of us — subject to hunger and exhaustion and grief and the particular vulnerability of loving people who might not love you back. He lived the life we were supposed to live and couldn't — fully surrendered to the Father, fully righteous, fully human. And then He died the death we were supposed to die — bearing in His body the full weight of human sin and the full force of divine justice — so that the equation could be resolved without either holiness being compromised or love being abandoned.

And then He got up. Which is the part the whole story was building toward.

*"Here's the thing about Jesus that I can't get past: the cross is God solving a problem that He didn't create, at a cost He didn't have to pay, for people who were actively contributing to the problem. That's not a metaphor for something. That actually happened. And the Resurrection — the empty tomb, the witnesses, the community that was willing to die rather than recant what they saw — that's not a spiritual principle. That's a historical event that changes what death means and what life is for."*

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## **RESPONSE: REPENTANCE, FAITH, SURRENDER**

The gospel closes with an invitation, not a demand. And the invitation is to do three things that are, at their root, the same thing approached from different angles.

Repentance is turning — specifically, turning away from the posture of self-sufficiency that is the root of the human problem, and turning toward God. Not a performance of remorse. Not a religious ritual of self-punishment. A genuine reorientation of the direction your life is pointed.

Faith is trusting — throwing the weight of your life onto the Jesus who died and rose, in the same way you throw your weight onto a chair when you sit down. Not the feeling of certainty. Not the absence of questions. Just the willingness to put your weight down and find out whether it holds.

Surrender is releasing — specifically, releasing the control of your own life that you have been gripping with both hands, and opening those hands to receive what you could never produce on your own. It is the moment the prodigal son decides to go home. Not because home is comfortable or because the father is safe in any ordinary sense. But because he has run out of other options and the memory of home is better than everything else that's available.

*"The response the gospel asks for is not that you clean yourself up or become a different kind of person before you come. It's that you come as you are. Right now. With everything you're carrying and everything you've done and everything that's been done to you. And you say to God — I'm done running this myself. I'm done pretending I have it handled. I believe You are who You say You are. I believe Jesus did what You say He did. And I want what that makes possible."*

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## **EXTENDING THE INVITATION WITHOUT PRESSURE TACTICS**

Tim Keller, one of the most thoughtful practitioners of urban gospel ministry in the last half-century, said something that has become a kind of North Star for

me in gospel conversations: *"Our job is not to close the deal. Our job is to make the introduction."*

Read that again slowly.

Not to close the deal. To make the introduction.

This single reframe removes an enormous amount of pressure from the gospel conversation — pressure that, when present, actually inhibits the very response it is trying to produce. Because pressure in a gospel conversation communicates, however unintentionally, that the person's response is more important to you than the person. That you need them to say yes — for your sake, for your sense of spiritual success, for the resolution of the evangelistic transaction you have been trying to complete. And people who feel needed in that way tend to pull back, because need without genuine love is manipulation in a hat.

The introduction, by contrast, is a gift offered without conditions. It says: *here is Someone I know. Here is what He has meant to my life. I would love for you to meet Him. But the meeting is yours to accept or decline, and I will be here either way.*

That said — extending an invitation is appropriate, important, and not something to be avoided out of excessive politeness. There is a moment in many gospel conversations when the person you're talking to has heard enough, has been moved enough, has come close enough to the edge that an invitation is both natural and needed. Not a high-pressure altar call. Not a demand for an immediate decision. Just an honest, gentle, specific offer.

It might sound like this: *"I'm not asking you to decide anything right now. But I want to ask you something honestly: Is any part of what I've said connecting with where you actually are? Because if it is, I'd love to keep talking about it. And if you're ever at a point where you want to do something about it — whatever that looks like for you — I want you to know I'm a safe person to have that conversation with."*

Or, if the moment feels riper: *"Is there anything stopping you right now from saying yes to this? Because if not — if the only thing standing between you and this is the mechanics of how to do it — I can walk you through that."*

And then — and this requires real discipline — you stop talking. You have made the offer. The response is theirs. The silence that follows an honest invitation is not awkward — it is sacred. It is the space in which the Holy Spirit does what only the Holy Spirit can do.

Do not fill it.

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## **WHEN THEY'RE NOT READY**

Most of the time, the person you're talking to will not say yes today. And that is not failure. That is the harvest operating on its own timeline, which we covered in Chapter Three, and the principles remain what they were.

When someone is not ready — when they receive what you've said with genuine interest but are not in a place to respond — the most important thing you can do is land the conversation well. Not with disappointment. Not with a last-ditch guilt trip disguised as pastoral concern. With exactly what you offered at the beginning: genuine, no-agenda love.

*"I'm glad we talked about this. It means something to me that you were willing to go here with me. There's no pressure — none. But I want you to know that this conversation doesn't change anything between us. You're my friend either way. And whenever you want to pick this up again — a month from now, a year from now, whatever — I'm here."*

And then mean it. And then be there.

Because the gospel conversation that ends without a decision is not the end of the story. It is, in many cases, the moment when the most important seed was planted. And the faithfulness with which you tend the relationship after the conversation is itself a continuation of the proclamation.

You are not a closer. You are an introducer. Make the introduction. Do it well. Leave the rest in hands more capable than yours.

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### **DUMMY DRILL #8**

*This drill is designed to be slightly uncomfortable. That is the point.*

*PART ONE: Find a trusted Christian friend who is willing to play the role of a skeptic or an unbeliever for the purpose of this exercise. Brief them on what you need: a realistic, honest portrayal of someone who is spiritually curious but not convinced, or openly skeptical, or church-wounded — whatever type of person you are most likely to encounter in your actual life.*

*PART TWO: Have the full conversation. Start somewhere natural — not at the gospel, somewhere ordinary — and find your way there using the tools from this chapter. Use a curiosity question. Listen to their response. Bridge with your own experience. Offer, don't impose. Walk through the four elements of the gospel message in your own plain language. Extend an invitation.*

*Let it be messy. Let it be imperfect. Let yourself get stuck and have to find your footing. That is not a problem — that is the training working.*

*PART THREE: Debrief afterward. Ask your friend: What felt natural? What felt forced? Where did they feel heard, and where did they feel like you were moving past them toward a destination? What was the most effective moment in the conversation, and what made it effective? What would have made them more likely to engage further?*

*Take notes. Revise your approach. Do it again with a different friend playing a different kind of person.*

*Practice is not a lack of faith. Practice is wisdom taking the form of preparation. The Holy Spirit works through prepared people just as readily as through unprepared ones — and the prepared person tends to leave fewer unnecessary obstacles in the way.*

*Get uncomfortable. Get feedback. Get better.*

*Then go have the real conversation.*

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*"Our job is not to close the deal. Our job is to make the introduction." — Tim Keller*

*"The gospel is only good news if it gets there in time." — Carl F.H. Henry*

*"You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink. Your job is to make it thirsty." — Various attribution (Your job is faithful witness. God's job is the thirst. Stay in your lane.)*

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*Chapter Nine is where things get interesting in a different way. Because no matter how well you share the gospel, somebody is going to ask you something you didn't see coming. Something hard. Something sharp. Something that makes you want to check your watch and remember a prior commitment. We're going to look those questions directly in the face. And we're going to find out that honest answers to hard questions are not the enemy of faith. They are some of its greatest allies.*

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### CHAPTER 9: HANDLING THE HARD QUESTIONS

#### *What to Do When They Ask Something You Can't Answer*

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*"Always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence." — 1 Peter 3:15 (NASB)*

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Early in my chaplaincy work, I sat across a table from a paramedic named Danny who had been on the job for eleven years and had seen things that eleven years of that job will put in a person whether they want them or not. Danny was not hostile to faith. He was not a committed atheist with a philosophical axe to grind. He was just a man who had pulled too many children out of too many cars and had arrived, through the accumulated weight of specific, unignorable experiences, at a place where the existence of a good God felt like a proposition that required more explaining than he had ever heard anyone do adequately.

He looked at me across that table — knowing I was a pastor, knowing what I believed — and he said, without hostility but with a directness that left no room for evasion: *"How do you do it? How do you look at what we look at and still believe there's a God who gives a damn?"*

I want to tell you that I had a brilliant answer ready. I want to tell you that I reached into my apologetics training and produced a response so theologically satisfying and pastorally sensitive that Danny wept and gave his life to Christ right there in the break room.

That is not what happened.

What happened is that I sat with the question for a moment — a real moment, not a performative pause — and then said something like: *"I don't have a*

*complete answer to that. I have a partial one. And I have a lot of questions of my own that I've stopped expecting to resolve before the end. But I have something. Do you want to hear it?"*

Danny said yes. We talked for an hour. He didn't pray a prayer that afternoon. But something shifted. A door opened. And it opened not because I had a brilliant apologetic argument, but because I was honest about the limits of what I knew while being clear about what I did know — and the combination of those two things created a kind of trust that a polished performance never could have.

That hour with Danny in the break room is the operating philosophy of this entire chapter.

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## **THE FREEDOM OF NOT KNOWING**

Let me begin with what may be the most liberating sentence in this entire book:

*You do not have to have all the answers.*

Not as a concession to intellectual mediocrity. Not as an excuse to stay ignorant about your faith. But as a genuine, theologically grounded, practically liberating truth about the nature of the task you have been given.

Peter, writing to a community of believers who were navigating significant social pressure and facing real questions about the faith they professed, told them to be *"always ready to make a defense"* — 1 Peter 3:15 (NASB). The Greek word translated *defense* is *apologia* — a reasoned, thoughtful response. Not a comprehensive theological treatise. Not an answer to every conceivable objection in the history of skeptical philosophy. A reasoned, thoughtful response, offered with gentleness and reverence, to the specific question in front of you.

That is a manageable assignment. It is not an assignment to be omniscient. It is an assignment to be honest, prepared, and humble — which is a

combination available to every believer, regardless of theological education or intellectual firepower.

Here is what I have discovered in years of hard conversations: the three most powerful words in apologetics are not *"have you considered"* or *"the evidence suggests"* or even *"Jesus said."* The three most powerful words are: *I don't know.*

Not as a conversation-ender. As a conversation-opener. *I don't know — but I want to think about that with you. I don't know — but let me tell you what I do know and why it holds me even in the absence of a complete answer. I don't know — and the fact that I don't know doesn't embarrass me, because the God I believe in is large enough to hold questions I can't resolve.*

That kind of honesty disarms skeptics more effectively than any argument, because it communicates something that most religious conversations fail to communicate: that you are a truth-seeker, not a defender of a position. That you are genuinely interested in reality, wherever it leads. That you are not threatened by hard questions, because your faith is not built on the absence of them.

*I don't know, but I'll find out* is not intellectual weakness. It is intellectual integrity. And in a world that has been subjected to a great deal of religious certainty that turned out to be unfounded, intellectual integrity is extraordinarily attractive.

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## **QUESTIONS VERSUS SMOKESCREENS**

Before we get to the specific questions, there is a diagnostic skill worth developing, because not every hard question is a genuine hard question.

Some questions are sincere. They represent real intellectual or existential obstacles — places where the person you're talking to has genuinely wrestled with something and has not found an answer that satisfies them. These questions deserve your full, honest, respectful engagement. They are

invitations to a real conversation, and treating them as anything less is a disservice to the person asking and to the gospel you're representing.

Some questions are smokescreens. They are deployed not because the person is genuinely troubled by the problem of evil or the reliability of Scripture, but because they are uncomfortable with where the conversation is heading and have learned, through years of social experience, that asking a theological question is an efficient way to redirect a gospel conversation into a debate they can control or exit gracefully. The question is real — the problem of evil is a real problem — but it is not the real issue. The real issue is closer to home, more personal, more threatening than any philosophical problem. And the philosophical question is a safer place to stand.

Learning to distinguish between these two requires the same skill we have been developing throughout this entire book: listening. Not to the question itself, but to the person asking it. Is there genuine distress behind this question — a real wound, a real experience of suffering or confusion that has produced genuine doubt? Or is there a subtle shift in energy, a slight elevation of the conversational temperature, that suggests the question has appeared at a convenient moment and may be doing protective work?

You can engage both kinds of questions without becoming a therapist or an interrogator. With sincere questions, go deep. Give them your honest best. With smokescreens, you can engage the surface question briefly and then gently redirect: *"That's a real question and I want to come back to it. But before we do — I noticed we were talking about something more personal a minute ago. Do you want to stay with that a little longer?"*

Sometimes the smokescreen will drop. Sometimes it won't, and the debate about the reliability of Scripture will be the most productive conversation available in that particular moment. Read the room. Use your judgment. Trust the Spirit to show you which is which.

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## **THE TOP TEN: HONEST, HUMBLE ANSWERS**

What follows is not a comprehensive apologetics manual. There are excellent books devoted entirely to each of these questions, and I will point you toward some of them in the Appendix. What I am offering here is a framework — a way of approaching each question that is honest about its complexity, grounded in genuine response, and calibrated for a real conversation rather than a theological classroom.

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## **QUESTION ONE: WHY DOES GOD ALLOW SUFFERING?**

This is the oldest question in the book — literally. Job asked it before most of the Bible was written, and he asked it better and with more raw honesty than most apologetics textbooks manage. It is also, for the Danny in your life, the most personal question — because behind the philosophical framing is almost always a specific experience of specific suffering that has made the existence of a good God feel personally untenable.

Start by honoring the weight of the question. *This is the question I take most seriously, and I want to be honest with you: I don't think there's an answer to it that makes the suffering stop hurting. The best I can offer is a response that sits inside the suffering rather than explaining it away.*

Then offer the best of what you actually have:

First — the existence of suffering is not evidence against the existence of God. It is evidence that the world is not as it was designed to be. The Christian story does not claim that this world is functioning properly. It claims precisely the opposite — that something went catastrophically wrong, that creation is *"groaning"* — Romans 8:22 (NASB) — in the weight of that wrongness, and that the whole arc of the story is moving toward its restoration. Suffering, in the Christian framework, is not a design feature. It is a wound.

Second — the God of the Bible is not distant from suffering. He entered it. The Incarnation is not God observing human suffering from a safe remove and declining to intervene. It is God taking human suffering into Himself — *"a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief"* — Isaiah 53:3 (NASB). Jesus wept at

Lazarus' grave. He cried out from the cross in desolation. Whatever God is doing in human suffering, He is not doing it from outside.

Third — the honest answer includes mystery. There are dimensions of the problem of suffering that no human being in this life will resolve, and pretending otherwise is dishonest. What you can say with confidence is not *I understand why this happened* but *I know Someone who does, and I have learned to trust Him even with the questions He hasn't answered yet*. That is not intellectual cowardice. It is intellectual honesty about the limits of what finite creatures can know about an infinite God.

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## **QUESTION TWO: WHAT ABOUT PEOPLE WHO'VE NEVER HEARD?**

This question deserves to be taken seriously, because behind it is usually a genuine moral concern: does a just God really condemn people for not responding to a message they never received? That concern is not unreasonable, and dismissing it is not a good apologetic move.

Here is what Scripture actually says, and what it doesn't say.

What it says: *"For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made."* — Romans 1:20 (NASB). There is a general revelation available to all human beings through the created order — an awareness of God's existence and character that is not dependent on hearing the gospel. Every person, everywhere, has access to this.

What it also says: God is just — perfectly, completely just — in a way that no human legal system has ever approximated. The judge of all the earth will do right — Genesis 18:25 (NASB). Whatever His disposition toward those who have not heard the explicit gospel, it will be exactly just and exactly loving simultaneously, because that is what He is.

What it doesn't say: it doesn't give us a clear theological map of every scenario. And the honest answer to this question includes the

acknowledgment that we do not have complete information about how God deals with people at the edges of special revelation.

What you can say clearly: *"I don't know exactly what God does with people who genuinely never had access to the gospel. What I do know is that the God who went to the lengths of the cross to rescue people is not looking for reasons to condemn. And what I also know is that the best response to that question is to make sure as few people as possible have to depend on it — because you're talking to someone right now who has heard."*

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### **QUESTION THREE: ISN'T THE BIBLE FULL OF CONTRADICTIONS?**

The honest first response to this question is another question: *"Have you read it? And if so — which contradictions are you referring to specifically?"*

Not combatively. Genuinely. Because in the vast majority of cases, the person asking this question has not personally discovered contradictions in careful Bible reading. They have absorbed the claim from the cultural atmosphere — the general impression that the Bible is a confused, internally inconsistent document that has been disproven by modern scholarship — and they are repeating it as a received certainty rather than a personal conclusion.

Which is not to say the question has no teeth. There are genuine difficulties in the biblical text — passages that are difficult to harmonize, historical details that require careful scholarship to understand, apparent discrepancies between parallel accounts. These are real, and dismissing them is not honesty.

But there is a significant difference between *"there are difficult passages that require careful interpretation"* and *"the Bible is full of contradictions."* The former is true. The latter is a claim that serious biblical scholarship, including scholarship from non-Christian sources, does not actually support.

What you can offer: *"The Bible is a library of sixty-six books written over fifteen hundred years by dozens of authors in multiple languages and genres. The*

*consistency of its central message across all of that diversity is, honestly, one of the things that persuades me it has a single Author behind it. There are hard passages — I'm not going to pretend there aren't. But 'hard to interpret' is not the same as 'self-contradictory.' And most of the specific contradictions I've heard cited dissolve under careful reading. Can you tell me which ones are troubling you? I'd rather talk about actual texts than the general claim."*

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#### **QUESTION FOUR: HOW CAN JESUS BE THE ONLY WAY?**

This is the exclusivity question, and it is the one that sounds most arrogant to the pluralist ears of contemporary Western culture. The claim that Jesus is the singular path to God strikes many people as the height of religious imperialism — the presumptuous insistence of one tradition that it has cornered the market on truth while all others are wrong.

The first thing to do with this question is to separate the emotional charge from the intellectual content. The claim feels arrogant. But the feeling of a claim's arrogance does not determine its truth. If Jesus actually said what He said — *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me"* — John 14:6 (NASB) — then the question is not whether the claim is arrogant, but whether it is true. Arrogance is a quality of persons, not propositions.

Second — the exclusive claim of Christianity is not that Christians are better than everyone else, or that people of other faiths are without value or insight, or that God has been entirely absent from the spiritual searching of humanity outside the church. The exclusive claim is specifically about Jesus — about what He did on the cross and in the resurrection, and whether that event is the singular hinge of human history or merely one spiritual option among many.

Third — exclusivity is not unique to Christianity. Every serious worldview makes exclusive claims. The atheist who says there is no God is making an exclusive claim that contradicts every religion on earth. The moral relativist who says all moral positions are equally valid is making an exclusive claim

that contradicts every moral tradition that has ever insisted some things are genuinely wrong. The question is not whether to make exclusive claims — everyone does — but whether the specific claims Jesus made are true.

*"Jesus didn't give us the option of treating Him as one path among many. He claimed to be the only path, and He backed that claim with a resurrection that either happened or didn't. If it happened, His exclusivity isn't arrogance — it's reality. If it didn't happen, then I'm wrong about everything. But the question of whether it happened is a historical question, not a feelings question. And I think it happened."*

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## **QUESTION FIVE: WHAT ABOUT SCIENCE AND EVOLUTION?**

The framing of this question as a conflict between Christianity and science is one of the most successfully propagated myths of the last two centuries, and it deserves to be addressed head-on.

The conflict narrative — the idea that science and religious faith are inherently opposed, that the advancement of scientific knowledge has progressively dismantled the case for God — is historically inaccurate and intellectually untenable. The vast majority of the founders of modern science — Galileo, Kepler, Newton, Faraday, Mendel, Collins — were people of genuine religious faith who understood their scientific work as the exploration of a created order. The conflict is not between science and faith. It is between specific interpretations of Genesis and specific interpretations of evolutionary biology, and that is a considerably more particular and less dramatic dispute.

What Christianity requires is not a specific theory of biological origins. It requires that there is a Creator, that humanity is uniquely made in the image of God, and that the universe is not a cosmic accident without meaning or purpose. Those claims are not falsified by evolutionary biology — they operate at a different level of explanation than biology addresses.

*"I don't think science and faith are enemies. I think they're asking different questions. Science asks how — how did the universe develop, how did life*

*emerge, how do biological systems work. Faith asks why — why is there something rather than nothing, why does the universe operate on rational principles that a rational mind can investigate, why does anything mean anything at all. Those are not competing answers to the same question. They're answers to different questions. And I find that both together give me a more complete picture than either one alone."*

For the person who has specific questions about the mechanics of the science-faith interface, point them toward thinkers like Francis Collins, John Polkinghorne, or Alister McGrath — serious scientists and scholars who are also serious Christians and have written accessibly on exactly this territory.

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## **QUESTION SIX: WHY IS THE CHURCH SO FULL OF HYPOCRITES?**

This is the question that deserves the most honest answer of any on this list, because it is the question most grounded in actual observable reality rather than philosophical abstraction.

The church is full of hypocrites. This is not a disputable claim. It is a verifiable fact, documented daily in the behavior of people who claim the name of Christ and live in ways that contradict everything He stood for. The abuse scandals. The financial corruption. The racism. The exclusion of the very people Jesus sought out. The gap — sometimes a chasm — between the gospel of grace that is proclaimed and the graceless culture that is practiced.

This deserves not a defense but an acknowledgment. *"You're right. And I want to be honest: the hypocrisy you've seen is real, it has done real damage to real people, and there is no version of a good apologetic that dismisses it or explains it away. The church has failed people — catastrophically in some cases — and I am not going to tell you otherwise."*

Then — and only then — the distinction: *"But here's what I've had to figure out for myself: the failure of Jesus-followers to live like Jesus is not evidence against Jesus. It's evidence that the transformation the gospel promises is real but incomplete in this life — that we are, all of us, works in progress rather*

*than finished products. The question is not whether Christians are hypocrites. We are. The question is whether Jesus is who He said He was, independently of how badly His followers have represented Him. And I think the answer to that question is yes — which means the standard He set is the very standard by which our hypocrisy is rightly condemned."*

Brennan Manning addressed this better than almost anyone: the most repulsive hypocrisy is not the failure of Christians to live up to their beliefs — it is the pretense that they already have. Honesty about our failure is itself a form of gospel proclamation. It demonstrates that what we believe is not a performance standard we have achieved but a grace we are receiving.

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## **QUESTION SEVEN: HOW DO YOU KNOW GOD EXISTS?**

This is the epistemological question — the one about the grounds of religious belief — and it is worth engaging carefully because it is often the question behind the question behind the question.

There are several categories of response available, and the most effective approach depends on the person you're talking to.

For the philosophically inclined: the cosmological argument — everything that exists has a cause, the universe exists, therefore the universe has a cause that is itself uncaused — remains one of the most durable arguments in the history of philosophy. The fine-tuning of the universe's physical constants for the existence of life is a fact of physics, and its implications for design are taken seriously by physicists who are not Christians. The existence of consciousness — the irreducible fact of subjective experience — remains unexplained by any purely materialist account. These are not proofs in the mathematical sense, but they are genuine reasons to find theism more plausible than its alternatives.

For the experientially oriented: the testimony of personal encounter — the lived experience of a God who is not absent — carries evidential weight that is routinely dismissed by people who have not had the experience and routinely

acknowledged by people who have. The universality of religious experience across every human culture in every era of recorded history is a datum that requires explanation, and *mass delusion* is a considerably less parsimonious explanation than *this is pointing at something real*.

For everyone: *"I can't give you a mathematical proof, and I wouldn't trust anyone who claimed to. What I can give you is this: the world makes more sense to me with God in it than without Him. The existence of the universe, the existence of consciousness, the existence of moral reality, the existence of beauty that exceeds any survival function — all of these things require explanation. And the explanation that begins with a personal, creative, moral God fits the data better than the explanation that begins with nothing and ends with us. That's not proof. But it's not nothing either."*

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#### **QUESTION EIGHT: WASN'T JESUS JUST A GOOD TEACHER?**

C.S. Lewis answered this question so effectively and so efficiently in *Mere Christianity* that I am going to give you the core of his argument without apology, because it remains, sixty years later, the clearest response available.

The *good teacher* option is not actually available, given what Jesus said about Himself. A good teacher does not claim to be the Son of God, the only path to the Father, the resurrection and the life, and the one who will judge all humanity at the end of history. A person who makes those claims is either telling the truth, in which case *good teacher* is a significant understatement, or they are not telling the truth — in which case they are either deliberately deceptive or profoundly deluded, and neither of those options is compatible with being a good teacher in any meaningful sense.

Lewis called it *Liar, Lunatic, or Lord* — and the logic is tight. You can believe Jesus was wrong about His own identity. You can believe He was lying. But the one position the actual historical record of His teaching does not support is the comfortable middle ground of admiring Him as a wise moral philosopher while dismissing His central claims about Himself.

*"I understand why that option is appealing, because Jesus genuinely was a remarkable teacher, and a lot of what He said is attractive even to people who don't believe He was who He claimed to be. But He didn't give us that option cleanly. The claims He made about Himself were so specific and so extreme that they force a verdict. The question isn't whether His ethics were admirable. It's whether He was right about who He was. And if He was — then 'good teacher' doesn't come close to covering it."*

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### **QUESTION NINE: WHAT ABOUT ALL THE EVIL DONE IN THE NAME OF RELIGION?**

The Crusades. The Inquisition. Religiously motivated terrorism. The abuse of institutional power by religious authorities. The weaponization of Scripture to justify slavery, colonialism, the oppression of women, the persecution of minorities. This is a long and genuinely terrible list, and the honest Christian response to it is not defensive.

*"Most of that list is real, and the parts of it that involve people claiming to act in the name of Jesus are a source of genuine grief and genuine shame. I'm not going to try to explain it away."*

Then — several honest observations:

First, the atrocities done in the name of religion do not constitute evidence that the religion is false. They constitute evidence that human beings are capable of using any ideology — religious, political, philosophical — to justify the things they wanted to do anyway. The history of the twentieth century demonstrates conclusively that secular ideologies are at least as capable of producing mass atrocity as religious ones. Stalin's Soviet Union and Hitler's Germany were explicitly secular projects, and the body count of the twentieth century's secular ideologies exceeds anything done in the name of God in all of human history combined.

Second, Jesus Himself was executed by the religious establishment of His day for challenging their power and their corruption. The history of the church's

worst abuses is largely a history of the church departing from the actual teaching of Jesus rather than following it. The standard for critique is the thing itself — and the thing itself, the actual Jesus of the actual Gospels, has never been credibly accused of anything resembling the evils done in His name.

Third: *"I think you have every right to be angry about this. I'm angry about some of it too. But I want to ask you something honestly: does the behavior of people who claimed to follow Jesus change who Jesus actually was? Because I think those are separable questions. And I think if you read the Gospels without the filter of everything done in His name afterward, you might find Someone who looks nothing like the institution that has sometimes claimed to represent Him."*

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## **QUESTION TEN: WHY WOULD A LOVING GOD SEND PEOPLE TO HELL?**

This is the question that carries the most emotional weight, and it deserves to be handled with both theological seriousness and pastoral tenderness — because behind it is almost always a specific person the asker is thinking about. A parent. A friend. Someone they loved who died without, as far as they could tell, making peace with God.

Start with the reframe that has the most theological substance: God does not, in the most accurate sense, *send* people to hell. People choose hell — which is to say, they choose, persistently and finally, to live without God. And hell is the full realization of that choice. It is not primarily a place of punitive torture inflicted by an angry deity on people who didn't say the right prayer. It is the ultimate, irreversible, self-chosen experience of existence apart from the God who is the source of all life, all love, all goodness, and all joy. C.S. Lewis described it as the doors locked from the inside.

This does not make hell comfortable or easy to contemplate. It shouldn't be. The prospect of eternal separation from God is the most terrible thing available, and the Christian response to it is not detached philosophical acceptance but something much closer to anguish. Paul expressed it with an

intensity that should silence any Christian who treats the doctrine of hell with casual indifference: *"I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren."* — Romans 9:2-3 (NASB). That is the appropriate emotional register for this doctrine.

What you can also say: *"I believe God does everything short of overriding a person's will to bring them to Himself. The cross is the evidence of that — it is the most extreme possible expression of a God who will go to any length to make reconciliation available. What He will not do is force someone to receive it. Love, by definition, cannot be coerced. And the same freedom that makes love possible makes rejection possible. Hell is not God's preference. It is the accommodation of human freedom taken to its ultimate end."*

And then the most honest thing: *"I hold this doctrine with a great deal of humility and a great deal of grief. I don't think any Christian should talk about hell casually. I don't think any Christian should be certain about the precise mechanics of who ends up there and who doesn't. What I am certain about is that the God who went to the cross is not looking for reasons to condemn people. And the best response to the question of hell is not to spend energy debating its geography but to make sure as few people as possible have to find out."*

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## **WHY YOU DON'T HAVE TO WIN**

Ravi Zacharias described apologetics as *"the art of helping people get past their intellectual objections so their heart can hear what it already knows."* That framing is worth sitting with, because it reorients the entire enterprise. The goal is not victory in an intellectual contest. The goal is to remove obstacles — to clear enough of the debris of bad arguments and unanswered questions that the person can actually hear the thing their soul has been designed to respond to.

You do not have to win the argument. You have to stay in the conversation. You have to be honest about what you know and what you don't. You have to demonstrate, through the quality of your engagement, that faith and intellectual seriousness are not mutually exclusive — that the God you believe in is not threatened by hard questions, because He is the ground of all truth and all genuine inquiry leads toward Him rather than away from Him.

Dale Carnegie — not a theologian, but a man who understood human communication with rare precision — observed that *"a man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still."* And he was right. You cannot argue someone into the kingdom. You can remove obstacles. You can provide honest, thoughtful, humble responses that make the rejection of Christianity slightly less intellectually comfortable than it was before the conversation. You can plant seeds of doubt in the doubt — small moments of *what if they're right* that the Holy Spirit can water in the quiet hours of 3am when the person is alone with their questions and their life.

That is enough. It is more than enough. It is exactly what you were asked to do.

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## **STAYING IN THE CONVERSATION WHEN IT GETS HEATED**

A brief word on what to do when the apologetics conversation escalates — when intellectual engagement tips into emotional confrontation and the temperature in the room begins to rise.

The single most important thing is to refuse to match the escalation. Not because you are conflict-averse or because your position is weak, but because the moment a gospel conversation becomes a fight, the gospel has left the room. You are now in a contest, and contests produce winners and losers, and losers do not typically respond to their defeat by surrendering to the God of the person who beat them.

When someone gets heated, get quieter. Slower. More curious. *"I can hear this is bringing up something strong for you. I'm not interested in fighting with you — I'm genuinely interested in you. Can you help me understand what's behind*

*that?"* This is not a technique. It is a genuine pastoral move that demonstrates, in real time, the very grace you have been trying to describe.

And if the conversation reaches a point where continuing it will do more harm than good — if the heat has become too intense for honest dialogue to survive — it is entirely appropriate to offer a graceful pause. *"I think we've both said some real things today, and I don't want to push past the point where we can hear each other. Can we pick this up another time?"*

The conversation can always be resumed. The relationship, if broken by a pushed-too-hard apologetics encounter, is considerably harder to repair. Protect the relationship. The conversation will find its way back.

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### **DUMMY DRILL #9**

*This drill comes in two parts and is designed to be done over the course of a week rather than in a single sitting.*

*PART ONE: Pick three questions from the Top Ten that feel most personally challenging to you — the ones where, if someone asked you right now, you would feel the least equipped to respond. For each one, spend thirty minutes doing the following: write down your honest current response, however incomplete. Then identify one book, article, or resource that addresses that specific question seriously, and read enough of it to expand your response. You do not need to become an expert. You need to have something honest and thoughtful to say.*

*PART TWO: Have the conversation. Find a friend — Christian or not — who is willing to ask you hard questions about your faith for twenty minutes without letting you off the hook. Give them the Top Ten list if necessary. Tell them to push back on your answers rather than accept the first thing you say. Let yourself get uncomfortable. Notice where you genuinely don't know and practice saying so without panic. Notice where you actually have more to offer than you thought.*

*After the conversation, write down the two or three moments where you felt most equipped and most at peace with your answers. Write down the two or three moments where you felt least equipped. The first list is evidence of what the Spirit has already built in you. The second list is your reading list for the next month.*

*The goal is not a comprehensive answer to every hard question in the history of human doubt. The goal is an honest, humble, thoughtful response to the specific person in front of you — offered with gentleness and reverence, as Peter said, and with the deep confidence of a person who has found something true and is not afraid to hold it up to the light.*

*Hard questions are not the enemy of faith. They are, more often than not, the road to it.*

*Stay in the conversation. Keep your gentleness. Trust the God who is the answer to every question, whether or not you can articulate how.*

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*"A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still." — Dale Carnegie (Sometimes the pagans get it right)*

*"Apologetics is the art of helping people get past their intellectual objections so their heart can hear what it already knows." — Ravi Zacharias*

*"I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else." — C.S. Lewis*

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*Chapter Ten is where we get contextual. Because the same gospel lands differently in different lives, and wisdom knows the difference between a church-wounded skeptic and a spiritually indifferent first responder and a grieving intellectual and a child asking their first real question about God. One gospel. A thousand conversations. Let's talk about how to have the right one.*

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### CHAPTER 10: CONTEXTUAL EVANGELISM

#### *One Gospel, Many Conversations*

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*"To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some."* — 1 Corinthians 9:22 (NASB)

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There is a principle in emergency medicine called *mechanism of injury* — the idea that how a person was hurt shapes how you treat them. A broken bone sustained in a car accident and a broken bone sustained in a fall from a ladder may look identical on the X-ray, but the mechanism — the force, the direction, the circumstances of the injury — tells the experienced medic things about what else might be wrong that the image alone cannot show. Treat the image without understanding the mechanism, and you may fix the visible problem while missing the one that kills the patient.

I have thought about that principle more times than I can count in pastoral and chaplaincy contexts, because it describes something about human beings and their relationship to the gospel that most one-size-fits-all evangelism approaches consistently miss.

The gospel is the same gospel for every person. The four walls — God, Man, Christ, Response — do not change based on the audience. The resurrection is not differently true for a firefighter than for a philosophy professor. Grace is not more available to a recovering addict than to a suburban professional whose addiction is to the appearance of having it together. The message is singular, non-negotiable, and universally necessary.

But the mechanism of injury varies enormously. And the wise gospel witness — the person Paul describes when he says *"I have become all things to all men"* — learns to read the mechanism before deploying the treatment. Not

because the treatment changes. Because how you approach someone in pain should be shaped by how they got there.

This chapter is about learning to read the mechanism.

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## **PAUL'S PRINCIPLE AND WHAT IT ACTUALLY MEANS**

Before we get to the specific populations, I want to spend a moment with Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 9:22, because it has been both profoundly right and profoundly misunderstood in the history of evangelical practice.

*"I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some."*

What Paul is describing is not a chameleon spirituality — a faith so flexible that it reshapes itself to whatever the audience finds most comfortable, softening its edges and adjusting its claims to minimize resistance. That would not be the gospel at all. It would be the kind of people-pleasing that Paul elsewhere describes with considerable contempt — *"Am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God?"* — Galatians 1:10 (NASB).

What Paul is describing is something far more demanding and far more sophisticated: the willingness to enter another person's world — their cultural assumptions, their emotional landscape, their intellectual framework, their specific wounds and specific hungers — deeply enough to speak the unchanging gospel in a language they can actually hear. The message does not change. The posture, the entry point, the vocabulary, the pace, the specific aspect of the gospel that you lead with — all of these adjust based on who is in front of you.

Paul in Athens, standing before the Areopagus, does not quote the Hebrew Scriptures. He quotes Greek poets — *"for we are also His children"* — Acts 17:28 (NASB) — and uses the Athenians' own altar to an unknown God as his entry point. Same gospel. Entirely different approach. Because Paul had done the work of understanding his audience well enough to know which door of

the gospel opened toward the specific hungers of the specific people he was addressing.

That is the art this chapter is attempting to teach. Not to change what you believe or dilute what you proclaim. But to develop the wisdom to know which door to open first — and how to approach it — for the specific human being God has placed in front of you.

Lesslie Newbigin, one of the twentieth century's most perceptive missiologists, understood this when he wrote that *"the church must go to where people are, not just invite them to come to where the church is."* Going to where people are requires knowing where they are. Which requires the size-up. Which requires listening. Which is why we spent four chapters on it before getting here.

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## **SHARING WITH THE CHURCH-WOUNDED:**

### ***Leading with Grace, Not Guilt***

Of all the populations covered in this chapter, this is the one I know most intimately — because in my years of ministry, the church-wounded have been my most consistent congregation. They show up in fire stations and furniture shops and recovery meetings and back porches, carrying the specific weight of a faith that was handed to them in broken form by broken people, and they are — many of them — both closer to and further from the gospel than they appear.

Closer, because the wounds they carry are evidence that something once mattered to them. You cannot be wounded by something you were never invested in. The grief and the anger and the disillusionment are, paradoxically, testimony to the fact that at some point, the faith was real enough to be worth losing.

Further, because the scar tissue that forms around spiritual wounds is particularly dense and particularly resistant to the kind of messages that

produce breakthrough in people without religious history. The church-wounded have heard it before. They have sat in the pews. They know the vocabulary. They can recite the Romans Road from memory and tell you, with considerable specificity, exactly which verse was weaponized against them and exactly how it felt when it landed.

What they have often never encountered — and what your entire posture in conversation with them must communicate before a single explicit gospel word is spoken — is grace without conditions. The experience of being genuinely loved, genuinely welcomed, genuinely valued by someone who claims to follow Jesus, without any performance requirement, without any expectation that they will return to church or clean up their theology or stop being angry about what was done to them.

Here is the non-negotiable rule for sharing the gospel with the church-wounded: **lead with acknowledgment, not apologetics.**

Before you defend the faith, acknowledge the wound. Not vaguely — *"I know the church has hurt a lot of people"* — but specifically, with the willingness to sit in the particular details of what this particular person experienced and say, without qualification or counter-argument: *"That was wrong. What was done to you in the name of Jesus was wrong, and I am not going to tell you otherwise."*

This will sometimes feel like you are undermining your own witness. You are not. You are establishing the only foundation on which a genuine gospel conversation with this person can be built: the foundation of honest acknowledgment that the institution is not the gospel, and that the gospel — the real one, the grace-soaked, ragamuffin-welcoming, shame-dissolving gospel of Jesus Christ — is not responsible for what was done to them. In fact, Jesus is the standard by which what was done to them is rightly condemned.

From there — slowly, without rushing, without pressure — you can begin to distinguish between the Jesus they were handed and the Jesus who appears in the Gospels. These are often, upon careful examination, very different

people. The Jesus of the Gospels ate with the people that the religious establishment excluded. He saved His harshest words for the religiously powerful who were crushing ordinary people under the weight of their own righteousness — Matthew 23 is not a gentle document. He touched lepers and welcomed prostitutes and told the story of a father who ran toward a returning prodigal before the apology was even finished.

That Jesus — the actual one — is not the one most church-wounded people were shown. And showing them the difference, without pressure and without a timeline, is one of the most redemptive things a gospel witness can do.

A few specific cautions:

Do not rush them back to church. For many church-wounded people, a Sunday morning service is not the next step — it is several steps further down the road than they are, and pushing them toward it prematurely will communicate that your actual goal is institutional re-enrollment rather than genuine care. Let them come to that, if and when they do, in their own time and on their own terms.

Do not minimize the wound by pointing to the good the church has done. This is the religious equivalent of responding to someone's account of a car accident by mentioning that cars have also driven a lot of people safely to their destinations. It may be true, but it is not helpful, and it communicates that you are defending an institution rather than honoring a person.

Do not be surprised by the anger. Anger at the church, in a church-wounded person, is not spiritual immaturity. It is often the most honest and most healthy response available to someone who was genuinely wronged. Sit with the anger. Let it be what it is. The God who drives moneychangers out of temples with a whip is not unfamiliar with righteous anger toward religious corruption.

And do not give up. The church-wounded are often the most fertile soil for genuine gospel encounter — precisely because they know the difference between performance and reality, between religious noise and genuine grace,

and when they finally encounter the real thing, they tend to recognize it at a depth that people without their history sometimes cannot.

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## **SHARING WITH FIRST RESPONDERS:**

### ***Meeting Trauma with Truth***

This population is close to my own history, and I want to write about it with the specificity it deserves.

First responders — firefighters, paramedics, law enforcement, emergency dispatchers, emergency room staff — occupy a unique position in contemporary society that creates a unique set of spiritual dynamics. They are repeatedly exposed to the worst moments of human experience — death, suffering, violence, tragedy — in a professional context that demands functional competence and emotional containment. They are trained to suppress the normal human responses to abnormal experiences because the job requires it. And over time, the suppression accumulates.

The spiritual landscape of first responders tends to be characterized by a few consistent features that are worth understanding before you attempt a gospel conversation.

There is a pervasive pragmatism. First responders live in a world of immediate cause and effect, of tangible problems and concrete solutions, and abstract theological concepts often land with a thud in that world. The God who feels real in a quiet sanctuary can feel very distant in a trauma bay at 3am. The faith that worked in Sunday school can feel inadequate in the face of what gets pulled from car wrecks. Effective gospel witness in this context is concrete, honest, and grounded in real experience rather than religious abstraction.

There is often a deep and largely unprocessed grief. The cumulative weight of years of traumatic exposure — the calls that never leave, the faces that surface in the 3am hours — is a spiritual burden as much as a psychological one, and it tends to produce one of two responses: a hardening that looks like

cynicism and functions as self-protection, or a searching that looks like restlessness and functions as hunger for something solid enough to hold the weight.

There is a strong tribal identity. First responders are deeply loyal to their tribe, and the tribe's collective attitude toward religion — whatever it is in that particular station or department — carries enormous social weight. The person in your station who mocks faith shapes the culture of the conversation about faith, often more than anyone who holds it.

And there is a specific theological question that surfaces again and again in first responder communities, in different forms but with the same underlying content: *does any of this mean anything? Does the suffering I've absorbed have any significance, or is it just what happens in a universe that doesn't care?*

That question is your entry point.

The gospel, in a first responder context, is most effectively approached not as a religious proposition but as the answer to the meaning question — the announcement that the suffering is not random noise in a purposeless universe, that the God who entered human suffering in the Incarnation and absorbed its full weight on the cross is not a stranger to what first responders carry, and that the grief is not the end of the story.

Chaplaincy, in this context, is largely about presence before proclamation. The first responder who knows you showed up after a bad call — who knows you sat in the apparatus bay at midnight when nobody asked you to, who knows you ate bad station food and didn't talk about faith unless they brought it up — that first responder will listen to you in a way that no cold-contact evangelist in their parking lot ever could.

Earn the culture. Sit with the grief. Let the questions come when they come. And when they do — and they will, eventually, in the dark hours when the pragmatism cracks and the searching surfaces — be there with something real.

One specific note: the suicide rate in first responder communities is, in most sectors, higher than the line-of-duty death rate. The occupational trauma is real and it is lethal, and the gospel witness in this context is not merely about eternal destinies. It is about the immediate, urgent, desperate need for the kind of hope that can hold a person together when the accumulated weight of what they have absorbed threatens to break them. This is not the time for a Romans Road presentation. This is the time for Immanuel — God with us — in the most literal, immediate, present-tense sense available.

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## **SHARING WITH THE ADDICTED AND BROKEN:**

### ***The Gospel as the Ultimate Recovery Story***

I have spent significant ministry time in recovery communities, and what I have found there has deepened my understanding of the gospel more than almost any other context I have worked in.

Here is why: the person in a recovery community has, by necessity, already done the hardest thing in the gospel. They have admitted powerlessness. They have acknowledged, publicly and without the protection of self-sufficiency, that they cannot fix themselves from the inside. They have stood in a circle of other broken people and said the thing that the human ego fights with everything it has to avoid saying: *I can't do this alone. I need help. I am not enough.*

That posture is, theologically speaking, the beginning of everything. It is the posture that Jesus describes in the Beatitudes — "*Blessed are the poor in spirit*" — Matthew 5:3 (NASB) — and the posture that the gospel requires before grace can be received. The recovering person has, in some sense, already been brought to their knees. The question is what they find when they get there.

Many recovery programs gesture toward *a higher power* — deliberately left undefined, theologically deliberately vague, so as to be accessible to as many people as possible. This is understandable and not without pastoral wisdom.

But it leaves a door open that the gospel is uniquely positioned to walk through, because the gospel offers not a vague higher power but a specific Person — a God with a face and a name and a history of seeking out exactly the kind of people who are sitting in that recovery meeting.

The gospel, in a recovery context, is most effectively shared as a recovery story — because that is precisely what it is. It is the story of a humanity that became addicted to autonomy, that found itself powerless over the consequence of that addiction, that exhausted every alternative and finally, desperate and depleted, turned toward the only Source capable of producing the transformation that willpower alone could never achieve.

The language of recovery — powerlessness, surrender, higher power, one day at a time, community as the context of healing — is not foreign to the gospel. It is, in many ways, the gospel in street clothes. And the Christian witness in a recovery context does not need to work against that language. It can work through it, filling in the blank of *higher power* with the God who came looking for the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son — Luke 15 (NASB) — and refused to stop looking until He found what was lost.

There are several things to avoid in this context.

Do not imply that faith is the recovery program — that someone who *really* trusted God would not need AA or NA or therapy or medication or the sustained support of a community. This is not theology. It is cruelty dressed in spiritual vocabulary, and it has driven people away from faith and back toward active addiction in the moment of their greatest vulnerability.

Do not rush the faith conversation in early recovery. The person who is newly sober is managing a neurological and emotional upheaval that requires their full attention. Plant seeds. Be present. Let the relationship develop. The conversation about Jesus is not going anywhere.

Do not treat recovery communities as a mission field in the extractive sense — as a population to be evangelized and then moved into your church. Many recovering people find their deepest community and their most authentic

spiritual experience in their recovery meeting rather than in a Sunday morning service, and that is between them and God. Your job is not to relocate them. Your job is to introduce them to Someone who was already in the room before you arrived.

And do remember: the ragamuffin gospel — the gospel of grace freely given to the undeserving — is more alive and more viscerally real in recovery communities than in almost any other context I have encountered. These are people who know they are beggars. They have stopped pretending otherwise. The bread you carry is exactly what they are hungry for.

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## **SHARING WITH INTELLECTUALS:**

### ***Engaging the Mind Without Abandoning the Heart***

The intellectual presents a unique challenge in gospel witness — not primarily because their objections are insurmountable, but because the approach that works with most people tends to generate resistance in people for whom ideas are the primary currency of engagement.

The intellectual needs — and deserves — a conversation that takes their mind seriously. Not a conversation that panders to intellectual vanity, but one that demonstrates that faith and rigorous thinking are not mutually exclusive. That the gospel can withstand scrutiny. That the God who created the human capacity for reason is not threatened by its exercise. That *"love the Lord your God with all your mind"* — Matthew 22:37 (NASB) — is not a throwaway line.

This means doing your homework. Not because you need to out-argue the intellectual — you probably won't, and trying to often backfires — but because the quality of your engagement signals respect. The intellectual who asks about the historical reliability of the resurrection and receives a thoughtful, specific, nuanced response — one that acknowledges the genuine complexity of the question while making an honest case for the evidence — is more likely to continue the conversation than the intellectual who is met with a pivot to personal testimony and a dismissal of the question.

That said — and this is critical — intellectual engagement is not the whole of the gospel witness to intellectuals. The head and the heart are not as separate in real human beings as the categories suggest, and even the most rigorously intellectual person is also a person with wounds and hungers and longings that no amount of philosophical sophistication has been able to fully manage. The gospel speaks to both.

The most effective approach I have found with intellectuals involves three movements:

*First, take the ideas seriously.* Engage the actual arguments. Don't pretend the hard questions aren't hard. Read enough to have a substantive conversation — you do not need to be a professional philosopher, but you need to have done more than skim a few apologetics bullet points. Francis Collins, Alvin Plantinga, N.T. Wright, Tim Keller — these are serious thinkers who have done the intellectual heavy lifting, and their work is accessible enough to give you a foundation.

*Second, introduce the personal dimension.* At some point in the intellectual conversation, a gentle pivot becomes appropriate: "*Can I ask you something more personal? Behind all the philosophical questions — and I think they're genuinely important — what is it that you're actually looking for? What would it take for you to believe?*" This question often surfaces what is really going on beneath the intellectual presentation, and the answer is frequently far more personal than the questions suggest.

*Third, be honest about your own intellectual journey.* The testimony — your Before, Encounter, After — lands differently with an intellectual when it includes honest acknowledgment of the questions that remain unresolved. "*I still have questions I can't answer. Faith has not made the intellectual landscape simpler — in some ways it has complicated it. But I have found that the questions are better carried inside a relationship with Jesus than outside it.*"

One specific caution: do not be intimidated into intellectual dishonesty. The intellectual who is pressing you hard with sophisticated objections is not always winning the argument — they are sometimes performing confidence in a position they hold less securely than the performance suggests. You do not have to pretend you are not challenged. You do not have to have an answer to every question. But you also do not have to concede more than the evidence actually requires. Hold your ground with gentleness and intellectual honesty, and the intellectual will respect you more for it than if you collapsed under pressure.

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## **SHARING WITH THE RELIGIOUSLY OVERCONFIDENT:**

### ***The Hardest Conversation of All***

I debated whether to include this category, because it is the one where the gospel witness most frequently produces more heat than light and where the temptation to abandon the enterprise in frustration is strongest. But it deserves honest treatment, because this population is large and their spiritual condition is, in some ways, more precarious than people whose lostness is obvious.

The religiously overconfident — the person who is thoroughly convinced of their own spiritual adequacy, whose faith is primarily a performance of righteousness rather than a reception of grace, whose relationship with God is functionally transactional and whose attitude toward the less religiously impressive is one of thinly veiled superiority — is the person Jesus spent most of His time trying to reach and had the least visible success with.

That should tell you something.

The rich young ruler walked away sad — Mark 10:22 (NASB). The Pharisees, by and large, went from hostile to more hostile. The elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son stands outside the party at the end of the story, refusing to go in, while his father pleads with him — Luke 15:28 (NASB). Jesus does not force him in. The door is open. The invitation is genuine. But the elder

brother's overconfidence in his own record of faithfulness has made the party feel like an insult rather than a gift.

The challenge with the religiously overconfident is that they already have a fully formed theological framework, and that framework has a place for everyone — including you, and the place it has assigned you is below them on the spiritual hierarchy. Your testimony does not compute in their system, because their system does not have a category for grace that bypasses performance. The gospel, to them, sounds like moral laziness — an excuse for people who couldn't or wouldn't do what they have done.

You are not going to win this conversation with argument. And you are probably not going to win it with testimony either — because they have a counter-testimony: their own life of religious achievement, which they experience as evidence that the performance-based system works.

What you can do — and what, over the long game, sometimes produces the most remarkable transformations — is live a life in front of them that they cannot quite account for within their system. The joy that exceeds religious achievement. The peace that does not depend on performance. The grace extended to people they have written off. The willingness to be honest about your own failure without the shame spiral that religious performance requires. These things are, to the religiously overconfident, inexplicable — and inexplicable things eventually produce questions.

When the questions come — and they come most often in seasons of failure, when the performance-based system breaks down under the weight of something the religiously overconfident could not control or achieve their way out of — be there. Without I-told-you-so. Without triumphalism. With exactly the grace you have been trying to embody.

The elder brother's father went out to him. He didn't wait for the elder brother to come to his senses and come inside. He went out and stood in the dark beside him and made the case for the party one more time. That is your model.

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## SHARING WITH CHILDREN:

### ***Simple, Honest, and Never Manipulative***

Children occupy a unique and precious place in gospel witness, and they deserve an approach that honors both the simplicity of their understanding and the reality of their spiritual experience.

Jesus' treatment of children in the Gospels is instructive and consistently counter-cultural. In a world that treated children as property — beings of no social standing who would become significant only upon reaching adulthood — Jesus *"took them in His arms and began blessing them, laying His hands on them"* — Mark 10:16 (NASB). He made them the model of kingdom receptivity: *"Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven."* — Matthew 18:3 (NASB). He took them seriously. He took their faith seriously.

Children are often more spiritually perceptive than adults, precisely because they have not yet developed the sophisticated defensive mechanisms that keep adult awareness of need and longing at arm's length. They ask the real questions — *Why do people die? Does God know me? Is heaven real? Does Jesus actually love me?* — without the self-consciousness that teaches adults to pretend those questions have already been answered or are not worth asking.

Sharing the gospel with children requires several specific commitments.

*Simplicity without condescension.* The gospel is profoundly simple at its core — God made us, we broke the relationship, Jesus fixed it, we receive the gift — and children can grasp this. What they cannot grasp, and should not be expected to, is the full theological weight of systematic soteriology. Meet them where their understanding is without talking down to them. Children have remarkably sensitive antennae for being patronized.

*Honesty without terror.* Sin and its consequences are real, and children deserve honest engagement with them. But the gospel is not an opportunity to terrify children into a decision. The manipulation of a child's fear — constructing vivid pictures of hell, using emotional pressure, creating urgency that bypasses genuine understanding — is not evangelism. It is exploitation, and its long-term spiritual consequences are frequently devastating. The gospel is the best news in the universe. Present it as such.

*Invitation without pressure.* A child who makes a decision under emotional pressure in a heightened environment may or may not be making a genuine response to the gospel. A child who comes to faith through a relationship of trust, in an environment of genuine love, at a pace that is their own — that is something real. Do not push for the decision. Create the conditions for genuine encounter. Trust the Holy Spirit to do what only He can do.

*Follow-up without abandonment.* A child who responds to the gospel needs exactly what an adult who responds to the gospel needs: community, teaching, relationship, the sustained presence of someone who will walk with them as they grow. Pray a prayer with a child and then disappear from their life, and you have planted a seed in soil that has no root system. Plant it in relationship.

And if you are a parent or grandparent reading this: the most powerful gospel witness your child or grandchild will ever receive is watching the grace of God function in the texture of your daily life. Not your perfection — they can see through that. Your honesty about your own need, your genuine dependence on grace, your capacity to apologize and forgive and return to God when you have wandered. That ordinary, unperformed witness is the most durable thing you will give them.

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## **SHARING ACROSS CULTURAL DIFFERENCES:**

***Listen Twice as Long Before You Speak***

The principle that has governed this entire book — listen before you speak — is not merely good communication advice. In cross-cultural gospel witness, it is the non-negotiable foundation of everything that follows. Because the cultural assumptions you bring to a gospel conversation are invisible to you — they are the water you swim in — and if you do not do the work of making them visible, you will consistently mistake your cultural packaging for the gospel itself, and offer people a package they will rightly decline.

The gospel has a culture. Not the gospel itself — the gospel is trans-cultural, universal, addressed to every human being in every context in every era — but every human presentation of the gospel carries the fingerprints of the culture it was formed in. The music, the vocabulary, the emotional register, the social assumptions, the implicit picture of what a Christian looks like and how they behave — all of these are cultural artifacts, not gospel content, and confusing them is one of the most consistent and most consequential mistakes in the history of Christian mission.

Lesslie Newbigin, who spent decades as a missionary in India and returned to the West to discover that Western culture was itself a mission field requiring the same contextual sensitivity he had practiced in South India, described the task as *"the translation of the gospel into the thought forms and life forms of a culture."* Translation — not adaptation of the content, but rendering of the content in forms that are native to the hearer rather than foreign.

This requires listening at a depth most people do not bring to cross-cultural conversations. Not just listening to what people say, but listening to what their cultural framework assumes — about God, about humanity, about shame and honor, about community and individual, about authority and tradition, about what constitutes a serious offer and what feels manipulative. These assumptions vary enormously across cultures, and the gospel presentation that feels natural and winsome in one cultural context can feel abrasive, presumptuous, or bizarre in another.

Some specific guidance:

In honor-shame cultures — which include most of the global South and many immigrant communities in the West — the gospel's address to personal guilt may be less immediately resonant than its address to shame and restoration of honor. The cross, in these frameworks, is not only where sin's guilt was carried but where shame was absorbed and honor was restored. This is not a different gospel — it is a different facet of the same gospel, and it is thoroughly biblical.

In collectivist cultures — where identity is primarily communal rather than individual — the highly individualized Western gospel presentation ("*Jesus died for you personally, and you need to make your own individual decision*") may not land with its intended force. The gospel's address to communities, families, and peoples — the restoration of shalom to broken social fabric — is at least as prominent in Scripture as its address to individuals, and leading with communal dimensions may create more genuine resonance.

In contexts where Christianity is associated with colonial history — where the cross has been carried alongside the colonizer's flag and the gospel has been presented as a package deal with Western cultural superiority — the work of building trust requires explicit acknowledgment of that history. Not guilt-ridden paralysis, but honest acknowledgment that the gospel is not the property of any culture, that the Jesus who is being introduced is not a Western cultural figure but a Middle Eastern Jewish rabbi whose entire ministry challenged the powerful on behalf of the marginalized.

In all cross-cultural contexts, the rule is simple and demanding: *listen twice as long as you speak*. Learn enough about the culture to know what questions the gospel answers in that cultural framework — because the questions exist, in every culture, because the hunger is universal even when its cultural expression varies. Find the hunger. Offer the bread that answers it. Trust that the God who is the Creator of every culture knows how to reach every culture — and that your job is to be a faithful, humble, genuinely curious learner before you are a teacher.

## THE COMMON THREAD

As we close this chapter, I want to name the thread that runs through every one of these populations and every one of these contextual approaches — because it is the thing that matters most, regardless of who you are talking to.

Every human being you encounter — the church-wounded and the first responder, the intellectual and the child, the recovering addict and the religiously overconfident, the person from a culture entirely different from yours — is a person made in the image of God, carrying the specific weight of a specific life, carrying the specific hunger that Augustine described as the restlessness that finds no rest until it rests in God.

The context shapes the conversation. The hunger is the same.

Your job, in every conversation with every person in every context, is the same job it has always been: to love this specific person well enough to understand where they are, and then to offer — gently, honestly, without pressure, at the pace that genuine love requires — the One who made them for Himself and has never stopped coming after them.

The mechanism of injury varies. The treatment is the same.

One gospel. A thousand conversations. All of them sacred.

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### DUMMY DRILL #10

*This drill is designed to be done over several weeks rather than in a single session.*

*PART ONE: Identify your context.*

*Which of the populations covered in this chapter do you have the most natural access to? Where does your life already place you in proximity to people who need the gospel? Your workplace, your neighborhood, your history, your own story of woundedness or recovery — all of these give you natural credibility and natural access to specific populations.*

*Write down the two or three populations where you have the most genuine connection — not the ones you feel most spiritually prepared for, but the ones where your actual life has given you earned proximity.*

*PART TWO: Do a cultural audit.*

*For the populations you identified, spend some time honestly examining the cultural assumptions you bring to the conversation. What does your version of Christianity assume that might not be universal? What aspects of your gospel presentation are genuinely gospel content, and what aspects are cultural packaging? Ask a trusted friend from outside your cultural framework to review your testimony and your gospel presentation with that question in mind.*

*PART THREE: Go to where they are.*

*Identify one specific place where the people you are called to reach actually gather — not a church event designed to attract them, but a place where they already are. A fire station. A recovery meeting. A coffee shop frequented by intellectuals. A neighborhood where a different culture is concentrated. Go there. Not to evangelize. To learn. To listen. To be present without agenda.*

*Go at least three times before you open your mouth about anything spiritual.*

*Then go again.*

*The church that goes to where people are rather than waiting for people to come to where the church is looks, in practice, very much like Jesus — who went to Samaria when every proper Jew went around it, who entered Jericho when the righteous walked past it, who sat at wells in the heat of the day when the respectable had already gone home.*

*Go where He would go. The conversation will find you there.*

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*"The church must go to where people are, not just invite them to come to where the church is." — Lesslie Newbigin*

*"The gospel is like a caged lion. It does not need to be defended. It just needs to be let out of its cage." — Charles Spurgeon*

*"God is not looking for extraordinary people. He is looking for ordinary people who believe in an extraordinary God." — Hudson Taylor*

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*Part Four begins on the next page. We have talked about what happens before the conversation, during the conversation, and through the conversation. Now we need to talk about what happens after. Because the most important moment in a gospel conversation is not the moment someone says yes. It is every moment that comes after it. And we need to be ready for both answers — the yes and the not yet — with equal grace and equal faithfulness.*

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### PART FOUR: WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

#### *After the Conversation*

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## CHAPTER 11: WHEN THEY SAY YES

### *You Led Someone to Faith. Now What?*

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*"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you." — Matthew 28:19-20 (NASB)*

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I want to tell you about one of the most disorienting experiences available to a new Christian, and I want to tell you about it because it is almost entirely preventable, and yet it happens with a frequency that should embarrass the evangelical church into serious self-examination.

A person comes to faith. Genuinely, really, actually — something broke open in them and they said yes to Jesus with whatever degree of understanding they had at the time, and it was real, and the Holy Spirit moved, and something new began. The person who walked them through that moment — the friend, the coworker, the neighbor, the chaplain — was present and faithful and genuinely moved by what just happened.

And then that person went home.

And the new believer woke up the next morning in the same life they had always been living, with the same habits and the same relationships and the same internal architecture they had always had, except now there was something new in the basement that they had no idea what to do with. Nobody had told them what to read. Nobody had told them how to pray — really pray, not just recite something. Nobody had told them what to do with

the doubts that arrived approximately forty-eight hours after the initial experience, right on schedule. Nobody had given them a community to belong to, or if they had said *you should come to church sometime*, they had said it without enough specificity or follow-through to make it feel like a real invitation rather than a polite suggestion.

The seed was planted in soil that had no root system. And without root, the seed is vulnerable — to the scorching heat of difficulty, to the choking thorns of the life that keeps pressing in on every side, to the birds that come immediately to take away what was sown — Matthew 13:4-7 (NASB).

Jesus told that parable for a reason. The sowing is not the whole story. What happens to the seed after it lands is at least as important as the moment it left the sower's hand.

This chapter is about what happens after the yes. About the moment of faith as a beginning rather than a destination. About the difference between the mile marker and the journey. And about the irreplaceable responsibility of the person who was present at the beginning to remain present in what comes next.

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## **THE MILE MARKER MISTAKE**

There is a tendency in evangelical culture — understandable, human, fueled by genuine excitement — to treat the moment of conversion as the finish line. The goal was reached. The decision was made. The prayer was prayed. The kingdom has a new citizen. Hallelujah.

And then we move on to the next person.

This is the mile marker mistake, and it is one of the most consequential errors in the practice of personal evangelism. Because the moment of faith is not a finish line. It is a starting line. It is mile one of a journey that will last the rest of the person's earthly life and then extend, gloriously and forever, beyond it. The mile marker is real and worth celebrating — genuinely, extravagantly worth

celebrating, in the way that heaven itself celebrates, with the kind of joy that Jesus describes in Luke 15 over one sheep found, one coin recovered, one son returned. Do not skip the celebration.

But then stay for the journey.

The Great Commission — the instruction that has governed Christian mission since the day Jesus gave it — does not say *go and get decisions*. It says *go and make disciples*. — Matthew 28:19 (NASB). Disciples. The word is *mathetes* in Greek — learners, apprentices, people who are formed over time in the patterns and practices and character of a teacher. The Commission is not fulfilled at the moment of conversion. It is barely begun. The conversion is the enrollment. The discipleship is the education. And the education takes a lifetime.

Hudson Taylor, whose life of radical missionary faithfulness earned him the right to say it plainly, said: "*The Great Commission is not an option to be considered; it is a command to be obeyed.*" And the command is not merely to proclaim. It is to teach. To baptize. To bring people into the community of faith and walk with them as they learn to observe everything Jesus commanded. That is the full scope of the commission, and the person who proclaims the gospel without participating in some form of ongoing follow-up has completed the introduction and skipped the relationship.

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## **CONVERSION AND DISCIPLESHIP: THE CRITICAL DISTINCTION**

Let me be precise about what I mean when I distinguish conversion from discipleship, because the distinction is not about valuing one over the other. Both are essential. They are simply different things, operating on different timelines, requiring different kinds of investment.

Conversion is the moment — or the season, or the gradual dawning — in which a person moves from spiritual death to spiritual life. It is the new birth Jesus describes in John 3 — an event that is real, decisive, and irreversible. It is the moment the prodigal son "*came to his senses*" — Luke 15:17 (NASB) —

and turned toward home. It is instantaneous in its essential nature, even when it feels gradual in its experience. Something changes. A new relationship begins. A new identity is conferred.

Discipleship is the lifelong process of becoming, in actual lived practice, the person that the new identity declares you already are. It is the working out of the salvation that has already been worked in — *"work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure"* — Philippians 2:12-13 (NASB). It is learning to pray, to read Scripture, to live in community, to resist the patterns of the old life, to extend grace, to suffer well, to love people who are difficult to love. It is the slow, often painful, always grace-dependent process of being transformed into the image of Christ — *"from glory to glory"* — 2 Corinthians 3:18 (NASB).

The new believer needs both to be celebrated and to be accompanied. They need the joy of the beginning and the sustained support of the journey. And the person who walked them to the starting line is, in most cases, the most natural person to take the first miles of the journey with them — not because you must become their permanent discipler, not because the entire weight of their spiritual formation rests on your shoulders, but because the relationship that produced the conversion is the most natural seedbed for the early stages of discipleship.

Stay for the beginning. Point them toward what comes next. And connect them to a community that can carry what you cannot carry alone.

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## **WALKING SOMEONE THROUGH AN INITIAL PRAYER**

I want to address this practically, because it is a moment that paralyzes a lot of otherwise capable Christians — not because it is complicated, but because it feels high-stakes, and the high-stakes feeling tends to produce performance anxiety that makes the whole thing more awkward than it needs to be.

Here is the first and most important thing to understand: there is no magic formula. There is no specific combination of words that constitutes the valid, efficacious salvation prayer, without which the whole thing doesn't count. The prayer is not a transaction that activates a contractual clause in the divine covenant. It is a conversation — a first, fumbling, real conversation between a person and a God who has been waiting for exactly this moment since before that person was born.

What matters is not the precision of the words. What matters is the sincerity of the heart that produces them — the genuine turning, the genuine trust, the genuine surrender that the prayer is attempting to express. The Holy Spirit is not a bureaucrat looking for correctly filed paperwork. He is the One who *"intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words"* — Romans 8:26 (NASB) — which means He is quite capable of receiving a prayer that is imperfect in its form and perfect in its honesty.

That said — here is a simple, practical way to walk someone through it:

*First, ask a clarifying question.* Before you invite the prayer, make sure you understand what the person is actually saying yes to. Not as a theological examination — not a quiz to determine whether their soteriology is sufficiently precise — but as a genuine pastoral check-in. *"Can I ask — what do you feel like you're saying yes to right now? What does this feel like from the inside?"* Listen to the answer. It will tell you where they are and what, if anything, needs clarification before you proceed.

*Second, normalize the imperfection.* Many people hesitate at the threshold of a prayer of faith because they don't feel ready, or they're not sure they feel the right things, or they're worried the prayer won't count because they still have doubts. Address this directly before the prayer: *"I want you to know that this doesn't have to be perfect. God is not grading your delivery. What matters is that you mean it — and the fact that you're here suggests you mean it. Say what's true for you. That's enough."*

*Third, offer to pray with them rather than for them.* The invitation is not "repeat this prayer after me, word for word" — which reduces the most important conversation of a person's life to a recitation exercise. It is "would it help if I prayed first, and then you talked to God in your own words?" Or: "Would you like to just talk to God right now, in your own words, and I'll sit here with you?" Your presence is the support. The prayer is theirs.

*Fourth, if they want guidance,* you can offer a simple framework without scripting it verbatim: "You might want to tell God that you know you've been living without Him — that you've been running your own life and it hasn't been enough. Tell Him you believe Jesus died for you and rose again. Tell Him you want to receive what that makes available — forgiveness, relationship, a new start. And tell Him you're turning over the keys." Then let them do it in their own words, at their own pace, without interruption.

*Fifth, after the prayer, name what just happened.* Not with excessive religious fanfare, and not with a sales-closer's triumphalism, but with genuine, warm acknowledgment. "What you just did is real. Something happened. The relationship you were made for just began in a new way, and God is not going to forget this moment even if you do." Ground them in the reality of it. The feelings will fluctuate — and telling them that in advance is an act of pastoral kindness that will serve them well in the days when the feelings go flat.

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## **NEXT STEPS: THE FOUR FOUNDATIONS**

The new believer needs four things immediately, and these four things correspond to the four basic means of grace that the church has understood, since its earliest days, to be the environment in which spiritual life grows. They are not complicated, and they are not optional.

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### **FOUNDATION ONE: THE BIBLE**

The new believer needs to begin reading the Word of God — not because it is a religious duty to be performed, but because it is the primary means by which they will come to know the Person they just committed their life to. You cannot grow in a relationship with Someone whose words you never read.

The guidance here needs to be specific, because *"you should read your Bible"* is advice that most new Christians receive and approximately none of them know what to do with. The Bible is a large and initially bewildering document, and the person who opens it randomly and lands in Leviticus or Ezekiel on their first attempt is not likely to find it the transformative experience it can be.

Start them in the Gospel of John. This is not arbitrary — John's Gospel is theologically rich, deeply personal in its portrait of Jesus, and written with the explicit purpose of producing faith: *"but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."* — John 20:31 (NASB). It is the gospel writer's own stated evangelistic and discipleship purpose. Let the new believer read it slowly, one chapter at a time, with a simple question in mind: *What does this tell me about who Jesus is?*

After John, move to Luke — Acts — the Psalms — Paul's letters. Build the reading habit before building the reading scope. Consistency matters more than comprehensiveness in the early stages.

Give them a Bible. A real one, in a readable translation — the NASB for accuracy and depth, the NLT for accessibility in early reading. Write something personal in the front cover. The Bible you give someone at the beginning of their faith journey is a document they will keep for the rest of their life. Make it feel like it came from a person who loves them.

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## **FOUNDATION TWO: PRAYER**

Prayer is the other side of the conversation that the initial prayer of faith began. The new believer needs to know that what they did in that first prayer was not a one-time transaction but the opening of an ongoing dialogue — and

that the God who received that first prayer is genuinely interested in continuing the conversation.

Demystify prayer. Many new Christians have a picture of prayer as a formal religious performance that requires specific postures, specific language, and a level of spiritual development they have not yet achieved. This picture is wrong, and correcting it early does enormous pastoral good.

Prayer is simply talking to God. Not performing for God — talking to Him. With the same honesty and the same directness and the same willingness to say the uncomfortable true thing that characterizes any genuine relationship. *"Tell God what you actually think and feel. Tell Him about your day. Tell Him what you're afraid of. Tell Him when you're grateful. Tell Him when you're confused or angry or not sure He's there. He already knows all of it — the point of saying it out loud is not to inform Him. It is to practice the relationship."*

The ACTS framework — Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication — is useful scaffolding for a new believer who wants some structure. But do not let the structure become the point. The point is the relationship.

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### **FOUNDATION THREE: COMMUNITY**

This is the one that is most frequently skipped and most urgently necessary, and I want to say it with the directness it deserves.

The Christian life was never designed to be lived alone. It is not a private spiritual arrangement between an individual and God that can be practiced in isolation. It is a communal life — a body, as Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 12, in which every member is necessary and no member can function fully without the others. The new believer who tries to do this without community is attempting to live a communal life in solitary confinement, and the results are almost uniformly impoverished.

They need people. Specifically, they need people who are further along the journey, who can model what maturing faith looks like in the ordinary texture

of daily life. They need people who are at a similar stage, who can provide the solidarity of shared discovery. And they need people who are less far along — because the fastest way to consolidate what you are learning is to begin giving it away.

This means connection to a local church body — imperfect, occasionally frustrating, sometimes painfully human, but irreplaceable in the economy of spiritual formation. And it means your continued personal investment — not as the new believer's only resource, but as the person who made the introduction and has the relationship capital to walk them into the broader community with genuine care and genuine follow-through.

Do not hand them a church address and consider your obligation fulfilled. Take them. Sit with them. Introduce them to specific people. Create the social scaffolding that allows them to develop roots in a community that was, until recently, entirely foreign to them.

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#### **FOUNDATION FOUR: ACCOUNTABILITY**

The new believer needs at least one person — ideally you, at least initially — with whom they can be completely honest about how the journey is actually going. Not the performance version. The real version.

Where is the old life pressing back in? What habits are proving harder to release than expected? What doubts have surfaced? What questions have emerged from their Bible reading that they are embarrassed to ask in a church setting? What happened this week that they handled the old way instead of the new way, and how do they feel about that?

This is the conversation that most Christian community does not create space for — the honest one, the vulnerable one, the one that requires a level of trust and safety that takes time to build. But it is the conversation in which the most significant formation happens. Not in the polished public spaces of Sunday morning, but in the private, honest, gracious accountability of a relationship where the truth can be told without fear of judgment.

You built that relationship in the process of sharing the gospel. Do not abandon it now that the gospel has been received. The relationship was always the vehicle. It remains the vehicle. Let it carry what it was built to carry.

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## **CONNECTING THEM TO A LOCAL CHURCH**

I want to spend a specific moment on this, because it is simultaneously one of the most important next steps and one of the most complicated ones — and the complication deserves honest acknowledgment.

Every local church is imperfect. Some are more imperfect than others. Some are, frankly, environments that would do more harm than good to a new believer in a particular season of their journey. The fact that something bears the name *church* does not automatically make it the right next step for every person at every point on their spiritual journey.

That said — the answer to imperfect churches is not no church. It is the wisdom to find the right church, and the patience to help the new believer navigate their way into genuine community rather than simply checking the connection-to-a-church box and moving on.

What should you look for in a church for a new believer? A community where the gospel is clearly and regularly proclaimed — not assumed, not replaced with moral improvement programming, but actually proclaimed. A community where genuine welcome is extended to people who are new and rough and in process, rather than an environment where belonging is conditioned on the achievement of a certain level of spiritual polish. A community where the new believer will have access to relationships — not just programs, but people who will actually know their name and notice when they're absent.

The church does not need to be perfect. It needs to be genuine. There is a significant difference.

And if the new believer has a history of church wounding — if the very word *church* carries weight that makes the suggestion difficult — honor that. Do not

push toward institutional re-enrollment before the wounds have been acknowledged and some degree of healing has begun. The community of faith can take many forms in the early stages of a new believer's journey, and insisting on a particular institutional form before the person is ready is a way of protecting your ecclesiastical preferences at the expense of their spiritual health.

Lead with relationship. Let the institution follow when the person is ready to receive it.

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## **WHAT NOT TO DO**

In the interest of the honesty that has governed this entire book, let me name three specific failures that occur frequently in the aftermath of a conversion moment, because naming them is the most effective way to help you avoid them.

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## **DO NOT LEAVE THEM ALONE**

The first forty-eight to seventy-two hours after a genuine conversion experience are some of the most spiritually vulnerable hours of a new believer's life. The enemy, as Peter tells us, "*prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour*" — 1 Peter 5:8 (NASB) — and the new believer, disoriented and unequipped, is exactly the kind of person that description applies to.

Check in. The next day. Not with a formal discipleship curriculum, not with a list of next steps to work through, not with theological content to download. Just a text or a call that says: "*Hey. Thinking about you. How are you doing today?*"

Be available. Be present. Be the consistent human evidence that what happened yesterday was real and that they are not alone in what comes next.

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## **DO NOT OVERLOAD THEM**

The opposite error — and it is common among theologically enthusiastic Christians who have been waiting for this moment and now cannot contain themselves — is to bury the new believer in content. Every book you've been waiting to recommend. Every resource that shaped your own faith. Every doctrine you want to make sure they understand correctly. Every church event you want them to attend.

The new believer is a newborn. You do not feed a newborn steak. You feed them milk — *"like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation"* — 1 Peter 2:2 (NASB). Clear, nourishing, digestible, appropriate for where they are.

One Bible. One book to start, if they're a reader. One community to begin building relationship in. One conversation at a time.

Restraint in this moment is an act of love. The information will be there when they are ready for it. Give them the foundation before you build the house.

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## **DO NOT BECOME THEIR ONLY RESOURCE**

This is the error with the longest shadow, because it tends to emerge from genuine love and genuine investment rather than from negligence — and yet its consequences can be as damaging as outright abandonment.

You cannot be everything to a new believer. You are not their pastor, their counselor, their Bible teacher, their accountability partner, their prayer partner, their primary community, their crisis intervention line, and their doctrinal safety net — simultaneously and indefinitely. Attempting to be all of those things is not discipleship. It is a codependent relationship dressed in spiritual clothing, and it produces a believer whose faith is rooted in you rather than in God and whose spiritual growth is limited by the ceiling of your own capacity.

Your job is to walk them into the community of faith — not to replace it. To build bridges toward the resources and relationships they need — not to become those resources and relationships yourself. To be present and faithful and genuinely invested — and also to be honest about your own limits and to actively connect them with others who can offer what you cannot.

The most loving thing you can do for a new believer, after walking them through their initial steps, is to multiply the relationships of support and accountability around them until they are genuinely rooted in something larger and more durable than your individual friendship.

That is not abandonment. That is discipleship doing exactly what it was designed to do.

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## **THE JOY OF THIS MOMENT**

Before we get to your Dummy Drill, I want to make sure we do not lose something in the practical details of this chapter that should be named and honored.

When someone says yes to Jesus — when the conversation you have been faithful to, the relationship you have invested in, the seed you have planted and watered arrives at the moment of harvest — something happens in the heavens that Jesus Himself described as a party. *"I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."* — Luke 15:7 (NASB).

More joy in heaven. Over one person. Over this particular, specific, beloved human being who was lost and is now found — who was dead and is now alive. The angels are celebrating. The Father is running down the road. The robe and the ring and the fatted calf are already being prepared.

Let yourself feel the weight of that. Let the joy of it be real. Let it remind you why you do this — why you open your mouth when it's uncomfortable, why

you stay in the conversations when they go sideways, why you plant seeds in soil you can't see and water ground that doesn't always respond.

This is why. This moment. This person. This party that is happening right now in the presence of God over the soul that just came home.

You got to be part of that.

There is nothing — nothing in the entire range of human experience available to an ordinary person living an ordinary life — that compares to being the person through whom another person found their way to God. It is the highest privilege available to a human being, and it is available to you — imperfect, nervous, ragamuffin you — every single day.

Do not let the practical details of follow-up and next steps and what-not-to-do cause you to miss the wonder of the moment itself.

Someone said yes. Heaven is celebrating. Stay for the party. And then stay for the journey.

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 **DUMMY DRILL #11**

*This drill has two parts, and both are practical enough to complete in a single sitting.*

*PART ONE: Create your "What's Next" card.*

*Imagine someone in your life just said yes to Jesus — right now, today. What are the five most important things they need to know and do in the next week? Not the next year — the next week.*

*Create a simple, clear, non-intimidating card or document — no more than one page — that answers those five questions. It should include: what to read first and how much, how to pray and how often, who to call if they have questions, what the next community step is with a specific name and time and place, and one piece of honest encouragement for when the doubts arrive.*

*Keep it simple. Keep it human. Keep it specific enough to be actionable rather than general enough to be ignorable.*

*PART TWO: Make a discipleship plan for one specific person.*

*Think of the person in your life who is closest to faith right now — the one where a yes seems most possible in the near future. Without presuming on the outcome, think through what the first thirty days of follow-up would look like if that person said yes today.*

*What Bible would you give them? What would you tell them to read first? What community would you connect them to, and how specifically would you facilitate that connection? What would your check-in rhythm look like? Who else in your community of faith could you bring alongside this person to build the web of relationship around them?*

*Write it down. Having the plan before the moment means the moment does not catch you unprepared — and the new believer gets the full benefit of your faithful follow-through rather than the improvised version you construct in the parking lot after the prayer.*

*The Commission is not complete at the conversion. It has barely begun.*

*Stay for the whole thing.*

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*"The Great Commission is not an option to be considered; it is a command to be obeyed." — Hudson Taylor*

*"Discipleship is not an offer that a man makes to Christ. It is not a bargain in which the sorrow is all ours and the joy all His." — Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

*"The goal of spiritual formation is the transformation of the whole person into Christlikeness." — Dallas Willard*

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*Chapter Twelve is for the other answer. The not yet. The not now. The silence. The person you love who looked at everything you offered and walked the*

*other way. This chapter is about staying faithful when faithfulness produces no visible result. About releasing outcomes without releasing people. About the long, quiet, costly obedience of continuing to love someone who has not yet said yes.*

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### CHAPTER 12: WHEN THEY SAY NO (OR NOT YET)

#### *Releasing the Outcome Without Losing the Relationship*

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*"I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth." — 1 Corinthians 3:6-7 (NASB)*

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I want to tell you about a conversation I have had more times than I can count, in more forms than I can catalogue, with more people than I can name — and I want to tell you about it because it represents what is, for most Christians who take the gospel seriously, the most quietly painful dimension of the whole enterprise.

It goes something like this.

Someone you love — really love, not in the general theological sense of loving your neighbor as yourself, but in the specific, personal, they-matter-to-me-in-ways-I-cannot-fully-articulate sense — has heard the gospel from you. Not once. Multiple times, in multiple forms, through multiple conversations across months or years of faithful relationship. They have seen your life. They have watched the gospel function in you under pressure. They have asked questions and received honest answers. They have been given every reason to say yes and no reason to doubt the sincerity of the person offering the invitation.

And they looked at it. Considered it. And said no.

Or — which is in some ways harder — they said nothing at all. They changed the subject. They thanked you for the conversation and went home and the next time you saw them nothing had changed and the door that had been open was quietly, firmly, politely closed.

And you drove home with that particular kind of grief that has no clean name — not quite failure, not quite loss, not quite guilt, but some combination of all three pressed together into a weight that sits in the chest and doesn't fully release.

If you have shared the gospel with anyone you genuinely love, you know this weight. If you haven't felt it yet, you will. And this chapter is for that moment — for what to do with that weight, how to carry it faithfully, and how to remain present and loving with the person who said no without turning your faithfulness into a form of pressure that slowly poisons the relationship you were trying to redeem.

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## **IT WAS NEVER REALLY ABOUT YOU**

The first thing to understand — and it needs to be understood not just intellectually but down in the emotional basement where the weight actually lives — is this:

The rejection of the gospel is not a rejection of you.

I know that is easier to say than to feel. I know that when someone you love looks at the most important thing in your life and declines it, the experience of rejection is real and personal and does not dissolve simply because a theological principle is invoked. The heart does not work that way, and pastoral honesty requires me to acknowledge that.

But here is what is also true, and what the theological principle is actually trying to communicate beneath its clinical surface: the gospel is not your invention. It is not your idea, your creation, your product, or your project. You did not design it. You did not earn it. You did not generate the truth claims at its center. You received it, as a gift, from a God who has been in the business of pursuing human beings long before you arrived on the scene and who will continue pursuing this specific person long after your particular gospel conversation has receded into their memory.

When they said no, they were not primarily responding to you. They were responding to something much larger — the whole accumulated weight of their history with God, with religion, with the questions and wounds and resistances that have formed in them over a lifetime of living. You were the messenger in a moment. The message — and the God whose message it is — has been in conversation with this person's soul at a level neither of you can fully see.

Paul makes this precise and important in 1 Corinthians 3: "*I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth.*" — verse 6 (NASB). Note the division of labor. Paul plants. Apollos waters. God grows. The growing — the actual transformation of a human heart, the mysterious and sovereign work of bringing a person from death to life — is not in the column labeled *your responsibilities*. It is entirely in God's column. Which means the outcome of the gospel conversation — the yes or the no or the not yet — is not a verdict on your performance. It is a moment in a story that God is writing, at a pace and on a timeline that belongs entirely to Him.

You were faithful. The outcome is His. These two things are true simultaneously, and holding them together is the only way to carry the weight of the no without either collapsing under it or hardening against it.

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## **THE LONG HARVEST**

There is a stubborn myth in evangelical culture — never stated explicitly but consistently implied by the way we talk about conversion — that the timeframe between a genuine gospel presentation and a genuine faith response should be relatively short. That if you do everything right, if the message is clear and the relationship is genuine and the timing is appropriate, the harvest should follow the planting with reasonable promptness.

This myth is not supported by Scripture, and it is not supported by the documented experience of the vast majority of Christians who eventually come to faith in adulthood.

The agricultural metaphor that Jesus and Paul reach for consistently in discussions of kingdom growth is not accidental. Farming is slow. The gap between planting and harvest is measured not in days but in seasons — and some crops, in some soils, require multiple seasons before the ground is ready to produce. The farmer who plants in spring does not expect to harvest in summer. He expects to wait. To tend. To trust the process. And to recognize that the apparent inactivity of the field between planting and harvest is not evidence that nothing is happening. It is evidence that the most important things are happening underground, invisible to observation, on a timeline that the seed determines rather than the farmer.

The spiritual equivalent of this is one of the most consistently documented realities in the testimonies of people who come to faith in adult life: almost no one comes to faith through a single gospel encounter. Almost everyone who has a genuine conversion story can trace the thread of it back through multiple conversations, multiple people, multiple moments of exposure to the gospel — spread over years, sometimes decades — that accumulated quietly until the soil was prepared for the harvest.

The person who first spoke to them about Jesus may have been someone they knew at twenty. The person who prayed with them to receive Christ may have met them at forty. Between those two people was a twenty-year gap filled with seeds planted by others — a book someone left on a coffee table, a crisis that cracked something open, a friendship that demonstrated grace in a way that was impossible to entirely dismiss, a moment of inexplicable spiritual hunger in the middle of an otherwise ordinary Tuesday. None of those seeds knew about the others. All of them were part of the same harvest.

You may be planting seed that will not break the surface for twenty years. You may be watering ground that someone else planted a decade before you showed up. You may never, in this life, see the harvest your faithfulness produced. And the call — the costly, difficult, grace-requiring call — is to plant and water faithfully anyway, with the deep confidence of a person who knows that the God who causes the growth has not forgotten the seed.

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## THE STORIES OF LONG SEEDS

I want to give you some specific encouragement here, because abstract principles about long harvests are easier to believe when they are grounded in actual lives.

Augustine of Hippo — whose *Confessions* remains one of the most extraordinary documents of spiritual autobiography in human history — spent the first three decades of his life in active resistance to the Christianity of his mother, Monica. Monica prayed for her son with a persistence that her bishop described with words that have become one of the most quoted pieces of pastoral encouragement in church history: "*It is impossible that the son of these tears should perish.*" She wept for him. She prayed for him. She pleaded with bishops to speak with him and was told, gently but firmly, that Augustine was not ready to be reasoned with. She waited. She persisted. She refused to stop believing that the God who had captured her could capture her brilliant, restless, morally complicated son.

Augustine came to faith at thirty-two. He became one of the most significant theologians in the history of the church. Monica did not live to see the full scope of what her faithfulness produced — but she lived to see the harvest. She wept then too.

That is one story. There are millions of others, most of them unrecorded in any book, known only to the families and friends who planted and waited and never gave up. The parent whose adult child came home after twenty years of wandering. The friend whose patient, no-agenda love over a decade finally became the bridge that held. The chaplain whose single conversation in a hospital room turned out to be the one that broke the log jam of a lifetime's resistance.

These stories are happening around you right now, in the ordinary neighborhoods and ordinary lives of ordinary people who planted ordinary seeds and trusted an extraordinary God with the harvest. Some of them will

read this book. Some of them are waiting, right now, for a harvest that is closer than they know.

Do not give up. The seed you planted is not dead. It is underground.  
Underground is not the same as lost.

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## **MAINTAINING THE RELATIONSHIP AFTER A NO**

Here is where the practical rubber meets the relational road, because the temptation after a gospel conversation that ends in rejection is one of two equally damaging responses.

The first is withdrawal. The unconscious but real pulling back from the relationship — not a dramatic exit, but a subtle cooling, a reduction in investment, a quiet rearrangement of emotional priorities that communicates to the person who said no that the friendship was contingent on a spiritual outcome that didn't materialize. This is the failure that turns the no into a confirmation of everything the person suspected: that they were a project, not a friend, and that the friendship was instrumental to an agenda that has now been frustrated.

The second is renewed pressure. The response to the no that refuses to accept it — that continues to bring the gospel into every subsequent conversation, that cannot resist one more angle of approach, one more resource to share, one more conversation about the topic that has already received its answer. This response is also understandable, and it also emerges from genuine love and genuine urgency. But it communicates something corrosive: that the person's answer is not being respected, that the friendship is not safe, that every subsequent interaction with you is likely to end up in the same place, and that the most self-protective thing they can do is reduce their exposure to you.

Both of these responses lose the relationship. And losing the relationship is the single most counterproductive thing you can do after a no, because the

relationship is the only ongoing vehicle through which any future gospel moment will travel.

So how do you maintain the relationship after a no without being weird about it?

The answer is both simpler and harder than most evangelism training suggests: *you just keep being their friend*. Not a differently weighted friend. Not a friend with a revised strategy. Not a friend who has filed them under *long-term project* and is patiently waiting for the next opening. Just — their friend. The person who shows up, who asks about their life, who laughs with them, who sits with them in the hard moments, who is genuinely present in the ordinary texture of a shared existence.

Here is the practical guidance for the days and weeks immediately following a no:

*Do not mention it.* In the immediate aftermath, the absence of any reference to the gospel conversation is itself a form of communication — specifically, it communicates that the relationship did not hinge on the outcome of that conversation, and that the friendship you have built is real rather than instrumental. Let a natural interval pass. Let some ordinary relationship moments accumulate. Let the no settle into the history of the relationship without becoming its defining moment.

*When you do reference it — if they bring it up — be honest and gracious.* If they bring up the conversation themselves — which people sometimes do, weeks or months later, often when something has happened that made them think about it — receive that honestly and warmly without treating it as the reopened door you've been waiting for. *"I'm glad we had that conversation. I meant everything I said. And I hope you know that none of that changes anything between us."*

*Let your life continue to speak.* The most powerful ongoing witness after a verbal gospel conversation is the silent, consistent, unforced witness of a life that is genuinely different because of what it is rooted in. You cannot make

someone believe. But you can continue to be, in front of them, the evidence of the thing you were trying to describe. That evidence does not expire when the conversation ends.

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## **LOVING WITHOUT AGENDA**

I want to say something about this that cuts against a certain kind of spiritually motivated self-monitoring that can develop in Christians who are deeply earnest about evangelism.

After a no, some people begin to watch themselves — to examine their own motives in maintaining the relationship, to wonder whether their continued friendship is genuine or strategic, to question whether they are really loving this person or simply playing a very long game. And the questioning, over time, can produce a kind of relational paralysis — an inability to be naturally present because you have become too self-conscious about what your presence is for.

Here is the pastoral permission you may need: you are allowed to love people without a spiritual agenda. Not because their eternal souls don't matter — they matter more than anything — but because genuine love for a person is not the same as an ongoing evangelism strategy, and conflating the two does damage to both.

The friend who continues to love you after you've declined what they offered is not demonstrating inferior love. They are demonstrating the truest kind — the kind that does not require the beloved to respond in a particular way in order to be sustained. The kind that Jesus described when He said "*love your enemies*" — Matthew 5:44 (NASB) — not as a technique for converting enemies, but as the natural expression of a heart that has been transformed by the love of God.

Love the person. Not as a vessel to be filled or a project to be completed, but as a human being made in the image of God who is valuable independent of any spiritual outcome. Trust that love like that — sustained, unconditional,

genuinely free of requirement — is itself a form of proclamation. That it is, in the long run, one of the most powerful apologetics available. That the person who has experienced that kind of love — who has been genuinely, faithfully, persistently loved by someone who asked nothing in return — has experienced, in human form, the kind of love the gospel is trying to describe.

You are not wasting your love on someone who said no. You are demonstrating the gospel with your life in the only way available to you in this particular season.

Keep loving them. Let it be real. Trust God with the rest.

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## HOW TO GRIEVE HONESTLY

There is a kind of grief that comes with certain nos that deserves to be named and honored, because the church often does not give Christians permission to feel it — and unexpressed grief that has no legitimate outlet tends to either fester into resentment or harden into indifference, neither of which serves the person, the relationship, or the ongoing work of the gospel.

When someone you love deeply — a spouse, a parent, a child, a friend of decades — looks at the gospel and walks away from it, that is a genuine loss. Not the loss of the person from your life, but the loss of a hope you held for them — the hope that they would know what you know, that they would find what you found, that the gulf between your deepest reality and theirs would close. That hope is real, and its frustration is a real grief, and you are allowed to feel it without guilt and without apology.

Paul felt it. With an intensity that should give every Christian permission to grieve their own version of it, he wrote: *"I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren."* — Romans 9:2-3 (NASB). Unceasing grief. The foremost apostle, the man who planted churches across the known world, carried a weight of grief for the people he loved who had not come to

faith. He did not suppress it or spiritualize it or convert it into mere theological concern. He felt it in his body and named it honestly.

You are in good company when you grieve.

Here is how to grieve well — with honesty and without the grief becoming something that damages the relationship:

*Take it to God first.* The grief for someone who has said no is the raw material of intercession — which is, as we will discuss in the next chapter, the most powerful thing you can do for someone after a verbal gospel witness has reached its apparent limit. Bring the grief into the presence of God. Tell Him exactly what you feel — the sorrow, the frustration, the helplessness, the love. Let the grief become prayer. Let the prayer become an act of surrender in which you place the person you love into the hands of the God who loves them infinitely more than you do.

*Talk to a trusted friend.* Not to the person who said no — that would be unfair and would place a burden on them that the relationship cannot bear. But to a trusted Christian friend who can receive your grief with genuine compassion and genuine faith. Who can remind you, when the weight is heaviest, that the story is not over.

*Do not let the grief become a verdict.* Grief, held too long without release, can harden into a kind of premature certainty — a conviction that this person's no is final, that the door is permanently closed, that hope is no longer reasonable. Resist this. The harvest timeline belongs to God, not to your emotional processing of the no. Your grief is legitimate. The verdict it is tempted to render is not yours to render.

Phillips Brooks, the great nineteenth-century preacher, wrote with a directness that has never left me: "*Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger men. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks.*" The task of continuing to love someone who has said no — continuing to be present, continuing to grieve honestly, continuing to hold hope without pressure, continuing to trust the long harvest — is not a task

equal to your natural powers. It requires something beyond what you brought to the conversation.

Pray for powers equal to that task. They will be given.

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## **THE POSTURE OF SUSTAINED HOPE**

I want to close this chapter with something that is not a technique and not a strategy and not a practical next step. I want to close it with a posture — the interior orientation that makes everything in this chapter possible rather than merely admirable.

The posture is hope. Specifically, the theological virtue of hope — which is not the same as optimism, and not the same as wishful thinking, and not the same as the refusal to acknowledge reality. Theological hope is the confident expectation of what God has promised, held in the present tense while the evidence remains incomplete. It is the *"substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"* — Hebrews 11:1 (NASB). It is the farmer's confidence in the harvest while the field is still bare.

The person who said no is still the person God made for Himself. Still the person whose heart is restless until it rests in God. Still the person whose soul has a hunger that nothing else will ultimately satisfy. The no did not change any of those things. It did not close the door on the God who is still pursuing them through every ordinary moment of their ordinary life — through the beauty that exceeds what atheism can account for, through the moral intuitions that survive every attempt to dismiss them, through the 3am hours when the noise of daily life goes quiet and the deep questions surface whether invited or not.

God has not given up on the person who said no to you. He is still at work. The story is still being written. And the most faithful thing you can do — in the days and months and years that follow the no — is to hold the same hope that God holds. To refuse to write the ending before the story is finished. To love the

person in front of you with the same patient, persistent, non-coercive love that God has been lavishing on them since before they drew their first breath.

The no is not the end of the story.

It is a page in the middle.

Keep reading. Keep praying. Keep showing up. Keep loving.

The Author has not closed the book.

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### **DUMMY DRILL #12**

*This drill is different from the others in this book. It is not primarily about skill development. It is about the interior life — about what you do with the weight of the no in the quiet places where nobody can see.*

*PART ONE: Name the person.*

*Think of the person in your life whose no has cost you the most. Not abstractly — specifically. The person whose lack of faith you carry as a weight, whose name surfaces in your prayers with a mixture of love and grief and hope and helplessness.*

*Write their name down. Then write, as honestly as you can, what you feel when you think about their no. Not what you're supposed to feel. What you actually feel. The grief, the frustration, the love, the fear, the hope. Get it all on paper.*

*PART TWO: Separate the burdens.*

*Look at what you wrote and identify two categories: the things that are your responsibility and the things that belong to God. Your faithfulness in the relationship, your continued love, your ongoing availability — these are yours. The timing of their response, the work of the Spirit in their heart, the ultimate harvest — these belong to God.*

*Draw a line between the two lists. Then practice, in writing, the act of release — handing the second list back to God with as much genuine surrender as you can muster today. Not forever — you may need to do this again tomorrow. Just today.*

*PART THREE: Make one concrete, agenda-free investment in the relationship.*

*Identify one specific thing you could do in the next week to simply love this person — not as an evangelism strategy, not as a seed-planting maneuver, but as an act of genuine friendship that asks nothing in return. Then do it.*

*And pray. Not a performance of intercession, but an honest conversation with the God who loves this person more than you do, in which you tell Him exactly how you feel and exactly what you're trusting Him to do.*

*The burden of the no is real. It does not have to be carried alone.*

*Give it to the One who can do something with it.*

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*"Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger men. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks." — Phillips Brooks*

*"Never give up on anyone. And that includes not giving up on yourself." — Dieter F. Uchtdorf*

*"The intercessor is not wrestling with God for the soul of another. The intercessor is agreeing with God for what God already wants to do." — Dutch Sheets*

*"Nothing is ever wasted in the kingdom of God — not a tear, not a prayer, not a seed planted in ground that hasn't broken the surface yet." — A ragamuffin pastor who has been there*

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*Chapter Thirteen is about the long game in the deepest sense. Not the long game of waiting for a specific person to say yes, but the long game of your own sustained faithfulness — the rhythms and practices and community that make*

*it possible to keep showing up, keep planting, keep loving, without burning out, giving up, or going numb. Because the harvest field needs workers who last. And lasting requires something more than willpower. It requires a life.*

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### CHAPTER 13: STAYING IN THE GAME

#### *Evangelism as Lifestyle, Not Event*

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*"And He was saying to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.'" — Luke 10:2 (NASB)*

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In the fire service, we talk about something called *cumulative stress* — the slow, largely invisible accumulation of occupational weight that builds in a person not through a single catastrophic event but through the relentless accumulation of ordinary difficult ones. The calls that go well but still cost something. The paperwork. The politics. The interrupted sleep. The meals that get cold while you're out on a run. The particular exhaustion of being consistently available for other people's worst moments while managing your own with whatever is left over.

A firefighter experiencing cumulative stress does not usually notice it happening. That is precisely what makes it dangerous. There is no single moment of breaking — no dramatic crisis that announces itself as the problem. There is just a gradual thickening of the distance between the person and the work they used to love. A subtle dulling of the passion that brought them to the job in the first place. A growing sense of going through the motions. A day when they realize, with quiet surprise, that the urgency that used to get them out of bed is gone — and they cannot identify exactly when it left.

I have watched the same process happen in Christian ministry and personal evangelism with a frequency that should concern us all.

The person who started sharing their faith with genuine excitement and genuine love finds, after months or years of mixed results, that the excitement

has quietly evacuated the premises. The relationships that were once genuine have taken on a slightly managed quality — a faint transactional undertone that they are increasingly aware of and increasingly uncomfortable with. The gospel conversations that used to feel natural now feel effortful. The prayers for the people in their lives that were once urgent have become rote — faithful in form, diminished in fire.

They are still in the game. But they are running on empty. And running on empty in gospel work produces exactly the kind of witness that pushes people away rather than drawing them in — the performance of passion rather than its reality, the going through of spiritual motions that the people around them can sense without being able to name.

This chapter is about staying in the game in the full sense — not merely continuing to attempt gospel conversations, but maintaining the interior life from which genuine gospel witness flows. About the difference between evangelism as a program you run and evangelism as a life you live. About the rhythms and the practices and the community that make it possible to keep showing up, decade after decade, with the same love and the same urgency and the same genuine fire that you had at the beginning.

Because the harvest field is vast. Jesus said so Himself. And the laborers are few. And the ones who are here need to last.

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## **WHY EVANGELISM BURNS PEOPLE OUT**

Before we talk about sustainability, we need to talk honestly about what produces the burnout — because the solutions only make sense in light of the specific problems they are solving.

Evangelism burnout tends to have several consistent sources, and most of them are rooted not in the gospel itself but in the way the gospel has been framed and deployed in evangelical culture.

**The performance model.** When evangelism is taught primarily as a skill to be mastered and a quota to be met — when success is measured in decisions and the implicit message is that faithful Christians are productive evangelists in the measurable sense — the person who is not regularly seeing visible results will eventually experience the gap between their effort and their output as a form of personal failure. And sustained personal failure, however unjustly attributed, is exhausting. The performance model of evangelism does not just fail to produce sustainable witness. It actively produces burnout in the people who take it most seriously, because they are the ones most invested in the gap between what they were told to expect and what they actually experience.

**The burden of outcomes.** When a Christian has absorbed — consciously or not — the belief that the eternal destiny of the people around them depends primarily on the quality of their witness, the weight of that responsibility is not merely heavy. It is crushing. Every conversation that doesn't result in a decision becomes a potential eternal failure. Every relationship with an unbeliever becomes a source of low-grade anxiety rather than genuine pleasure. The love that should fuel the witness is slowly replaced by a dread that hollows it out, and what began as mission becomes burden becomes paralysis.

**The isolation of solo witness.** Much evangelical evangelism training is designed for individuals — lone witnesses deployed into a harvest field with a set of personal skills and a command to go. The problem with this model is that it is not how the early church did it, it is not how Jesus deployed His disciples, and it is not sustainable for most human beings operating in the real world. We were not designed for solo witness. We were designed for community witness — for the mutual support, the shared discernment, the distributed labor that allows the whole body to accomplish what no individual member could sustain alone.

**The disconnection of witness from worship.** When gospel-sharing becomes a program to be run rather than an overflow of a life being transformed, it loses its source. The person who is not being regularly replenished by genuine

encounter with God — whose prayer life is more duty than delight, whose Scripture reading is more curriculum than communion — will eventually have nothing to give. You cannot sustainably pour out what is not being poured in. The witness that dries up is almost always the witness that has been disconnected from its source.

Understanding these sources does not make the burnout disappear. But it tells us where to look for the solutions — and the solutions are not, as it turns out, primarily about better technique or more training or stronger willpower. They are about the interior life. About the rhythms. About the community. About the prayer that makes everything else possible.

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## **THE SUSTAINABLE MODEL: PRAY, LOVE, SERVE, SHARE**

Over years of ministry practice and considerable personal trial and error, I have come to believe that sustainable gospel witness operates on a cycle of four movements that are not sequential steps so much as perpetually recurring rhythms. They are not a program. They are a pattern of life. And when all four are functioning together, the result is a witness that does not burn out — because it is not drawing on a fixed reservoir of human energy but on the inexhaustible Source that replenishes as it is drawn from.

The four movements are: Pray. Love. Serve. Share.

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### **PRAY**

Everything begins here and returns here, and the order is not accidental. Prayer is not the preparation for the real work of evangelism. Prayer is the work — the foundational, irreplaceable, nothing-else-works-without-it work — from which everything else flows.

Specifically, the prayer that fuels sustainable witness is not primarily the prayer that asks God to give you opportunities or to bless your efforts. It is the prayer that begins with genuine encounter with God Himself — worship,

confession, gratitude, surrender — before it moves toward petition for the people in your life who don't yet know Him. It is the prayer that keeps your own soul calibrated to the reality that you are loved, forgiven, held, and not ultimately responsible for outcomes that belong to God.

And it is the prayer of intercession — the sustained, specific, by-name practice of bringing the people you love into the presence of the God who loves them more. We will spend an extended section on this shortly, because it is the most undervalued and most consistently transformative practice available to a Christian witness.

For now — the simple principle: if your evangelism is outrunning your prayer life, you are drawing on reserves that will not last. The witness that endures is always the witness that prays.

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## LOVE

The second movement is the sustained, daily, ordinary practice of genuinely loving the people around you — not as a pre-evangelism strategy, but as the natural expression of a heart that is itself being loved by God.

This means what we covered in Chapter Six: real friendship, real presence, real investment in the actual lives of the actual people God has placed around you. It means showing up when it costs something. It means the long game of relationship that does not require a gospel conversation to justify its existence.

And it means something else that is worth naming specifically in the context of sustainability: the love must be genuine or it will not last. The person who is loving others primarily as an evangelism mechanism will burn out, because instrumental love has a finite supply — it is sustained by the hope of a specific return, and when that return does not materialize, the fuel runs out. But genuine love — love that is the overflow of being genuinely loved by God, love that values the other person independently of any spiritual outcome — has access to a supply that is not finite. *"The love of God has been poured out*

*within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.*" — Romans 5:5 (NASB). Poured out. Not rationed. Not distributed in measured amounts proportional to the recipient's spiritual responsiveness.

Love that comes from that source does not burn out. It replenishes as it is given.

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## **SERVE**

The third movement is the practical, embodied, hands-and-feet expression of the love that the second movement describes. It is the showing up in tangible, concrete, sometimes inconvenient ways that communicates through action what words alone cannot convey: that the people around you are worth something to you beyond their spiritual status, that the God you represent is interested in the whole of their lives rather than merely their eternal destinations, and that the gospel is not merely a verbal proposition but a way of being in the world that makes a visible difference.

Service is also, practically speaking, one of the most effective creators of genuine gospel opportunity — not because it is deployed strategically as a door opener, but because it places you in proximity to people's real needs and real vulnerabilities in a way that naturally produces the kind of trust that opens doors to depth. The neighbor who watched you show up with a chainsaw after the storm, the coworker whose family you fed during a medical crisis, the first responder whose bad call you sat with at midnight — these people have experienced something about you that no gospel presentation could communicate on its own.

Service also keeps the witness honest. The person who is serving genuinely has an organic credibility that the person who is only talking does not. It is very difficult to be cynical about a gospel that keeps showing up with a casserole.

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## **SHARE**

The fourth movement is the verbal witness — the actual gospel conversations that this book has been equipping you for. And notice where it falls in the cycle. It is fourth. Not because it is least important, but because it is most effective when it emerges from the first three. The prayer that has been praying for this person. The love that has been genuine and sustained. The service that has demonstrated what the love looks like in practice. From that foundation, the verbal witness carries a weight and a credibility that it simply cannot generate on its own.

This does not mean you never share until you have completed a lengthy prerequisite of prayer and relationship-building. Sometimes the conversation happens quickly. Sometimes a stranger on a plane or a person in a crisis needs to hear the gospel right now, without the benefit of an established relationship. The Spirit moves as He wills, and there are moments when the verbal witness is precisely what the moment demands, whatever the relational history.

But for the sustained, lifestyle-level witness that is the subject of this chapter — the everyday faithfulness that keeps the harvest field engaged over decades — the fourth movement is most powerful when it arises organically from the first three. And the rhythm of cycling through all four, continuously and without burning any one of them as primary fuel, is what makes the witness sustainable.

Pray. Love. Serve. Share. And then return to prayer. Because the cycle is not a ladder you climb to the top and stay. It is a wheel that keeps turning — and the turning is the life.

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## **BUILDING GOSPEL RHYTHMS INTO ORDINARY LIFE**

One of the most practical shifts available to a Christian who wants to move from event-based to lifestyle-based witness is the shift in how you think about time. Specifically, the shift from setting aside special time for evangelism — the once-a-week outreach event, the quarterly gospel conversation you've

scheduled with yourself — to recognizing that the ordinary structure of your daily life is already full of gospel opportunity.

You have regular contact with the same people on a repeated basis. Your neighbor, your coworker, your regular barista, the person at the gym, the parent you see at school pickup. These relationships are not accidental. They are the geography of your mission field — the specific, particular, God-arranged proximity in which you have been placed to be a gospel presence.

The question is not how to carve out special time for evangelism. The question is how to be present in the time you already have with the people you already know. It is the difference between adding an evangelism program to an already full calendar and learning to see the calendar you already have through a mission lens.

Here are a few specific practices that have helped me build gospel rhythms into the ordinary structure of daily life:

*A weekly prayer list of five names.* Every Sunday, I write down five specific people who do not share my faith and pray for them by name throughout the week. Not a long, elaborate intercession — just their names, brought before God, with the simple request that He do in their lives what only He can do. This practice does two things simultaneously: it keeps the mission alive in my awareness, and it develops in me a genuine spiritual investment in these specific people that naturally changes how I show up in my interactions with them.

*Monthly intentional presence.* Once a month, I make a deliberate effort to spend meaningful time in a space where the people I am called to reach naturally gather — not as a programmed evangelism event, but as genuine presence in their world. A fire station visit. A recovery meeting. A neighborhood gathering. The coffee shop where the regulars know each other. I go to be present, not to perform. And I go consistently, over time, so that my presence is recognized and my relationship with the community has depth.

*The question I carry.* For years I have carried a simple question into every significant conversation: *what is this person actually hungry for?* Not as a technique, but as a genuine pastoral orientation. It keeps me listening rather than performing, attending to the actual person rather than the gospel opportunity they represent. And it consistently surfaces things that I would have missed if I had been focused on finding an opening rather than finding a person.

*Regular debrief with God.* At the end of each day — briefly, honestly, without performance — I spend a few minutes reviewing the day's interactions with the simple question: *where did I see You today, and where did I miss You?* This practice, done consistently over time, develops a sensitivity to the Spirit's activity in ordinary moments that is one of the most practical tools I know for recognizing divine appointments when they arrive.

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## **KEEPING YOUR OWN SOUL FED**

This is the section that pastoral humility requires me to include, because I have failed at it more than once and watched others fail at it in ways that produced consequences far beyond personal burnout.

You cannot give what you do not have. This is not a metaphor. It is a spiritual law as consistent and as consequential as the physical laws that govern the material world. The person who is pouring out without being poured into will empty. It is only a matter of time and volume.

The evangelical tendency to treat spiritual self-care as a form of selfishness — to valorize the person who gives until there is nothing left as the model of faithful service — is not only psychologically unsustainable. It is theologically mistaken. Jesus did not pour Himself out without drawing from the Source. He withdrew regularly to pray — *"But Jesus Himself would often slip away to the wilderness and pray"* — Luke 5:16 (NASB). Not occasionally. Not when the schedule allowed. *Often.* In the middle of a ministry that was producing more

demand than any human being could meet, He regularly, intentionally withdrew from the demand to be replenished by the Source.

If Jesus needed this, you need this. The question is whether you will arrange your life to include it, or whether you will wait until the emptiness forces the issue in ways that are considerably more difficult to recover from.

What does it mean, practically, to keep your soul fed while you are feeding others?

It means a prayer life that is not primarily oriented toward the needs of others. That has space — real, protected, unhurried space — for your own encounter with God. For the worship that reminds you who He is. For the confession that keeps the account current. For the silence that allows you to receive rather than perpetually transmit.

It means Scripture reading that is not always in service of something — not always preparation for a sermon, a conversation, a discipleship meeting. Reading that is for you. The Word that fed you before you were feeding anyone else.

It means community with people who know you as a person rather than a minister. Friends who ask about your soul and mean it. People who can tell when you are empty before you can, and who have the relational access to say so.

It means rest. Genuine, unproductive, guilt-free rest — which is not a concession to human weakness but the practice of a principle built into the structure of creation itself. The Sabbath is not a suggestion. It is a commandment, and the commandment carries an implicit theology: you are not the most important worker in the harvest field. The God who was at work before you arrived will be at work after you rest. Rest is an act of trust.

And it means honest attention to your own spiritual temperature. The practice of asking yourself, regularly and without self-deception, how you are actually doing — not how the ministry is going, but how your soul is. Whether the joy is

real or performed. Whether the love is genuine or effortful. Whether the fire is burning or the smoke machine is running.

The soul that is well-fed produces witness that is alive. The soul that is running on fumes produces witness that is going through the motions. Your own spiritual health is not a self-indulgent distraction from the mission. It is the most fundamental prerequisite for it.

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## **COMMUNITY EVANGELISM: WHY YOU DON'T HAVE TO DO THIS ALONE**

I want to challenge an assumption that runs through much of evangelical evangelism culture and has produced, I believe, unnecessary isolation and unnecessary burnout in countless Christians who were trying to be faithful.

The assumption is that evangelism is primarily an individual responsibility — that each Christian is personally responsible for the gospel witness in their sphere of influence, and that the measure of faithfulness is the individual's personal performance in this arena. This assumption is not entirely wrong. Personal responsibility is real. Your relationships are yours, and no one else can live your life or inhabit your particular web of connections.

But the assumption becomes problematic when it produces the solo witness model — the lone Christian deployed into the harvest field, responsible for the full spectrum of gospel engagement with the people in their life, without support, without collaboration, without the mutual reinforcement of a community doing the same work in proximity.

The New Testament model of witness is emphatically communal. Jesus sent the disciples out *two by two* — Mark 6:7 (NASB). Not solo. In pairs. With the support, accountability, and complementary gifting that partnership provides. The early church evangelized as a community — their witness was not merely the accumulated individual efforts of their members but the collective life of a community that was itself a demonstration of the gospel. "*By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.*" — John 13:35 (NASB). The community's internal love was itself a proclamation. The gospel

was visible not just in individual conversations but in the life of the body together.

What does community evangelism look like in practice? It looks like a small group that prays together for specific people by name. It looks like two friends who share a commitment to the same population — first responders, or recovering people, or the neighborhood around their church — and who show up together, reinforce each other, and debrief together after. It looks like a community that creates together the kind of hospitable, welcoming, genuinely warm environment that makes it easy to bring people into contact with the body — not as a recruitment mechanism, but as an extension of the table fellowship we discussed in Chapter Six.

It looks like Christians who talk to each other about the gospel conversations they are having — who share what is working and what isn't, who pray for each other's people, who celebrate each other's harvests and grieve each other's nos. Who treat the mission as a shared enterprise rather than a parallel set of individual performances.

You do not have to do this alone. In fact, you were never designed to. Find your people. Do this together. The harvest is larger than any one of you, and the laborers — Jesus said so explicitly — are too few. Which means the ones who are here need each other.

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## **THE PRAYER LIFE THAT FUELS IT ALL**

I want to close this chapter with the practice that is, in my experience, both the most consistently transformative and the most consistently undervalued element of sustained gospel witness: the prayer of intercession.

Intercession — the sustained, specific, by-name practice of bringing the people who do not yet know God into the presence of the God who knows and loves them — is not a preliminary step in the evangelism process. It is not the nice thing you do before the real work begins. It is itself the real work. It is participation in the most important thing happening in any person's life — the

sovereign, relentless, grace-driven pursuit of their soul by a God who refuses to stop coming after what is lost.

When you pray for a specific person by name — when you bring them before God not as an evangelism project but as a beloved human being whose life and whose eternal destiny you have laid before the One who holds both — you are doing something that no conversation, no argument, no relationship, no act of service can replicate. You are entering the spiritual dimension of their life in a way that bypasses every defense they have constructed against the gospel. You are agreeing with the purposes of God for them. You are, as Dutch Sheets described it, not wrestling with God for their soul but agreeing with God for what God already wants to do.

And here is what I have observed, consistently and without exception across years of intercessory practice for specific people: intercession changes the one who prays as much as it changes the circumstances being prayed over. The person you pray for by name, week after week, becomes someone you love differently. More specifically. More tenderly. With less agenda and more genuine investment in their actual life. The prayer produces a quality of love in the pray-er that the pray-er could not have manufactured on their own — because the pray-er is spending time in the presence of the God who loves this person with a love that is contagious.

You begin to see them the way God sees them. And seeing them that way changes everything about how you show up.

Here is a simple framework for intercessory prayer that I have used for years and commend to you without reservation:

*Pray for their awareness.* That God would break through the noise and busyness and distraction of their life and create moments of genuine spiritual awareness — the 3am silence, the beauty that exceeds its occasion, the question that surfaces unbidden and will not go away.

*Pray for their wounds.* That the places where religion or life or people have hurt them would be touched by the God who heals — that the scar tissue would soften, that the doors locked against Him would loosen.

*Pray for divine appointments.* That God would orchestrate the encounters, the conversations, the moments of intersection that are beyond your engineering but entirely within His sovereignty.

*Pray for yourself.* That you would be present, attentive, available — that when the moment comes, you will not miss it. That your love would be genuine and your courage would be real and your words would be His rather than yours.

*Pray the Scripture over them.* Take the promises of God — the verses about His desire that none should perish, about His ability to save to the uttermost, about the power of the gospel — and pray them specifically over this person's life. Let the Word of God shape the content of your intercession.

John Stott, whose global vision for the church was matched only by his pastoral depth, wrote that "*we must be global Christians with a global vision because our God is a global God.*" The harvest field is vast — it extends from your neighborhood to the ends of the earth — and the God who is pursuing it is the God of every nation, every culture, every language, every person. The prayer that fuels your personal witness connects you to that vast, cosmic, Spirit-driven enterprise of pursuit.

You are not a lone laborer in an indifferent field. You are a participant in the most significant movement in the history of the universe — the God of all things coming after the people He made for Himself. The prayer that sustains you connects you to the Source of that movement. It reminds you whose harvest this actually is. It replenishes what the work depletes. And it keeps the fire burning that no amount of technique or training can light on its own.

Stay in the game. Feed your soul. Find your community. Pray without ceasing. Love without agenda. Serve without calculation. Share without pressure.

And trust the God of the harvest to do what only He can do with the faithfulness of laborers who stayed.

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 **DUMMY DRILL #13**

*This drill is designed not for a single sitting but for the next thirty days. It is the most important drill in this book, because it is about building something that lasts rather than practicing something once.*

*PART ONE: Establish your prayer list.*

*Write down five names — five specific people in your life who do not share your faith. Put that list somewhere you will see it every morning. Commit to praying for those five people by name every day for thirty days. Not long prayers — honest ones. Specific ones. Prayers that bring the actual person, with their actual life and their actual wounds and their actual hunger, into the presence of the God who made them.*

*At the end of thirty days, note what has changed — in them, as far as you can observe, and in you. Pay particular attention to the second.*

*PART TWO: Audit your soul-feeding rhythms.*

*Honestly evaluate the current state of your own spiritual replenishment. Is your prayer life primarily oriented toward the needs of others, or does it include genuine space for your own encounter with God? Is your Scripture reading sustaining you personally, or has it become primarily instrumental? When did you last experience genuine, unhurried rest?*

*Identify one specific change you will make in the next week to improve the sustainability of your interior life. Not a comprehensive spiritual renovation — one change. Make it concrete. Put it in your calendar.*

*PART THREE: Find a partner.*

*Identify one other Christian in your life who shares your commitment to gospel witness and invite them into a simple, regular rhythm of shared prayer and accountability around the people you are both trying to reach. Monthly coffee.*

*Weekly texts. Whatever form fits your relationship and your schedule. Just — do it together rather than alone.*

*The harvest is plentiful. The laborers are few. And the few who are here were never meant to work in isolation.*

*Stay in the game. Together.*

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*"We must be global Christians with a global vision because our God is a global God." — John Stott*

*"Prayer is not preparation for the work. Prayer is the work." — Oswald Chambers*

*"The man who mobilizes the Christian church to pray will make the greatest contribution to world evangelization in history." — Andrew Murray*

*"You don't have to be the whole fire department. You just have to stay on the truck." — A ragamuffin chaplain who learned this the hard way*

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*Part Five begins on the next page. We are going deeper now — into the theology behind the witness, the tools that support it, and the foundation that holds it all together. For those of you who can't put this book down — this section is for you. Because understanding WHY you share changes everything about HOW you share. And the more deeply you understand the gospel, the more compellingly you will carry it.*

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### PART FIVE: ADVANCED DUMMY TRAINING

#### *Going Deeper for Those Who Can't Put This Down*

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## CHAPTER 14: THE THEOLOGY BEHIND THE CONVERSATION

### *Why You Share Determines How You Share*

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*"For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died." — 2 Corinthians 5:14 (NASB)*

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There is a question that sits underneath every gospel conversation you will ever have — not always articulated, not always conscious, but present and operative in the way that a foundation is present and operative beneath a building whether or not the people inside are thinking about it.

The question is: *why are you doing this?*

Not the surface answer — *because I want my friend to know Jesus, because the Great Commission says so, because I believe this is true and truth should be shared*. All of those are real answers and good ones. But underneath them, at the level where motivation actually forms and behavior actually originates, there is something more specific and more determinative. Something that shapes not just whether you share the gospel but how — the tone you carry into the conversation, the emotional content of the invitation you extend, the way you respond when the person says no, the quality of the love that sustains the witness over the long years of a relationship that has not yet produced visible fruit.

Your theology of evangelism is not an abstract intellectual exercise. It is the engine of your practice. And the engine determines not just the speed but the character of everything the vehicle produces.

This chapter is for the people who want to understand the engine — who are not content to practice a method without examining its foundations, who know that the deepest and most durable changes in behavior begin not with technique but with understanding. It is for the people who have been sharing the gospel and want to understand, more precisely and more completely, what they are actually participating in when they do.

What follows will range across some of the most contested and most consequential territory in Christian theology. I will try to be honest about the complexity without being paralyzed by it, and to be clear about what I believe without pretending that every serious Christian agrees with me on every point. The goal is not to produce theological uniformity. It is to produce theological depth — because the person who understands why they share, at the level where it actually matters, will share in a way that is qualitatively different from the person who has only been taught how.

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## **IS EVANGELISM OUR JOB OR GOD'S?**

The answer, as I promised in the outline, is yes.

This is not a dodge. It is the precise and honest answer to a question that has generated more heat than light in theological discussions of evangelism precisely because the question itself contains a false binary. It assumes that if evangelism is primarily God's work, human participation becomes unnecessary — and that if it is primarily human work, divine sovereignty becomes a convenient excuse for passivity. Both of those assumptions are wrong, and the biblical answer refuses to choose between them.

Let me be specific about what belongs to each party.

God's side of the ledger is extensive and is worth enumerating carefully, because most Christians dramatically underestimate it. The drawing of a person toward faith — the initial awakening of spiritual interest, the creation of hunger and longing that precedes any conscious seeking — belongs to God. *"No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him."* — John

6:44 (NASB). The regeneration that makes genuine faith possible — the new birth, the transformation of a spiritually dead person into a spiritually alive one — belongs to God. *"But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ."* — Ephesians 2:4-5 (NASB). The conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment that produces genuine repentance — this belongs to the Holy Spirit — John 16:8 (NASB). The faith itself — the very capacity to believe — is described by Paul as a gift: *"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God."* — Ephesians 2:8 (NASB).

When you look at that list carefully, what becomes apparent is that the most important things — the things without which no conversion can occur — are entirely outside the column of human responsibility. We cannot draw people to God. We cannot regenerate dead souls. We cannot produce the conviction that breaks a person open or the faith that lays hold of grace. All of that is God's work, done by God's power, on God's timeline.

What is on our side of the ledger is both smaller and more specific: availability, faithfulness, and love. We carry the message. We build the relationships. We tell the story. We pray. We serve. We remain present. We open our mouths when the Spirit prompts. We plant and we water. These are not trivial — they are the indispensable human contribution to the work. But they are the contribution of instruments, not authors. Of mail carriers, not post offices. Of messengers, not the message itself.

The practical implication of this division is enormous and liberating: you can engage in gospel witness with full effort and zero ultimate responsibility for outcomes. The weight of a person's eternal destiny is not on your shoulders. It never was. The God who is sovereign over salvation is far more invested in the salvation of the person you're talking to than you are — and far more capable of producing it. Your job is the faithful, loving, prayerful, available part. His job is everything that makes the faithful, loving, prayerful, available part actually work.

Paul Washer, not a man known for minimizing the human responsibility in evangelism, nonetheless said something that captures this beautifully: *"We are not called to make converts. We are called to preach the gospel. God makes converts."* That sentence does not eliminate the urgency of proclamation. It relocates the weight of outcomes where it actually belongs — and in doing so, it frees the proclaimer to share with the freedom and the love that the gospel itself describes, rather than the anxiety of a person who believes the whole enterprise depends on their performance.

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## **ELECTION, FREE WILL, AND WHY YOU SHOULD SHARE WITH EVERYONE ANYWAY**

I am going to spend time in this section that will frustrate readers who want simple answers and be inadequate for readers who want comprehensive ones, and I am making peace with both outcomes in advance. Because this is territory where the greatest theological minds in the history of the church have held positions in genuine and unresolved tension, and the honest thing is to engage that tension honestly rather than to pretend it resolves more cleanly than it does.

The doctrines of election and free will represent what is perhaps the most sustained and most significant theological debate in Protestant Christianity — the question of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human agency in the process of salvation. On one side stands the Reformed tradition, which insists that God's election of individuals for salvation is unconditional, prior to any human merit or decision, and entirely according to His sovereign will and purpose. On the other stands the Arminian tradition, which insists that God's election is conditioned on His foreknowledge of human faith — that human beings are genuinely free to accept or reject the gospel, and that God's sovereignty is exercised in a way that does not override that freedom.

Both traditions have serious biblical warrant. Both traditions have produced serious, committed, faithful Christians who have shared the gospel

compellingly and at great personal cost. And both traditions — this is the point I most want to make — have arrived at the same practical conclusion: share the gospel with everyone.

The Calvinist shares with everyone because God's elect are found among all peoples and all nations, and since you cannot identify them in advance, the faithful response is to proclaim indiscriminately and trust God to gather His own. The Arminian shares with everyone because every person has the genuine capacity to respond and the genuine freedom to do so, and the proclamation is the means God has appointed to give them that opportunity. Different theological architectures. Identical practical commission.

Here is what I want you to take from this section, regardless of where you land theologically: the doctrine of election, properly understood, is not a reason to share the gospel with less urgency. If anything, it is a reason to share with more confidence — because the sovereignty of God in salvation means that the ultimate outcome of your witness does not rest on the persuasiveness of your presentation. The elect will be gathered. The Spirit will work. The Word will accomplish what God sent it to accomplish. Your faithfulness in carrying the message is the instrument through which that sovereign purpose is fulfilled, not the substitute for it.

And the doctrine of free will, properly understood, is not a reason to share the gospel with manipulative pressure — as though the outcome depends entirely on your ability to produce a human decision. The freedom that makes genuine faith possible is also the freedom that makes genuine love possible, and any evangelism approach that bypasses or overrides human freedom in pursuit of a decision is not producing genuine faith. It is producing a counterfeit that will not hold.

Both doctrines, taken seriously, produce the same posture: faithful, loving, unhurried, non-coercive proclamation — offered to everyone, pressed on no one, entrusted to the God whose work it ultimately is.

That is the posture of grace. It is also the posture that produces the most genuine responses. Not coincidentally.

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## **THE HOLY SPIRIT'S ROLE: A FULLER PICTURE**

We touched on the Holy Spirit's job description in Chapter Three, but the theological depth of this chapter warrants a fuller account — because understanding precisely what the Spirit does in the process of salvation changes everything about how you understand your own role.

The Spirit's work in bringing a person to faith operates in three distinct movements, each of which is essential and none of which is within human power to replicate or replace.

**Conviction** is the first movement, and it is the work Jesus described most directly in John 16:8: *"And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment."* — (NASB). Conviction is not the same as guilt — though it may include guilt. It is the Spirit-produced awareness of one's actual condition before God: the recognition of sin as sin, of one's own moral bankruptcy, of the gap between what one is and what one was made to be. It is the internal counterpart of the external gospel message — the message landing not merely in the mind but in the conscience, where it does the work that produces genuine repentance rather than mere religious decision.

You cannot produce conviction. You can proclaim the truth that the Spirit uses to produce it. You can pray for it. You can love the person with the kind of genuine, non-judgmental love that creates the safety for the conviction to be felt and processed rather than defended against. But the conviction itself — the breaking open, the seeing oneself clearly, the undeniable sense of need — is His work, not yours.

**Regeneration** is the second movement, and it is the most mysterious and most foundational of the three. It is the new birth Jesus described to Nicodemus — the transformation of a spiritually dead person into a spiritually

alive one, accomplished by the Spirit working in ways that Jesus compared to the wind: *"The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."* — John 3:8 (NASB). Regeneration is not a decision the person makes. It is something done to them — or better, in them — by the sovereign action of the Holy Spirit. It is the supernatural implanting of spiritual life that makes genuine faith possible.

The practical implication is crucial: you are not trying to talk people into regeneration. You cannot. What you are doing — in all the relationship-building and listening and serving and sharing that this book has described — is creating the conditions in which the Spirit can do the work that only He can do. You are removing obstacles. You are demonstrating the reality of what the gospel describes. You are being a window through which light can enter. The light is His.

**Illumination** is the third movement — the Spirit's work of making the truth of the gospel not merely intellectually accessible but spiritually receivable. Paul describes this work in 1 Corinthians 2:14: *"But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised."* — (NASB). The person without the Spirit's illuminating work is not simply uninformed about the gospel. They are constitutionally unable to receive it as the life-giving truth it is — not because they are unusually stubborn, but because spiritual truth requires spiritual perception, and spiritual perception is the Spirit's gift.

This means that the most important moment in any gospel conversation is not the moment you say the right thing. It is the moment the Spirit illuminates what you said — when a truth that has been heard before is suddenly received differently, when words that have landed on the surface suddenly penetrate to the depths. You have no control over that moment. You can create the conditions for it. You can pray for it. You can get out of its way by being honest rather than performative, by loving genuinely rather than strategically, by trusting the Spirit to do what you cannot.

And then you can watch what He does with it. Which is, in my experience, one of the most consistently astonishing things available to a human being who stays in the room long enough to see it.

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## **WHY GRACE-CENTERED THEOLOGY PRODUCES THE MOST COMPELLING WITNESSES**

This is the section I most want every Christian who has ever shared the gospel from a place of anxiety or guilt or performance pressure to read and receive.

There is a direct and traceable relationship between a person's functional theology of grace — what they actually believe, at the level where behavior is formed, about how they stand before God — and the quality of their gospel witness. And the relationship is this: the more deeply a person has received the grace of the gospel for themselves, the more naturally, freely, and compellingly they communicate it to others.

Conversely, the person whose Christianity is primarily organized around performance — whose relationship with God is functionally maintained by their own effort and whose standing is experienced as contingent on their spiritual achievement — will share a gospel that has the smell of performance on it. Not always obviously, not always intentionally, but perceptibly. The person on the receiving end will sense, beneath the correct theological content of the message, a transactional energy — an implicit suggestion that what is being offered is not as free as the words claim, that there are conditions lurking in the fine print, that belonging requires a performance they may not be able to sustain.

Because that is the gospel the witness actually believes they themselves are living.

The ragamuffin — the person who has genuinely received grace in the full weight of what it means, who knows they are loved not because of what they have achieved but in spite of what they have not, who has been broken open by the extravagance of a forgiveness they did not earn and cannot lose — that

person shares the gospel differently. With the freedom of someone who is not defending a position but offering a gift. With the ease of someone whose security does not depend on the response they receive. With the love of someone who is genuinely, overflowingly grateful rather than dutifully compliant.

Paul anchors the entire enterprise of gospel witness in exactly this place when he writes that *"the love of Christ controls us."* — 2 Corinthians 5:14 (NASB). The word translated *controls* is *sunecho* in Greek — it means to compel, to press in on from all sides, to leave no room for a different direction. Paul is saying that the love of Christ is not one of several motivations he has for sharing the gospel. It is the motivation that occupies the entire motivational space. It crowds out the other options. It leaves him no room to not share — not because he is coerced by obligation but because he is propelled by love.

That is the witness the world cannot easily dismiss. Not the witness of the dutiful Christian fulfilling an obligation. The witness of the person who is genuinely, unmistakably in love with the Jesus they are describing — who cannot talk about Him without something coming alive in their voice that was not there a moment before. That quality of witness is not a technique. It is the fruit of a theology of grace that has been received personally and is being lived genuinely.

The deeper you go into grace — into the unearned, unconditional, extravagant, relentless love of a God who gave everything to get you back — the better evangelist you become. Not because you have more information. Because you have more love. And love, as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 13, is the thing that outlasts knowledge and surpasses eloquence and remains when everything else has faded.

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## **THE DANGER OF FEAR-BASED EVANGELISM**

I want to be direct about this because I have seen it do too much damage to be indirect.

There is a version of evangelism that operates primarily through fear — the manipulation of a person's terror of hell, the use of graphic depictions of divine punishment, the leveraging of existential dread as the primary motivating force toward a conversion decision. And I want to say clearly, with theological seriousness and pastoral conviction: this approach is not merely ineffective. It is a distortion of the gospel. And its long-term consequences in the lives of the people subjected to it are frequently catastrophic.

Let me be careful here to distinguish between two things that are sometimes confused.

The first is the honest, compassionate, appropriately-weighted acknowledgment of the reality and seriousness of judgment and its eternal consequences. This is not fear-based evangelism. This is faithful proclamation. The New Testament does not suppress the reality of judgment — Jesus spoke about it with a directness that makes many contemporary Christians uncomfortable. The seriousness of what is at stake is a legitimate and important part of the gospel message, and presenting it honestly is not manipulation. It is respect for the full scope of reality.

The second is the deliberate deployment of fear as the primary lever of conversion — the engineering of emotional states of terror, the graphic theatrical manipulation of imagery designed to produce a panic response, the implicit or explicit message that the person's primary motivation for faith should be the desperate avoidance of punishment. This is not the gospel. This is coercion dressed in theological clothing.

Here is why the distinction matters practically: genuine faith cannot be produced by fear alone. Fear can produce compliance. It can produce a decision made under duress. It can produce the words of a prayer recited by a person who is primarily trying to make the terror stop. But it cannot produce the surrender of the heart, the genuine turning of the will, the love that is the natural response to the love of God revealed in the gospel. *"We love, because He first loved us."* — 1 John 4:19 (NASB). The motivational sequence is love receiving love — not fear avoiding punishment.

The person who came to faith primarily through fear tends to carry that fear as the organizing emotion of their subsequent Christian life — and a faith organized primarily around fear tends to be legalistic, performance-anxious, and brittle. It tends to produce exactly the kind of religious overconfidence or religious paralysis that the actual gospel is designed to heal.

And for many people — particularly the church-wounded, the skeptical, the thoughtfully resistant — a fear-based presentation is the precise thing that confirms their worst suspicions about Christianity: that it is fundamentally about control, about the manipulation of vulnerable people through the exploitation of their deepest terrors, rather than about the genuinely astonishing love of a God who pursued them at enormous cost.

The antidote is not the suppression of the serious dimensions of the gospel. It is the recovery of the primary motivation that Paul identified — the love of Christ that controls us. The gospel that begins and ends with the love of God rather than the wrath of God — not because the wrath is not real, but because the love is the prior and primary reality from which the wrath derives its significance. God's wrath, in biblical theology, is the expression of His love for the good and His holy resistance to what destroys it. Wrath in the service of love is a very different thing from punishment as an end in itself.

Share the full gospel. Include the serious parts. But let the organizing center be where Paul put it: the love of Christ. The love that "*controls us*" — that so fills the motivational space that nothing else is driving the bus.

That is the gospel the world needs to hear. And that is the gospel the world will most readily receive.

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## **WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN AMBASSADOR**

Paul, in 2 Corinthians 5:20, describes the role of the Christian witness with a specific and illuminating image: "*Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*" — (NASB).

An ambassador. The word carries a specific set of meanings in the ancient world that are worth unpacking, because each of them illuminates something important about the nature of Christian witness.

An ambassador is a representative. They speak on behalf of another — not on their own authority, not with their own message, not in service of their own agenda. Everything they say and do in their official capacity is an expression of the one who sent them, and their effectiveness is measured not by the impressiveness of their personal performance but by the fidelity of their representation. The good ambassador disappears behind the message. The less the recipient is thinking about the ambassador and the more they are thinking about the one the ambassador represents, the more successful the mission has been.

The implication for gospel witness is direct: your job is to make Jesus visible, not yourself. The witness that draws attention to the cleverness of the messenger or the sophistication of the presentation is working against itself. The witness that is so transparent, so genuinely pointing away from itself toward the One it represents, that the person on the receiving end finds themselves thinking about Jesus rather than about you — that is the witness that fulfills the ambassador's role.

An ambassador carries authority that is not their own. They speak with the full weight of the sending nation behind them — not because of who they personally are, but because of who sent them. The smallest, most unimpressive ambassador of a powerful nation carries an authority in the receiving court that far exceeds their personal stature. In the same way, the most ordinary, unpolished, uncertain Christian witness carries an authority that is entirely disproportionate to their personal impressiveness — because they are carrying the message of the God of the universe, and that message is, as Paul said, "*the power of God for salvation.*" — Romans 1:16 (NASB). Your inadequacy as a messenger does not reduce the power of the message. It may, in fact, make the power of the message more visible — because when

extraordinary things happen through obviously ordinary people, the source of the extraordinary is harder to miss.

An ambassador does not have the authority to change the terms of the message. The ambassador who decides, on the basis of personal preference or the anticipated reception of the audience, to modify the terms of the treaty they are carrying has ceased to be an ambassador and become a freelancer. They no longer represent the one who sent them. They represent their own judgment about what the other party would find most acceptable. And the treaty they negotiate on those terms is not the treaty that was sent.

The Christian witness who adjusts the gospel — who removes the parts that provoke resistance, softens the parts that demand response, reframes the parts that require surrender — has stopped carrying the gospel and started carrying their own edited version of it. The motive may be compassionate. The result is a message that cannot do what the actual gospel does, because it is no longer the actual gospel.

Carry the message as it was given. With gentleness, with wisdom, with appropriate sensitivity to the person and the moment — yes. But with fidelity to the content that was entrusted to you, without unauthorized editorial revision.

And finally — an ambassador's presence in the receiving court is itself a statement. Simply being there, representing the sending nation, is a form of communication before a word is spoken. The Christian whose life is genuinely, visibly shaped by the gospel — whose presence in a room communicates something before they open their mouth — is already doing the work of an ambassador. The witness does not begin when the gospel conversation begins. It begins when you walk in.

Charles Spurgeon understood this at a depth that the brevity of the quotation almost conceals: *"God does not need our strength. He asks only for our availability."* Availability — the willingness to be present, to show up, to carry the message to the court to which you have been sent — is the entire scope of

the ambassador's contribution to the mission. The strength is God's. The strategy is God's. The outcome is God's.

Show up. Be faithful. Represent well.

That is the whole assignment. It is also, if you let yourself feel the weight of it, the most extraordinary privilege available to a human being.

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## THE LOVE THAT CONTROLS

I want to close this chapter by returning to the verse that anchors it, because I think it contains the most important single truth about the motivation of gospel witness available in the New Testament — and I want to make sure it has landed before we move on.

*"For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died."* — 2 Corinthians 5:14 (NASB).

Paul says the love of Christ *controls* him. Not motivates. Not encourages. *Controls* — that pressing, crowding, occupying-all-the-space word that leaves no room for a different organizing center. The love of Christ has moved into Paul's motivational house and taken up every room. There is no corner left for obligation, for fear, for the desire for religious achievement, for the performance anxiety that drives so much of what passes for evangelical witness. The love of Christ has displaced all of it.

And then he tells us what the love of Christ *is* — specifically, what aspect of it has produced this controlling, all-consuming, no-room-for-anything-else effect: *"one died for all, therefore all died."* The death of Christ, embraced in its full theological weight, has produced in Paul the recognition that the old life — the life organized around self, around performance, around the preservation of his own standing — died with Christ on the cross. He is a new creation — *"the old things passed away; behold, new things have come"* — 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NASB). And the new creation's organizing center is no longer self but the love of the One who died to produce it.

That is the theology behind the conversation. That is why Paul could not stop sharing the gospel — not because he was disciplined enough to keep doing a hard thing, but because the love that controlled him was not his own love for the gospel but the gospel's love pressing itself outward through him. He was a window. The light was not his.

The deepest answer to the question of why you share is not because you are supposed to. Not because you are afraid of consequences if you don't. Not because your church has an outreach program and you are a faithful participant. The deepest answer is the same one Paul gives: because you have been laid hold of by a love so vast, so unearned, so personally specific to your particular life and your particular need, that the only natural response — the response that requires no manufacture, no willpower, no technique — is to turn around and tell everyone you can find where you found it.

That is the theology that produces the witness that lasts.

That is the love that controls.

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 **DUMMY DRILL #14**

*This drill is theological and interior rather than practical and exterior — which is appropriate for the chapter it follows. It will take more time than most, but the time is worth it.*

*PART ONE: Examine your motivation.*

*Sit with this question honestly, without rushing to the flattering answer: What is the primary emotion that drives your gospel witness? Is it love — the genuine, overflowing, grateful love of a person who has been transformed by grace and cannot help wanting others to experience the same? Is it obligation — the sense of duty to a command, maintained by willpower rather than desire? Is it anxiety — the low-grade fear of what happens to the people you love if they don't believe, or of what God thinks of you if you don't share? Is it*

*guilt — the accumulated weight of the gap between what you know you should do and what you actually do?*

*Write down your honest answer. Then ask: what would it take for the love of Christ to become the controlling motivation — the one that occupies the whole space? What in your understanding of grace needs to go deeper for that to happen?*

*PART TWO: Revisit your own gospel.*

*Go back to Dummy Drill #1 from Chapter One — the paragraph you wrote about what the gospel has actually done in your life. Read it again. Then ask: has anything changed since you wrote it? Has the gospel gone deeper? Has grace become more real, more personal, more controlling in the time since this book began?*

*Write a second paragraph — not replacing the first, but extending it. What has the gospel done in your life in the time since you began reading this book? What has shifted? What has opened? What has the love of Christ been doing in the motivational basement of who you are?*

*PART THREE: Write your theology of witness in one paragraph.*

*Drawing on everything in this chapter — the division of labor between God and us, the role of the Spirit, the nature of the ambassador's calling, the love that controls — write a single paragraph that captures your understanding of why you share the gospel and what you are participating in when you do.*

*Keep it personal. Keep it honest. Keep it grounded in the actual gospel rather than the performance of it.*

*Then read it back to yourself before your next gospel conversation.*

*Let it be the foundation you stand on.*

*Let the love of Christ fill the space.*

*Everything else follows from that.*

*"God does not need our strength. He asks only for our availability." — Charles Spurgeon*

*"The gospel is not the door into a building. It is the ground on which the building stands." — J.I. Packer*

*"We are not diplomats but prophets, and our message is not a compromise but an ultimatum." — A.W. Tozer*

*"You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you." — John Bunyan (Because the gospel we received was given to people — us — who could never repay it. And the only appropriate response to that is to give it away the same way.)*

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*Chapter Fifteen is the final chapter before the conclusion. It is the most practical chapter in Part Five — a survey of the actual tools available to you for the actual conversations you will have. Because knowing what resources exist, and knowing which ones are genuinely useful versus which ones are primarily impressive to other Christians, is part of the wisdom this book has been trying to build. One more chapter. Then we send you out.*

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### CHAPTER 15: TOOLS FOR THE TOOLBOX

#### *Resources That Actually Help (and Some That Don't)*

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*"How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!"* —  
Romans 10:15b (NASB)

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I want to begin this chapter with a confession that I suspect a significant number of readers will recognize.

I have a shelf — a physical, actual shelf in my office — that contains approximately thirty books I have purchased over the years with the specific intention of giving them to people who were asking spiritual questions. Several of those books have been on that shelf for years. Some of them have never been opened, not because they are not good books, but because I purchased them in a moment of evangelical optimism about a specific person's readiness to receive them and then, upon reflection, realized that handing my skeptical coworker a four-hundred-page systematic theology was perhaps not the precisely calibrated next step the Spirit was indicating.

I also have, somewhere in a box in a closet, a collection of gospel tracts accumulated across two decades of church conferences and ministry training events — representing a range of design sensibilities from earnestly sincere to genuinely alarming, and a range of theological approaches from admirably clear to mildly bewildering. I have distributed approximately four of them in my entire ministry career. The rest have made a faithful witness primarily to the inside of the box.

This is not a chapter that is going to shame you for the shelf or the box. The impulse that produced both of them — the desire to be prepared, to have something to offer, to equip yourself with resources that can serve the people around you — is a good impulse. What this chapter is going to do is help you

curate that impulse with more precision, so that the tools you carry are the tools you will actually use, with the people who will actually benefit from them, in the ways that will actually help.

Because tools matter. The right resource at the right moment for the right person can be a genuine gift — a bridge between where they are and where the gospel is calling them. And the wrong resource at the wrong moment for the wrong person can communicate, in a single awkward handoff, that you have been running a program on them rather than offering them a friendship.

The wisdom is in knowing the difference.

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## **A WORD ABOUT TOOLS IN GENERAL**

Before we get to the specific resources, there is a principle about tools that governs everything in this chapter and that I want to name clearly.

A tool is only as good as the hand that wields it and the situation in which it is deployed. The most brilliant gospel presentation framework ever developed becomes a liability in the hands of someone who treats it as a script to be executed rather than a guide to be adapted. The most mediocre resource becomes a genuine gift when it is offered with genuine love, at the right moment, by someone whose relationship with the recipient has created the trust that allows it to be received.

This means that the question you should be asking about any tool is not primarily *is this a good resource?* but *is this the right resource for this specific person at this specific moment in their journey?* A book that was transformative for you may be completely wrong for your friend whose theological assumptions are entirely different from yours and who is three stages further back on the Engel Scale than you were when the book changed your life. A gospel presentation framework that works brilliantly with people who have no church background may create unnecessary obstacles for someone who grew up in church and has spent twenty years deconstructing everything they were handed there.

The tool serves the conversation. The conversation does not serve the tool.  
With that principle established, let us look at what is actually in the toolbox.

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## **GOSPEL PRESENTATION FRAMEWORKS: AN HONEST EVALUATION**

There are several well-developed frameworks for presenting the gospel content in a structured, accessible, reproducible way, and each of them has genuine strengths and genuine limitations. I want to give you an honest assessment of the major ones — not to dismiss any of them, but to help you understand which tool fits which situation.

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### **THE ROMANS ROAD**

The Romans Road is the oldest and most widely used of the structured gospel presentation tools, and its longevity is not accidental — it is built entirely from Scripture, it is theologically sound, and in the right hands and the right context, it is genuinely effective.

The basic route runs through five key passages in Paul's letter to the Romans: Romans 3:23 (*"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"*), Romans 6:23 (*"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord"*), Romans 5:8 (*"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us"*), Romans 10:9 (*"that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved"*), and Romans 10:13 (*"for 'Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved'"*). — all NASB.

The Romans Road presents the core gospel content clearly and in a logical sequence that moves from human need through divine provision to human response. It is the gospel, faithfully presented.

Its limitations are also real. As a tool designed to be walked through systematically with a Bible in hand, it works best with people who have some

degree of biblical familiarity and respect for Scripture as an authority — people who will receive *"the Bible says"* as a meaningful statement rather than a non-sequitur. With people who have no Bible framework, or who are in an active season of questioning Scripture's reliability, the Romans Road can feel like trying to prove a conclusion by citing the book whose authority is precisely what is in question.

It also tends, in the hands of less experienced practitioners, to produce a certain mechanical quality — a sense of being walked through a presentation rather than invited into a conversation. The antidote is not to abandon the framework but to use it as a skeleton rather than a script — to know the passages well enough that they surface organically in a genuine conversation rather than being read sequentially from a highlighted Bible in a way that signals *I am now deploying a technique*.

*Best for:* People with some degree of biblical literacy, people in genuine crisis who need a clear and direct presentation of the gospel content, and as a personal memory aid for the Christian who wants a scriptural backbone for their gospel conversations.

*Less effective for:* Committed skeptics, post-church individuals with complicated Bible relationships, and intellectual seekers who need engagement with their specific questions before they are ready for a systematic presentation.

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## **THE BRIDGE ILLUSTRATION**

The Bridge — developed primarily through the ministries of Campus Crusade for Christ and the Navigators — is a visual illustration of the gospel that uses the image of a chasm between humanity and God, bridged by the cross of Christ. It can be drawn on a napkin or a whiteboard in about two minutes and communicates the core gospel content with remarkable visual clarity.

Its strength is its simplicity and its visual quality. For people who are visually oriented, who think in images rather than propositions, and who need to see

the structure of the gospel's logic rather than just hear it, the Bridge can be genuinely illuminating. The image of the chasm — the gap between what humanity is and what God is, and the impossibility of bridging it from the human side — is both biblically accurate and experientially resonant for a wide range of people.

Its limitations are similar to the Romans Road in some respects — it can become mechanical in the wrong hands — but it has an additional one: the visual emphasis on the gap and the bridge can, if not handled carefully, produce a gospel presentation that feels more like an engineering solution to a structural problem than an encounter with a Person who loves you. The bridge is the right metaphor for the cross as far as it goes. But bridges are impersonal. The God who spans the gap in the gospel is not an impersonal mechanism — He is a Father running toward a prodigal, a shepherd leaving ninety-nine to find one, a woman turning the house upside down for a single lost coin. The Bridge illustration needs the warmth of personal narrative to do its full work.

*Best for:* Visual learners, people who are genuinely trying to understand the logical structure of the gospel, informal settings where drawing on something creates engagement, and as a supplement to a personal testimony rather than as a standalone presentation.

*Less effective for:* People who find visual aids in conversation patronizing, deeply relational contexts where the drawing introduces an unnecessary formal register, and people whose primary obstacle to faith is not logical but emotional.

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## **TWO WAYS TO LIVE**

Developed by Phillip Jensen and the Matthias Media team in Australia, Two Ways to Live is a six-point gospel outline that begins with the creation narrative — God the good Creator and King, humanity created to live under His rule — and moves through the Fall, God's response in sending His Son, the

death and resurrection of Jesus, the human response required, and the two ways of living that remain: continuing in rebellion or submitting to God's rule and receiving His forgiveness.

*Two Ways to Live* has several significant strengths. It begins with God's sovereignty and humanity's created purpose rather than with human sinfulness — which means the presentation of sin lands against a backdrop of what was lost rather than as the opening salvo of an accusation. It takes the storyline of Scripture seriously as the framework for the gospel, which produces a more complete and more narratively coherent presentation than approaches that jump straight to the cross without the context that makes the cross meaningful. And it is honest about the ongoing nature of the two-ways choice — that coming to faith is not a single moment of religious transaction but a fundamental reorientation of one's entire life.

Its limitations are primarily contextual — it is a substantial presentation that works best when the person is ready for a full gospel explanation rather than a brief gospel touchpoint. In a fifteen-minute conversation, it can feel rushed. In a longer, unhurried conversation with someone who is genuinely seeking and ready to engage with the full scope of the gospel's claims, it is excellent.

*Best for:* Seekers who are ready for a comprehensive gospel engagement, people who are already asking significant questions about meaning and purpose and need a framework that addresses the whole human story, and as a personal study tool for Christians who want to deepen their own understanding of the gospel's narrative structure.

*Less effective for:* Casual gospel touchpoints in brief conversations, people in acute crisis who need a more immediate and emotionally present response, and contexts where the formal six-point structure feels out of place.

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## **THE THREE CIRCLES**

Developed by Jimmy Scroggins at Family Church in West Palm Beach, the Three Circles is a gospel presentation that can be drawn in thirty seconds on

any available surface and is perhaps the most naturally conversational of all the visual frameworks. It begins with God's design — a circle representing the life we were made for — moves to the brokenness that results from sin, shows the human attempts to escape brokenness through recovery attempts that bring us back to brokenness rather than to design, and then introduces the gospel — the person and work of Jesus — as the path from brokenness back to God's design, with a clear invitation to repent, believe, and pursue.

The Three Circles' greatest strength is its entry point. Beginning with *God's design* rather than with *your sinfulness* creates an immediate resonance with the universal human experience of feeling that life should be more than it is — the intuition that something is broken and that there is something better to be recovered. This is a felt need rather than an imposed category, which means the presentation begins with identification rather than accusation, and the person on the receiving end is nodding before the cross has been introduced.

It is also genuinely usable in organic conversation — the drawing can emerge naturally on a napkin at coffee without creating the formal register that more elaborate presentations sometimes produce.

Its limitation is that its brevity and accessibility, which are genuine strengths, can also result in a gospel presentation that moves too quickly past the depth of both the human problem and the divine solution if the person presenting it is not careful to fill in the content that the simple visual framework necessarily abbreviates.

*Best for:* Organic, relational conversations with people at various stages of spiritual interest, visual learners, people whose primary felt need is brokenness and longing rather than guilt and judgment, and as a first gospel touchpoint that opens a larger conversation.

*Less effective for:* People who find drawing in conversation patronizing, intellectual contexts where the visual simplicity may undercut the seriousness of engagement, and situations where a longer, more substantive presentation is both appropriate and possible.

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## **THE HONEST OVERALL ASSESSMENT**

Here is what I want you to take from this section: all of these tools have genuine value, and none of them are the gospel. They are maps, not the territory. They are frameworks for organizing gospel content, not substitutes for the genuine, personal, Spirit-empowered encounter that only God can produce.

The most important thing about any gospel presentation framework is not which one you choose but whether you know it well enough to use it conversationally rather than mechanically — whether it has become part of your thinking rather than a script you execute. A framework you know deeply and use flexibly is infinitely more powerful than a framework you know perfectly and use rigidly.

Learn one. Know it well. Adapt it freely. And always, always let it serve the conversation rather than drive it.

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## **BOOKS TO PUT IN PEOPLE'S HANDS**

A well-chosen book, offered at the right moment in a spiritual conversation, can do work that no single conversation can do — because it goes home with the person, engages them in the privacy of their own mind, can be read and reread and argued with and returned to. A book is a gospel conversation that continues after you have left the room.

The key is matching the book to the person's actual stage of spiritual interest — because a book that would be transformative for a person who is seriously seeking can be completely wrong for a person who is not yet convinced that the questions are worth asking.

Here is a practical guide organized by where the person is in their journey:

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## **FOR THE SPIRITUALLY INDIFFERENT OR EARLY CURIOUS:**

These people need books that raise the questions rather than answer them — books that are engaging enough to hold a non-religious reader and thoughtful enough to create the kind of restlessness that turns indifference into interest.

*The Question That Never Goes Away* by Philip Yancey — Yancey is one of the most gifted writers in contemporary Christian publishing precisely because he does not write for people who already believe. He writes for the doubting, the questioning, and the wounded, and his work meets them where they are without condescension.

*Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis — This remains, nearly seventy years after its publication, one of the most effective pieces of pre-evangelism and evangelism literature available in the English language. Lewis writes as a former atheist who came to faith through a process of genuine intellectual reckoning, and his argument for Christianity is the argument of a person who has genuinely considered the alternative. For the intellectually oriented, spiritually curious person, there is very little that competes with it.

*The Reason for God* by Tim Keller — Written specifically for the thoughtful urban skeptic, Keller engages the most common intellectual objections to Christianity with rigorous honesty and genuine respect for the people raising them. For the person who has real questions and wants to know whether serious engagement is possible, this book communicates that it is.

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## **FOR THE GENUINE SEEKER:**

These people are already asking the serious questions. They need books that take the questions seriously and move toward genuine answers.

*Simply Jesus* by N.T. Wright — Wright is one of the most significant New Testament scholars of his generation, and this book makes his scholarship accessible to a general reader while presenting the person and significance of

Jesus with a freshness and depth that many Christians find as transformative as the seekers it is written for.

*The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel — Written by a former atheist journalist who investigated the historical claims of Christianity with the tools of his trade, this book engages the evidential questions about the resurrection and the reliability of the New Testament with a journalistic rigor that resonates specifically with people for whom historical evidence is the primary currency of persuasion.

*Surprised by Hope* by N.T. Wright — For the person whose spiritual questions center on death, meaning, and what lies beyond, this book addresses the resurrection — its historical reality and its implications — with a depth and a hope that is unlike anything else in the genre.

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### **FOR THE CHURCH-WOUNDED:**

These people need books that acknowledge the wound before they offer the remedy — books written by people who understand what it is to be hurt by religion and have found a way back to the real thing without pretending the hurt did not happen.

*The Ragamuffin Gospel* by Brennan Manning — This is the book I have given away more times than any other in my ministry, and it has opened more doors in church-wounded people than anything else in my library. Manning writes as someone who has been to the bottom and has encountered a grace there that the respectable Christian institution had not shown him. For the person who was told they were not enough, this book says something different.

*What's So Amazing About Grace?* by Philip Yancey — Yancey's exploration of grace as the most radical and least practiced element of the Christian message is both a healing book for the church-wounded and a challenging book for everyone else. It is honest about the church's failures in a way that earns the right to make the case for the gospel.

*Searching for Sunday* by Rachel Held Evans — For the person who loved the church and was hurt by it and is trying to figure out whether there is anything worth going back to, Evans' memoir of leaving and returning to faith engages the complexity of that experience with unusual honesty and unusual grace.

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### **FOR THE INTELLECTUAL SKEPTIC:**

These people need books that do not condescend — that engage their actual objections with intellectual seriousness and do not pretend that faith requires the suspension of critical thinking.

*God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* by Christopher Hitchens — I include this not as a book to give away but as a book to read yourself.

Understanding the best case against the faith you hold is part of the intellectual preparation that allows you to engage seriously with the skeptics in your life. Know what the best critics actually say.

*Surprised by Faith* by Don Page — Written by a physicist who was a committed atheist before becoming a Christian, this book addresses the science-faith interface from the inside of both worldviews and offers a perspective that is genuinely credible to the scientific mind.

*Making Sense of God* by Tim Keller — A companion and precursor to *The Reason for God*, this book addresses the more fundamental question of why religion and faith matter at all in a secular age — engaging the secular person on their own terms before making the case for Christianity specifically.

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### **APPS, PODCASTS, AND DIGITAL RESOURCES**

The digital landscape for spiritual exploration has changed dramatically in the past decade, and for a significant portion of the population — particularly younger generations who do their most serious thinking through screens and earbuds rather than books — these resources represent the most natural access point to gospel content.

A few that deserve specific mention:

*The Bible App (YouVersion)* — For the new believer or the curious seeker who is exploring Scripture for the first time, YouVersion is an extraordinarily accessible entry point. Its reading plans, audio options, and multiple translation availability make Scripture genuinely approachable for people who find the physical Bible intimidating. For a new believer, setting up a reading plan together — walking them through the app, choosing a starting point, committing to the same plan simultaneously so you can discuss it — is a practical and relational way to facilitate early Scripture engagement.

*The Gospels in a year — any structured reading plan* — The discipline of a structured reading plan is one of the most practically useful gifts you can offer a new or curious person. It removes the intimidating open-endedness of "*you should read the Bible*" and replaces it with a specific, manageable, daily commitment. Do it alongside them when possible.

*Podcasts for the skeptical and seeking:* Tim Keller's podcast and sermon archive at Gospel in Life. NT Wright Online. The Liturgists for the deconstructing and church-wounded. Revisionist History by Malcolm Gladwell — not Christian content, but exceptional at producing the kind of restless, questioning, assumption-challenging thinking that primes people for genuine gospel encounter.

*RightNow Media* — Often called the "Netflix of Christian resources," this platform contains an enormous range of video content from Bible studies to documentary-quality teaching series. Many churches provide access to their congregants, and some provide guest access for people exploring faith. For the visual learner who is genuinely seeking, a well-chosen short series — *The Story of God* by Louie Giglio, for instance — can provide gospel content in a format that is both accessible and engaging.

*Alpha* — The Alpha Course, available both as an in-person program and through digital content, is one of the most widely used and most consistently effective resources for people who are asking spiritual questions and are

ready for a structured exploration. Its genius is its combination of content, conversation, and community — it is not merely a lecture series but a shared experience that creates genuine relationship alongside genuine exploration. If your church runs Alpha, it is worth knowing well and referring people to intentionally.

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## **FILM, ART, AND STORY AS PRE-EVANGELISM**

This is the section I am most personally enthusiastic about, and I want to explain why before I get to the specifics.

Pre-evangelism is the work of preparing the soil before the seed is planted — creating the conditions in which the spiritual questions can surface, the hunger can be acknowledged, the assumptions that keep people from taking the gospel seriously can be examined. And in contemporary Western culture, one of the most effective pre-evangelism tools available is the one the culture is already consuming voraciously: story.

Film, literature, and art do something that direct gospel proclamation often cannot — they engage people's imaginations before their defenses engage. They create identification with characters who are grappling with exactly the questions the gospel speaks to — meaning, suffering, love, death, redemption, the possibility of grace — without the social alarm bells that sometimes activate when a person realizes they are being evangelized. The best stories sneak past the drawbridge and plant something in the imagination that the explicit gospel presentation can later build on.

C.S. Lewis understood this instinctively and built his entire pre-evangelism strategy around it — the Narnia Chronicles were designed precisely to create in children (and adults) an imaginative love for the *kind of thing* that Christianity is before they encountered Christianity explicitly. He wrote that he wanted to "*steal past those watchful dragons*" that guarded the heart against direct religious assault by approaching from the direction of story and imagination.

You do not need to be C.S. Lewis to use this approach. You need to know what your friend is watching, reading, and listening to — and to have enough cultural literacy to meet them there.

Some specific films that have served as natural bridges to gospel conversations in my experience and observation:

*Schindler's List* — The question of what produces the capacity for radical grace toward the undeserving, in the midst of systematic evil, is a gospel question in disguise. Schindler's transformation is a story about the mystery of conscience and the inexplicable overflow of generosity, and it raises questions that the gospel is uniquely positioned to address.

*The Shawshank Redemption* — Hope in the context of unjust suffering. The friendship that sustains. The possibility of a freedom that the prison cannot ultimately contain. This is a gospel-adjacent story that has opened more conversations about faith than many explicitly Christian films.

*Les Misérables* (either the film or the stage production) — This is perhaps the most overtly gospel-structured story in the Western secular canon — the confrontation between grace and law, the transformation of a man by an act of undeserved mercy, the pursuit of redemption. Victor Hugo wrote a gospel illustration and called it a novel, and the conversation it opens about grace and justice and what changes a human being is a direct bridge to the actual gospel.

*A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* — The story of Fred Rogers, and specifically of his patient, grace-saturated engagement with a cynical journalist's wounds, is one of the most winsome portrayals of Christlike love available in contemporary film. For the church-wounded or the hardened skeptic, watching someone be loved without conditions — and watching what it does to them — is pre-evangelism at its most gentle and most powerful.

In literature: *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoevsky raises the problem of evil and the possibility of faith with a depth that no apologetics textbook matches. *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson is the most honest and most beautiful portrayal

of Christian faith I have encountered in contemporary fiction. *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy raises the question of what sustains love and goodness in the absence of any rational basis for them — and the answer the story implies is more theological than McCarthy may have intended.

In music: The tradition of what might be called *secular sacred* — music that deals with transcendence, grief, longing, and the possibility of grace outside explicitly religious frameworks — is enormous and varied. Johnny Cash. U2. Sufjan Stevens on the gospel-adjacent end. Nick Cave. Leonard Cohen. These are artists whose work raises the questions the gospel answers, and conversation about their work can be a natural bridge to the questions themselves.

The principle is simple: pay attention to what moves people. Art that moves people is almost always touching something true — some dimension of the human condition that the maker and the receiver both recognize as real. And the gospel speaks to every true thing. Meeting people in what moves them is meeting them in the vicinity of what they already know to be real — and from there, the distance to the gospel is shorter than it appears.

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## **USING YOUR CHURCH'S RESOURCES WITHOUT MAKING PEOPLE FEEL LIKE A PROJECT**

This is a practical wisdom section, because the resources available through your local church — events, programs, community spaces, pastoral staff — are potentially enormous assets in gospel witness and are frequently deployed in ways that undermine rather than support the relational witness you have been building.

The central mistake is using church resources as a substitute for relationship rather than as an extension of it. Inviting a friend to a church event before the relationship has the depth to support the invitation communicates, however unintentionally, that the friendship was a funnel rather than a friendship — that the goal was always to get them to church, and the relationship was the

mechanism. People sense this. It closes doors that the preceding relationship had opened.

The alternative is to use church resources as natural extensions of a relationship that already has genuine depth — invitations that arise organically from the conversation you have been having rather than as a programmatic next step you have been working toward.

Some specific guidance:

*Invite people to things that are genuinely for them, not primarily for you.* An invitation to a Sunday morning service in the first stages of a gospel conversation is often premature and can feel like a sales pitch for institutional membership. An invitation to a community service project, a neighborhood gathering, a shared meal — something that demonstrates the community's genuine care for the world outside its walls — is often a better first bridge.

*Be specific about what they are being invited to.* "You should come to church sometime" is not an invitation. It is a vague gesture in the direction of an institution. "We are doing a dinner for the neighborhood next Saturday, and I would really love to have you there — the food is good and the people are genuine" is an invitation. Specificity communicates seriousness and reduces the anxiety that a vague institutional invitation can produce.

*Go with them.* Never send a person to a church event alone. The most powerful thing about a personal invitation is the presence of the inviter alongside the invitee — the embodied communication that you are not redirecting them to an institution for your own convenience but genuinely accompanying them into a community where you have a stake in their experience.

*Debrief afterward.* Ask what they thought. Ask what was confusing, what resonated, what raised questions. Create the space for an honest reaction that does not require them to be politely appreciative. Their honest reaction is valuable information about where they are and what the next faithful step looks like.

*Protect the relationship from the institution.* If your friend has a bad experience at a church event — is spoken to insensitively, encounters something that activates their existing wounds, is made to feel like a recruitment target — address it directly and compassionately. Do not defend the institution at the expense of the relationship. The relationship is the gospel vehicle. Protect it.

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## **CREATING A CURIOSITY LIBRARY**

The concept of a curiosity library is simple and practical, and I want to close this chapter with it because it is one of the most useful tools I know for the Christian who wants to be consistently prepared to offer the right resource to the right person at the right moment.

A curiosity library is a small, curated collection of resources — books, films, podcasts, links — organized by the type of person and the type of question, that you can draw from quickly and confidently when the moment arrives. It is not a comprehensive theological library. It is a thoughtful, well-chosen set of tools that you know well enough to recommend with genuine personal investment rather than generic spiritual obligation.

Here is how to build one:

*Start with what has actually helped you.* The book that changed your own thinking about something. The film that opened a conversation you did not expect. The podcast that gave you language for something you had been trying to articulate. Resources you have personally encountered carry a credibility in the recommending that resources you have only heard are good cannot match.

*Organize by person type, not by theological category.* Your curiosity library should have a section for the church-wounded, the intellectual skeptic, the genuinely seeking, the spiritually indifferent, the recovering, the grieving. When a person surfaces in your life who fits one of those categories, you want

to be able to reach for the right resource without having to think too hard about it in the moment.

*Keep it small enough to be curated.* Twenty well-chosen resources you know intimately are worth more than two hundred resources you have collected without engaging. The curiosity library is not a comprehensive database. It is a set of genuine personal recommendations that you can offer with the confidence of someone who has been helped by what they are offering.

*Update it regularly.* The cultural and literary landscape changes, and the resources that connect with people's questions in one decade may feel dated in another. Pay attention to what is resonating with the people around you — what they are reading, watching, listening to — and allow that to inform what you add.

*And remember* — the most important item in any curiosity library is not on the shelf. It is the relationship you have built with the person you are handing the resource to. A mediocre book offered within a genuine relationship will do more gospel work than an excellent book offered without one. The resource is the extension of the relationship. The relationship is always the primary tool.

Paul's benediction over the feet of those who carry the good news — "*How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!*" — Romans 10:15b (NASB) — was not written about the eloquent or the highly resourced or the theologically sophisticated. It was written about ordinary people making the ordinary journey from where they were to where someone else needed to hear something. The feet do not need to be beautiful. They need to move. They need to go. They need to carry the message to the person who needs it, in whatever form that person can receive it, with whatever tools are genuinely useful in that specific moment.

Your job is not to have the perfect library or the perfect framework or the perfect set of resources. Your job is to know the gospel, love the person, and bring the best of what you have to the meeting point between the two.

Beautiful feet. Moving in the right direction.

That is always enough.

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### **DUMMY DRILL #15**

*This drill is a building exercise — the construction of your personal curiosity library. Set aside two hours and work through it completely.*

*PART ONE: Audit what you already have.*

*Go to your bookshelf — physical or digital — and identify every resource you own that has been genuinely helpful in your own spiritual formation or that you have found useful in gospel conversations. Make a list. Include books, films, podcasts, websites, apps — anything.*

*Now evaluate each item on the list with these questions: Do I know this well enough to recommend it personally? Is it accessible to someone without significant Christian background? Does it address genuine questions that the people in my life are actually asking?*

*Keep the items that pass. Set aside the ones that don't.*

*PART TWO: Identify the gaps.*

*Looking at the categories we covered in this chapter — spiritually indifferent, genuine seeker, church-wounded, intellectual skeptic — which categories are well-served by your current collection? Which ones have nothing in them?*

*For the empty categories, identify one resource in each that you will acquire and engage with in the next thirty days. Not add to the shelf — actually read, watch, or listen to, so that you can recommend it with genuine personal investment.*

*PART THREE: Create the actual library.*

*Compile your curated resources into a simple, organized list — whatever format works for you. By person type. With a one-sentence note about why you are recommending it and for whom it is most appropriate.*

*Put it somewhere you can access it quickly — your phone, a note on your desk. The point is availability in the moment, not impressive organization in the abstract.*

*PART FOUR: Give something away.*

*Identify one person in your life right now who is at a specific stage of spiritual interest and who would benefit from one specific resource in your library. Give it to them this week. Not with pressure. Not with an agenda. With a simple, honest: "I thought of you when I read this. I think you'd find it interesting. No obligation."*

*Then let it go. And pray.*

*The feet move. The message travels. The rest belongs to the God who sends the message and receives the feet.*

*How beautiful they are.*

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*"How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!" — Romans 10:15b (NASB)*

*"Books are the quietest and most constant of friends; they are the most accessible and wisest of counselors, and the most patient of teachers." — Charles W. Eliot (And in the hands of the gospel-bearer, they are sometimes the most powerful of missionaries.)*

*"A book is a gift you can open again and again." — Garrison Keillor (So is the gospel. Which is what makes giving one away feel so much like giving the other.)*

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*One chapter remains before the conclusion. Actually — no. We have arrived. The conclusion is next. And the conclusion is not the end of the book. It is the beginning of everything the book was trying to get you to do. Go. Love. Listen.*

*Speak. Trust. Repeat. The harvest is plentiful. Your feet are beautiful. The God who sends is faithful. Let's finish well.*

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### CONCLUSION: GO BE THE GOSPEL BEFORE YOU TELL IT

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*"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." — Acts 1:8 (NASB)*

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We started this book on a back porch somewhere, with a cup of coffee going cold and the weight of a question you had been avoiding longer than you wanted to admit.

*How do I do this?* How do I tell the people I love about the thing that has changed everything for me, without sounding like a religious infomercial or a walking guilt trip or one of those people — the ones you cross the street to avoid at neighborhood gatherings because you know what's coming and you'd rather not?

We have covered a lot of ground since that back porch. We have talked about what the gospel actually is and why your own brokenness is not an obstacle but an asset. We have talked about listening before speaking and building bridges before crossing them. We have talked about the art of the conversation and the handling of the hard questions and the contextual wisdom that allows one gospel to find its way into a thousand different lives. We have talked about what happens when they say yes, and the harder and longer work of continuing to love when they say no. We have talked about the theology beneath the practice and the tools that serve it and the prayer that fuels it all.

That is a lot of pages for what is, at its core, a very simple thing.

One beggar. Another beggar. Bread.

Let me close with that simplicity.

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## YOU DON'T HAVE TO HAVE IT ALL TOGETHER

I want to say this one more time, at the end, because I know what happens between the reading of a book and the living of its content. I know the gap that opens between the inspiration of the final chapter and the Tuesday morning when you are standing in the break room with your coworker who just said something that opened a door and your mouth is dry and your mind is doing that thing where it goes completely blank and every single thing you just spent fifteen chapters reading has apparently vacated the premises.

You do not have to have it all together to tell people about the One who holds it all together.

This is not a motivational slogan. It is a precise theological statement about the nature of the God you are representing and the nature of the gospel you are carrying. The gospel is not a product that requires a high-functioning representative. It is a message that is most credibly carried by people who know, from the inside out, that they needed it — and who have not yet pretended otherwise. The cracks in the vessel are not a problem. They are, as Leonard Cohen wrote in a different context but with the same essential truth, how the light gets in.

The disciples Jesus sent from the upper room in Acts 1 were not polished. They were frightened. They were confused. They had spent the last ten days in a locked room trying to process the most disorienting sequence of events in human history — crucifixion, resurrection, forty days of resurrection appearances, and then ascension — and what Jesus left them with was not a comprehensive training program or a detailed strategic plan. He left them with a promise and a commission.

The promise: *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you."* — Acts 1:8 (NASB). Not might receive. Will receive. The power is not generated by the disciples. It is given. It arrives with the Spirit, and the Spirit

arrives on schedule, independent of the readiness of the people He is arriving to inhabit.

The commission: *"You shall be My witnesses."* — Acts 1:8 (NASB). Not — you shall perform evangelism. Not — you shall execute a gospel presentation strategy. Witnesses. The word that describes people who simply report what they have seen, what they have heard, what they have experienced firsthand. You cannot be an ineffective witness to your own experience. You can only tell it or not tell it. And the disciples, whatever their considerable failings and ongoing confusions, told it. They told it in Jerusalem and they told it in Judea and they told it in Samaria and they told it to the ends of the earth, and two thousand years later you are reading a book about it in a world that would not exist in anything like its current form if they had not.

They did not have it all together. They changed the world anyway.

You do not have it all together either. Neither do I. Neither does anyone who has ever carried this gospel with genuine honesty about their own condition.

Good. Go anyway.

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## **THE RAGAMUFFIN REMINDER**

Brennan Manning, the patron saint of this book and of the particular approach to faith and witness it has been trying to describe, told a story near the end of his life about a moment of profound clarity that came to him in the most unlikely of places — a recovery meeting in a church basement, surrounded by people whose lives were as comprehensively broken as his own had been, hearing a man who had been sober for thirty years describe what had kept him going in the hard years.

The man said: *"I don't understand grace. I have never understood it. But I have learned to stand underneath it."*

Manning said that sentence broke something open in him that years of theology had not touched. Not understanding grace. Standing underneath it.

That is the ragamuffin posture. Not comprehension — we do not, in this life, comprehend what it means that the God of the universe looked at the full inventory of our failure and chose, at incalculable cost to Himself, to pay for it. That comprehension exceeds the capacity of any finite mind. But we can stand underneath it. We can let it cover us. We can receive it with both hands, the hand of our sin and the hand of His grace, and we can carry it to the people around us not as something we have mastered but as something that has, mercifully and inexplicably, covered us.

God uses cracked vessels because that is all He has to work with. This is not a concession to human inadequacy. It is the entire theology of the Incarnation — the God who entered humanity in the form of a homeless rabbi in an occupied territory, who was born in a barn and died as a criminal and chose fishermen and tax collectors and reformed prostitutes as the primary vehicles of His message. The cracked vessel is not the fallback option. It is the design. Because a cracked vessel makes the contents visible in a way that a seamless, perfect container cannot.

When people see the gospel functioning in a life that is visibly, honestly, unashamedly in process — a life that does not pretend to have arrived, that acknowledges its own need, that carries joy and peace that seem genuinely disproportionate to the circumstances — they see something they cannot explain away. They see the light coming through the crack, and they want to know where the light is coming from.

That is your witness. Not your achievement. Your availability to be the cracked vessel through which the light of the gospel makes itself visible.

Stand underneath it. Let it cover you. Let the cracks show. And then go.

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## **YOUR JERUSALEM**

Jesus told the disciples that their witness would begin in Jerusalem — which is to say, it would begin where they already were. Not in some distant and exotic mission field that required a major life disruption to access. Not in the most

spiritually sophisticated context or the most strategically significant city or the most demographically promising population segment. In Jerusalem. The city they were already in. The streets they already knew. The people who already had faces and names and histories in their memory.

Your Jerusalem is your neighborhood. Your workplace. Your family. Your regular barista and your next-door neighbor and the person you went to high school with who appeared in your newsfeed last week and is clearly going through something. The specific, particular, God-arranged geography of your ordinary life.

This is, simultaneously, the most encouraging and the most convicting dimension of the Great Commission. Encouraging, because it means you do not need to go anywhere unusual or develop any special access or wait for a more strategic moment. The mission field is already your address. You are already there. The harvest is already around you, and it does not require any additional geographic movement to reach it.

Convicting, because it means the people who need the gospel are not safely abstract — they are specific and close and known, and their faces are the faces of the people you will sit across from at Thanksgiving and wave to across the fence and pass in the hallway tomorrow morning. Their lostness is not a statistic. It is personal. And personal lostness, in the life of someone who believes what you believe, is a call that cannot be answered with theological abstraction or missional sentiment. It requires showing up. In person. In Jerusalem.

The Judea and Samaria and ends of the earth come later. Jesus mentioned them too, and He meant them too — the concentric circles of witness that expand from the center outward, from Jerusalem to the farthest reaches of the world that God so loved. The global vision matters. John Stott was right that we must be global Christians with a global vision. But the global vision does not replace the local faithfulness — it grows from it. The Christian who cannot find the gospel conversation in their own neighborhood will not find it in Samaria either.

Start where you are. With the people you already know. In the ordinary geography of your ordinary life.

That is your Jerusalem. It was always your Jerusalem. And it has been waiting for you.

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## **THE GREAT COMMISSION IS NOT THE GREAT SUGGESTION**

I want to say something here that is not harsh but is direct, because the conclusion of a book about evangelism is precisely the moment when directness is most appropriate and most honest.

The Great Commission — *"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations"* — Matthew 28:19 (NASB) — is a command. Not a recommendation. Not a goal for the particularly motivated. Not an optional program for Christians who happen to have the spiritual gift of evangelism or the personality type that makes gospel conversations feel natural. A command. From the Lord of the church. To the church. Including you.

The command does not come with a clause that exempts you on the basis of introversion or theological uncertainty or the fear of rejection or the particular difficulty of the relationships in your specific Jerusalem. It comes with a promise — *"I am with you always, even to the end of the age"* — Matthew 28:20 (NASB) — which means the One who issued the command has committed to accompany its fulfillment. But it is still a command.

I say this not to induce guilt — we have spent fifteen chapters trying to dismantle the guilt-driven model of evangelism — but to name clearly what is at stake in the choice between faithfulness and silence. The Great Commission is not the Great Suggestion. The harvest field is real and the laborers are genuinely few and the people in your Jerusalem are genuinely there, carrying genuinely real hungers and genuinely real wounds and genuinely real questions that the gospel was designed, from before the foundation of the world, to answer.

You have been equipped. You have been commissioned. You have been promised the presence of the One who sends you. The only remaining question is whether you will go.

And I believe you will. Not because you have finished this book and finished is a kind of going — it is not. But because the God who moved in you enough to bring you to this book is the same God who is moving in you right now, at the end of it, pressing gently and persistently toward the door that leads to the street that leads to the person who is waiting — whether they know it or not — for the particular witness that your particular life and your particular story and your particular cracked vessel makes possible.

Go.

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## THE RHYTHM THAT HOLDS IT ALL

Before I close, I want to give you something you can carry in your pocket — not a formula, not a technique, but a rhythm. Six words. The entire practice of sustained gospel witness compressed into a sequence that fits in a sentence.

### **Go. Love. Listen. Speak. Trust. Repeat.**

*Go* — into the ordinary geography of your life, with your eyes open and your heart attuned to the people God has placed around you. Not to a program. Into your actual life. Present and available.

*Love* — genuinely, without agenda, without a hidden scorecard, without conditions that the person must meet before the love is sustained. The love of Christ flowing through the cracked vessel of your ordinary life into the ordinary lives around you.

*Listen* — before you speak. Always before you speak. With the ears that hear not just what people are saying but what they are actually hungry for beneath what they are saying. With the patience that says *you matter more than my message, and my message is most powerful when it lands in a person who has been genuinely heard.*

*Speak* — when the moment is right. With your own words, in your own voice, from your own experience. Your testimony that nobody can argue with. The four-sentence gospel that you have practiced until it sounds like you. The invitation extended without pressure and released without resentment.

*Trust* — the God of the harvest with everything that comes after. The outcome that belongs to Him. The timeline that belongs to Him. The work of conviction and regeneration and illumination that belongs to His Spirit. The harvest that He will bring in His season from the seeds you have faithfully planted.

*Repeat* — because this is not an event but a life. Because the cycle never ends this side of glory. Because new people keep arriving in your Jerusalem and new moments keep opening in your existing relationships and the harvest keeps growing faster than the laborers keep up with and the faithful, sustainable, grace-fueled, Spirit-powered rhythm of going and loving and listening and speaking and trusting is the life you were made for.

That is the whole thing. Six words. A lifetime of practice.

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## **THE WORLD THAT IS WAITING**

Frederick Buechner — the novelist and theologian who wrote with a clarity about grace that always seemed to have come through something rather than around it — offered a benediction that I have never been able to improve on and have never stopped returning to:

*"Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid."*

Here is the world. Not an abstraction. Not a mission field mapped in strategic planning documents. The actual, specific, irreplaceable world that God so loved — with its beauty that exceeds what atheism can account for and its suffering that exceeds what easy faith can contain. The world where beautiful and terrible things will happen today, in your neighborhood, to people you know and people you are about to meet. The world that is not waiting for the perfect evangelist or the perfectly timed gospel conversation or the precisely

calibrated resource. The world that is waiting for someone — imperfect, broken, honest, available — to show up with the bread and point to where they found it.

Don't be afraid.

Not because the conversations won't be awkward. Some will. Not because the people won't push back. Some will. Not because the nos won't cost something. They will. But because the God who sends you into the beautiful and terrible world is the same God who holds it — who holds every person in it, every question raised in it, every wound inflicted in it, every hunger that rises from it. And His commitment to the world He loves is not contingent on your eloquence or your confidence or your absence of fear.

He is with you. To the end of the age. Through every awkward gospel conversation and every long, fruitless-feeling season of faithful presence and every moment when the words don't come and the timing feels wrong and the fear is louder than the faith.

He is with you.

So go.

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## **THE THANK-YOU THAT KEEPS MOVING**

Martin Luther, in one of his more doxological moments, wrote that *"the whole life of a Christian should be nothing but praises and thanksgiving."* And I have thought about that sentence in the context of evangelism more than Luther probably intended, because I think it contains the most honest and most liberating account of why we share the gospel that is available to us.

Gratitude.

Not obligation. Not guilt. Not the fear of failing a divine mandate. Gratitude — the natural, spontaneous, barely-containable response of a person who has received something they did not earn, could not purchase, and had no right to

expect. The response of the beggar who found the bread. The response of the prodigal who arrived home expecting a servant's wage and received a robe and a ring and a party. The response of the woman who found the lost coin and could not keep the finding to herself.

The whole life of a Christian as praise and thanksgiving — as the ongoing, embodied, relational, verbal expression of gratitude for a grace that is too large to be contained in the interior of a single life and keeps pressing outward, toward the people who are still where you once were, still carrying the weight you used to carry, still hungry for the bread you have found.

What better thank-you than sharing what saved you?

What better praise than telling someone where the bread is?

What better life than the life of the grateful beggar, turned around to face the direction they came from, hands full of the thing that changed everything, saying simply and honestly and with the full weight of their own experience:

*I know where to find it. Let me show you.*

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*"Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid." —*  
Frederick Buechner

*"The whole life of a Christian should be nothing but praises and thanksgiving." —*  
Martin Luther

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*Go. Love. Listen. Speak. Trust. Repeat.*

*The harvest is plentiful. The laborers are few. You are one of them. Your feet are beautiful. The God who sends you is faithful.*

*Now go.*

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*— Jeff Metro Community Chaplaincy Metro East, Illinois*

*A ragamuffin who found the bread and couldn't stop talking about it.*

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*"And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." — Jesus, Matthew 28:20 (NASB) (The last promise. The only one you need.)*

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*The Appendices follow on the next page. But honestly — you have everything you need. Go.*

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### APPENDIX A: THE GOSPEL IN PLAIN ENGLISH

#### *A One-Page Handout for Personal Use*

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*Cut out. Fold up. Keep in your wallet, your Bible, your back pocket. Read it until it sounds like you. Then tell it to someone who needs it.*

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### THE GOSPEL IN PLAIN ENGLISH

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#### **GOD MADE EVERYTHING — INCLUDING YOU — FOR RELATIONSHIP.**

He is not a cosmic force or a vague spiritual energy. He is a Person — the Creator of everything that exists — and He made you specifically, intentionally, and with a purpose. That purpose was relationship. He made you for Himself. He made you to be known, loved, and to know and love Him in return. Everything He made, He called good. Including you.

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#### **SOMETHING WENT WRONG.**

Humanity chose independence over relationship. We decided we would rather run our own lives than live in dependence on the God who made us for Himself. The Bible calls this sin — and it is not primarily about the specific bad things you have done. It is about the posture beneath them. The declaration of independence from God. The decision to live as though we are accountable to nobody but ourselves.

And that decision has consequences. Not because God is waiting to punish you, but because separation from the Source of all life is, itself, a kind of death. Spiritual death first — the hollowing out of the life we were made for.

Physical death following. And without something changing, an eternal separation from the God who made us.

This is the bad news. It is necessary to say it, because the good news only makes sense against its backdrop.

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### **GOD REFUSED TO LEAVE IT THERE.**

The God who had every right to respond to human rebellion with permanent distance responded instead with pursuit. He entered the world He had made — in the person of Jesus Christ, His Son — lived the life of perfect dependence on God that none of us could live, and then died the death that our independence had earned.

Not as a martyr. Not as a tragic victim. As a substitute. Jesus absorbed, in His own body on the cross, the full weight of everything that stood between humanity and God. Every sin. Every failure. Every act of rebellion and self-sufficiency and running away. He took it all. And He paid for it. In full.

And three days later — the most important three words in the history of the world — He got up.

The resurrection is not a metaphor. It is the historical event that validates everything Jesus claimed about Himself and announces, to everyone who will hear it: *death has been defeated. The debt has been paid. The door is open.*

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### **YOUR PART IS SMALLER THAN YOU THINK.**

You do not fix yourself and then come to God. You come to God and He begins the fixing.

What the gospel asks of you is this:

**Repentance** — turning. Turning away from the posture of running your own life without God, and turning toward the God who has been pursuing you. Not a performance of remorse. A genuine change of direction.

**Faith** — trusting. Not the feeling of certainty. Not the absence of questions. Simply the willingness to put the full weight of your life onto Jesus — the way you put your weight on a chair when you sit down — and find out whether He holds.

That's it. Not clean yourself up first. Not figure out all your doubts first. Not become a different kind of person first.

Come as you are. Right now. With everything you're carrying.

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### **WHAT YOU RECEIVE IN RETURN.**

Forgiveness — complete, permanent, already accomplished. Not because you earned it. Because He paid for it.

Relationship — with the God who made you for Himself, restored and unbroken, beginning now and extending beyond death into a future that exceeds imagination.

A new identity — not defined by your worst moments or your deepest failures or the things that were done to you. Defined by the grace that covers all of it and calls you, simply, *beloved*.

And a community — imperfect, human, sometimes frustrating, but irreplaceable — of other broken people who have found the same bread and are learning together what it means to live in the light of it.

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### **THE GOSPEL IN FOUR SENTENCES.**

*Humanity broke what God made. God fixed what humanity broke. Jesus paid what humanity owed. Faith receives what grace freely gives.*

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### **IF THIS IS CONNECTING WITH WHERE YOU ARE —**

You don't need a special building or a special prayer or a special religious credential. You need a conversation. You can have it right now, wherever you are, in your own words.

Tell God the truth. Tell Him you have been running your own life. Tell Him you believe Jesus is who He said He was and did what He said He did. Tell Him you want what that makes available. Tell Him you're done trying to do this alone.

He is listening. He has been listening. He has been waiting — not with impatience, but with the particular quality of waiting that belongs to the Father in the parable, who *"saw him while he was still a long way off, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him."* — Luke 15:20 (NASB).

He will run toward whatever you offer. That has always been who He is.

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### **HAVE QUESTIONS? NOT SURE YET? THAT'S OKAY.**

The person who gave you this page is a safe person to talk to. They are not going to pressure you or judge you or require you to become someone different before the conversation can continue. They found this bread and they couldn't keep it to themselves. That's the only reason you're holding this page.

Reach out. The conversation is worth having.

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*"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."* — John 3:16 (NASB)

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*Appendix B follows: 30 Days of Prayer for People Far from God*

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### APPENDIX B: 30 DAYS OF PRAYER FOR PEOPLE FAR FROM GOD

#### *A Daily Intercession Guide*

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#### HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Before you begin, do one thing.

Write five names on a piece of paper — five specific people in your life who do not yet share your faith. Not five categories of people. Five actual human beings with actual faces and actual histories that you know something about. Put that paper where you will see it every morning. These are the people you are praying for across the next thirty days.

Each day's prayer has three parts: a Scripture to anchor you, a brief reflection to orient your heart, and a specific prayer focus for the people on your list. The prayers are not scripts to be recited. They are frameworks to be inhabited — starting points from which your own honest, specific, personal intercession can grow.

Some days you will feel the weight of these prayers. Some days you will not feel much of anything. Pray on both kinds of days. The effectiveness of intercession is not measured by the emotional intensity of the pray-er. It is measured by the faithfulness of the God who receives it.

One final note: as you pray for the people on your list, pay attention to what changes in you. The person who prays for someone by name, day after day, finds that they begin to love that person differently — more specifically, more tenderly, with less agenda and more genuine care. This is not accidental. It is the Spirit doing in you what He is doing in the person you are praying for. The intercession is always working in both directions.

Now begin.

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## WEEK ONE: FOUNDATIONS

### *Praying from the Character of God*

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#### DAY 1: THE GOD WHO PURSUES

*"What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?" — Luke 15:4 (NASB)*

**Reflection:** Before you pray for the people on your list, remember who is already praying for them — or more precisely, who is already pursuing them. The God who left ninety-nine to find one has not abandoned the people you love. He is actively, persistently, with complete commitment pursuing them right now, through every ordinary moment of their ordinary lives. You are not asking God to begin caring about these people. You are joining a pursuit that was already underway before you showed up.

**Pray:** Father, thank You that You are the God who goes after what is lost — that You do not wait for the lost to find their way home but go into the far country to find them. I bring before You today the five people on my list. You know each of them by name. You know exactly where they are on the journey, exactly what has shaped them, exactly what has kept them from You. I am not telling You anything You don't already know. I am simply joining the pursuit that You have never abandoned. Would You let me see each of them today the way You see them — with the love of the One who left everything to find them? Amen.

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#### DAY 2: THE GOD WHO KNOWS THEM

*"O Lord, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar." — Psalm 139:1-2 (NASB)*

**Reflection:** The God you are praying to knows each person on your list with a completeness that you cannot approach. He knows their history before you

met them. He knows the wounds they carry that they have never told anyone about. He knows the questions they ask themselves at 3am. He knows the exact shape of the hunger they have been trying to fill with things that have not filled it. He knows them, and He loves what He knows. Pray from that knowledge — not yours, His.

**Pray:** Lord, I confess that I know the people on my list only partially — I see what they show me, and I guess at what they hide. But You know them completely. You knew them before they were born and You will know them after this life ends. I ask You today to do in each of them what only complete knowledge can do — to reach past the surface they show the world and touch the specific, personal, private place where the hunger lives. The place that nothing else has reached. Reach there today. Amen.

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### **DAY 3: THE GOD WHO IS PATIENT**

*"The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." — 2 Peter 3:9 (NASB)*

**Reflection:** God's patience is not indifference. It is the active, intentional, purposeful restraint of the One who wants every human being to come to repentance — who is holding the door open with both hands and calling into the distance for as long as there is time to call. The people on your list are still within the patient reach of a God who has not yet closed the door. That is not a small thing. That is the whole thing.

**Pray:** Father, I thank You for Your patience — which is not slowness but love extended to its maximum reach. I thank You that the people on my list are still within that reach today. I confess that I sometimes grow impatient with Your timeline — that I want the harvest on my schedule rather than Yours. Forgive my impatience. Calibrate my expectations to Your patience. And in the meantime, let me be the human evidence of that patience in the lives of the people I am praying for — present, consistent, unhurried, faithful. Amen.

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## DAY 4: THE GOD WHO IS ABLE

*"Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us." — Ephesians 3:20 (NASB)*

**Reflection:** The salvation of a human soul is not a difficult problem for God. It is not a problem at all. The same power that spoke galaxies into existence, that raised Jesus from the dead, that transformed Saul of Tarsus from the church's most violent persecutor into its most prolific apostle — that power is not diminished by the stubbornness of the people on your list or the apparent impossibility of their situation. Far more abundantly beyond all that you ask or think. Pray accordingly.

**Pray:** God, I confess that I sometimes look at the people on my list and quietly despair — that I have decided, without meaning to, that some of them are too far gone or too entrenched or too wounded to find their way to You. Forgive my small vision. You are able to do far more than I can imagine, by power that I do not generate and cannot limit. I release my small assessments of what is possible and ask You to do in each of these people what only You can do — what I cannot engineer, cannot argue into existence, cannot produce by any effort of my own. You are able. I am trusting You to be exactly that. Amen.

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## DAY 5: THE GOD WHO LOVES THEM MORE THAN I DO

*"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." — Romans 5:8 (NASB)*

**Reflection:** The love you feel for the people on your list is real and it matters. But it is a reflection — a pale, partial, imperfect reflection — of the love God has for each of them. The love that went to the cross while they were still sinners. The love that did not wait for them to become worth loving before it acted. Before you pray for them today, let that love land on you personally —

you were once on someone else's prayer list, and God loved you while you were still far off. Let that memory fuel your intercession.

**Pray:** Father, I am undone by the love that went to the cross for people who were not yet asking for it. Including me. I was on that list once — far off, uninterested, or actively running — and Your love came after me anyway. Let that same love — not my smaller version of it, but Yours — reach the people on my list today. Let it reach past every defense they have constructed and every wound that has hardened into resistance and find them where they actually are, in the specific shape of their specific need. Your love is the only love that can do that. Send it. Amen.

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## **DAY 6: THE GOD WHO USES ORDINARY PEOPLE**

*"But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong." — 1 Corinthians 1:27 (NASB)*

**Reflection:** You are not the most qualified person to reach the people on your list. You are the available one — the one God has placed in proximity to them, in relationship with them, with access to their lives that no professional evangelist or polished apologist has. God's consistent track record is using the unimpressive and the available to do the things that the impressive and the unavailable could not. Your ordinariness is not a problem to be overcome. It is the medium through which God most consistently works.

**Pray:** Lord, I thank You that You do not require impressive instruments. I am not impressive. I am available, imperfectly willing, and genuinely grateful for the grace that has covered my own insufficiency. Use that — the availability and the gratitude and the willingness — as the vehicle through which Your love reaches the people on my list. Let my ordinary presence in their ordinary lives be the cracked vessel through which something extraordinary becomes visible. I am not enough. You are more than enough. That has always been the arrangement. Amen.

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## DAY 7: REST AND REVIEW

*"This is the day which the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it." —*  
Psalm 118:24 (NASB)

**Reflection:** Pause today. Review the week of prayer. Look at the five names on your list and consider: what has changed in your heart toward each of them in this first week of intentional intercession? What do you notice? What has the Spirit been doing in you as you have been praying for them?

**Pray:** Father, I thank You for the gift of this week of prayer. I thank You for each person on my list by name — for the specific gift of their existence, for the particular beauty and particular brokenness that makes each of them themselves. I thank You that You are at work in their lives whether I can see it or not. I rest today in the confidence that the prayer I have offered this week has not been wasted — that it has landed in the hands of the God who causes the growth, who is doing in each of these people what I cannot see and cannot measure and cannot rush. I trust You with all five of them today. Amen.

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## WEEK TWO: SPECIFIC PRAYERS FOR SPECIFIC NEEDS

### *Praying Into the Particular*

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## DAY 8: FOR THE WOUNDS THAT CLOSE THE DOOR

*"He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds." —* Psalm 147:3  
(NASB)

**Pray:** Lord, I think about the specific wounds each person on my list carries — the places where religion or life or people have hurt them and left scar tissue that makes the word *God* taste bitter. I do not ask You to minimize those wounds or hurry their healing. I ask You to be the healer who is equal to them. To reach the specific injury with the specific medicine that only You can

provide. To distinguish Yourself — the real Jesus — from the distorted version that may have produced the wound in the first place. Heal what has been broken. Open what has been locked. And let me be present in that process as someone who acknowledges the wound honestly rather than defending the institution that inflicted it. Amen.

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### **DAY 9: FOR THE QUESTIONS THEY CARRY**

*"Call to Me and I will answer you, and I will tell you great and mighty things, which you do not know." — Jeremiah 33:3 (NASB)*

**Pray:** Father, I think about the questions each person on my list is carrying — the ones they voice and the deeper ones beneath them. The intellectual objections. The philosophical doubts. The personal crises of meaning that keep surfacing despite every attempt to bury them in busyness. I pray that You would meet each question with Yourself — not necessarily with an answer that resolves the question tidily, but with a Presence that makes the question livable and the seeking worthwhile. And I pray that when they look for somewhere to bring the questions, they find in me someone who is not threatened by them — someone who has learned to carry their own unanswered questions inside a relationship with You and who can show them, honestly, that it is possible. Amen.

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### **DAY 10: FOR THE HUNGER BENEATH THE SURFACE**

*"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." — Matthew 5:6 (NASB)*

**Pray:** Lord, I ask You today to awaken in each person on my list the hunger that Augustine described — the restlessness that finds no rest until it rests in You. Not manufactured hunger, not artificial spiritual crisis, but the genuine surfacing of the deepest need of a human soul — the need for the One they were made for. Let the things they have been using to fill that space begin to

feel insufficient. Not through suffering inflicted cruelly, but through the growing, undeniable awareness that what they have is not enough and that something they cannot quite name is missing. And when the hunger surfaces, let them find me — and through me, let them find the bread. Amen.

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## **DAY 11: FOR THE BARRIERS THEY HAVE BUILT**

*"The Lord is not far from each one of us."* — Acts 17:27 (NASB)

**Pray:** Father, I think today about the specific defenses each person on my list has constructed against You — the intellectual fortifications and the emotional walls and the religious disappointments that have been stacked like sandbags against the possibility of genuine encounter. I do not ask You to bulldoze those defenses with force. I ask You to find the crack. The small place where the wall is thinnest. The question that already has a loose stone. The experience that has already produced a moment of wonder they haven't known what to do with. Work through the crack. Let the light in through the small opening. Trust the light to do what light does in a dark place. Amen.

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## **DAY 12: FOR DIVINE APPOINTMENTS**

*"The steps of a man are established by the Lord, and He delights in his way."* — Psalm 37:23 (NASB)

**Pray:** Lord, I ask You today for the specific, orchestrated, only-You-could-arrange encounters that would bring each person on my list into contact with the gospel in a form they can receive. The conversation with a stranger that stays with them. The book that surfaces unexpectedly. The crisis that cracks something open. The moment of beauty or grief or inexplicable joy that raises the question that no secular framework can adequately answer. You are the God who arranges steps. Arrange the steps of the people on my list toward You — and arrange my steps toward them, so that when the moment comes, I am in the right place at the right time with the right words. Amen.

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## **DAY 13: FOR THE PEOPLE IN THEIR LIVES**

*"And how are they to hear without a preacher?" — Romans 10:14 (NASB)*

**Pray:** Father, I am not the only person You are working through in the lives of the people on my list. I ask You today to raise up other witnesses — friends, coworkers, family members, strangers in the right place at the right time — who will speak Your truth into their lives from directions I cannot access. I am one laborer in one part of the harvest field. Multiply the laborers around each person on my list. Surround them with the evidence of Your reality, coming from multiple directions at once, until the accumulation becomes undeniable. And let me be one consistent, faithful, loving voice in the chorus that You are assembling around each of them. Amen.

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## **DAY 14: REST AND REVIEW**

*"I will lie down and sleep in peace, for You alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety." — Psalm 4:8 (NASB)*

**Pray:** Lord, I release the people on my list into Your hands tonight. Not because I have stopped caring — because I have started trusting. The weight of their eternal destinations belongs to You, not to me. I lay it down here, at the end of this second week, and I receive in its place the peace that You promise to the person who trusts You with what they cannot carry alone. They are Yours. They were Yours before I knew them. They will be Yours long after I am no longer in a position to pray for them. I trust You with all five of them. Watch over them tonight. Amen.

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## **WEEK THREE: PRAYING FOR THE CONVERSATION**

*Preparing the Ground and the Gardener*

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## DAY 15: FOR MY OWN READINESS

*"Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you." — 1 Peter 3:15 (NASB)*

**Pray:** Lord, today I turn the prayer toward myself. I ask You to prepare me — not just for a gospel conversation, but for a gospel life. Make me genuinely ready — not with a rehearsed script, but with a living faith that has been recently encountered and is presently real. Keep the gospel fresh in me. Keep the gratitude alive. Keep the wonder of what You have done from becoming so familiar that I can speak of it without being moved by it. Let what I say about You come from what I actually know of You today — not from theological memory alone, but from living encounter. Amen.

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## DAY 16: FOR COURAGE

*"For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline." — 2 Timothy 1:7 (NASB)*

**Pray:** Father, I confess the fear that keeps me silent in the moments when I should speak. The fear of rejection, of awkwardness, of saying the wrong thing, of disrupting a relationship I value. I know that this spirit of timidity is not from You — that You have given me power and love and discipline instead. I ask You today to make those gifts functionally real in me — not as abstract theological possessions but as lived experience in the moment when the door opens and my mouth needs to move. Replace my fear with love for the person in front of me. Replace my timidity with the quiet confidence of someone who is carrying a message that belongs to Someone far more powerful than the fear. Amen.

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## DAY 17: FOR THE RIGHT WORDS

*"But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you." — John 14:26 (NASB)*

**Pray:** Lord, I have experienced the moment when my mind goes blank — when the conversation opens and I have nothing. I ask You today for the promise Jesus made to His disciples: that the Helper would bring to remembrance what is needed, in the moment it is needed. I am not asking for eloquence. I am asking for faithfulness — the right word at the right time for the specific person I am talking to. And in the meantime, I ask You to help me prepare — to know my story, to know the gospel, to know the people on my list well enough that when the moment comes, the words that surface are genuine rather than desperate. Amen.

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## **DAY 18: FOR GENUINE LOVE**

*"Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins." — 1 Peter 4:8 (NASB)*

**Pray:** Father, I ask You to examine my love for the people on my list and be honest with me about what You find. Is it genuine — rooted in the love You have poured into me through the Spirit? Or has it become instrumental — tinged with the agenda of a spiritual outcome I am hoping to produce? Wherever it has become instrumental, purify it. I want to love these people the way You love them — completely, without conditions, independent of their response. Let the love come first, always. Let the gospel arise from the love rather than replacing it. Make me someone they trust not because I have earned their trust strategically but because the love they experience from me is unmistakably real. Amen.

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## **DAY 19: FOR THE TIMING**

*"Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity." — Colossians 4:5 (NASB)*

**Pray:** Lord, I ask You today for wisdom about timing — the wisdom to recognize the open door when it appears, and the patience to wait for it when it has not yet appeared. I confess my tendency toward impatience — toward forcing conversations before the soil is ready or the trust is deep enough to support what I want to say. Give me the farmer's patience. Give me the sensitivity to the Spirit's prompting that knows the difference between a door that is opening and a door that is not yet ready, and responds to each with appropriate faithfulness. And when the door opens — let me not miss it. Amen.

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## **DAY 20: FOR WHAT HAPPENS AFTER**

*"I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth." — 1 Corinthians 3:6 (NASB)*

**Pray:** Father, I ask You today to prepare me for the outcomes I cannot control. For the conversations that end without resolution. For the seeds that go underground without visible response. For the relationships where the faithful investment of years produces no visible gospel fruit in the season I am given. I ask You to cultivate in me the farmer's deep contentment — the settled trust that the seed planted in good soil, in obedience to the One who causes growth, is never wasted. Let me plant faithfully and water faithfully and then release the outcome — genuinely, without resentment, without despair — into the hands of the God who grows what we plant. Amen.

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## **DAY 21: REST AND REVIEW**

*"Be still, and know that I am God." — Psalm 46:10 (NASB)*

**Pray:** Lord, I am still today. I bring no requests. I bring only the names on my list and the trust that You are God — that You know each of these people and

love each of them and are actively pursuing each of them in ways I cannot see. I receive the rest that comes from laying down the weight I was never meant to carry — the weight of outcomes that belong to You. I am still. You are God. That is enough. Amen.

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## **WEEK FOUR: PRAYING THE SCRIPTURES**

### ***Letting the Word Shape the Intercession***

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#### **DAY 22: PRAYING LUKE 15 OVER THEM**

*"For this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found."* — Luke 15:24 (NASB)

**Pray:** Father of the prodigal — I bring before You the people on my list who are in the far country. They are spending themselves on things that do not satisfy. They are carrying a hunger they may not have named yet. But You are the Father who sees them *"while they were still a long way off"* — who is already watching the road, already prepared to run. Let them come to their senses. Let the hunger drive them toward home. And when they turn — whenever they turn — let them find You running toward them before they have finished the apology they were rehearsing. Amen.

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#### **DAY 23: PRAYING EZEKIEL 36:26 OVER THEM**

*"Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."* — Ezekiel 36:26 (NASB)

**Pray:** Lord, I pray this ancient promise over each person on my list today. Where there is hardness — the accumulated calcification of disappointment, resistance, and self-protection — I ask You to do what only You can do: remove the stone and replace it with flesh. Not by force. Not by circumstance

alone. By the sovereign, mysterious, life-giving work of Your Spirit in the interior of a human soul. New hearts. New spirits. The capacity to feel and receive what the stone heart cannot. Do this work in each of the people I love. Amen.

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#### **DAY 24: PRAYING ISAIAH 55:11 OVER EVERY WORD SPOKEN**

*"So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it." — Isaiah 55:11 (NASB)*

**Pray:** Father, I pray today over every word that has ever been spoken to the people on my list about You — every seed ever planted, by me or by anyone before me, in the soil of their lives. I claim this promise over all of it. It will not return empty. It will accomplish what You sent it to accomplish. On Your timeline, in Your way, with results that may not be visible to the person who planted. I release every conversation, every gesture of love, every act of service, every honest testimony — I release it all into Your hands, trusting that not one seed is lost. Amen.

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#### **DAY 25: PRAYING JOHN 6:44 AND TRUSTING THE DRAWING**

*"No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day." — John 6:44 (NASB)*

**Pray:** Father, I thank You today for this specific and reassuring truth: that the drawing of a person toward faith is Your work, not mine. I ask You to draw each person on my list — to exercise the sovereign, irresistible, but never coercive drawing of love that brings people toward Jesus. I ask You to make Yourself unavoidable in their lives. To be present in the beauty that moves them, the suffering that breaks them, the questions that will not leave them alone. Draw them. And in the drawing, use every person and every conversation and every

seed planted in faithfulness as the human instruments through which Your drawing moves. Amen.

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## **DAY 26: PRAYING ROMANS 10:17 OVER EVERY FUTURE CONVERSATION**

*"So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ."* — Romans 10:17 (NASB)

**Pray:** Lord, faith comes from hearing. That simple, direct, consequential truth places a responsibility on me that I do not want to carry passively. Someone has to speak. Someone has to open their mouth and say the word that becomes the hearing that produces the faith. I am asking You to use me — and others — as the voices through which each person on my list hears the word of Christ. Not in a way that feels like a presentation or a performance but in a way that sounds like a person who actually believes what they are saying because it actually happened to them. Give me words. Give me moments. Give me the courage to let the words happen in the moments. Amen.

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## **DAY 27: PRAYING 2 PETER 3:9 AGAIN — IT BEARS REPEATING**

*"The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance."* — 2 Peter 3:9 (NASB)

**Pray:** Father, I return to this verse because I need to return to it. I need to be reminded again that it is not Your will that any of the people on my list perish — that Your desire for their salvation is not less than mine, but infinitely greater. You are not holding back from them. You are not indifferent to their condition. You are patient — not passive, but patient — extending the invitation with every breath they draw and every morning they wake up. Thank You for the patience that has kept the door open. I pray that before the patience reaches its end, each person on this list walks through it. Amen.

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## **DAY 28: PRAYING ACTS 16:14 — FOR OPENED HEARTS**

*"The Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul." — Acts 16:14 (NASB)*

**Pray:** Lord, You opened Lydia's heart. You did not wait for Lydia to open it herself. You did the opening — the sovereign, gracious, specifically personal work of making a human heart receptive to what it would otherwise have deflected. I pray this for each person on my list. Open their hearts. Not against their will — but by the same mysterious, gentle, prior work of grace that made Lydia able to receive what Paul was saying. Let the conversations they have heard already, and the conversations that are coming, land in soil that You have prepared to receive them. Open hearts. It is Your work. I am asking You to do it. Amen.

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## **FINAL DAYS: PRAYING WITH HOPE**

### ***Ending Where the Story Is Going***

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## **DAY 29: PRAYING THE FUTURE BACKWARD**

*"For I know the plans that I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope." — Jeremiah 29:11 (NASB)*

**Pray:** Father, I pray today with my eyes on what You have said about the future — that Your plans for the people on my list are plans for welfare and hope, not calamity. I pray from that future backward into this present moment. I ask You to do everything necessary — every preparation, every conversation, every divine appointment, every opening of every heart — to bring each person on my list into the future You have planned for them. A future that includes knowing You. A future where the lostness is replaced by finding. I am trusting You for that future for each of them. Move them toward it today. Amen.

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## **DAY 30: THE PRAYER OF RELEASE AND CONTINUED FAITHFULNESS**

*"And He was saying to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.'" — Luke 10:2 (NASB)*

**Reflection:** You have prayed for the five people on your list for thirty days. Something has happened in you — even if nothing visible has happened in them yet. The intercession has been real. The seed has been planted in the soil of God's own hearing, and it will not return empty. Today's prayer is a prayer of release and recommitment — releasing the outcomes you cannot control, recommitting to the faithfulness that is yours to offer.

**Pray:** Lord of the harvest, I come to the end of thirty days of prayer for five specific people with five specific names and five specific stories that You know better than I do. I do not know what You have been doing in each of them during these thirty days. I cannot see the underground work. I cannot measure what the intercession has accomplished. I simply believe — on the authority of Your own Word and Your own character — that it has accomplished something.

I release each of these five people into Your hands today. Not for the first time and not for the last. I release the outcomes, the timelines, the mechanics of how and when and through whom the harvest comes. These things belong to You.

What I keep is the faithfulness. The continued love. The sustained presence. The willingness to pray for another thirty days, and another after that, for as long as You give me breath and give them time.

Send more laborers into Your harvest field. Start with me. Make me faithful in my small Jerusalem — in the ordinary geography of my ordinary life — for as long as You keep me in it.

And bring home, in Your time, every one of the five names on this page.

I trust You with all of them.

I always will.

Amen.

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## **A FINAL WORD**

You have prayed for thirty days. Do not stop.

The thirty-day guide is a beginning — an on-ramp to the sustained practice of intercession that is the most powerful thing available to a Christian witness. The people on your list did not expire at the end of Day 30. Neither did the God who is pursuing them.

Start again. Use the same names or add new ones. Return to the prayers that most moved you. Develop your own. Let the intercession grow more specific and more honest and more personal as you grow in your knowledge of the people you are praying for and the God you are praying to.

And watch. Pay attention. The intercessor who prays faithfully for a person over time will eventually see something — a crack in the resistance, an unexpected question, a moment of unusual openness — and will recognize it as the answer to a prayer prayed month

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### APPENDIX C: RECOMMENDED READING BY AUDIENCE TYPE

#### *A Curated Guide for the Gospel Witness Who Wants to Put the Right Book in the Right Hands*

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#### HOW TO USE THIS APPENDIX

A book offered at the wrong moment to the wrong person is not a gift. It is a conversation-ender dressed in good intentions.

The recommendations that follow are organized not by theological category or publication date but by the person you are trying to reach — their specific wounds, their specific questions, their specific location on the journey. Before you reach for a title, ask the question that should govern every resource decision in gospel witness: *Is this the right book for this specific person at this specific moment?*

A few organizing principles that shaped these selections:

*Accessibility matters.* A book that requires a seminary education to engage is not a gift to a spiritually curious person who has never read theology. Every book on this list can be meaningfully read by an intelligent non-specialist.

*Honesty matters more.* The books on this list do not pretend that the hard questions have easy answers. They engage difficulty honestly, because the people you are giving them to will smell dishonesty from three chapters away and use it as confirmation of everything they already suspected about Christianity.

*Personal investment matters most.* The books you have actually read and been genuinely helped by carry a weight in the recommending that secondhand recommendations cannot match. Wherever possible, give books you know. Give them with a personal note. Give them as a friend offering

something that helped them, not as an evangelist executing a resource-deployment strategy.

Each section includes primary recommendations — books most likely to connect — and secondary recommendations for people who have gone further into the question. A brief annotation accompanies each title so you know why it is on the list and for whom it is most appropriate.

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## **SECTION ONE: FOR THE SKEPTIC**

### ***The person who has intellectual objections and needs rigorous, honest engagement***

The skeptic is not your opponent. They are a person who takes truth seriously enough to resist easy answers — which means they are, in an important sense, already doing the right thing. The books you offer them must take their skepticism seriously, engage their actual objections rather than strawman versions of them, and demonstrate that faith and intellectual rigor are not mutually exclusive.

What the skeptic almost never needs is a book that sounds like it was written primarily for people who already believe. They will feel the in-group address from the first page and disengage. The best books for skeptics are written by people who were once skeptics themselves, or who have spent serious time with skeptical arguments, or who write with the particular quality of intellectual honesty that communicates: *I have considered what you are thinking, and I am taking it seriously.*

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## **PRIMARY RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**Mere Christianity — C.S. Lewis** The starting point for almost every reading list aimed at the intellectually resistant, and it earns that position. Lewis writes as a former atheist who came to faith through a process of genuine intellectual reckoning, and his argument is built from the inside of the

skeptical position rather than from outside it. His *trilemma* argument regarding Jesus — liar, lunatic, or Lord — remains one of the most elegant pieces of apologetic reasoning in the English language. The prose is accessible without being condescending. The logic is tight without being cold. *Best for:* Any skeptic with literary sensibility. Particularly effective with people who describe themselves as intellectual but not religious. *Note:* The first section, on the moral argument for God's existence, is where most skeptics either get hooked or get resistant. If your friend struggles with the opening, encourage them to push through to Book Two.

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**The Reason for God — Timothy Keller** Written specifically for the thoughtful urban skeptic — the educated, culturally sophisticated person who has absorbed the secular case against Christianity and has genuine, substantive objections — Keller's book engages each major objection with the seriousness it deserves before making the positive case for faith. What distinguishes it from many apologetics books is Keller's genuine respect for the people he is addressing. He does not write down to skeptics. He writes with them, acknowledging the real force of their objections before responding to them. *Best for:* The skeptic who has specific intellectual objections rather than general indifference. Particularly effective with people who work in academic, legal, or analytical fields.

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**Surprised by Faith — Don Page** Written by a PhD physicist who was a committed atheist before becoming a Christian, this book addresses the science-faith interface from the inside of both worldviews. Page does not pretend that the questions are simple or that the answers are obvious. He writes as someone who took both science and its implications with maximum seriousness and arrived, through that seriousness, at faith. For the skeptic whose primary resistance is scientific, there is very little that carries more credibility than this kind of first-person account from someone with genuine

scientific standing. *Best for:* Skeptics with scientific backgrounds or whose primary objection is the perceived conflict between faith and science.

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**Making Sense of God — Timothy Keller** A companion to *The Reason for God* and, in many ways, a more fundamental book — it addresses the prior question of why religious faith matters at all in a secular age, engaging the secular person on their own terms before making the case for Christianity specifically. For the person who is not yet asking whether Christianity is true because they are not yet convinced that the question matters, this book meets them where they are. *Best for:* The spiritually indifferent person who has absorbed secular assumptions about the irrelevance of religion.

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## **SECONDARY RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**The Everlasting Man — G.K. Chesterton** Chesterton's magisterial account of human history as the story that requires Christ to make sense of it. Dense and demanding but extraordinarily rewarding for the skeptic with patience and literary appetite.

**Orthodoxy — G.K. Chesterton** Chesterton's account of his own intellectual journey toward Christian faith — written with the wit and the paradox and the sheer rhetorical pleasure that makes him one of the most re-readable writers in the apologetics tradition.

**Gunning for God — John Lennox** Oxford mathematician John Lennox engages the new atheism — Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris — with both scientific standing and genuine respect for the arguments. For the skeptic whose objections have been shaped by the new atheist literature.

**Can Man Live Without God? — Ravi Zacharias** An engagement with the existential and philosophical consequences of atheism that is both rigorous and personal. For the skeptic who is beginning to feel the weight of the questions that their secular framework cannot adequately address.

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## SECTION TWO: FOR THE SEEKER

### *The person who is already in motion toward spiritual truth*

The seeker is perhaps the most rewarding person to offer a book, because they are already asking the questions. The book you offer does not need to create hunger — it needs to feed it. It needs to meet the seeking where it actually is, take the questions seriously, and provide not just intellectual content but genuine spiritual nourishment.

The best books for seekers have a quality of personal honesty that intellectual apologetics books sometimes lack — they are written by people who know what the seeking feels like from the inside, who have walked the road and can describe the landmarks. They do not just argue for Christianity. They show what it is like to actually live inside it.

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### PRIMARY RECOMMENDATIONS:

**Simply Jesus — N.T. Wright** Wright is one of the foremost New Testament scholars of his generation, and this book makes his scholarship accessible to a general reader while presenting the person and significance of Jesus with a freshness and historical depth that feels genuinely new even to people who grew up hearing about Him. Wright argues that we have domesticated Jesus — made Him too small, too safe, too easily co-opted by our various agendas — and that recovering the actual Jesus of history is one of the most important and most disorienting things a person can do. For the seeker who is drawn to Jesus but unsure what to do with the institutional Christianity that claims Him, this book is a revelation. *Best for:* Seekers who find Jesus compelling but are confused by the gap between Him and the church that represents Him.

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**The Case for Christ — Lee Strobel** Written by a former atheist journalist who investigated the historical claims of Christianity with the tools of his trade —

interviewing scholars, examining evidence, testing the reliability of the New Testament accounts — this book engages the evidential questions in a format that is accessible and genuinely compelling. For the seeker whose questions are primarily historical and evidential, Strobel's journalistic approach provides a model for serious investigation that does not require abandoning intellectual integrity to reach faith. *Best for:* Seekers who need historical evidence rather than philosophical argument. Particularly effective with people who respond to journalism, documentary, or investigative formats.

---

**Surprised by Hope — N.T. Wright** For the seeker whose spiritual questions center on death, meaning, and what lies beyond — whose seeking has been catalyzed by loss or grief or the confrontation with mortality — this book addresses the resurrection with a depth and a hope that is unlike anything else in the genre. Wright argues that the resurrection is not an optional theological upgrade to the Christian message but its absolute center, and his account of what the resurrection means for the present as well as the future is genuinely transformative. *Best for:* Seekers who have been moved to spiritual searching by grief, loss, or the confrontation with death.

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**The Pilgrim's Progress — John Bunyan** An unconventional recommendation for a seeker, but one I make without apology. Bunyan's allegory of the Christian life — the journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, through the Slough of Despond and Vanity Fair and Doubting Castle — speaks to the seeking person at the level of story and imagination rather than argument. The Pilgrim's Progress is the journey many seekers are already on, rendered in narrative form by someone who walked it himself. For the literary seeker who responds to story rather than argument, there is very little that competes with it. *Best for:* Literarily inclined seekers, people who are on a genuine spiritual journey and need a map expressed in the language of story.

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## SECONDARY RECOMMENDATIONS:

**The Jesus I Never Knew — Philip Yancey** Yancey's exploration of who Jesus actually was — drawn from the Gospel accounts and engaged with the freshness of someone who is genuinely surprised by what he finds — is an ideal book for the seeker who finds Jesus compelling but has received a distorted picture of Him from cultural Christianity.

**Knowing God — J.I. Packer** A theological classic that reads as anything but dry theology — Packer's account of who God is and what it means to actually know Him personally has been a significant spiritual formation resource for several generations of readers, including many who came to faith through it.

**Ruthless Trust — Brennan Manning** For the seeker who is close to faith but is struggling with the surrender it requires — who can see the gospel intellectually but is finding it difficult to let go of the control that faith requires releasing — Manning's account of radical trust is both challenging and deeply compassionate.

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## SECTION THREE: FOR THE CHURCH-WOUNDED

### *The person who was hurt by religion and needs to meet the real Jesus*

Of all the populations covered in this appendix, the church-wounded require the most careful curation — because the wrong book, offered with the wrong timing, can feel like another form of the institutional pressure that produced the wound in the first place. The books that work for this population share several qualities: they are honest about the church's failures, they distinguish clearly between the institutional church and the Jesus it imperfectly represents, and they are written by people who carry their own wounds and have found, improbably and gracefully, a way back to the real thing.

The church-wounded do not need to be argued back into Christianity. They need to encounter, in the pages of a book, the Jesus they were never adequately shown — the One who reserved His harshest words for the

religious establishment and His most tender engagement for the people the establishment had broken and discarded.

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### **PRIMARY RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**The Ragamuffin Gospel — Brennan Manning** There is no book on this list that I have given away more times, pressed into more hands, or seen do more genuine gospel work in the lives of church-wounded people than this one. Manning writes as a man who has been to the bottom — alcoholism, failure, the gap between his own professed faith and his actual life — and has encountered there a grace that the respectable church had not shown him. His central argument — that the gospel is specifically, scandalously for the broken and not for the religious achievers — is both theologically precise and experientially devastating to the church-wounded person who was told, in whatever form the message came, that they were not enough. *Best for:* Almost any church-wounded person. Particularly powerful for people who experienced legalism, performance-based religion, or the implicit message that belonging required a level of spiritual achievement they could not sustain.

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**What's So Amazing About Grace? — Philip Yancey** Yancey's exploration of grace as the most radical and least practiced element of the Christian message is simultaneously a healing book for the church-wounded and a convicting book for everyone else. He is ruthlessly honest about the church's failures to embody grace — the judgmentalism, the exclusion, the weaponizing of Scripture — while making a devastating case that the failure belongs to the church's departure from Jesus rather than to Jesus Himself. For the church-wounded person who needs permission to be angry and a reason to look again at what they were angry at, this book provides both. *Best for:* Church-wounded people who are processing anger. The chapter on grace and ungrace is worth the price of the book alone.

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**Searching for Sunday — Rachel Held Evans** Evans' memoir of leaving and returning to faith — of loving the church and being hurt by it and leaving it and finding she could not stay away from what it represented at its best — engages the complexity of church-woundedness with a personal honesty that is rare and genuine. She does not wrap the story with a neat theological bow. She sits in the difficulty and trusts the reader to sit in it with her. For the church-wounded person who is in the middle of their own version of this story and needs to know that someone else has been there and survived, this book is a companion. *Best for:* People in active deconstruction, people who have left the church and are trying to figure out whether there is anything worth returning to.

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**In the Name of Jesus — Henri Nouwen** Nouwen's brief, devastating meditation on Christian leadership and ministry — written from a position of hard-won personal humility — addresses the ways that power and performance and the need for affirmation corrupt what should be grace. For the church-wounded person whose wounding came specifically from leaders who abused their authority, Nouwen's account of what servant leadership actually looks like in the pattern of Jesus is both validating and quietly redemptive. *Best for:* People wounded specifically by spiritual authority figures, pastors, or institutional leadership.

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## **SECONDARY RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**Abuse of Grace — David R. Lilly** A direct engagement with the specific wounds produced by spiritually abusive church environments — legalism, manipulation, authoritarian leadership — that validates the wounded person's experience while making a careful distinction between the abuse and the gospel it distorted.

**Leaving the Fold — Marlene Winell** For the person whose church wounding has been severe enough to produce genuine spiritual trauma — particularly people who came out of high-control or cultic religious environments — this book provides both psychological framework and genuine compassion.

**The Prodigal God — Timothy Keller** Keller's reading of the parable of the prodigal son focuses on what is often missed: the elder brother's story. For the church-wounded person who was the faithful, rule-following insider who discovered that the system they had invested in was bankrupt, the elder brother's story is their story. Keller's exposition of the father's response to both sons is a profound account of a grace that is genuinely good news for both the obvious sinner and the religious overachiever.

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## **SECTION FOUR: FOR THE RECOVERING**

### ***The person whose brokenness has brought them to the end of themselves***

The recovering person has already done the hardest theological thing — they have admitted powerlessness. They have said, publicly and at great personal cost, the thing that the human ego fights most furiously to avoid: *I cannot fix this from the inside. I need something outside myself.* That admission is, theologically, the beginning of everything. The books that serve this population meet them in that admission and point them toward the One who is equal to the need it has created.

What the recovering person almost never needs is a book that adds to their burden of self-improvement. They have been trying to improve themselves, often for years, and they have arrived at this moment precisely because self-improvement has been insufficient. The books on this list speak grace into that insufficiency without minimizing its severity.

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## **PRIMARY RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**The Ragamuffin Gospel — Brennan Manning** It appears on this list twice because it belongs on this list twice. Manning's own history of addiction and recovery — and his theological account of the grace that reaches people at their lowest rather than waiting for them to climb back to a respectable level — makes this book uniquely credible and uniquely powerful in recovery contexts. The person in recovery who reads Manning will find someone who has been where they are and has found something genuinely sufficient for the need. *Best for:* Anyone in recovery from addiction, compulsive behavior, or any pattern of living that has brought them to genuine powerlessness.

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**Addiction and Grace — Gerald May** May was a psychiatrist who spent his career at the intersection of psychology and spirituality, and this book is one of the most carefully reasoned and most pastorally tender accounts of the relationship between addiction, human longing, and the grace that alone is capable of addressing both. He argues that at the root of every addiction is a misdirected longing for God — a hunger that is genuinely for the infinite, temporarily satisfied by the finite, and therefore structurally incapable of being permanently satisfied by anything less than its actual object. For the recovering person whose recovery program has gestured toward a higher power without filling in what that power is, this book fills in the blank. *Best for:* Recovering people who are willing to engage with psychological and spiritual frameworks simultaneously. Particularly effective for people in twelve-step programs who are ready to explore what or who the higher power actually is.

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**Redemption — Mike Wilkerson** An explicitly gospel-centered account of how the biblical story of Israel's redemption from Egypt maps onto the experience of addiction, bondage, and recovery. Wilkerson argues that the gospel is not an add-on to recovery but the only sufficient foundation for it — that true freedom requires not just behavioral change but the identity transformation that the gospel produces. Written with genuine pastoral wisdom and genuine understanding of the specific dynamics of addiction. *Best for:* Recovering

people who are ready to engage with explicitly biblical content and who are looking for a recovery framework that goes deeper than behavior modification.

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**Abba's Child — Brennan Manning** Manning's account of the identity transformation at the center of the gospel — from the false self, constructed by performance and approval, to the true self, grounded in the unconditional love of the Father — speaks directly to the identity confusion that underlies most addiction and compulsive behavior. For the recovering person whose addiction has been, at some level, about managing the pain of a false self that was never adequate, this book is a direct address to the wound beneath the wound. *Best for:* Recovering people who are beginning to engage with the deeper identity questions that lie beneath the behavioral patterns of addiction.

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## **SECONDARY RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**The Prodigal God — Timothy Keller** The parable of the prodigal son is the gospel for the recovering person in its most accessible form. Keller's exposition of both sons — the obvious sinner and the religious elder brother — covers both ends of the addiction spectrum.

**Shattered Dreams — Larry Crabb** For the recovering person whose path to faith has run through the specific experience of having everything they counted on fall apart — whose brokenness is the brokenness of disappointment as much as addiction — Crabb's account of how God uses shattered dreams to produce genuine faith is a profound pastoral gift.

**One Thousand Gifts — Ann Voskamp** For the person in recovery whose spiritual journey is leading them toward gratitude as a spiritual practice, Voskamp's lyrical account of the discipline of thankfulness is both an invitation and a guide.

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## SECTION FIVE: FOR THE INTELLECTUAL

### ***The person who needs rigorous engagement with their actual arguments***

The intellectual requires — and deserves — books that do not condescend. That take their arguments seriously. That engage the strongest versions of their objections rather than the most easily dismissed versions. That demonstrate, through the quality of the engagement, that Christian faith and intellectual rigor are not merely compatible but that some of the most rigorous intellects in Western history have found Christianity not just emotionally satisfying but intellectually compelling.

The best books for intellectuals are written by people who have paid the price of serious intellectual engagement with both the case for and the case against Christianity — and have found, at the end of that engagement, that the evidence points more compellingly in one direction than the other.

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### **PRIMARY RECOMMENDATIONS:**

**The Brothers Karamazov — Fyodor Dostoevsky** I begin with a novel because for the genuinely literary intellectual, no apologetics textbook will carry the weight of a great work of fiction that grapples honestly with the ultimate questions. Dostoevsky was one of the most profound theological thinkers in the history of literature, and *The Brothers Karamazov* is his fullest engagement with the problem of evil, the nature of faith, the existence of God, and the meaning of suffering. Ivan Karamazov's Grand Inquisitor chapter is one of the most powerful statements of the case against Christianity's God ever written — and Dostoevsky does not flinch from it, because he knows that the only faith worth having is the faith that can hold its ground in the face of it. *Best for:* The literary intellectual who has genuine philosophical sophistication. Worth reading together with the intellectual you are trying to reach.

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**The Language of God — Francis Collins** Collins directed the Human Genome Project and is one of the most significant scientists of his generation. He is also a committed Christian who came to faith as an adult scientist, and this book is his account of that journey — the scientific questions, the philosophical questions, the personal encounter that moved him from atheism to faith. For the intellectual whose primary resistance is the perceived incompatibility of scientific and religious worldviews, Collins' standing and honesty provide a credibility that no non-scientist apologist can match. *Best for:* Scientifically trained intellectuals, people in medicine, biology, or research fields whose primary objection is the science-faith interface.

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**Surprised by Joy — C.S. Lewis** Lewis' autobiography of his journey from atheism to faith — through the experience he calls *Joy*, a recurring longing for something that nothing in the world has yet satisfied — is one of the most honest and most intellectually rigorous accounts of religious conversion available. Lewis does not argue himself into faith in the way that a debate transcript might suggest. He finds himself, despite his best intellectual resistance, unable to stay away from a truth that kept pursuing him. For the intellectual who has been asking the meaning and purpose questions without finding adequate secular answers, Lewis' account of the inadequacy of every secular answer he tried is both validating and illuminating. *Best for:* Intellectuals who are experiencing the inadequacy of their secular framework, people who have been asking the meaning question and have not found a satisfying secular answer.

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**Reason for God — Timothy Keller** Already recommended in the skeptic section, this book belongs here as well. Keller engages the intellectual's objections with the rigor they require and makes the positive case for Christianity with genuine philosophical sophistication. For the intellectual who needs to see that serious thinking and Christian faith are not mutually

exclusive, Keller's combination of philosophical rigor and pastoral warmth is an ideal demonstration.

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**Pensées — Blaise Pascal** Pascal was one of the greatest mathematicians and physicists of the seventeenth century and also one of the most profound Christian thinkers in the history of the church. His *Pensées* — a collection of notes for an apologetics work he never completed — contain some of the most brilliant and most personally honest engagements with the human condition and the question of God available in Western literature. The famous *wager* argument is here, but so is something far more profound: an account of the human condition — its greatness and its wretchedness — that is so accurate it is almost physically uncomfortable to read. *Best for:* The philosophically sophisticated intellectual with patience for a non-linear text. Best given to someone who is already in genuine conversation rather than as a first offering.

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## SECONDARY RECOMMENDATIONS:

**The Question of God — Dr. Armand Nicholi Jr.** A Harvard professor's comparative study of the worldviews of Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis — two of the twentieth century's most influential thinkers, one a committed atheist and one a committed Christian — examining how each worldview addresses the ultimate questions of human existence. An ideal book for the intellectual who needs to see both cases presented with genuine rigor before engaging with either.

**Miracles — C.S. Lewis** Lewis' philosophical examination of the possibility of miracles — particularly the Resurrection — is more rigorous and more demanding than *Mere Christianity* and is ideal for the intellectual who has already engaged with Lewis' more accessible work and is ready for the deeper philosophical treatment.

**God and the Astronomers — Robert Jastrow** Jastrow, an agnostic astronomer, wrote this book as an honest account of where the scientific evidence points on the question of cosmic origins. His famous closing paragraph — about the scientist who has scaled the mountains of ignorance and pulls himself over the final rock to be greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries — is one of the most quoted and most honest admissions in the science-religion conversation.

**The Everlasting Man — G.K. Chesterton** Chesterton's account of human history and the uniqueness of Christ within it — argued from first principles rather than from Scripture — is a work of sustained brilliance that engages the intellectual on historical and philosophical grounds before making the specifically Christian case. Dense and demanding and enormously rewarding.

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## **A FINAL WORD ON BOOKS AS GIFTS**

Every book on this list is a seed. Not a harvest — a seed. The person you give it to may read it and be unaffected. They may read it and be deeply moved but show nothing on the outside. They may not read it at all. They may read it ten years from now, when it surfaces again on the shelf at exactly the right moment, and find in it the book they needed in a season you cannot yet see.

You are not responsible for the germination. You are responsible for the planting.

Give the book with a personal note. Tell them why you thought of them when you read it. Tell them there is no obligation — no test at the end, no follow-up quiz, no requirement that they agree with what they find. Tell them you are happy to talk about it if they want to, and equally happy to say nothing more about it if they don't.

Then pray the seed into the ground. And trust the God who causes growth to do what He has always done with seeds planted in faith and released in love.

*How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news.*

Including the feet that carry books.

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*Appendix D follows: Glossary of Christian Jargon — Translated for Normal Humans*

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### APPENDIX D: GLOSSARY OF CHRISTIAN JARGON

#### *Translated for Normal Humans*

*(Because "washed in the blood, sanctified, and quickened by the Spirit" means nothing to your coworker)*

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#### A NOTE BEFORE WE BEGIN

Every tribe has its language. Firefighters talk about *apparatus* and *incident command* and *positive pressure ventilation* and everyone outside the fire service nods politely and understands nothing. Lawyers talk about *tort* and *estoppel* and *mens rea* and produce the same nodding. Doctors. Engineers. Software developers. Every specialized community develops a shorthand that serves communication within the tribe while simultaneously communicating to everyone outside the tribe: *you are not one of us*.

The church is no different — except that the church's tribal language has a particular problem that legal jargon and medical terminology do not share. Legal jargon is impenetrable but harmless. Christian jargon is impenetrable and carries an additional charge: it sounds, to the person who did not grow up inside it, either slightly threatening, vaguely cultish, or simply embarrassing in the way that all in-group language sounds embarrassing to the person who is not in the group.

When you use Christian jargon in a gospel conversation with someone outside the faith, you are not merely being unclear. You are communicating — involuntarily but effectively — that the thing you are describing belongs to a world they do not inhabit and may not be welcome in. The words themselves become a wall rather than a door.

This glossary exists to help you tear down the wall.

What follows is a translation guide — organized alphabetically, annotated with genuine pastoral humor, and written with the specific goal of helping you say what you actually mean in language that the person sitting across from you can actually receive. The translations are not dumbed down versions of the real thing. They are the real thing, expressed in the plainest available language.

Use them. Your coworker will thank you. Probably not out loud. But still.

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## THE GLOSSARY

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**ANOINTED** (*adjective*) **What Christians mean:** Especially empowered or set apart by God for a specific purpose. Sometimes used to describe a person, a message, or a moment that seemed particularly Spirit-filled. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** Either a cooking instruction or something out of a medieval coronation ceremony. **Say instead:** *"There was something different about that conversation — something that felt like more than just me."* Or simply: *"That message really connected with people in a deep way."* **Bonus note:** The word is often deployed as a compliment — *"that was so anointed"* — which, while theologically meaningful to the speaker, lands as impenetrable religious praise to anyone outside the circle. If someone's sermon was genuinely powerful, telling them it was powerful is both clearer and equally honest.

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**BACKSLIDING** (*verb/noun*) **What Christians mean:** A return to patterns of sin or spiritual disengagement after a period of genuine faith. The theological concept is real and important — the reality of ongoing human failure in the Christian life. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** A geological phenomenon. Possibly involving mud. **Say instead:** *"I went through a season where I drifted from the faith."* Or: *"He walked away from his faith for a while."* **Bonus note:** *Backsliding* also carries a faint whiff of judgment that the plainer

language avoids — as though the person who is struggling with consistency is failing at a performance standard rather than navigating the genuine difficulty of following Jesus in a world that pulls in other directions.

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**BLESSED** (*adjective*) **What Christians mean:** Experiencing God's favor, provision, or goodness in a tangible way. Rooted in the biblical concept of *barak* — the flourishing that comes from being in right relationship with God. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** A vague expression of gratitude that has lost all specific content. Also the name of a reality TV show. **Say instead:** *"I feel genuinely grateful for what God has provided."* Or: *"Things have been going well in ways that feel like more than coincidence."* **Honest note:** Blessed has been so thoroughly diluted by social media usage that it has nearly lost all meaning even within Christian circles. When your Instagram caption reads *"just feeling so #blessed"* over a photo of your new car, you have not communicated a profound theological reality. You have communicated that you are pleased with your car.

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**BORN AGAIN** (*adjective*) **What Christians mean:** Having experienced the spiritual new birth Jesus described in John 3 — the supernatural transformation of a person's spiritual condition from death to life, from separation from God to relationship with Him. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** Either an extreme religious makeover or a Jimmy Carter reference. **Say instead:** *"Something genuinely changed in me when I came to faith — not just my behavior, but something deeper. A new beginning at the level of who I actually am."* **Historical note:** *Born again* was a perfectly functional piece of theological vocabulary until it became primarily a political and cultural identifier in the late twentieth century. It is not wrong. It is loaded. Be aware of the cargo it carries into a conversation before you deploy it.

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**BROKEN** (*adjective, as in "I am broken" or "my brokenness"*) **What Christians mean:** The condition of being damaged by sin — one's own and others' — in ways that affect the whole person. Also, in some usages, the posture of humility before God that acknowledges one's own insufficiency. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** Either a mental health disclosure or an appliance that needs repair. **Say instead:** *"I've come to understand that there are places in my life that are genuinely damaged — patterns and wounds that I couldn't fix from the inside."* **Nuance note:** *Broken* is actually one of the more translatable pieces of Christian vocabulary because the experience it describes is universal. The translation challenge is moving it from abstract spiritual category to honest personal acknowledgment. The difference is between *"I am broken"* delivered as theological statement and *"there are places in me that were genuinely damaged and needed something I couldn't produce on my own"* delivered as honest testimony.

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**CALLING** (*noun*) **What Christians mean:** The specific sense of God's direction toward a particular vocation, life purpose, or ministry assignment. Rooted in the biblical concept of being *called* by God into relationship and into specific service. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** Career counseling with divine supervision. **Say instead:** *"I feel a strong, persistent sense that this is what I'm supposed to be doing with my life — and I believe that sense comes from God."* **Note:** *Calling* is actually useful vocabulary in contemporary culture, where the concept of vocation as more than employment has gained significant traction. The word itself may land well. The potential confusion is the implication that only professionally religious people have callings — that calling is reserved for pastors and missionaries. Clarifying that every person has a calling — to love their neighbor, to do their work with integrity, to be present to the people around them — broadens the concept helpfully.

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**COVERED** (*adjective, as in "I'm covered by the blood" or "covered in prayer"*)

**What Christians mean:** Protected by the atoning work of Christ (the blood covering) or undergirded by the intercession of others (covered in prayer). Both concepts are theologically substantive. **What it sounds like to your**

**coworker:** Either a furniture arrangement or an insurance policy. **Say instead:** *"The forgiveness Jesus provides covers everything — nothing is outside its reach."* Or: *"People have been praying for you — holding you up before God."*

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**CONVICTION** (*noun*) **What Christians mean:** The Holy Spirit's work of making a person genuinely aware of their sin — not as external accusation but as internal recognition. The spiritual discomfort that precedes genuine

repentance. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** A criminal justice outcome. **Say instead:** *"I started to see, clearly and uncomfortably, the ways I had been living as though I were accountable to nobody."* Or: *"Something happened that made me genuinely aware of how far I was from the life I was supposed to be living."*

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**COVERED BY GRACE** (*phrase*) **What Christians mean:** Living under the forgiveness of God — the experience of being accepted and loved by God despite one's failures and sins, entirely because of what Christ accomplished rather than what one has achieved. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** A vague spiritual umbrella policy with unclear terms and conditions. **Say instead:** *"The forgiveness God offers isn't conditional on my getting everything right. It covers the whole mess — past, present, and future."*

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**DISCERNMENT** (*noun*) **What Christians mean:** The Spirit-given ability to perceive the spiritual reality beneath surface appearances — to distinguish between what is of God and what is not, to recognize genuine spiritual movement versus its counterfeits. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** General good judgment, possibly with a spiritual hat on. **Say instead:** *"I had a*

*strong sense — and I believe it was from God — that something wasn't right about that situation." Or simply: "I felt led away from that, and looking back, I think that instinct was from God."*

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**DOING LIFE TOGETHER** (*phrase*) **What Christians mean:** The practice of genuine Christian community — shared experience, mutual support, authentic relationship within the body of Christ. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** A living situation or a very committed friend group. **Say instead:** *"We have a group of people we're genuinely honest with — who know our real lives, not just our Sunday versions."* **Note:** The phrase *doing life together* has become so ubiquitous in certain evangelical circles that it functions more as an affectation than a description. The reality it points toward — genuine, honest, mutually accountable Christian community — is profoundly important. The phrase itself has been worn smooth by overuse.

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**FELLOWSHIP** (*noun*) **What Christians mean:** The specific quality of community that exists between people who share life in Christ — a depth of connection rooted in shared identity in Jesus rather than merely shared interests or circumstances. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** A scholarship program. Possibly involving hobbits. **Say instead:** *"The community at our church is different from just hanging out — there's a depth and a honesty to it that I haven't found in other places."*

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**FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT** (*phrase*) **What Christians mean:** The experience of being particularly empowered or moved by the Holy Spirit — a heightened awareness of God's presence and an unusual capacity for spiritual fruitfulness. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** An inexplicable emotional state, possibly requiring medical attention. **Say instead:** *"In that moment, I felt something beyond my own capacity — a peace, or a courage, or a clarity that I don't take credit for."*

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**GLORIFY** (*verb, as in "to glorify God"*) **What Christians mean:** To make the character and nature of God visible through one's life — to live in a way that draws attention to who God is rather than who you are. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** A lighting choice. **Say instead:** *"I want my life to point to God — to live in a way that makes people curious about what I'm rooted in."*

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**GOD IS GOOD ALL THE TIME** (*phrase*) **What Christians mean:** A genuine theological conviction that God's character is consistently, unchangingly good — even in circumstances that do not appear good. Often deployed as call and response in church settings. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** A slogan. Possibly on a coffee mug. **Honest pastoral note:** The call-and-response deployment of this phrase has, in many church contexts, produced a kind of reflexive theological cheerleading that functions as a substitute for genuine engagement with the reality that life is sometimes genuinely hard and God's goodness is genuinely difficult to see in certain seasons. The conviction is true and important. The slogan can become a way of avoiding the honest conversation that conviction is meant to sustain.

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**GRACE** (*noun*) **What Christians mean:** The completely unearned, unconditional favor of God — love given not because of merit but in spite of its absence. The free gift of forgiveness, acceptance, and relationship that cost God everything and cost the recipient nothing. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** A pretty name, a prayer before meals, or a quality of movement. **Say instead:** *"What God offers isn't something you earn by being good enough. It's a gift — entirely free, entirely undeserved, entirely real."* **Note:** *Grace* is one of those words that has sufficient cultural familiarity to be worth using, provided you define it immediately. The word itself is not the problem. The assumption that the person you're talking to understands its theological content is the problem.

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**HEDGE OF PROTECTION** (*phrase*) **What Christians mean:** Divine protection surrounding a person or situation — drawn from the imagery of Job 1:10, where God's protection of Job is described as a hedge. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** Landscaping. **Say instead:** *"I've been praying for God's protection over you."* Or simply: *"I've been asking God to watch over you."* **Note:** This one can be retired without theological loss. *Hedge of protection* appears nowhere in the New Testament as a prayer framework, and the alternative — *"I'm praying for God's protection over you"* — communicates the same thing with considerably more clarity and considerably less horticultural confusion.

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**THE HOLY SPIRIT LAID IT ON MY HEART** (*phrase*) **What Christians mean:** A strong internal sense of divine prompting — the experience of feeling called or directed toward a specific action, conversation, or awareness that goes beyond ordinary human inclination. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** Cardiac symptoms with a religious explanation. **Say instead:** *"I had a strong sense that I was supposed to reach out to you — and I've learned to pay attention to those feelings."* Or: *"Something kept bringing you to mind, and I've come to believe those promptings are real."*

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**LOST** (*adjective, as in "he is lost"*) **What Christians mean:** The spiritual condition of a person who is not in relationship with God — separated from Him by sin and not yet having received the gospel's offer of reconciliation. The opposite of *saved*. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** A navigational problem or a television series. **Say instead:** *"He hasn't found his way to faith yet."* Or: *"She's still looking for the thing that actually fills the emptiness."* **Note:** *Lost* is actually one of Jesus' own preferred metaphors — the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son — and it is both theologically precise and experientially resonant for many people who have felt exactly that condition. The challenge

is the context: describing your friend as *lost* to another Christian is a theological observation; describing them as *lost* in their presence is a label they did not ask for and may experience as dismissive of their actual spiritual searching.

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**LAID IT ON THE ALTAR** (*phrase*) **What Christians mean:** The act of surrendering something — a worry, a hope, a relationship, a dream — to God's control rather than maintaining one's own grip on it. Drawn from the Old Testament imagery of sacrifice. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** A religious ceremony involving furniture. **Say instead:** *"I've been trying to release my grip on that outcome and trust God with it."* Or: *"I've had to stop trying to control it and leave it in God's hands."*

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**AMEN** (*interjection*) **What Christians mean:** A Hebrew word meaning *so be it* or *truly* — an affirmation of the truth of what has been said, used to close a prayer or affirm a statement of faith. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** Either the end of a prayer or enthusiastic agreement, depending on context. **Translation note:** *Amen* is one of the few pieces of Christian vocabulary that requires no translation — its meaning in context is generally clear even to non-Christians. The problem is its deployment as a general affirmation in the middle of sentences: *"And God showed up — amen? — in the most remarkable way."* In that usage, *amen* functions as a tribal signal rather than a meaningful word, and can make a gospel conversation feel like a church service to someone who did not sign up for one.

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**QUIET TIME** (*noun*) **What Christians mean:** A regular, personal practice of prayer and Scripture reading — time set aside for individual encounter with God. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** A nap. Or what you tell toddlers to do. **Say instead:** *"I have a regular practice in the morning of reading the Bible and praying — it's become the thing that keeps me grounded."*

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**REDEEMED** (*adjective*) **What Christians mean:** Purchased back from bondage — specifically, freed from the bondage of sin and its consequences through the payment Christ made on the cross. The metaphor is drawn from the ancient practice of buying a slave's freedom. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** A coupon that has been used. **Say instead:** *"Christ paid the price to free me from what had me bound — and I'm living in the freedom of that purchase."* **Note:** *Redeemed* is a word worth reclaiming rather than retiring, because the metaphor of purchase and freedom it contains is both theologically precise and experientially accessible — most people have some experience of feeling bound by something. The key is unpacking the metaphor rather than assuming it lands on its own.

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**REPENT / REPENTANCE** (*verb/noun*) **What Christians mean:** A genuine turning — a change of direction, a reorientation of the whole life away from self-sufficiency and toward God. Not merely feeling sorry for specific bad behavior, but a fundamental shift in the posture of one's life. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** A street preacher holding a sign. Also possibly a medieval flogging. **Say instead:** *"What the gospel asks for is a genuine turning — stopping the running, changing direction, and moving toward God rather than away from Him."* Or: *"Not just feeling bad about specific things, but a real change of direction at the level of who is actually in charge of my life."* **Note:** *Repentance* is one of those words worth rescuing rather than replacing, because the concept it contains — genuine turning, not merely feeling bad — is important and irreplaceable. But it requires unpacking every time it is used in gospel conversation, because the cultural associations it carries (guilt, self-flagellation, fire-and-brimstone religiosity) are almost entirely inaccurate to its biblical meaning.

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**REVIVAL** (*noun*) **What Christians mean:** A season of unusual spiritual awakening — either personal or corporate — in which faith is renewed, people come to faith in unusual numbers, and the Spirit's activity is particularly evident. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** Either a theatrical production or the resuscitation of something that was dead. Technically both accurate. **Say instead:** *"Something remarkable happened in that community — people were genuinely turning to God in ways that went beyond anything the church's normal programs could account for."*

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**SAVED** (*adjective*) **What Christians mean:** The state of having received the gospel's offer of forgiveness and relationship with God — of having crossed from spiritual death to spiritual life, from separation to reconciliation. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** A rescue scenario. Also something that happens to files on a computer. **Say instead:** *"He came to faith."* Or: *"She found her way to God."* Or, if the context supports a little more specificity: *"He reached the point of genuinely trusting Jesus — of putting the weight of his life down on that and finding it held."* **Note:** *Saved* and *salvation* are not wrong — they are thoroughly biblical — but they carry a cultural charge in contemporary Western culture that the plainer alternatives avoid. *Salvation* in particular is worth using in theological conversation while being translated for evangelistic conversation.

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**SANCTIFICATION** (*noun*) **What Christians mean:** The ongoing, lifelong process of being made more like Christ — the Spirit's work of transforming a person's character, habits, and disposition to increasingly reflect the nature of Jesus. The process that follows conversion and continues until death. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** A cleaning product. Or a legal designation applied to buildings. **Say instead:** *"The process of actually becoming, in real life, the person that faith declares you already are — which is the work of a lifetime rather than a single moment."*

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**SPIRIT-LED** (*adjective*) **What Christians mean:** Directed, prompted, or empowered by the Holy Spirit in a particular decision, action, or season of life. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** Either a navigational app with theological settings or a personality type. **Say instead:** *"I felt strongly that God was directing me toward that decision."* Or: *"Looking back, I can see that something beyond my own judgment was guiding that."*

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**TESTIMONY** (*noun*) **What Christians mean:** A personal account of one's experience of God's work in one's life — particularly the story of how one came to faith and what has changed since. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** A legal proceeding or a reality television format. **Say instead:** *"My story"* or *"what happened to me."* These are both more human and more accessible than *testimony* while pointing toward exactly the same content. **Note:** Ironically, *testimony* as a word functions well within gospel conversations once the conversation has developed enough that the person understands what you mean by it. The challenge is using it too early, before the context has established its meaning.

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**THE LORD TOLD ME** (*phrase*) **What Christians mean:** A strong sense of divine direction — an internal conviction, a prompting of the Spirit, a clarity about a decision or direction that the person attributes to God's guidance. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** Either a mental health concern or a claim to prophetic authority that requires immediate examination. **Say instead:** *"I had a very strong sense that God was directing me toward that."* Or: *"Something kept coming back to me about that decision, and I've learned to pay attention to those promptings — I believe they're from God."* **Pastoral note:** *The Lord told me* is one of those phrases that functions beautifully among people who share a common understanding of how God communicates and lands with a thud — or worse, with alarm — among people

who don't. The alternative language communicates the same reality (God's guidance) while acknowledging the epistemic humility that is actually appropriate to the claim.

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**UNDER THE BLOOD** (*phrase*) **What Christians mean:** Protected and forgiven by the atoning sacrifice of Jesus — living under the covering of His shed blood, which satisfied the demands of divine justice and reconciled humanity to God. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** A horror movie. Genuinely and without exaggeration. **Say instead:** *"Forgiven — completely, because of what Jesus did."* Or: *"Living in the freedom of a debt that has already been paid in full."* **Note:** The theological content of *under the blood* is profound and important — the atonement is not a metaphor to be soft-pedaled. But the specific phrase communicates that content to people within the tradition and communicates something between confusion and alarm to people outside it. The reality it points toward can be expressed with full theological integrity in language that does not require a prior immersion in evangelical church culture to decode.

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**UNEQUALLY YOKED** (*phrase*) **What Christians mean:** Drawn from 2 Corinthians 6:14 — the biblical instruction against forming primary partnerships (particularly marriage) between Christians and non-Christians, using the image of two animals of different sizes being yoked together for work. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** An egg preparation gone wrong. **Say instead:** *"The Bible cautions against building your most significant partnership with someone whose fundamental values and commitments are different from yours — specifically, whose faith is different from yours."* **Note:** This is worth mentioning not because it often comes up in gospel conversations but because it occasionally comes up in pastoral conversations, and *unequally yoked* is one of those phrases that produces such genuine confusion in the people who haven't heard it before that it is worth having a translation ready.

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**WALKING WITH THE LORD** (*phrase*) **What Christians mean:** Living in active, ongoing, daily relationship with God — a life of consistent prayer, Scripture engagement, and practical obedience that constitutes genuine discipleship rather than nominal religious affiliation. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** A very specific recreational activity with an unusual companion. **Say instead:** *"Living in a genuine, daily relationship with God — not just believing in Him intellectually but actually staying in conversation with Him."*

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**WASHED IN THE BLOOD** (*phrase*) **What Christians mean:** Cleansed from sin by the atoning sacrifice of Jesus — forgiven and made spiritually clean by the blood He shed on the cross. Drawn from Revelation 7:14 and the Old Testament sacrificial system. **What it sounds like to your coworker:** See *Under the Blood*. Add laundry. **Say instead:** *"Forgiven — completely and permanently — because of what Jesus did."*

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**WORD OF KNOWLEDGE / WORD OF WISDOM** (*phrase*) **What Christians mean:** Charismatic gifts described in 1 Corinthians 12 — supernatural insight into a person's situation (knowledge) or divinely given practical wisdom for a specific circumstance (wisdom). **What it sounds like to your coworker:** Either a fortune cookie or a very confident opinion. **Say instead:** *"I had what I believe was a specific sense from God about your situation — something I couldn't have known otherwise."*

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## **A CLOSING WORD ON THE LANGUAGE OF GRACE**

Language matters. It always matters, because language is the primary medium through which one human being attempts to reach another, and the medium shapes what can be communicated. Every piece of vocabulary on this list contains genuine theological content — real, important, biblical truth

about God and humanity and the gospel. None of it should be abandoned. All of it should be translated.

The goal is not a gospel that has been stripped of theological substance in the interest of cultural accessibility. The goal is a gospel whose theological substance is communicated in language that does not require membership in the tribe to decode — language that meets people in the vocabulary of their actual lives rather than requiring them to learn a new language before they can receive the message the language is trying to carry.

Jesus did not speak to fishermen in the vocabulary of the Temple. He spoke in the vocabulary of fish and bread and sheep and seeds and lost coins and prodigal sons — in the ordinary language of ordinary people living ordinary lives, into which He introduced extraordinary truth.

That is the model. Ordinary language. Extraordinary content.

Your coworker does not need to be washed in the blood, quickened by the Spirit, sanctified, justified, glorified, or walking in the fullness of their redemptive calling.

They need to know they are loved. They need to know they are broken in ways they cannot fix. They need to know that Someone fixed it anyway. And they need to know that the offer is real and the door is open and you will walk through it with them if they want to go.

Say that. In those words or words very close to them.

It is enough. It has always been enough.

The bread does not need a fancy wrapper. It just needs to reach the person who is hungry.

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*Appendix E follows: Common Objections Quick-Reference Card*

## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### APPENDIX E: COMMON OBJECTIONS QUICK-REFERENCE CARD

#### *What to Say When They Push Back — Without Losing Your Mind or the Conversation*

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#### HOW TO USE THIS APPENDIX

Chapter Nine covered the Top Ten hard questions in depth — the full theological and pastoral treatment, with room to breathe and think and sit with the complexity. This appendix is something different.

This is the card you keep in your back pocket.

The quick-reference format exists for the moment when someone raises an objection in real time — when you are in an actual conversation with an actual human being and you have approximately three seconds to decide how to respond before the silence becomes awkward and the moment passes. You do not have time, in that moment, to recall a twelve-page theological treatment. You need something short, honest, and human enough to keep the conversation alive.

What follows is organized in three columns: the objection as it actually sounds in real conversation, a brief honest response that acknowledges the weight of the question without collapsing under it, and a one-line redirect that moves the conversation forward rather than ending it. At the bottom of each entry is a *deeper dive* pointer — where to go if the person wants more than the quick response can provide.

A few ground rules before you read:

**These are not debate-winning arguments.** The goal of every response here is not to silence the objection but to honor it, engage it honestly, and keep the relationship and the conversation intact. A man convinced against his will is

of the same opinion still. You are not trying to win. You are trying to stay in the room.

**Memorize the posture, not the script.** The specific words matter less than the orientation they express — curiosity rather than defensiveness, honesty rather than performance, genuine engagement rather than the execution of a technique. Know the posture. Let the words be your own.

**When in doubt, ask a question.** The best response to almost any objection is a genuine question: *Can you tell me more about that? What specifically has you stuck there? Is that a question you've been sitting with for a while?* Questions keep you listening. Listening keeps you in the conversation. The conversation is where everything happens.

Now — the card.

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## THE QUICK-REFERENCE CARD

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### OBJECTION 1:

***"I'm a good person. Why do I need religion?"***

**What they're really saying:** *I don't feel the weight of what the gospel addresses. My self-assessment doesn't include the category of needing rescue.*

**Quick honest response:** *"I don't doubt that. Most people I know are genuinely trying. The gospel isn't really an argument that you're a bad person — it's more about whether being good is actually enough to close the gap between us and a God who is perfectly holy. I came to realize that my best days still left me short of that, and the gap wasn't something I could close by trying harder."*

**One-line redirect:** *"Can I ask — what's your honest standard for being good enough? And who decides when you've cleared it?"*

**If it gets worse and they push harder:** *"What would it take to convince you that you needed something outside yourself? I'm genuinely curious."*

**Deeper dive:** Chapter 2 (What Exactly Is the Gospel?), specifically the section on sin as autonomy rather than moral failure.

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## **OBJECTION 2:**

***"I tried Christianity and it didn't work."***

**What they're really saying:** *I had a genuine encounter with institutional Christianity that was either ineffective or actively harmful, and I am protecting myself from repeating that experience.*

**Quick honest response:** *"I believe you. And I'm sorry — genuinely. There's a version of Christianity that gets handed to people that isn't actually the gospel, and if that's what you got, your disappointment makes complete sense. I'd be curious what it was you encountered — and whether the Jesus I've come to know looks anything like what you were given."*

**One-line redirect:** *"What did your version of Christianity tell you it would do — and what actually happened?"*

**If it gets worse and they go cold:** *"I'm not trying to recruit you back to something that hurt you. I'm wondering if there's a distinction between what you experienced and the Jesus behind it."*

**Deeper dive:** Chapter 10 (Contextual Evangelism), section on sharing with the church-wounded.

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## **OBJECTION 3:**

***"There are so many religions. How can yours be the only right one?"***

**What they're really saying:** *The exclusive claims of Christianity feel arrogant and culturally imperialistic. How can any one religion corner the market on truth?*

**Quick honest response:** *"That's a fair discomfort. But here's the thing — every worldview makes exclusive claims. The atheist who says there's no God is making a claim that contradicts every religion on earth. The question isn't whether to make exclusive claims. It's whether the specific claims Jesus made are true. And those claims are falsifiable — they hinge on whether a resurrection happened. That's a historical question, not a feelings question."*

**One-line redirect:** *"If the resurrection actually happened — and I think there's serious historical evidence that it did — what would that do to the question of whether Christianity is uniquely true?"*

**If it gets worse and they feel talked at:** *"I don't want to bulldoze you with this. What's your honest instinct about Jesus specifically — not the religion, just Him?"*

**Deeper dive:** Chapter 9, Question Four (How can Jesus be the only way?).

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#### **OBJECTION 4:**

***"The Bible is full of contradictions and errors."***

**What they're really saying:** *I have absorbed the cultural consensus that Scripture is unreliable, probably without examining specific texts myself.*

**Quick honest response:** *"Can I ask — which ones? I'm not being combative. I've just found that most of the specific contradictions I've heard cited dissolve under careful reading. The Bible is a library of sixty-six books written over fifteen hundred years in multiple languages and genres — there are genuinely difficult passages. But difficult to interpret isn't the same as self-contradictory."*

**One-line redirect:** *"I'd genuinely rather talk about the specific texts that trouble you than debate the general claim. What's actually bothering you?"*

**If it gets worse and they can't name specifics:** *"Fair enough — the reputation is out there whether or not the specifics are. What I'd say is that the historical reliability of the New Testament is actually quite strong by the standards of ancient documents. I'm happy to point you toward some of the scholarship on that if you're interested."*

**Deeper dive:** Chapter 9, Question Three. For the intellectually oriented, recommend *The Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel (Appendix C).

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## **OBJECTION 5:**

**"God can't exist — look at all the suffering in the world."**

**What they're really saying:** *Either I have experienced specific suffering that makes the existence of a good God feel personally untenable, or I find the philosophical problem of evil genuinely incompatible with theism.*

**Quick honest response:** *"That's the question I take most seriously, and I want to be honest with you — I don't have an answer that makes the suffering stop hurting. What I have is this: the Christian story doesn't claim the world is fine. It claims something went catastrophically wrong, that the world is broken from its design, and that God's response was to enter that brokenness rather than observe it from a safe distance. Jesus died in agony. Whatever God is doing with human suffering, He's not watching from outside it."*

**One-line redirect:** *"Is there something specific — something you've actually been through — that's behind this question for you?"*

**If they share something personal and painful:** *Stop. Listen. Do not immediately return to the apologetics. The question has just become pastoral. Sit with the pain before you return to the philosophy.*

**Deeper dive:** Chapter 9, Question One. Philip Yancey's *Where Is God When It Hurts?* (not on the main reading list — worth adding to your curiosity library).

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**OBJECTION 6:**

***"I believe in science, not religion."***

**What they're really saying:** *I hold a conflict narrative between science and faith that feels settled, and I assume that intellectual integrity requires atheism or agnosticism.*

**Quick honest response:** *"So do I, actually. I don't think they're enemies — I think they're asking different questions. Science asks how. Faith asks why. How did the universe develop, how did life emerge — that's science's territory, and I take it seriously. Why is there something rather than nothing, why does the universe operate on rational principles that a rational mind can investigate, why does anything mean anything — those are questions science isn't designed to answer. I need both."*

**One-line redirect:** *"Francis Collins ran the Human Genome Project and is a committed Christian. Neil deGrasse Tyson says the universe is indifferent. They're both serious scientists. What do you make of the fact that the evidence doesn't settle it as clearly as the culture suggests?"*

**If it gets worse and they cite Dawkins:** *"Dawkins is a brilliant biologist. His philosophy is more contested than his biology. Have you read any of the responses to him — Lennox, Polkinghorne, McGrath? They're serious scientists and serious Christians who don't think he's made the case as cleanly as he believes."*

**Deeper dive:** Chapter 9, Question Five. Francis Collins' *The Language of God* (Appendix C).

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**OBJECTION 7:**

**"Christians are hypocrites."**

**What they're really saying:** *Either I have specific, personal experience of Christian hypocrisy that has wounded me, or I am using the church's failures as protective distance from a more personal engagement with the gospel.*

**Quick honest response:** *"You're right. I'm one of them — I believe things I don't consistently live. I think the honest Christian position is not 'we've got it together' but 'we're receiving something we haven't fully become yet.' The hypocrisy is real and indefensible. What I keep coming back to is whether Jesus is responsible for how badly His followers have represented Him — because looking at the actual Gospels, He looks nothing like a lot of what's been done in His name."*

**One-line redirect:** *"Is there a specific experience of Christian hypocrisy that's behind this for you? I'd rather hear about the actual thing than debate the general category."*

**If it gets worse and they have a specific wound:** *"That was wrong. What was done to you in the name of Jesus was wrong, and I'm not going to explain it away. I'm sorry it happened."*

**Deeper dive:** Chapter 9, Question Six. Chapter 10, section on the church-wounded.

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**OBJECTION 8:**

**"I'm spiritual but not religious."**

**What they're really saying:** *I have genuine spiritual hunger and some degree of genuine spiritual experience, but institutional Christianity has been unsatisfying, suffocating, or actively harmful, and I have constructed an alternative that serves my spiritual needs without the liability.*

**Quick honest response:** *"I think I understand that. There's something genuine in the spiritual-but-not-religious position — a real hunger that organized*

*religion has often done a poor job of feeding. I'd be curious what the spiritual part looks like for you — what you've actually encountered or experienced. Because what I've found is that the Jesus of the Gospels is considerably more interesting and more disruptive than the institutional Christianity that often claims to represent Him."*

**One-line redirect:** *"What does the spiritual part actually feel like for you? What are you reaching toward?"*

**If they describe genuine spiritual experience:** *"That resonates with something. Where do you think that comes from? What's your honest account of what you're touching when that happens?"*

**Deeper dive:** Chapter 5 (Reading the Room), section on spiritual indifference and the seeker. Also Chapter 4 — this conversation requires deep listening before any speaking.

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## **OBJECTION 9:**

***"What about people who've never heard the gospel?"***

**What they're really saying:** *Either this is a genuine moral concern about divine justice, or it is a deflection — a way of raising a question about other people to avoid engaging the question about themselves.*

**Quick honest response:** *"That's a real question and I hold it with genuine humility. Here's what I know: God is perfectly just in a way no human legal system has ever approximated, and whatever He does with people who genuinely never had access to the gospel will be exactly just and exactly loving simultaneously. What I also know is that you're not in that category — you're talking to someone who is telling you right now. The question of what God does at the edges of special revelation doesn't change what He's offering in the middle of it."*

**One-line redirect:** *"Can I be honest with you? I wonder sometimes if that question is more about other people than about you. What's your own honest position on what you've heard?"*

**If they push back on the redirect:** *"Fair enough — I could be wrong about that. Let me try to answer the question on its own merits."* Then return to the quick honest response above.

**Deeper dive:** Chapter 9, Question Two.

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## **OBJECTION 10:**

***"I don't believe in hell."***

**What they're really saying:** *The doctrine of eternal punishment is morally repugnant to me, and I cannot reconcile it with a God who is supposed to be loving.*

**Quick honest response:** *"I hold that doctrine with a great deal of grief and a great deal of humility. What I'd push back on gently is the framing — the most accurate account I know of is not that God sends people to hell against their will, but that hell is the ultimate experience of the choice to live without God taken to its final end. C.S. Lewis described it as doors locked from the inside. The same freedom that makes genuine love possible makes genuine rejection possible."*

**One-line redirect:** *"Here's what I'm more confident about: the God who went to the cross is not looking for reasons to condemn. The cross is the evidence of a God who will go to any length to make the other option available. What do you do with that?"*

**If they remain resistant:** *"I don't think you should be comfortable with a version of hell that doesn't trouble you. It troubles me. What I'd say is — the response to that trouble is not to dismiss the doctrine, but to make sure as few people as possible have to depend on the theological edge cases."*

**Deeper dive:** Chapter 9, Question Ten.

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**OBJECTION 11:**

***"I just don't feel anything. Faith seems made up."***

**What they're really saying:** *Either I have not experienced anything that registers as genuine spiritual experience, or I have and I am not sure what to do with it, or I am protecting myself from the vulnerability of genuine faith by keeping it in the realm of the subjective.*

**Quick honest response:** *"I understand that. Faith doesn't usually begin with a feeling — it usually begins with a decision to take the claims seriously enough to investigate them honestly. The feeling, in my experience, tends to follow the engagement rather than precede it. And I'd also say — the absence of a felt experience of God is not evidence that God is absent. It may just mean you haven't yet been in the place where the encounter becomes possible."*

**One-line redirect:** *"What would honest investigation look like for you? Not commitment — investigation. Is there a question you'd be willing to sit with seriously?"*

**If they are genuinely open:** *Offer a specific first step — a book, a conversation, a Gospel to read. Make it concrete and low-pressure.*

**Deeper dive:** Chapter 3 (Killing the Freak-Out Factor) for the evangelist; C.S. Lewis' *Surprised by Joy* for the person asking.

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**OBJECTION 12:**

***"Religion is just a crutch for weak people."***

**What they're really saying:** *Faith is a psychological compensation mechanism for people who cannot face reality on its own terms — and I consider myself someone who can.*

**Quick honest response:** *"Maybe. Though I'd ask — a crutch for what? If the leg is actually broken, a crutch is not a weakness. It's appropriate medical equipment. The question isn't whether faith functions as a support — it does, and I don't deny it. The question is whether the reality it points to is real. If God actually exists, then 'using' God as a support isn't weakness. It's sanity."*

**One-line redirect:** *"What's your honest account of what gets you through the hardest things? I'm curious what you're leaning on."*

**If they have a genuine answer:** *"That's real. I'm not dismissing it. I'd just ask — is it enough? Is it sufficient for the weight of mortality and meaning and the question of what any of it is for?"*

**Deeper dive:** Chapter 14 (The Theology Behind the Conversation), section on why grace-centered theology produces compelling witnesses.

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### **OBJECTION 13:**

***"I'll think about it someday."***

**What they're really saying:** *I am not ready to engage, but I am not hostile. This is a polite deferral rather than a genuine no.*

**Quick honest response:** *"That's completely fair. I'm not trying to pressure you into anything. I'll just say — the questions don't get easier with more time, in my experience. But I respect where you are, and I'm not going anywhere."*

**One-line redirect:** *"Is there anything that would make the someday feel more like now? I'm genuinely asking — not to push you, just to understand what the obstacle is."*

**If they identify a specific obstacle:** *Address it specifically, briefly, and without pressure. Then release the conversation with genuine warmth.*

**What not to do:** Do not manufacture urgency through fear. The someday person is not a target to be closed. They are a person in process. Respect the process.

**Deeper dive:** Chapter 12 (When They Say No or Not Yet), section on maintaining the relationship after a no.

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**OBJECTION 14:**

***"I used to believe but I can't anymore."***

**What they're really saying:** *Something happened — intellectual, experiential, relational, or institutional — that made the faith I once held feel untenable. I am not indifferent. I am grieving.*

**Quick honest response:** *"I'm sorry. That's a real loss, and I don't want to minimize it. Can I ask what happened? Not to argue with it — because I'm probably not going to argue you back to faith, and that's not my job anyway. But I'd genuinely like to understand."*

**One-line redirect:** *"Is there anything about what you used to believe that you miss? Or does any of it still feel true even when you can't hold the whole thing?"*

**If they share the story:** *Listen. Really listen. This is one of the most sacred conversations available to a gospel witness — the person who had something real and lost it is often closer to finding it again than they appear. Do not rush toward solutions. Sit in the story.*

**Deeper dive:** Chapter 10, section on the church-wounded. Rachel Held Evans' *Searching for Sunday* (Appendix C).

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**OBJECTION 15:**

***"I just don't have time for religion."***

**What they're really saying:** *My life is full and the activation energy required to engage with faith feels higher than my current available surplus.*

**Quick honest response:** *"I get that. I'm not asking you to add something to an already full life. What I've found is that faith, when it's real, isn't an addition to life — it's more like a new foundation underneath the life you're already living. It doesn't necessarily take more time. It changes what the time you already have is for."*

**One-line redirect:** *"What would it look like to explore the questions without reorganizing your life around a church schedule? Is there a lower-threshold entry point that would work for where you are?"*

**What not to do:** Do not immediately invite them to church. That is exactly the institutional addition to their already full schedule that they just told you they don't have room for. Offer a conversation, a book, a podcast — something that fits inside the life they already have.

**Deeper dive:** Chapter 6 (Building Bridges, Not Walls), section on the long game.

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## THE UNIVERSAL RESET BUTTON

For those moments when you do not know what to say — when the objection lands and your mind goes blank and everything you just read has apparently departed — here is the response that works in almost every situation:

*"That's a real question, and I want to be honest with you — I don't have a complete answer to that. But I have something. Do you want to hear it?"*

This response does four things simultaneously. It honors the weight of the question. It refuses the pretense of having it all together. It signals that what you have is genuine rather than performed. And it returns the agency to the person you are talking to — giving them the choice to continue rather than pressing them forward.

It is not a technique. It is honesty. And honesty, in a gospel conversation, is always the right next move.

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## THE FIVE RESPONSES TO NEVER GIVE

In the interest of equal time, here is the quick-reference list of responses that are almost guaranteed to close the conversation rather than open it:

- 1. "I'll pray for you."** (As a conversation-ender rather than a genuine commitment. Delivered in a tone that communicates pity rather than love, this is experienced as dismissal rather than care.)
- 2. "The Bible says..."** (As an opening move to someone who does not yet accept the Bible's authority. Cite the book whose authority is precisely in question and you have started the conversation in the wrong place.)
- 3. "You just need to have faith."** (To the person who is raising a genuine intellectual objection. This communicates that the questions don't deserve engagement — which communicates that the questioner doesn't deserve respect.)
- 4. "Everything happens for a reason."** (To anyone in genuine pain. This is not the gospel. This is a bumper sticker that trivializes suffering and attributes a cosmic purposefulness to tragedy that the person in the middle of it cannot possibly receive.)
- 5. Any version of "you'll understand when you get to heaven."** (To someone wrestling with genuine theological difficulty. Deferring every hard question to the afterlife communicates that the faith cannot hold up to scrutiny in the present — which is precisely the opposite of what the gospel claims.)

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## THE FINAL WORD ON OBJECTIONS

Here is the thing about objections that no quick-reference card can fully capture, because it is not a response but a posture:

The person raising an objection is not your opponent. They are a human being made in the image of God, carrying the specific weight of a specific life, asking

the specific questions that their specific history has produced. The objection is not an attack to be defended against. It is a window into where they are — a gift, even, because it tells you what is actually in the way between this person and the gospel.

Receive it as a gift. Honor the weight of it. Engage it honestly and humbly and with genuine curiosity about the person behind it.

And then trust the God who causes growth with the rest.

That is the whole card.

Everything else is commentary.

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## HOW TO SHARE THE GOSPEL FOR DUMMIES

### APPENDIX F: SCRIPTURE MEMORY PLAN

#### *12 Key Gospel Verses in NASB to Internalize*

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#### **A WORD BEFORE THE VERSES**

I want to begin with a confession and a clarification, because both are necessary before we talk about memorizing Scripture.

The confession: I have been given more Scripture memory programs than I can count across my years in the church — wallet cards, phone apps, color-coded systems, curriculum-packaged review schedules, accountability partnerships specifically devoted to the weekly recitation of assigned passages. I have started most of them. I have finished approximately none of them. Not because the verses were not worth knowing, but because the systems turned the living Word of God into a performance task, and performance tasks done poorly produce shame, and shame produces avoidance, and avoidance means you end up knowing fewer verses than you started with.

The clarification: what I am offering here is not a program. It is not a curriculum. It is not a twelve-week memory challenge with a certificate of completion at the end.

It is twelve verses — the twelve verses that form the spine of the gospel and the backbone of gospel witness — offered with the simple, non-anxious invitation to let them become part of you over time. Not memorized as a recitation exercise. Internalized as the working vocabulary of a person who has been shaped by the gospel and is learning to speak from that shaping.

There is a difference between knowing a verse and having a verse. Knowing is retrieval — being able to produce the words on demand, correctly, in the right order, with chapter and verse attached. Having is something more embodied and more personal — the verse has moved from the memory into the marrow,

has become the thing you reach for in the dark, has shaped the way you see and think and pray in ways that continue even when you are not consciously thinking about it.

The goal of this appendix is having, not knowing. The method is slow, unhurried, non-anxious repetition — dwelling with each verse long enough that it becomes native rather than acquired. The timeline is yours. There is no deadline. There is no test.

There is only the Word, and the God who breathed it, and the gospel witness it will fuel in ways you cannot predict and do not need to manage.

Begin when you are ready. Take the time each verse requires. Return to any verse as often as it takes until the words are no longer words you are recalling but words you are speaking from inside.

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## HOW TO USE THIS PLAN

Each of the twelve verses is presented with four elements:

**The verse itself** — in NASB, the translation that has governed this entire book, valued for its accuracy and its fidelity to the original languages.

**The gospel thread** — a brief explanation of where this verse sits in the larger story of the gospel, so that the memory work is not isolated word-collection but the internalization of a connected, coherent narrative.

**A meditative prompt** — a single question or reflection to sit with while the verse is settling into you. Not an assignment. An invitation to let the verse do what living words do when given unhurried attention.

**A witness application** — one practical note on how this specific verse tends to surface in gospel conversations and what it makes possible when it has been genuinely internalized rather than merely retrieved.

Work through one verse at a time. Do not move to the next until the current verse is genuinely present — until you can say it without forcing it, in the

middle of a prayer or a conversation or a 3am wakefulness, without needing to look it up. For some verses that will take a week. For others it may take a month. Honor the pace the verse requires.

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## THE TWELVE VERSES

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### VERSE ONE

#### The Problem Stated

*"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* — Romans 3:23 (NASB)

**The gospel thread:** Before the good news can be received, the bad news must be understood. Not wallowed in, not weaponized, not deployed as accusation — but honestly named. The word *all* is doing the most important work in this verse. Not some. Not the obviously broken. Not the people whose failures are visible. All. Which means the ground at the foot of the cross is perfectly level — no one arrives there with a shorter distance to have traveled than anyone else. The CEO and the addict and the pastor and the prodigal and the respectable churchgoer and the committed atheist are all arriving from the same distance.

**Meditative prompt:** Where in your own life do you most clearly feel the *fall short* — the gap between what you were made to be and what you actually are? Let the verse land on that specific place rather than on humanity in the abstract.

**Witness application:** This verse is most powerful not as an accusation delivered to someone else but as an honest testimony about yourself. *"I came to understand that no matter how hard I tried, there was a gap between who I was and who I was made to be — and I couldn't close it from the inside."* The verse becomes a bridge when it is personal before it is universal.

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## VERSE TWO

### The Consequence Named

*"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."* — Romans 6:23 (NASB)

**The gospel thread:** This is the verse that contains both the problem and the first glimpse of the solution in a single sentence, which makes it one of the most structurally complete gospel verses in Scripture. *Wages* is the key word — not punishment arbitrarily assigned by an angry deity, but the earned consequence of a choice. Sin pays. It pays in the currency of death — spiritual first, physical following. But the verse does not end there. The contrast is introduced with a single conjunction that changes everything: *but*. The free gift of God. Not wages — gift. Not earned — free. Not death — life. And not a vague spiritual upgrade — eternal life in a specific Person, Christ Jesus our Lord.

**Meditative prompt:** Sit with the contrast between *wages* and *free gift* — between what you have earned and what is being offered instead. Let the distance between those two things be the space where gratitude forms.

**Witness application:** This verse is the gospel in miniature — problem and solution, earning and gift, death and life, all in one sentence. When the conversation is brief and the moment is moving quickly, this single verse contains everything necessary. Know it well enough to say it slowly, with enough pause after *death* that the *but* lands with its full weight.

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## VERSE THREE

### The Love Demonstrated

*"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."* — Romans 5:8 (NASB)

**The gospel thread:** This verse corrects one of the most persistent misunderstandings about the gospel — the idea that God's love is conditional, that it was activated by human turning or human goodness or human anything. *While we were yet sinners.* Not after we cleaned up. Not in response to our seeking. Before we were aware of the distance, before we had expressed any interest in closing it, before we had done anything to make ourselves worth pursuing — God demonstrated His love. The cross was not a response to human worthiness. It was the initiative of a God who loved what was unlovable by any measure except His own.

**Meditative prompt:** Let the phrase *while we were yet sinners* land specifically on whatever in your history makes you feel least deserving of love. The verse is making a specific claim about that exact place.

**Witness application:** This verse is the antidote to every form of fear-based evangelism and every version of the gospel that implies divine love is contingent on human response. When a person asks *"how could God love someone like me?"* — and they will ask it, in one form or another — this verse is the direct answer. Not a principle about God's love in the abstract. Evidence of what God actually did, with specific people, in specific historical conditions of human unworthiness.

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## VERSE FOUR

### The Exchange Explained

*"He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."* — 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NASB)

**The gospel thread:** This is the most theologically precise description of the atonement in the New Testament — the great exchange at the heart of the gospel, stated with a compression that repays extended meditation. Jesus, who had never sinned, was made sin — took into Himself the full weight and consequence of human sin, bearing what He had not earned. So that we, who had never been righteous, might become the righteousness of God — receive

what we had not earned. The exchange is total and mutual and entirely grace-driven: He takes our worst, we receive His best, and the transaction is entirely His initiative and entirely His cost.

**Meditative prompt:** Read the verse in both directions. First: He took what was yours. Then: You received what was His. Sit with the magnitude of both movements before you consider how to explain either to someone else.

**Witness application:** This verse is most useful in conversations with people who understand that they need forgiveness but cannot grasp how forgiveness can be offered without simply overlooking sin. The exchange answers that question precisely — sin was not overlooked. It was transferred, carried, paid for. The accounts were settled. The ledger was cleared not by pretending the debt did not exist but by someone else paying it in full.

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## VERSE FIVE

### The Gift Received

*"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." —*  
Ephesians 2:8-9 (NASB)

**The gospel thread:** If there is a single passage that contains the theological heart of the Reformation and the practical core of the ragamuffin gospel, it is these two verses. Grace: unearned divine favor. Faith: the receptive posture that opens the hand to receive what grace is offering. Not of yourselves: the salvation that is offered here originates entirely outside the recipient — it comes from God, not from human effort or merit or achievement. Gift: the word that settles the question of whether this can be earned. You do not earn a gift. You receive it. Not as a result of works: the performance-based model of relating to God is explicitly ruled out, here and definitively. So that no one may boast: which means no one who has received this gift can look at anyone else and feel superior. The ground at the cross is level. It was always level.

**Meditative prompt:** What does it feel like to receive something genuinely, completely free? Where does the discomfort of that live in you — the part that wants to have contributed something, earned some portion, deserved some fraction of what is being offered? That discomfort is important information about the depth to which grace still needs to penetrate.

**Witness application:** This passage is the direct answer to every person who believes that Christianity is primarily a moral improvement program — that what God wants is better behavior and what faith offers is the motivation to produce it. No. What God offers is a gift. What faith does is open the hand to receive it. The behavior transformation that follows is real and important, but it is the consequence of the gift, not the condition for it.

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## VERSE SIX

### The Door Identified

*"Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.'" — John 14:6 (NASB)*

**The gospel thread:** This is the verse that makes the exclusive claim — the one that contemporary pluralism finds most uncomfortable and that faithful gospel witness cannot soften without ceasing to be faithful. Jesus does not say He is one helpful path among several available options. He says He is *the way* — the singular, definitive, no-alternative route between where humanity is and where it was made to be. Three claims compressed into one sentence: He is the way (the only access), the truth (the ultimate reality that everything else is measured against), and the life (the source of the only life worth having). The exclusivity is not arrogance. It is the precise and unavoidable implication of the Incarnation and the Resurrection — if those things happened, this claim is simply accurate.

**Meditative prompt:** Sit with the three titles — *the way, the truth, the life* — individually. Where in your own experience has Jesus functioned as each of these? What has He been the way through? Where has He been the truth that

clarified what was false? Where has He been the life that animated what was dead?

**Witness application:** This verse requires the most careful handling of the twelve, because it will produce the most resistance. The wise gospel witness does not lead with it — it is a verse that lands most powerfully after the relationship and the conversation have established enough trust that the exclusive claim can be heard as invitation rather than judgment. When it does land, land it with gentleness: *"Jesus didn't leave us the option of treating Him as one path among many. He claimed to be the only path — and He backed that claim with a resurrection. If the resurrection happened, this isn't arrogance. It's just true."*

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## VERSE SEVEN

### The New Creation Announced

*"Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come."* — 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NASB)

**The gospel thread:** The gospel is not a moral renovation of the existing structure. It is a new creation — the same Person, but with a fundamentally different foundation, a new identity, a new relationship to God that produces, over time, an actually different life. *New creature* is not hyperbole. Paul means it precisely — the person who is in Christ has experienced something as fundamental as a new birth, and what they are now is genuinely new in a way that was not achievable through any amount of self-improvement. The old things — the old identity, the old standing before God, the old bondage — have passed away. Not been suppressed or managed or kept at arm's length through religious effort. Passed away. Gone. New things have come in their place.

**Meditative prompt:** What specifically has passed away in you since coming to faith? Not what you wish had passed away — what actually has? And what

new things have come that you cannot explain on any terms other than genuine transformation?

**Witness application:** This verse is the backbone of your testimony — the *After* section of the three-act story. The evidence that something genuinely changed is not primarily theological argument. It is the observable reality of a life that is different from what it was, in ways that exceed the explanatory power of self-improvement. When someone asks "*what difference does it actually make?*" — this verse is the answer, and your story is the evidence.

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## VERSE EIGHT

### The Scope of the Love

*"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."* — John 3:16 (NASB)

**The gospel thread:** The most quoted verse in Scripture, and consequently one of the most easily passed over without genuine attention — the verse so familiar that it can be recited without being felt. Which is a tragedy, because its content is staggering. *So loved* — loved to the degree of giving. *The world* — not the worthy portion of the world, not the portion that was already seeking, not the portion that had done something to merit the attention. The whole broken, resistant, indifferent world. *His only begotten Son* — the giving was the giving of the most precious thing in existence. *Whoever believes* — the scope of the offer is as wide as the scope of the love. Not a selected group. *Whoever. Shall not perish, but have eternal life* — the two destinations stated plainly, the offer of the better one extended to everyone.

**Meditative prompt:** Read the verse as though you have never read it before. Not as a recitation to be performed but as an announcement being made specifically to you, right now, about a love that was directed at you before you were aware of it. Let it land fresh.

**Witness application:** The universality of *whoever* is one of the most powerful elements of this verse in gospel conversation — particularly with people who have been told, explicitly or implicitly, that the gospel is not for people like them. *Whoever believes*. No exceptions. No fine print. No categories of people for whom the *whoever* does not apply. Say it with the weight it carries.

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## VERSE NINE

### The Invitation Extended

*"The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost."* — Revelation 22:17 (NASB)

**The gospel thread:** The last invitation in Scripture — the final page of the last book of the Bible, the closing words of the whole story, and they are an invitation. *Come*. The Spirit says it. The church says it. The person who has heard says it to the next person who needs to hear. And then the qualifications for the invitation: thirst. That is all. Not righteousness, not preparation, not resolution of theological difficulty, not the completion of a moral reformation program. *Let the one who is thirsty come*. The water is free. The invitation is open. The only requirement is the acknowledgment of need.

**Meditative prompt:** Sit with the word *thirsty*. Where in your own life — before faith, and perhaps still in the present — have you experienced the thirst this verse is describing? The longing for something you could not name, the hunger that nothing available had satisfied? Let that memory be the bridge between your experience and the experience of the people you are inviting.

**Witness application:** This verse is the invitation itself — the distillation of the gospel's offer into a single image and a single word. *Come*. When the conversation has been had and the gospel has been explained and the person is standing at the threshold, this is the invitation you are extending: not a religious program, not an institutional affiliation, not a moral improvement plan. Water for the thirsty. Free. Now. *Come*.

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## VERSE TEN

### The Assurance Given

*"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."* — Romans 8:38-39 (NASB)

**The gospel thread:** Paul wrote this passage after cataloguing the suffering, the groaning, the not-yet-ness of the present life, and it functions as the theological bedrock under all of it — the declaration that beneath every experience of weakness and failure and suffering and uncertainty and death itself, there is a love that is not contingent on any of those things and cannot be removed by any of them. The list is exhaustive by design — Paul is not leaving escape clauses. Death cannot separate you. Life cannot separate you. Present things, future things, depth, height, powers — nothing created can do it. Because the love of God in Christ Jesus is not a created thing. It is the ground of all things, and it does not yield.

**Meditative prompt:** Which item in Paul's list is most personal to you — which *nothing* in your own life most threatens your sense of being held? Bring that specific thing to the verse. Let the verse speak directly to it.

**Witness application:** This verse is the assurance the new believer needs most in the first weeks and months of faith — when the doubts arrive, when the old patterns press back in, when the feelings go flat and the certainty that was present at conversion seems to have evacuated. *Nothing can separate you.* Not your failure to maintain the feeling. Not your inability to live up to the faith you have professed. Not the questions you cannot answer. Not the gaps between who you are and who the gospel says you are becoming. Nothing. Say it to them. Say it often. Let it be the thing they hear from you when everything else is uncertain.

## VERSE ELEVEN

### The Commission Received

*"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth."* — Acts 1:8 (NASB)

**The gospel thread:** The last words of Jesus before the Ascension — the final instruction, the commissioning statement, the framework for everything the church has done in the two thousand years since. Two things in one verse: a promise and a commission, given together because neither is complete without the other. The commission — *you shall be My witnesses* — is not issued to people who have sufficiently prepared themselves. It is issued to frightened, confused, still-processing disciples who could not have passed any reasonable readiness assessment. The promise precedes the commission and makes it possible: *you will receive power*. Not human power. Not the power of preparation or training or natural gifting. The power of the Spirit, promised and given, enabling what the disciples could not produce themselves.

**Meditative prompt:** Where is your Jerusalem — the specific, ordinary geography of your daily life where the witness begins? Name it concretely. And where is your sense of the power promised here — the Spirit's presence and enabling that makes the witness possible? What does it feel like when you are aware of it?

**Witness application:** This verse reframes evangelism from obligation to commission — from a duty to be discharged to a role to be inhabited. You are not trying to do something impressive enough to earn the title of witness. You are a witness — by virtue of what you have experienced and what you have been given — and the task is simply to bear witness honestly to what is true. The power for that is promised and already given. The geography is already your address. Begin there.

## VERSE TWELVE

### The Promise That Holds It All

*"And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."* — Matthew 28:20b (NASB)

**The gospel thread:** The last words of Matthew's Gospel — the final sentence of the commission, the promise attached to the command, the ground beneath everything the Great Commission asks of ordinary human beings. *I am with you always*. Not I will help you when you have prepared adequately. Not I will show up for the moments when you are sufficiently faithful. Not I will be present when the situation is spiritually significant enough to warrant divine attention. *Always*. In the break room on Tuesday morning when the conversation opens unexpectedly and your mouth goes dry. In the three-year relationship that has not yet produced visible fruit. In the conversation that goes sideways and the no that lands hard and the long, faithfully tended season when nothing appears to be happening. *Always. To the end of the age.*

**Meditative prompt:** When is the *always* hardest to feel? In what specific contexts does the presence of Jesus feel most distant or most theoretical? Bring those contexts to this verse. Let the promise speak specifically to the places where you most need it to be true.

**Witness application:** This is the verse to internalize last and to carry first — because it is the foundational assurance under every gospel conversation you will ever have. You are not going into those conversations alone. You are not sustaining the witness on your own resources. You are not responsible for outcomes that belong to the One who promised to be with you always. He is in the conversation before you open your mouth. He will be in it after you close it. He is with you when the words are right and when they are wrong and when you say nothing at all and when the silence is the most honest response available. *Always. To the end.* Which has not yet come. Which means the promise is still in effect. Which means you can go.

## THE MEMORY PLAN: A SIMPLE APPROACH

Here is the non-anxious, non-program, sustainable approach to internalizing these twelve verses over time:

**One verse per month.** Twelve verses, twelve months. This is not a race. At the end of a year, you will have twelve verses genuinely internalized rather than fifty-two verses half-remembered. The slow path produces the durable result.

**Write it daily for one week.** The physical act of writing a verse by hand, once a day for seven days, anchors it in the body as well as the mind in a way that reading alone does not produce. Use a notebook. Keep it simple.

**Pray it for the second week.** Take the verse into your prayer time and let it shape what you say to God. If the verse is about grace, let it be the frame through which you receive God's grace in that morning's prayer. If it is about the commission, let it be the frame through which you offer yourself for that day's witness. The verse becomes yours when it has been prayed, not just recited.

**Use it in conversation in the third week.** Not artificially — not forcing a verse into a context where it does not belong. But with the attentiveness of a person who knows a verse well enough to recognize when it is the right word for the moment they are in. Say it naturally, in your own voice, as part of a genuine exchange.

**Review it in the fourth week.** Return to every verse you have previously worked through and say each one aloud, from memory, once. Not as a performance test — as a way of keeping the whole library accessible rather than allowing the earlier verses to fade as the later ones are added.

At the end of twelve months you will have twelve verses that are genuinely yours — not retrieved from memory but spoken from inside. Not words about the gospel but words that have become part of the gospel-shaped person you are continuing to become.

That is the whole plan.

It is enough.

The Word that does not return empty is already at work.

Let it work in you first. Then let it flow through you to everyone else.

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## **A FINAL WORD**

The Word of God does not need your perfect memory to accomplish its purposes. Isaiah said so: *"So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire."* — Isaiah 55:11 (NASB). The word accomplishes. You carry it. You plant it. You release it. The accomplishing belongs to the God who breathed it.

But the word that has been genuinely internalized — that has moved from the page into the person, from the verse into the voice, from the text into the testimony — carries a quality of authority and authenticity that the verse merely retrieved cannot match. It sounds like a person speaking from inside their own experience rather than a person quoting from an outside source. It lands differently. It stays differently.

Twelve verses. One year. No anxiety.

The word of Christ, dwelling in you richly — Colossians 3:16 (NASB) — producing the witness that is not performed but overflowed.

That is the whole plan.

Now — one last thing remains.

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*The book is finished. But the appendices were never the end. The end is the door you are about to walk through into the ordinary, irreplaceable, gospel-saturated geography of your actual life. The end is the conversation you are about to have with the specific person God has already placed in your path. The end is the beginning of everything this book was trying to get you ready for.*

*You are ready. You were always going to be ready enough. The Spirit is already in the conversation. Go.*

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*"And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." — Matthew 28:20b (NASB)*